

The Yarra Schools Consortium - An Active Learning Community

The Yarra Schools Consortium is a group of nine DEECD schools in the inner city area of Melbourne. The Consortium comprises Abbotsford Primary School, Collingwood College, Collingwood English Language School, Fitzroy Primary School, Lynall Hall Community School, Melbourne Girls' College, Richmond Primary School, Richmond West Primary School and Yarra Primary School.

The nine principals of the Yarra Schools Consortium have traditionally formed an active collegiate group, meeting at least twice each month. In 2003, whilst defining their own role and possible future directions as a group, a shared vision was recognised. The group wished to further develop the links between the nine schools and in doing so, work towards the development of an enhanced "Consortium Culture".

The group recognised that the most effective approach would be to establish some shared work or projects between the schools. In doing this, the group discerned some common aims around improving student learning outcomes, and combating rising levels of student absenteeism. As a result the School Participation Project and the Schools for Innovation and Excellence Program have been developed and implemented and have led to enhanced and newly developed relationships between the nine Consortium schools

The focus in the Consortium has been on the formation and operation of the following Consortium Learning Teams:

- Principals
- Assistant Principals
- Early Years
- Middle Years
- Success for Boys
- Wellbeing
- School Participation and Attendance
- Business Managers
- Student Transitions

Representatives on these groups are Consortium teachers and personnel who meet regularly to establish common professional learning including ideas on classroom approaches and other school initiatives as well as to share resources. The teams also provide an opportunity for enhancement of *Performance and Development Culture* initiatives through collegiate support

These learning teams have provided the stage and back drop for the development of strong relationships between the Consortium schools. These relationships can be defined as **The Nine Cs in the Yarra Schools Community**:

1. **Coalition: formation of a strategic partnership to support joint projects.**

The schools of the Yarra Schools Consortium recognise the value of a group of schools combining their complementary capacities to work strategically towards desired outcomes. Together they have been able to articulate **shared values and**

vision of a community approach to improving student outcomes, and have recognised the value of implementing joint projects. As a result the School Participation Project and the Schools for Innovation and Excellence projects have been initiated with agreement on clear goals, desired outcomes and the strategies needed to achieve these goals and outcomes.

2. Coordination: managed and organised use of shared resources and experiences.

The Consortium schools led by the Principals Group have managed the employment of the School Participation Officer and the SIE educator to establish strategic direction and to oversee and coordinate all aspects of Consortium projects. This has resulted in the subsequent formation of learning teams to focus on and implement the major strategic direction of the projects. This has involved clear definition of roles and responsibilities of the learning teams including a cooperative service delivery model for the project officer and educator resources. Management strategies implemented include the establishment of a central project office and the appointment of coordinating schools to manage the project funds and to facilitate human resource functions for the employment of the personnel.

3. Commitment: assurance made by each of the member schools that they will participate in and contribute to the joint project.

The School Participation Project and the SIE Program have enjoyed high levels of ownership and commitment from the leaders and key staff of all the Consortium schools. Each school has had designated representation on all learning teams and there has been full and regular attendance at meetings. This involvement has required individual school support of staff time release when necessary. Each school has fully recognised and demonstrated ownership of the project strategic plans.

4. Communication: reporting and sharing of ideas, knowledge and learning.

Regular, well-structured and purposeful meetings form a crucial part of the scaffolding for the work of the Consortium. Priority time is given in these meetings for the **sharing of ideas, knowledge and learning** and meetings are held on a rotational basis between all the school settings. Each team prepares detailed and well-circulated agendas and minutes and there is regular email and telephone contact made between staff in all schools. Staff visits, including classroom observation, to other Consortium schools are commonplace. Pivotal to the effective communication between all groups and all personnel involved in the project is the preparation of detailed monthly reports by the learning teams. The work is also widely profiled beyond the Consortium by regular detailed input to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as well as other community groups and agencies.

5. Cooperation: mutual assistance and teamwork between the Consortium schools.

Teamwork between the schools has been established through the cooperative use of the School Participation Officer and SIE Educator resource and the establishment of well functioning learning teams. The establishment of **shared programs** and initiatives such as student transition programs, professional learning activities, exhibitions and forums and the initiation of shared parent and student casework allow genuine teamwork to be of mutual benefit to schools. Schools have further assisted each other through the regular **sharing of facilities and resources**.

6. Collaboration: enhancement of the capacities of partner schools for mutual benefit and shared purpose.

All schools have actively involved in the planning and setting of priorities for the Consortium projects. This has resulted in agreement on shared approaches and the development of shared resources and tools. A major point of collaboration has been the development of the Consortium protocols, which articulate **shared policies and procedures**. All schools work actively together in all aspects of project decision-making.

7. Complementary capacity: recognition that the similarities and differences between the participating schools can be utilised to improve outcomes for all schools.

The distinct nature of each of the Consortium schools has been recognised and celebrated. Consortium schools have adopted the title and identity of *The Yarra Schools Consortium*. Learning teams have articulated that they accept collective responsibility for the learning outcomes of all students in all Consortium schools. There has been an acceptance at all levels that individual schools had differing capacities for improvement and there is also recognition and endorsement of some schools requiring more project support than others. Consortium schools regularly and enthusiastically support events and achievements in the other schools and recognise the responsibility and benefit of allocation of some project time to inform the wider community.

8. Critical reflection: use of an action research approach enabled by inbuilt processes and structures.

Learning teams adopt an action research and evidence based approach ensuring regular reflection, analysis of data and discussion of key learning. The learning from research from individual schools is communicated between all schools. The working groups pay special attention to the analysis of annual Consortium and individual school data to inform their work. The teams continually keep abreast of new directions and learning through the maintenance of regular professional reading and research as well as contact with similar projects and other good practice models. External evaluators and critical friends have been engaged to support Consortium projects.

9. Celebration: recognition and commemoration of collective and individual successes.

All Consortium meetings have a focus on acknowledgements and the reporting and celebration of good news. This approach is supported by regular reporting of all project initiatives to staff forums and in newsletters in each school. There is regular communication and affirmation of the recognition received by the Consortium and individual schools for the good practice adopted in the project. Publicity about the successes of the projects has also been gained through major press and television coverage as well as regular profiling of the projects to the wider community through input at professional learning forums

The schools of the Yarra Schools Consortium demonstrate how collective action around shared policy can produce significant outcomes that impact on student performance. There is clear evidence of improvement in teacher and staff professional confidence and competence, student learning outcomes, student attendance and student and parent connectedness to the schools and wider community.

Through the articulation of shared values and vision and the implementation of projects underpinned by the establishment of evidence based professional learning team approaches, the Yarra Schools Consortium has transformed into an active and effective learning community

Adapted from Pinda,Z and Walta, C Getting Clever with Attendance - The report of the Yarra Schools Network School Participation Project Addressing Issues of Student Absenteeism September 2006