

OPINION – ACSSO’s Guest Columnists address values-driven issues in education

NB: the opinions presented by guest columnists do not necessarily represent the current policy position of ACSSO

A JOURNEY TO RECONCILIATION –

WALKING FORWARD TOGETHER, STEP BY STEP...

Narrabundah Primary School in ACT has been recognised with the National AEU Arthur Hamilton Reconciliation Award for 2006. Here Principal Trish Keller and her team outline the stages of their community journey so far

Narrabundah Primary School, opened in 1964 is a small centrally located neighbourhood government school in the Australian Capital Territory. Initially it served a large though transient Australian and migrant community. Over the last decade the school population has declined considerably to around 90 students and now caters primarily for a small mainstream and Indigenous community, for whom transience remains a fact of life. The school is in an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage as identified by the Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage 2001. This indicates that much of the local population live with less than 60% of the national median income and experience high rates of unemployment and rented housing (including caravan parks, refuges, government flats). The Schools Equity Fund Advisory Group has identified Narrabundah Primary School as a priority school for funding.

The range of cultural diversity is large with the current indigenous enrolment of almost 50%. This diversity helps to characterize the special nature of Narrabundah Primary School.

As is the case with most communities the makeup of Narrabundah Primary School's immediate catchment area is diverse and in many ways differentiated. Families at ease with themselves co-exist with individuals and disjointed groups who experience social and economic realities with degrees of reluctance and difficulty. The pressures of urban living face all, but some are better equipped and disposed to deal with them more effectively than others. It is such an area that Narrabundah Primary School serves and in so doing offers the opportunity of both self and community enhancement to the children that are part of its programs and environment.

Inclusivity is the principle that underpins the educational practices of this small but diverse population. As an inclusive school we focus on making education better for all of our students and, in particular, for those at the margins of schooling to enable them to engage with the curriculum and the life of the school. Inclusivity and respect for all are the key features of the school. We strive to strengthen the capacity of our students to cope with negative life influences by building resilience. Our daily challenge is to maintain the safe and supportive environment we have created. We are achieving the situation with innovative programming and through cross-agency collaboration.

Narrabundah Primary has created and implemented numerous best practice examples of Inclusivity over the past seven years and these include:

Yerrabi Pathways – a school wide social skilling program. Its continuing success is because of its wholistic approach and consistency of implementation. It was constructed to achieve significant improvement in learning outcomes for all students and premised on the belief that social skills are vital for healthy growth and development. Through its design, development and implementation our extremely passionate and dedicated staff was determined to push the boundaries to make a difference in the learning outcomes of our students. We created our own data base to record incidents and consequently with the consistent approach we have taken over the past six years there has been a sharp decline in classroom and playground incidents and in 2005 no suspensions were made.

Kootara Well – a health and well-being program is a joint commitment to crossing boundaries to achieve health and wellbeing outcomes for the school population with extra needs. Kootara Well relies on the cooperation of cross-sectoral agencies enhancing community networks and bringing together on-site medical, social and health education services thereby facilitating greater access to these services for our students, their families and the community. Kootara Well is a non-threatening environment for parents, carers and the community with easy access to Dr Peter Sharp, a GP at Winnunga Nimmityjah, who provides a bulk billing service every week. Priority arrangements with service providers can be made for follow-up treatment. Dr Bill Glasson, immediate past president of the AMA is patron of Kootara Well.

On Track – this Boys and now Girls Program was created to support Aboriginal boys who needed a different approach to learning. This very flexible, early intervention, alternative education approach now supports the most vulnerable, underperforming and at risk boys and girls. In the first instance this program was created for just the students at Narrabundah Primary. We sought grant funding and were awarded \$300,000.00 over three years from the ACT Chief Minister's Community Inclusion Fund. Students from across twenty-two ACT government primary schools now access this program which is based at Narrabundah Primary. On Track has business partners in Aboriginal Youth Corporation, Gagan Gulwan, and Birrigai Outdoor Education Centre.

Daily School Breakfast Program – The operation of the Breakfast Program was increased from three to five days in 2000. The program has been described by a paediatrician from Westmead Hospital as the most important program we have. Healthy breakfast is prepared for every child every morning by a roster of parent volunteers and staff. The President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Bill Glasson has commended Narrabundah Primary School on its 'innovative and compassionate approach to health and learning and helping disadvantaged families give their kids a healthier start to their lives'. Food is sponsored by local businesses. The program provides a social skilling opportunity every day.

Guided Reading Program-. The specific educational objectives of the Guided Reading Program were to create a level playing field for our students, the majority of whom are severely disadvantaged and present with social and

emotional concerns. The impact of the home environment of many students is detrimental to their academic development.

Our actions in implementing the Guided Reading Program emphasizes that literacy is core business. The ACT Department of Education and Training's suite of action plans has as a commitment that schools will provide relevant and challenging learning opportunities for all students. The Guided Reading Program fulfils that commitment to our students. Thus we have been able to seek support from the Department's Numeracy and Literacy Team and the Indigenous Education Unit.

A very important benefit of the Guided Reading Program is increasing self-esteem, development of which is crucial in the early years, confidence and a willingness to take risks with learning, resulting in students demonstrating a greater receptiveness to continuing learning.....success breeding success.

The School Board has ensured that a budget line is allocated and appropriate funding has been allocated to retain the three Special Teachers Assistants for another year (2006) thus maximizing the consistency of our approach. The implementation of flexible structures and practices maximizes access to and equity for our disadvantaged students. Not to do so would impose yet another significant barrier to our students, the majority of whom come from circumstances that are considerably diminished. Funding for resources to keep them current and meaningful is a priority.

Bundah Booris Dance Group- Narrabundah Primary School is a place that honours and practices Indigenous culture and traditions. The dance group, the Bundah Booris, which means Bundah, as in short for Narrabundah, Kids, is another true valuing of Indigenous culture. The group is trained by a Wirradjuri man and the group is invited to perform at a variety of venues including in 2006 Floriade, United Nations Day celebration, the Unions ACT Dinner, the Student To Industry Dinner, the early Childhood Conference opening, at Erindale College assembly (we have a Buddy school arrangement with the college) and departmental functions. The Bundah Booris regularly lead the whole school in a welcome dance when important visitors come to Narrabundah Primary.

Friends of Narrabundah is a group of friends, relations and supporters of the principal and the school, established in 2002, who provide Narrabundah Primary with financial support.

Diabetes Care and Management Program - was the first urban setting for this program out of Western Australia and was implemented at Narrabundah Primary School during Terms 2 and 3, 2005. We worked in partnership with Ernie Bridge, OAM, JP and the Unity of First People of Australia. The links that have been formed with the parents, agencies and other community members are valuable. The program complemented all of our health and well-being programs. The early intervention message was delivered to the children loud and clear. We continue our links with Diabetes Australia and UFPA through Kootara Well and Winnunga Nimmityjah.

We fly all the flags on a daily basis; we acknowledge country at school gatherings and at meetings. We employ Aboriginal people in our school. We have an Aboriginal woman as School Board Chair and other Aboriginal parents are members of the various P&C committees.

There is no doubt there have been many reconciliation achievements in education, health and community building and much has been achieved at Narrabundah Primary School in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Every day we are working toward reconciliation not just in our programs but in terms of shifts in thinking and attitudinal change. The journey continues.....

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- *Find out more about Narrabundah primary School at their website:*
<http://www.narrabundahps.act.edu.au/>