Woolgoolga High School

Building community relationships, engagement and consultation

Context

Woolgoolga High School is located near Coffs Harbour on the north coast of NSW. With a student population of 900, the school caters for a diverse range of students including 10 percent who identify as Aboriginal, and an increasing number of refugee families, predominantly of Sudanese and Congolese backgrounds. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) rating of 110 (2015-2016 average). The school’s priority is to build strong relationships with the community and at least three of the school’s major programs have involved extensive consultative decision making.

Enhancing community consultation

1. Partnership with the Chamber of Commerce: The school sought the support of the Woolgoolga Northern Beaches Chamber of Commerce to enhance the delivery of programs related to the career development of students. Chamber of Commerce members and retired professionals were invited to monthly meetings to plan an annual careers day. Chamber members supported the school by providing expert presenters and mentors. They were from professions identified by students in a school developed survey of careers choices. Following the careers day, students maintained contact with presenters through work experience placements or mentor relationships.

2. Engaging the Aboriginal community: The school has actively engaged the Aboriginal community through various initiatives. These include the establishment of a homework centre, the employment of Aboriginal staff and the introduction of the teaching of the local Aboriginal language, Gumbaynggirr. This was introduced following an extensive community consultation process which recommended the teaching of the language to students.

3. The SMILE Program: The SMILE (Support Mentor Inspire Listen Encourage) program was initiated by senior students who recognised the need for extra support for some junior students and proposed a peer mentor program. Training is provided for 15-20 senior students over two school days, supported by community agencies that are actively involved in planning the program and also provide financial support. The SMILE program continues to be planned collaboratively with students maintaining ownership. Community meetings where students speak about the program are held regularly.

Achievements

1. Partnership with the Chamber of Commerce: The strong relationship developed with the Chamber of Commerce has resulted in the collaborative planning of a number of highly successful careers days for students at the school. The number of students undertaking work experience has doubled with many students who participated in Year 10 choosing to return in Years 11 and 12.

2. Engaging the Aboriginal community: Attendance at the homework centre has significantly increased, as has the engagement of the Aboriginal community in the school’s programs. The Gumbaynggirr language has been successfully added to the school’s teaching and learning program, taught by a languages teacher. All Year 7 students are provided with 100 hours of instruction in the Gumbaynggirr language.

3. The SMILE Program: Evidence-based research into SMILE has shown that student attendance has increased and behavioural issues have decreased. Suspension rates have more than halved since the introduction of the program. SMILE also provides leadership opportunities for students. As a result of their presentations at the community meetings, students have been invited to present at community events and at Youth Mental Health network meetings.

Sustainability

The school plans to continue with the existing programs to build the capacity of the community. The school and the Chamber of Commerce intend to include students in the planning and running of events. Plans are in place to ensure that the teaching of Gumbaynggirr continues. The Aboriginal education worker is undertaking training at the University of Sydney and will commence teaching the Gumbaynggirr language. Students will train, support and encourage new mentors in their roles in the SMILE program.

For more information on Woolgoolga High School visit their website.