The School with No Gates: Communication

Bourke Public School

Bourke is located in the traditional country of the Ngemba people. Today there are 21 different recognised indigenous language groups including Ngemba, Barkindji, Wangkumara and Murrawari in Bourke.

Bourke is considered to characterize the edge of settled farming lands and the start of the outback as is represented in the reference to “back o’ Bourke”. It is located approximately 800kms north-west of Sydney, on the banks of the Darling River. Initially dismissed as a difficult area for farming due to the harsh dry climate, it was established as a town in the mid-1800s due to its location on the River and potential as a harbor for the flourishing river trade. It is now a region for sheep grazing, but irrigation from the river is also used for fruit and cotton crops.

In the 1880s Bourke became the inland hub for trade with the Cobb & Co company establishing a terminus for trade, and the establishment of the rail in 1885 creating a thriving river and rail trade. It was also a stop-off point for Afghan cameleers. Bourke has many old buildings, many bearing the symbols of its maritime history. The courthouse is unique – on each corner parapet of the court house, the flagpoles are topped with crowns.

Bourke has had a profound impact on a number of significant Australians – Sir Fred Hollows undertook much of his pioneering eye surgery work from the town. He is buried in the local cemetery, so much was his connection to the country. The outback life has also
Defining Success

Bourke Public School has enjoyed relatively consistent success in numeracy outcomes in NAPLAN.

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<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Year 5</td>
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With the new transitions program where pre-school children are being prepared for school, and with many support services now operating within the school, teachers will gain significantly more teaching time and it is anticipated that greater gains will be seen in the future. Already most students are coming to school at the literacy and numeracy levels expected for their age.
Bourke Public School has been on a significant change journey to build attendance and community relationships. It is now enjoying successes. In previous years, local children would commence school without school behaviours which would then take three terms to develop. Most of the Aboriginal children had no experience with schooling prior to commencing in Kindergarten. This meant that this was a significant loss in schooling time – and learning. The students also had little school knowledge in terms of literacy and numeracy. The school implemented a pre-school option for families in which could send their children to pre-school for two days per week. This was a free service offered by the school. The school also encouraged parents to send their children to the community pre-school for other two days so that children were given four days of pre-school experiences. This has resulted in a larger intake of pre-school students which has developed kindergarten students who are school-ready on their first day of schooling. This has meant that students are ready to learn as soon as they enter school and thus are not losing valuable school time to learn school behaviours. This has resulted in most of the Kindergarten students being at age-appropriate level, or close to, by the time they enter school and again as they complete their first year of schooling. Students are starting school with well-developed counting principles and with many of the pre-number skills required for early mathematics learning.

The school has been proactive in their program to instill a confidence in coming to school, enjoying school, and learning school behaviours. Working closely with community members and inter-agency members, the children have the benefit of the usual pre-school activities (as available through the local preschool) as well as learning transitional behaviours so that they will be school ready when they come to the school. Even though there are other schools in the Bourke township, the school offers the service to all families with the specific intent that the school is there to provide for the students and families regardless of whether they will attend Bourke PS or other education providers.
Bourke PS has not specifically focused on numeracy per se but rather taken a much “bigger picture” frame to reform. The school has focused on building attendance under the belief that students need to come to school, feel safe, feel valued, if they are to learn. As such many strategies have been put in place to encourage the students and families to want to come to school. This has resulted in very positive attendance records.

Bourke PS has an attendance regularly of over 90%. In some weeks this is 95% with many classes having 100% attendance, and many students attending 100% of the time. The school has focused on building attendance first, so when the students are at school, learning is possible. This has impacted on the performance of the students. The school also recognizes that while attendance is critical, quality teaching is equally important. This is the next stage in the reform process at the school.

The attendance building has been accompanied by also building relationships with families so that they also feel that they can come to school. Parents are now dropping their children into the school, coming to school for functions, and generally connecting with the school. A number of strategies have been developed to build this re-connecting families to the school. Some strategies have been about bringing families into the school, but also taking the school into the community – the final report night for the year is a family night at the local swimming pool where teachers share reports with the families. There is also a “young mum’s” club where the young mothers in the community can come to the school for parenting, cooking, and technology classes so that the mums and their babies and infants can feel comfortable coming into the school.

Student wellbeing has been a touchstone to the attendance strategy. Not only ensuring that the students have their basic needs being met, but it also means that there are no excuses for not coming to school. If a student doesn’t have shoes, then the school will get them. If there is someone sick, the school will help get them to the doctor. If there is no food for lunch, the school will provide the lunch. Collectively the strategies have meant that the students come to school as there is no reason to stay home!
Student Wellbeing

As in many Aboriginal communities, there are many complex issues that are faced by students, families and communities. Bourke PS has taken on board the need to address student well-being as a priority. Students’ health is a priority so the school has adopted a multi-faceted approach to student wellbeing. The school sees its role as critical in providing the students with a safe, caring and loving environment where the students want to come each day.

Health Care

Considerable teaching and administration time was spent each day caring for students’ health. The school has now established a partnership with the Health Centre who sends a first aid person each morning to address health issues – such as wounds, bandages, dressings etc. This frees up teaching time, allowing teachers to commence each day without these tasks. The students are also looked after by qualified professionals and know that their health is being looked after.

The school has also partnered with a range of professionals – dentists, hearing specialists, ophthalmologists, speech pathologists, etc - to provide a comprehensive one-stop shop for health. By ensuring that the students’ health needs are looked after, then the students are in a better place for their learning.

The local health agencies have been happy to partner with the school in the provision of their services. It has had flow on benefits for them as they also get to know about the families and have been able to improve their outreach to the broader community.

Basic Needs

The school provides a breakfast program for the students who may not have had breakfast prior to coming to school. Being hungry inhibits learning so the program is offered prior to school, and is open to community members as well. Funding for the program has been acquired through a Lions Group in Sydney.

The school also offers an emergency lunch program. This is handled in a discrete manner so that any student who may not have lunch is able to access sandwiches or other foods for lunch. Similarly, if students do not have shoes or uniform, these can be provided by the school. By providing these services, families are not able to have excuses to send their children to school. These services enable students to come to school, and to learn.
Attendance Strategies

The school has implemented a number of important strategies to help build attendance. One key strategy has to been to build positive relationships with families so that families feel safe sending their children to school.

When a teacher commences at the school, and is new to community, the community liaison officer will take the teachers to meet the parents at the homes. Teacher undertake home visits where they share positive stories about the students, as well as any feedback on school performance.

Positive Learning Behaviours

In creating a safe school environment, Bourke has focussed on building a positive learning environment. Students focus on being safe, proud and respectful. These behaviours are named and reinforced as teachers work with the students. The school nurtures these attributes through their “Bluey” program. “Bluey” is a yabby (found in the area) and students are awarded blueys (stickers) for positive behaviours. They then stick their stickers on the large Bluey (located outside the office). When this is full, the school gets a reward – which could be 10 mins extra play.

Students also receive individual rewards that are exchanged for prizes and certificates for positive behaviours.
Bourke PS has worked consistently to build strong relationships with family, community and the various stakeholders within the Bourke community and beyond. The notion of community extends beyond the families to include relationships with businesses and agencies within the Bourke region, but also into areas outside of Bourke. Relationships have been established with health providers, for example, in the Sydney region who will come and work with the students.

Being visible in the wider community has been a strategy adopted by staff at the school. Staff attempt to attend as many community events and meetings as is possible, so that the school is seen to be active within the broader community. This has included events such as sports so that connections can be made with families, but also business meetings so that there can be possibilities of partnering with businesses and agencies.

Families Welcome

Bourke PS has been working to build a welcoming school, one where families and elders feel that they can come and be welcome. This has involved a wide range of strategies where there have been outreach programs to get the school into the wider community and then to bring the community (and families) into the school. Men are encouraged to come to play football with the students so that they can connect with the students on school grounds in an informal and friendly way. Families are now coming into the school for daily activities, to discuss absences with staff, to be involved in activities within the school.

Open Door

Across the school, the open door policy applies to staff as well as families. Families have come to learn that their presence, inputs, advice, reactions are all valued by the school. All staff have an open door to families so that they can feel welcome within the school and that their views are heard (and valued) by the staff.

Community Liaison

There are many levels of community liaison at Bourke. Ranging from the formal positions for community liaison, through to the informal roles played by staff at all levels, there is a focus on liaising positively with the wider community. It is seen to be a key role (and responsibility) of staff to work with families, community and businesses to promote the school and to encourage involvement of all parties in the education and well-being of the students.

One-Stop Shop

Aligned with the previous examples and other sections of this story, Bourke PS has been proactive in acting as a broker and site for many stakeholders in the education and well-being of the students.
Leadership

There is a strong and supportive leadership team at the school. The leadership is a highly developed model, built on the strengths of the team members. There is a team of principal, x deputy principals (sectors of school and behavior); and x assistant principals who work with the stages of schooling and also have teaching loads. There is also the community partnership leader whose role is to work with building relationships with the community. Collectively the team forms the executive at the school.

The leadership team has an open-door policy so that staff all feel welcome at any time to meet with any member of the leadership team to discuss aspects of their work or the operations of the school. The leadership team proactively seeks input from the staff and then acts on that input. There are many forums in which staff can participate, and indeed are expected to participate, so that staff feels a strong connection and ownership of the school.

The leadership team has created a very strong and clear vision for the school, and for the staff. The students are seen as the reason for being at school. The priority for teachers’ work is for the benefit of the students.

There is considerable support from multiple people within the school. A teacher can seek support from the Instructional leader, the Assistant Principal in their area, a Deputy Principal, the Principal or the Community Relationships Leader. Staff felt well supported by all levels of the leadership team and valued the open-door policy of the school whereby they could ask anyone for assistance, advice or to raise concerns, and know that their voice would be heard and concerns addressed.
**Curriculum Leadership - Instructional Leaders**

Within the highly devolved model at the school, there are two key middle leaders – leaders who assume responsibility for curriculum leadership in Numeracy/Mathematics. These roles are referred to as Instructional Leaders, arising from the targeted funding through the Connecting Communities Strategy. Both middle leaders are full time positions. The Connecting Communities funding provided the role for the early years Instructional Leader but recognising the value of the role, the school has appointed another Instructional Leader to work with the other Stages.

The Instructional Leaders serve a key role in the professional learning of the teachers. The Instructional Leaders in the two sectors of school seek to build the understandings of the teachers as to how students learn mathematics. All teachers access one hour each week of professional learning via the Instructional Leader. The session could include topics around student learning, planning for students’ needs, or interpreting data and then devising ways to act on that data. They also provide teachers with feedback on lessons, model lessons and support teachers in their planning and assessment. Large amounts of resources are provided to teachers to use as the basis of lessons, which they can adapt for their particular classes.

**Organising for Learning**

The school is structured around Stages rather than year levels. Stage 1 is K-1-2, Stage 2 is Yrs 1-2, Stage 3 Yrs 3-4; and Stage 4 is Yrs 5-6. The students are grouped by achievement in literacy and mathematics, and have home classes. With literacy being the first session of the day, and numeracy being the second, students move between groups, depending on their assignment to classes. As with most Aboriginal communities, there is considerable diversity within a classroom, so Bourke has adopted a model where classes are flexible and are tailored to meet the literacy/numeracy levels of the students.

Teachers are assigned to classes and may take, for example, a high achieving mathematics class but a low achieving literacy class, as well as being responsible for a home class. In this way, teachers work with most of the students in any stage level due to the flexibility of the classes. This model helps to build the strong relationships with each child which is a key part of the philosophy of the school.
Benefits for Learning and Learners

The overarching attendance and wellbeing strategies of Bourke PS have resulted in significant changes in school attendance. Students attending school, and feeling safe, has transferred to engagement and success in learning, particularly in mathematics. Learning also applies to teachers, so having support for teachers to developing their knowledge about teaching, and assessment, in mathematics is critical to building quality learning outcomes – for teachers and students.

Advice to Teachers

First and foremost, ask yourself, is what you are doing for the benefit of the students? This should be the priority in teaching. The students are the reason for the school’s presence, so they should be the priority in decision making.

Creating a welcoming and safe environment is foremost in learning. If students (and families) feel safe and valued, then they are more likely to attend, and attendance creates opportunities for learning.

Teaching should start with knowing where students’ learning is located. By identifying current levels of understandings, as opposed to hunches or assuming what students may know, teachers can target learning activities to consolidate and extend students’ mathematical learning.

Having targeted support for teacher learning builds teacher knowledge about the teaching of mathematics.

Building quality teams across the school, and recognising and valuing input creates an environment where staff, students and families are happy.
The model adopted at Bourke has been focused on attendance and wellbeing rather than mathematics per se. In more recent times, there is now a focus on numeracy and good practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Principle</th>
<th>Implications for mathematics</th>
<th>Focused strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build attendance</td>
<td>If students are attending school, they will be able to learn mathematics.</td>
<td>There are many general strategies outlined in the report to build attendance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student well-being</td>
<td>Feeling safe, well and basic needs being met, allows students to learn.</td>
<td>Many strategies have been built around well-being and in so doing have created spaces for learning mathematics.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Vision and leadership                     | Articulating and sharing a vision for the school, where students are the priority creates positive learning spaces for students. | Clearly articulated vision with pathways to enact that vision.  
  Supporting staff in open and collegial ways builds confidence, trust and professionalism.  
  Devolved models of leadership and teams of learners build a strong culture of learning within the school, and mathematics. |
| Supporting teachers’ professional learning in mathematics | Teachers develop skills and knowledge to implement quality teaching, assessment and learning for students. | Create middle leadership positions to support teacher learning.  
  Provide support for teachers to build quality practices in school mathematics.  
  Use data to inform teaching, support teachers in the collection, interpretation and actions arising from assessments to create targeted teaching in mathematics. |
Key Messages – Summary

Communication is central to success. Building trust and rapport with staff and within the staffing community builds a strong school.

While Bourke has focused on the wellbeing of the students and attendance which has had the flow-on effect for numeracy learning, they are now building the numeracy programs so as not to plateau.

Students need to attend school and feel safe if they are to learn. Building a school culture where students (and families) want to come requires many strategies and consistency in approach.

Teachers value the support from leaders in building a strong learning culture – for both students and staff.

Instructional leaders (middle leaders) enable the vision of the school to be enacted at the level of the classroom. New teachers need to be supported in the early career development and long term teachers also value input into new approaches to teaching. Having good support for teachers to be able to develop quality learning in mathematics can be assisted through in-school support.

School Demographics

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year range</td>
<td>U, K-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total enrolments</td>
<td>215</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Very Remote</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICSEA (school)</td>
<td>738</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICSEA (distribution of students)</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTE teaching staff</td>
<td>21.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-teaching staff</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTE non-teaching staff</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indigenous students %</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrolments: Girls/Boys</td>
<td>102/113</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language background other than English</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student attendance rate %</td>
<td>92%</td>
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