

# Strong as their teachers



Principal aims to boost student achievement by helping their instructors be the best they can be.  
By Madeleine Regan

When parents scanned the first Model Farms High School newsletter for 2015, they encountered the achievements of the 2014 Higher School Certificate (HSC) class. The results were exemplary.

In congratulating the students, principal Christina Bennet acknowledged that the results belonged to them. At the same time, she commended the teachers who assisted the cohort in achieving their potential. The key to better outcomes for students, she says, is better teachers.

"I try to help students be the best they can be by providing the best teachers and support within my means to do so," Bennet says. "The way I influence is to provide and engage in the professional development of staff."

Focusing on the results, Bennet informed parents that she would ask HSC teachers to provide her with "feedback on what we did well, what went as expected and what changes can be made to ensure that all our students achieve their potential".

Bennet is in her fifth year as principal at Model Farms High School in Baulkham Hills, a suburb 31 kilometres north-west of Sydney. Previous experience as deputy principal in two other schools prepared her for her role.

In the large, comprehensive school, there are about 1000 students, including a support unit of 26 students. About 28 per cent of families are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

When Bennet started as principal, she was intent on building a culture of

professional learning to build the capacity of teachers to become better classroom practitioners and education leaders.

An early change was to replace frequent short staff meetings with three longer professional learning sessions each term.

"I have a concept about leadership that says it's not just about being at the front," Bennet says. "You need to get inside the transaction of teaching and learning, realise that students are ready for learning and develop our understanding of learning. We've got to become better equipped so we are always aware that we are contributing to students achieving their potential."

## CULTURE CHANGE

The major challenges Bennet has faced have been about changing the culture and attitudes towards professional development. Whilst every teacher accepted the need for it, few had realised that they could be responsible for designing and seeking their own learning and growth.

"I wanted staff to acknowledge that the learning needs of students were changing



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and that, 'If they don't learn the way I teach, then I need to teach the way they learn!'"

Bennet says she has been influenced in her approach by models of leadership at other schools but is also guided by modern research into how students learn and thrive in school. Two contemporary education researchers, John Hattie and Viviane Robinson, have informed her vision for leading Model Farms High School to individual and collective improvement. Hattie's extensive research on what constitutes excellence in teaching has been instructive. His studies of literature and classroom practice provide evidence of the explicit impact of the teacher on the quality of learning. The work credits the expert teacher with successful student outcomes and increased opportunities to engage deeply with learning.

Robinson's influence on Bennet has been her work on the role of the school leader in supporting and participating in professional development. Data from more than 130 studies confirmed clear links between a principal's active participation in professional learning programs and improved student outcomes.

Bennet's structure for professional learning is created by sessions in the third, sixth and ninth weeks of each term. School-based professional learning workshops support teachers in areas such as literacy and numeracy, and mandated areas such as child protection. Professional learning sessions based on the curriculum are also held during the term. Additional professional workshops are organised as staff nominate their learning goals.

A tool that facilitates the professional learning culture at Model Farms is the BlueSky Education framework. It enables teachers to develop a personalised learning plan by identifying annual goals through an electronic portfolio. The workshops are organised this way. For example, three groups might identify areas as diverse as learning about Adobe tools, classroom management and eLearning. These priorities form the basis for the workshops. The personalised learning provides a collective result, which is always about improving the educational experience of students.

#### WORKING WITH STUDENTS

Bennet's own mantra, 'to be the best', is her aspiration for students. She believes they need to be supported so they are academically, emotionally and socially ready to learn, be their best and achieve their potential. As well as enabling excellent teaching and learning, the school offers a range of opportunities for students to develop and grow outside the classroom.

"Our student leadership and mentoring programs help students realise they have purpose and potential and ... allow them to experience themselves and their strengths," Bennet explains. "They then use this in the classroom to be better learners. Our range of programs – outdoor recreation camps, the Global Enterprise Challenge, Australian Business Week, WISE (wellbeing, internet, stereotypes and engagement) lessons – really helps students build resilience and provide a strong base from which [they can] grow."

The High Resolves Global Citizenship and Leadership Program, for example, encourages students to participate in projects relating to areas including the environment, social action and individual wellbeing.

Last year, a team of 10 students, with guidance from three mentors and a teacher, participated in the Global Enterprise Challenge. The worldwide, 12-hour competition requires teams of secondary school students to develop a

solution to a global problem. International judges assess a written report and three-minute video from each team. Of the 10 Australian teams, Model Farms High School achieved the national award and was fourth-place winner worldwide.

#### A RECOGNISED ACHIEVEMENT

Building a professional development culture, whilst a challenge, has also been Bennet's most significant achievement.

"I've worked to achieve the movement of staff and the school in the direction of a greater quest for professional improvement," Bennet says. "Last year, I initiated a whole school conference attended by 65 staff for two days on their weekend! It was completely designed to meet their collective and individual needs and the evaluation we conducted afterwards was so positive they want to do it again this year!"

Teacher comments about the conference reflected appreciation for the opportunity to develop collegial and team approaches to teaching and deeper professional relationships. One response highlights the motivational benefits of the conference: "The most important message that I will take out of the conference is to not get caught up in the busy nature of a term and let my standards slip in terms of quality teaching that engages/motivates students."

Other schools recognise the professional learning initiatives at Model Farms High School. Principals from neighbouring high schools send deputy principals to observe the use of BlueSky to design and implement professional learning.

Bennet is aware of the transformation in the school. Signs of success are evident throughout the range of leadership roles. For example, half the executive team, having undertaken training as coaches, now assist peers in developing professional goals. Head teachers are focused on facilitating professional growth. Bennet's vision for the school is about leadership building capacity in others, and students consequently growing and achieving their potential.

"We want to provide the community with young people who can meet challenges, solve problems and contribute to developing a society that is equitable," Bennet says. ■

**Madeleine Regan is a writer at Principals Australia Institute.**