Adelaide principal Meredith Edwards helps give students and communities what they need to succeed.
By Madeleine Regan

Last July, a Vietnamese teacher at Woodville High School told principal Meredith Edwards about the sudden removal of two Year 10 students, both asylum seekers from Vietnam. The two students had been moved to a Darwin detention centre. This event was the catalyst for an extensive protest campaign that earned a national reputation for the school and its commitment to social justice.

Woodville High is a complex organisation with more than 1000 students from over 65 cultural backgrounds, located in Adelaide’s western suburbs. It incorporates a Special Interest Music Centre, a strong visual and performing arts culture and a community garden. The focus on diversity, a core value of the school, is a constant source of energy and a commitment for Edwards as principal. Of course, there are challenges to keeping the balance between striving for diversity and the other two core school values – success and creativity.

During 11 years as principal, and a previous four-year stint as deputy principal, Edwards has grown to know her community, building a sharp focus on student leadership. She supported the group of 15 students in years 10 to 12 who led the Bring back the Woodville Kids campaign. They used traditional and social media to draw attention to the predicament of their Vietnamese classmates, two 16-year-olds who were returned to closed detention without notice or information about their future.

The student campaign was backed by asylum seeker support groups across Australia. Edwards described it as ‘a learning journey for the whole school’. The student leaders were critical in preparations for four public protests, including one at Parliament House with over 2000 participants. More than 13,000 signatures were gathered in an online petition and a small student media unit documented the campaign. The student leaders also succeeded in gaining the local council’s support. The mayor wrote letters to the prime minister and other federal and state politicians asking for the return of students to community detention.

Edwards’ conviction about the power of partnerships also motivated her to collaborate with six other Adelaide secondary school principals, who discovered that they too had students under community detention orders. The principals developed protocols to support and enable asylum-seeker students in completing their secondary education even after they turn 18.

Edwards promotes and communicates her vision of the school in the community. ‘I know it’s an old-fashioned concept but there is value for the community knowing who the principal is,’ she says. She has built robust partnerships with other schools and educational and training institutions, the local council and businesses in the western suburbs.

Also operating on the Woodville campus is the Wiltja School Program, which provides educational activities for more than 50 Anangu students. It is the urban annex of the secondary education programs offered to schools in Anangu communities in the remote north-west of South Australia. More than 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from local Adelaide and regional communities also attend the school and receive support from the Aboriginal education team.

A substantial number of students and their families have recently arrived in Australia. Some of the groups are supported by Bilingual School Support Officers from Vietnam, Bosnia and Africa. The Governing Council, which meets twice a term, listens to views of established Aboriginal, African, Bosnian, Serbian and Vietnamese parent groups alongside other family groups.

Edwards says that although, ‘it can be hard work, diversity is a richness, not a problem, and it guides everything we do. We want to ensure success for everyone and we ask: ‘Is this initiative serving the interests of each student? Who is missing?’ Diversity is closely linked to social justice at our school.’

Students are assisted in taking initiative and enjoying opportunities for leadership that enable them to influence change. For 12 years, the school has been involved in the Youth Opportunities leadership program, in which Year 10 students participate in a personal leadership course for 10 days over a term. A project officer who worked in the school with staff and students on initiatives related to mental health and wellbeing over three years observed Edwards’ support for student leadership: ‘She prioritises leadership. She nominates students for awards in the community and she just loves seeing them succeed,’ the project officer says.

Two specific examples of initiatives that enable students to experience practical leadership are Student Voice, and an anti-
bullying program students developed with support of the Student Wellbeing team and an ICT teacher.

Student Voice facilitates students influencing decisions that affect them and generating projects within and outside the school. Each year level is represented and members are nominated for bodies such as the School Governing Council and committees for school uniforms, the canteen and facilities, and occupational health and safety. In a research project with the University of South Australia, the Student Voice team surveyed peers on what constitutes effective teaching. They presented findings and recommendations to the leadership team at the end of 2014. Edwards is clear that the lessons students learn about leadership can be translated to other arenas. The experience of Student Voice has often directed students to undertake external roles such as membership on the local council’s Youth Advisory Committee and the district Aboriginal Youth Advisory Committees.

An anti-bullying focus has evolved over time with teacher support. A group of students in years 10 and 11 conducted a Facebook audit, and an eBullybox has been set up on the school intranet and student iPads so students can report bullying incidents at any time. The anti-bullying initiatives, including the website, a video and Year 9 awareness seminar, were recognised with a national award.

All teachers, including Edwards, take a home group, reinforcing a culture that promotes positive relationships between teachers and students. Two teachers work with each home group and remain with the same students to Year 10. Another team works with groups in years 11 and 12.

One of the biggest challenges Edwards faces is how to maintain support for the wide range of student needs with declining funds. Because of the large number of students who require additional support to complete Year 12, the personalised approach with external case managers is essential for developing learning plans. Edwards says a strength of the school is that “our staff have shared agreements to support students irrespective of their circumstances and educational experiences.”

In 2014, two awards recognised the student leaders in the Bring back the Woodville Kids campaign. The City of Charles Sturt commended them for “respectful social activism in support of young people in detention”. The citation for the inaugural Halogen Australia Team Leadership Award for Students emphasised “their goal displayed a skill beyond their years”. The team was also a finalist in the Australian Human Rights Commission’s Young People’s Human Rights Medal.

Edwards was also recognised. She received the MacKillop Medal, which the Australian College of Educators awards every two years in South Australia. The citation read: “Meredith epitomises the MacKillop vision for education, providing those at the margins with the full rights and entitlements in a developing learning environment based on social justice principles.”

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