

# Change agents

Public schools are breaking the mould to find new ways to revitalise learning and engage students.

**ANGELA ROSSMANITH** reports.

**T**he story of Fawkner Secondary College in Melbourne is a good example of why it is a mistake to assume that all government schools are alike, or should be, says AEU federal president Pat Byrne.

Fawkner, like many other state schools across the country, has adapted its structures and programs to fit the needs of the school community, and with great success. "It is one of many examples of teachers in government schools using their energy and ideas to explore ways of rethinking what is happening in their schools," says Byrne.

When Kerrie Heenan became principal at Fawkner six years ago, it was clear that something had to change. "We ran a pretty standard factory-model school with a traditional program, but it just didn't work," she says. Literacy and numeracy were very poor and attendance was low.

In its heyday, Fawkner had more than 1,000 students, but changing demographics and new schools catering for the largely Arabic population in its area had reduced enrolment to 320.

The school is truly multi-cultural, with 32 nationalities and 39 different languages spoken.

"We had to find ways to make learning relevant, and we decided to start with small changes," says Heenan.

The result was *Breaking Out*, a two-week program for Year 9 students—"the most at risk"—launched in 2001. The students decided what they wanted to learn about and how they would learn it, and they were offered opportunities to explore their particular interests beyond the school.

☺☺...with real funding—and I mean several hundred thousand dollars—you can bring about real change. ☺☺

"One group of 15-year-old boys was really keen on motor cars," says Heenan. The school arranged visits for the students to the Ford education centre, relevant classes at TAFE, a driver education program and enabled them to spend time 'hands-on' with engines.

## Switching kids on

The results of the program amazed the staff—particularly the transformed relationships between students and teachers. "Kids got to see teachers in a different light, not as people at

the front of the class giving orders, but as people willing to learn alongside them," says Heenan.

She will never forget the parent-teacher night when parents chased teachers down corridors to express their joy at their children's eagerness to read better so they could learn more about what interested them.

"We really switched the kids on to the big world out there. They realised learning has a purpose, it isn't something you have to do because you're told to."

Five years later, there have been many other changes. Walls have been pulled down between classrooms to extend learning spaces and allow for team teaching in the junior years. Negotiated individual programs (NIPs) have been introduced for Year 10.

Fawkner has established a partnership with law firm Minter Ellison that provides human and financial resources for further programs, and the school was used as a case study in exploring such partnerships between large and small organisations.

While Heenan believes she and her staff have been daring, she says the small year sizes meant they could not fail. "These days our attendance rate is equivalent to or better than the state benchmark, so there's been a huge turnaround. Our kids really like coming to school and parent surveys have gone through the roof."



## ➔ Briefly

- Schools are reporting impressive results from new ways of engaging students.
- The key is adapting to suit the school community.
- More funding is vital to support innovation in learning.

L-R: Anna Leimonitis,  
Brenda Ahim,  
Alex Casha (teacher),  
and Anthony Simioni.



L-R: Rhashida Elmasri, Jess Sartori (teacher) and Walid Hadi



Teacher planning session: (L-R) Alf Maccarone, Christine Carbone and Warren Harris.

The staffroom is also buzzing with eager conversation about learning and the sharing of expertise.

### Open to everyone

It is quite a challenge for public schools to change, like Fawkner, to fit community needs, says Dr Debra Hayes, associate professor in the School of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Education, at Griffith University in Queensland.

...those kids left their previous school to come here, and 36 per cent come from private schools.

“State schools are open to everyone, so they aren’t able to select or filter their students, and neither should they,” says Hayes. “But a private school can select and then exclude students who don’t meet the school’s criteria, and they have far greater funds and resources for programs.”

Hayes’ research indicates that a real problem is the lowered expectations of students from families with few resources. “There are people, even in

schools, who continue to think this way. We need to put more resources and more energy into schools to help kids do well, rather than lower our expectations of them.”

This is the line taken by Moree Secondary College, in the far north-west of NSW. Targeted by the state government as one of the state’s most disadvantaged schools, it was allocated funding three years ago.

The school decided to improve literacy and numeracy, says head science teacher Justin Longobardi. “We wanted to reduce class sizes and learn more about how to engage students in the classroom. In the first year, 2003, we employed three more staff, and teachers were released from face-to-face teaching to do some research and be part of quality-teaching discussions. Then teachers went back to the classroom to apply the new methods and strategies.”

The funding has also gone towards employing consultants such as Andrew Fuller, a clinical psychologist who specialises in resilience in children, and Eric Frangenheim, who models teaching strategies to engage students.

The indications are that literacy and numeracy are improving. “The great thing is that with real funding—and I mean several hundred thousand dollars—you can bring about real change,” says Longobardi. “When governments recognise how important education is and provide resources, you can really get results.”

Government schools are often limited by lack of time and other resources, says Byrne. “A number of schools’ achievements show what can be done with additional funding. If the resources are there, the students will follow,” she says.

### Culture of trust

Mindarie Senior College, 40km north of Perth, is not short on resources. Established in 2003, it is described as a ‘state of the art’ facility and it has a prestigious award from the Royal Architects Institute of Australia. Set in beautiful grounds, it enjoys sweeping ocean views.

One of the keys to Mindarie’s success is that it caters specifically to Years 11 and 12, says principal Peter Holcz.

“The school culture is so important,” he says. “We

wanted to establish a culture of trust and respect. We went in with this simple vision. I was determined to trust the kids."

For example, the furniture chosen for the auditorium was padded chairs, not plastic, because he was sure the students wouldn't ruin them. "So, even before we started, that was our thinking. We find there's no graffiti in the school. The kids just don't do it."

When Mindarie opened its doors, it had no feeder schools. It was advertised in shopping centres, primary schools and local cinemas, and while the hope was for 160 students, it attracted 320.

"We now have 650," says Holcz, "and what's amazing is that every one of those kids left their previous school to come here, and 36 per cent come from private schools. We simply don't have room for all the students who want to come here."

So what draws the numbers to Mindarie Senior College? Holcz says parents and students who visit are impressed with the atmosphere of trust. Because the school is for young adults, they can come and go between

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**Kerrie Heenan**  
Principal,  
Fawkner  
Secondary  
College

classes, leaving the grounds if they wish. Classes run to a four-day timetable, with Wednesday left free for outside programs, extra tutoring by teachers, or music and drama rehearsals.

Pivotal to Mindarie's success is a mentor system. "Teachers mentor about 17 students each and are responsible for monitoring performance and encouragement, and they are the first point of contact in early intervention."

## Innovation and standards

When schools adapt structures and programs to their school community's needs, they can never lose sight of the specific academic standards required across all schools. Can a creative and innovative approach be balanced with standardisation?

Holcz has no doubt it can. He believes certain innovations support students better than traditional models.

Heenan points to the results of innovation at Fawkner Secondary College as proof. For example, the standard 'one-teacher-to-one-class' model has been replaced with teams of teachers offering thematic integrated learning, and literacy and numeracy continue to improve.

"We're very excited about our programs," says Heenan, "and we more than meet all the state education requirements."●

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