

Thought Leaders Together - Abstract for ICP Conference Singapore 2009

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This workshop will explore the work of a highly effective network of nine extremely diverse government schools in the inner city area of Melbourne, Australia. Much of the student cohort is drawn from local high rise public housing.

The Principals have established a coalition around shared work and recognition of common vision, and in doing so have utilised the complementary capacities of each of the schools to improve student attendance and engagement, student learning and the professional capacity and confidence of staff.

This exciting work has been scaffolded by the formation of Professional Learning Teams and the following guiding principles can be identified:

1. Thought Leadership enables action
2. Shared moral imperative is powerful
3. Evidence based improvement leads to sustainable change
4. Diversity equals enrichment
5. Successful Learning should be for all
6. Shared resources expand individual capacities
7. Strategic relationships build communities

Through the enlightened and decisive action of this group of thought leaders, this network has transformed into an active and effective learning community. This network demonstrates how collective action around shared vision and policy can produce significant outcomes that not only impact on student learning and the professional competence and confidence of all staff, but also lead to enhanced community connectedness.

What is the Yarra Schools Consortium?

The Yarra Schools Consortium is a group of nine extremely diverse schools in the inner city area of Melbourne Australia. Originally the group was formed as an administrative cluster of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, but has since remained as an independent entity after recent restructuring of Department networks of schools.

THE SCHOOLS OF THE YARRA SCHOOLS CONSORTIUM

School	Description	Approx Student Pop 2009.
Abbotsford PS	Small P-6 with most students from local high rise public housing estate. Chinese bilingual program.	90
Collingwood ELS	It is a combined primary and secondary school, which provides full time, intensive English courses for newly-arrived migrants and refugees prior to their enrolment in a mainstream school or further education. Length of stay in the school is generally from 6-12 months.	130
Collingwood College P-12	International Accredited school with Steiner and Reggio Emilia streams as well as two alternative campuses for Work education and alienated students.	580
Fitzroy Primary School	P-6 school catering for culturally diverse local students who are predominantly from local high rise public housing.	150
Lynall Hall Community School	7-12 school catering for students who for a variety of reasons are seeking an alternative to mainstream schools.	130
Melbourne Girls' College	7-12 girls' college catering for local community as well as students from all over Melbourne.	1300
Richmond PS	P-6 school catering for local students who are predominantly from mid socio economic groups.	220
Richmond West PS	P-6 school with most students from local high rise public housing. Chinese and Vietnamese bilingual programs.	170
Yarra PS	P-6 school catering for local students who are predominantly from mid socio economic groups.	160

The nine Principals of the Yarra Schools Consortium have had a long history of collaboration and collegiality, with daily email contact and meeting each month in a local cafe. It was on this foundation that the subsequent joint work of the group was laid.

Why are the Principals of the Yarra Schools Consortium Thought leaders?

A thought leader can be described as a futurist or person who is recognized among peers and mentors for their innovative ideas and demonstrates the confidence to promote or share those ideas as actionable distilled insights¹. The Principals of the Yarra Schools Network can be identified as thought leaders as they have:

- Looked beyond the immediate context to creating new knowledge and ways of operation through demonstration and evidence
- Been courageous and confident in committing time and resources to projects outside their immediate accountabilities
- Converted their shared vision into achievable action
- Focused on small improvements which have eventually resulted in sustainable change
- Taken the requirements and accountabilities of the system and made them their own but with a critical and slightly rebellious edge

What has been established in the Yarra Schools Consortium?

Since June 2006 the Principals have implemented three major joint projects:

1. **School Participation Project** – The major focus of this project was on improving student attendance and engagement through the development of a whole school model.
2. **Success for Boys Project** – The major focus of this project was creating educational opportunities and environments which enable successful learning for all students.
3. **The Professional Learning Program** – The major focus of this program is on providing highly effective professional learning opportunities for all staff.

Each of these projects have been sustained over a number of years and have an emphasis on shared learning action research approaches embedded in the work of the classroom teacher and other practitioners. The work has been coordinated and driven by appointed full time project officers.

The main activity has been the establishment of nine professional learning teams, all of which have met regularly. These teams are:

- Principals
- Assistant Principals
- Student Attendance
- Middle Years Teachers
- Early Years Teachers
- Student Wellbeing
- Success for Boys
- Business Managers and Bursars
- Student Transition

There has also been an afterschool professional learning program established with schools participating in joint activities at least twice in each of the four terms. The schools have also participated in school visits and classroom observation opportunities.

One of the most powerful initiatives has been the facilitation of annual Consortium expos where the professional learning teams have been able to share their learning with all staff from all schools.

This work of the professional learning teams has also been documented in three Consortium publications:

- Getting Clever with Attendanceⁱⁱ
- Getting Clever with Student learningⁱⁱⁱ
- Success for Boys Success for All^{iv}

How has this work been achieved?

It can be recognised that the work of the Yarra Schools Consortium has been underpinned by the following guiding principles:

1. Thought Leaders enable action

The Yarra Consortium Principals have ensured both the implementation and sustainability of the joint work through:

- Taking the requirements and initiatives of the system and making them their own rather than being crippled by “the enemy is out there” or “Big Brother” mentality
- Getting down to converting ideas into action as soon as possible through taking calculated risks

- Demonstrating high levels of ownership of and commitment to the work of the coalition
- Giving structural support in their own schools and to all of the joint initiatives e.g. arranging time release for staff to attend PLT meetings
- Creatively sourcing funding from both government and non government bodies to support the projects
- Demonstrating shared leadership through the employment of project officers to drive and facilitate the initiatives

2. Shared moral imperative is powerful

The Principals of the Yarra schools Consortium have recognised the power of laying a solid foundation for all joint work by establishing a clear direction underpinned by shared understandings. This has been achieved by:

- Regular rigorous and honest professional dialogue
- Clear articulation of shared vision and values
- Identification of shared challenges and their impact in each of the schools
- Clear definition of roles and responsibilities at all levels of the joint initiatives
- The development of workable protocol documents including:
 - ❖ Enrolment
 - ❖ Student Attendance
 - ❖ Use of data
 - ❖ Student Learning
 - ❖ Student Wellbeing

3. Evidence based continuous improvement leads to sustainable change.

Recognition of the need to rigorously monitor and evaluate the work of the Consortium has been central to the strategic approach adopted. This has been achieved by:

- Adoption of evidence based and action research approaches
- Identification of clear and achievable goals and targets and articulation of these in project strategic plans and implementation plans
- Gathering of regular reports and feedback from the professional learning teams
- Scheduling of meetings twice each month so that detailed written reports are tabled
- Engagement of external critical friends, mentors and evaluators for each of the projects
- Utilisation of data to guide but not dominate the work

- Identification and celebration of all success
- Regular contact with other good practice projects and with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

4. Diversity leads to enrichment

The diverse nature of each of the nine schools could ordinarily be seen as a barrier to establishing common ground for shared work. However, the Yarra Principals recognised a rare opportunity to harness this difference to not only enrich each of the schools but also build the local community. They recognised that this could be achieved by:

- Fostering a culture where difference between the schools is expected, identified and celebrated
- Focusing on challenges that are shared in each of the settings and contexts
- Facilitating meetings that enable the voice of all participants
- Rotating the venues for meetings and activities between each of the schools so that all staff become familiar with the work in each school
- Recognising and celebrating successes in all schools

5. Successful learning should be for all

The Principals have encouraged the development of a Consortium culture where the learning of all the members of the community is encouraged and fostered. This is achieved by:

- Developing programs which focus on providing quality learning opportunities for all members of the school communities
- Recognising that all students regardless of background or circumstance can learn and have a right to learn
- Focusing on programs which lead to the development of whole school approaches
- Supporting a culture which recognises collective responsibility for the learning of all students in all schools
- Enabling opportunities where the learning of staff can be shared between schools

6. Shared resources expand individual capacities

Many of the participating schools have decreasing enrolments due to demographic changes in the local area and are at times challenged with inadequate funding and resources. Central

to the joint work has been recognition that the economies of scale created by partnerships can supplement the resources in each school. It has also been recognised that each of the schools has resources which can be readily shared to enrich other schools and to also minimise duplication. This sharing has been achieved by:

- Joint employment of project officers and other shared staff
- Adoption of a cooperative service delivery model for the shared personnel
- Establishment of a central office to administer the shared projects
- Developing joint submissions to attract funding for projects and programs
- Encouraging teaching staff to conduct shared planning sessions
- Shared use of individual school facilities
- Organisation case meetings with parents of students in more than one school
- Establishment of blogs and a SharePoint for curriculum materials
- Development of shared materials such as newsletter items and brochures
- Regular telephone and email communication between staff in the different schools

7. Strategic partnerships build communities

Shared work which is purposeful and strategic can not only break down the fences between schools but can also lead to the development of a discernible network culture and identity and ultimately an enhanced sense of community. In the Yarra Consortium this has been achieved by:

- Active marketing of the group of schools as a united entity- *The Yarra Schools Consortium*
- Development of active partnerships between the Consortium and other community groups and agencies
- Publishing and sharing the learning of the Consortium at all levels of the system

Success of the Work of the Yarra Schools Consortium

The work of the Yarra Schools Consortium is widely recognised not only for the learning generated in each of the schools but also for the new knowledge created which is of relevance to all schools and networks and for the system as a whole. Success of the work is indicated by:

- The work has been sustained for a period of six years and has continued even though the Consortium is now part of a larger network following a restructuring by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
- Identifiable improved student learning outcomes
- Improved levels of student attendance
- Teachers compete for the limited number of positions available on the professional learning teams and all meetings are fully attended. This is even more significant when it is recognised that most of these meetings are now held out of school hours.
- Teacher survey feedback indicates that they feel increased confidence and professional capacity. They state that Consortium programs have led to expanded repertoires of pedagogy and that they are now better able to also influence the learning of their colleagues. Feedback surveys from teacher observers confirm this evidence.
- Increased willingness and confidence of staff for visits and observations between schools.
- Staff feedback indicating that there is a discernible sense of belonging to the Consortium entity
- The Student Attendance model developed during the School Participation Project has not only markedly improved attendance in the Consortium schools but has gone on to inform Government policy and practice. The model is used in regions throughout Victoria as well as in some districts internationally. This work has also been widely acknowledged in the local media.
- The Consortium model for network operation is now informing the development of other local networks of schools.

Conclusion

The Principals of the Yarra Schools Consortium have established a coalition around shared work and recognition of common vision, and in doing so have utilised the complementary capacities of each of the schools to improve student attendance, engagement and learning as well as the professional capacity and confidence of staff.

Through the enlightened and decisive action of this group of thought leaders, this network has transformed into an active and effective learning community.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thought_leader

ⁱⁱ Pinda, Z and Walta, *Getting Clever with Attendance* – The report of the Yarra Schools Network School Participation Project exploring issues of student absenteeism 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Burton, P and Pinda, Z *Getting Clever with Student Learning* - Teacher and Student Learning in The Yarra Schools Consortium – An Active Learning Community 2007

^{iv} Pinda, Z *Success for Boys Success for All* – The work of the Yarra Schools Consortium Success for Boys Professional Learning team