



For principal Kris Willis, building an effective culture for positive outcomes all starts with a few good books.  
By Madeleine Regan

## Required reading

**T**wice a term, principal Kris Willis hosts a book club at Caroline Chisholm School in the ACT. After the students leave, he provides good food and staff attend voluntarily to discuss a book selected to expand on ideas such as learning about intelligence, creativity and motivation. The main criterion for book selection is that it not be educationally focused. Having read the text, teachers discuss how to apply ideas from it to their school context. Willis says: "This is an opportunity to read something beyond the classroom and experience mental agility in learning and reflecting. Carol Dweck's *Mindset*, our most recent book, is about the ability to grow and use our brain's capacity to learn and solve problems. Our book club has enjoyed the discussions and it's fun to spend the time with colleagues in a different learning environment." Of a staff of 55 teachers, 20 attend the sessions, which have attracted the interest of another school.

Professional reading is critical for Willis and the development of his leadership practice. He says he began reading seriously about education as part of "a quest for continual improvement". In 2012, as a deputy principal, he had puzzled about what he could do differently after dealing with increasing suspensions. It was clear that solutions might be located in contemporary research and thinking about education, school culture, change and leadership. The education authorities also provided leads for useful texts. He began reading widely. John Hattie

for ideas about classroom practice, Richard DuFour for professional learning communities, and Anthony Muhammad for transforming school culture. "I could access the ideas and use them to bring new ways of thinking to issues such as disengagement of students, management of difficult behaviour, and distrust of the school demonstrated by students and their parents. These issues confronted me and my colleagues."

### THE SCHOOL

Caroline Chisholm School, preschool to Year 10, is located in Tuggeranong, about 20 minutes south-east of the city. The student population comprises everything from children in families where parents are unemployed to those who are bureaucrats or academics. Aboriginal students make up just under 10 per cent of the 660 enrolments. Another 20 per cent are from families that speak a language other than English, and there is a small cohort of 20 international private students. Willis describes the school as a community. "We're not a commuter school. Our students walk, ride or catch the local bus and they spend time with each other on weekends," he says.

The primary and secondary branches – originally two separate schools – were amalgamated in 2008. A road divides the two sections of campus. Willis highlights the advantages of the small size of the school: "We have a sense of intimacy. It's possible to really know students as they move through the primary to Year 10." Another advantage of the school's

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structure is that Year 6 students belong to the senior campus – a year earlier than children in other settings. Although those students have a single classroom teacher, they also have increased access to electives and experience a seamless transition to secondary school. An intake of students occurs at Year 7 and more than half are from other schools. The feeder primary schools are part of the Caroline Chisholm community, and frequent interaction helps new students move into secondary school.

### CULTURAL CHANGE

Willis spent about 12 years in secondary schools in Western Sydney, with roles including maths executive, before taking on the deputy principal job at Caroline Chisholm in 2012. He began exploring the school culture because of challenges associated with student engagement. His reading of contemporary educational research led him to two main approaches, both supported by professional learning. Firstly, the work of DuFour enabled the whole school to collaborate and examine data to inform new practices. This led to an approach that involved teachers looking at the idea of change. “We wanted to get past the concentration on ‘the students in my class’ to a broader perspective that was an awareness of ‘our school,’” Willis says.

The second approach, using the work of educator and writer Muhammad, was to examine the culture and investigate how it could improve learning. The process of applying professional learning and implementing changes developed over two years. The challenges were apparent in 2013; through ongoing staff discussions and use of a clear message, a richer understanding developed. It showed the need for, and benefits of, transformation. By 2014, changes had occurred. “It felt like walking into a new school,” Willis reflects. “It was like a light had been shone and students were focused on learning. They experienced a sense of belonging and connection. We were also having more positive interactions with parents.”

Another measurement of positive cultural change is the increase in enrolments. In 2012, just 520 students were enrolled, nearly 27 per cent less than the 660 attending this year. Willis says, “We’re going against the trend and growing. People approach us and want their children at our school. They want to be involved here.” Further indication of positive change is the high rate of staff retention.

### STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

Leadership and student voice are important mechanisms for increasing children’s sense of belonging at Caroline Chisholm. Students take on leadership roles at both Year 10 and Year 5. At both levels, there are eight leadership positions, with opportunities for mentoring and student-led activities. At Year 10, students can choose to enrol in a semester elective leadership class. The elective is well subscribed and the curriculum includes learning about strengths and traits of leaders. Project work allows students to refine their skills and contribute to the community through mentoring Year 7 students and delivering social and emotional

learning skills to younger classes. Student leaders collaborate with staff on school vision and uniform issues. As Willis states: “Representation has been vested in the community at different levels, and we listen to the student voice.”

### THE EXECUTIVE AGENDA

Changes have also emerged in the agenda of the meetings for the 12-member executive group. Willis states: “The role of the executive is to [build] a community where all students are supported [to help them] achieve.” Professional learning and the school plan are the standing agenda items for the executive. For professional learning, at each meeting, one person takes responsibility to present a chapter of a text that all members have agreed to read for critical discussion. The current text is Hattie’s *Visible Learning*. A member leads discussion by asking questions such as, ‘What does this action mean at our school?’ and ‘What are some things we should stop doing?’

Members of the executive also examine the school plan’s three priorities, which are: how to achieve high-quality teaching and learning; how to develop inclusivity and access in the school culture and how to develop a preschool culture driven by interests, inquiry and reflective practice. The professional learning communities have participated in a long collaborative process constructing the plan.

### WELLBEING

The ‘Wellbeing team’ including year level co-ordinators, Indigenous officer, youth worker school psychologist and two executive members, meets fortnightly and balances learning support with a welfare focus. Wellbeing as a whole-school initiative is demonstrated through MindMatters and KidsMatter frameworks, for secondary and primary schools, respectively. The school recently received public acknowledgement from the ACT education minister, Shane Rattenbury. He recognised the school for its progress in engaging the school community in successfully implementing MindMatters Stage 1. The school emphasises the goal of supporting mental health for students and staff, along with wellbeing and connections with the community. “We value the idea of everyone having mental health and wellbeing tools in their back pocket,” Willis says.

### STAYING THE COURSE

Willis is clear about the directions the school is taking. He says adults need autonomy and opportunities to discuss setting goals and how to achieve them through a continual process. But he also says the school’s goals are not negotiable. “We have a strong positive culture with staff, students and families,” he says. “We’ve come a long way from 2012. It’s been hard work to get students to feel like part of school. We’re staying the course and working for what is best for the students.” ■

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