A twinning project helps build capacity in two neighbouring schools.
By Madeleine Regan

The image supported Noack as he developed the concept of a twinning partnership between two Catholic schools: St Joachim’s, where he was principal, and St Anne’s Parish Primary School. Both schools are in a large Catholic parish on the Mornington Peninsula, about 45 kilometres south of Melbourne.

Established in 1987, St Joachim’s at Carrum Downs catered for the developing outer suburban population. Almost 20 years earlier in 1968, St Anne’s Parish Primary School was built in the new suburb and parish of Seaford. The individual schools, 5 kilometres away from each other in the parish, have distinctive histories, experiences of teaching and learning, cultures and families. The Parish Priest is responsible for the governance of the schools.

THE RATIONALE FOR THE TWINNING PROJECT
In 2011, St Anne’s faced an uncertain future with challenges related to falling enrolments, school administration and ageing facilities. In contrast, St Joachim’s had experienced a strong culture of teaching and learning over five years, reflected in improved student learning outcomes and enrolment trends. With an emphasis on strengthening St Anne’s, the Parish Priest and Noack explored options to adapt and share policies, structures and learnings between both schools.

After considerable research, a proposal for a twinning partnership between the two schools was developed. In late 2011, with an opportunity for appointing a new principal at St Anne’s, the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne approved the three-year twinning project for commencement in the new school year. The expectation was that St Anne’s would be re-established as a flourishing school with strong leadership, a deep professional learning culture and connected community within the parish. It was also an opportunity to renew collaboration between the two schools. Noack was appointed co-ordinating principal and worked closely with the Parish Priest and newly appointed assistant principals in each school.

WHAT IS TWINNING?
The twinning partnership was based on the idea of town twinning. It’s a structure that fosters relationships and cultural connections between towns or cities with similar demographics. The model has been adapted for use in European Union countries with schools and training organisations, particularly for eLearning. The philosophy, principles and practice are outlined in a paper the Serbian Government published in 2006.

Noack saw that twinning could strengthen the capacity of each school as a separate organisation, an outcome demonstrated in the Serbian paper. In a progress report after the first year, Noack stated: “Twinning partnerships do not work to create an amalgam of two schools, but rather seek to bring out the best in each community through the spiritual, professional and personal ability and knowledge of each participant.”

The three-year period allowed sufficient time to facilitate collaboration through cultural change and school improvement. The main goal in the first year was to develop a new leadership framework for St. Anne’s, adapting policies, practices, expectations, organisational structures and templates from St Joachim’s. Other important elements were sharing high expectations for teaching and learning between the two schools, building different levels of leadership and allocating joint resources. The second year was a period of consolidation and growth of the organisational structures, strengthening the learning environment for students, improving the learning facilities and emphasising professional learning. The focus in year three was building independence through strong leadership roles in each school and acknowledgement of the separate identities.

SHARING LEADERSHIP
One of the first steps was to put in place new arrangements for shared leadership and professional learning. With each assistant principal, Noack identified curriculum leaders for religious education, teaching and learning and literacy and numeracy. Resources particular to each school, such as the performing arts hall at St Anne’s and the basketball stadium at St Joachim’s, were shared, and specialist teachers in physical education and the arts worked between the schools.

At first, teachers in both schools expressed uncertainty about what changes would result from the twinning. The innovative professional learning framework was one of the early developments. Teaching staff across both schools were
allocated four hours a week outside the classroom: two hours for professional learning and study and two more hours for planning in teams. Teachers were required to read contemporary educational research and report on how they applied the knowledge to their classroom practice. This increased broader collegial collaboration and a well-defined learning community.

Staff meetings were important mechanisms for sharing, discussing and applying the partnership vision. Each school had weekly meetings, and joint meetings were held every two to three weeks to examine teaching and learning theory and practice. Minutes of meetings were analysed through three questions: Is this matter about the needs of students? Is it about resources? Or is it about a professional challenge? As Noack says: “This kind of evaluation sharpened our conversations. It increased reflection. We were using common language, exploring common professional challenges and gaining new perspectives about our practice. Colleagues were supporting each other, schools were supporting each other.”

**MANY IMPROVEMENTS**

By 2013 St Anne’s enrolments had increased, student attendance had improved and there were financial gains. Data measuring organisational and teaching climates showed progress, and the indicator for community engagement increased by nearly 13 per cent. NAPLAN scores also demonstrated positive changes in student achievement for the cohort tested as Year 3 in 2011. Other achievements included strong leadership and staffing, and a robust professional learning framework for teachers that clearly improved opportunities for students in both schools. The shared professional learning was an essential underpinning for all staff that Noack says was valued highly by those involved in the twinning project, and is sustainable.

**EMPOWERING EACH SCHOOL**

Noack says it’s critical to limit a twinning project to three years: “There’s a need for a single vision in a school and each school deserves its own vision and autonomy.” By the end of 2014 he was satisfied that the original goals set for the project had been achieved. Whilst collaboration between staff was a defining aspect, each school retained its separate identity. The nine perspectives in Noack’s painting are a reminder of the creative initiatives taken in both schools over three years for the single vision of supporting the learning of students.

“We were building a learning community within a community,” he says. “My personal goal was to skill staff and move the culture to facilitate excellence in learning and teaching. The very nature of catering to the needs of two schools ... required individuals to go beyond what could normally be expected ... [We created] a common and shared view as to what best practice looks like.”

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