



Glenorchy Primary School principal Wendy Potter

Powerful allies



From communicating with parents, to leadership training for teachers to collaborations with surrounding schools, Glenorchy Primary principal Wendy Potter believes in strength from unity.

By Madeleine Regan

Wendy Potter frequently uses the word synergy in her conversations about Glenorchy Primary School, where she has been principal for 10 years. The word also features when she speaks about the group of schools in her local area, the Wellington Alliance. And when you think about synergy's meaning – about a combination of elements producing more than the sum of its parts – it's easy to understand the word's place in Potter's vocabulary.

The 420 students at Glenorchy, which is about 10 kilometres north of Hobart, form a diverse community. About 15 per cent speak a language other than English at home and many of them have spent

time in refugee camps. Nearly 14 per cent of families identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Potter describes disadvantage as a strong factor in the school community. In order to address the diverse needs, each student has a personal learning plan.

As for staff, all are encouraged to belong to a leadership team and there is a range of portfolio responsibilities teachers can choose from. Each one enables teachers to focus on an area that complements the school's values. The leadership teams are: literacy; inquiry-based learning; numeracy; positive action team; and systems and resources.

Each team leader facilitates two meetings a term and has line release for

their role. Leaders are nurtured through coaching with Potter and a weekly meeting. Planning is incorporated into the timetable, and coaching and peer support are important tools for teachers and leaders in their roles.

MAKING CONNECTIONS WORK

Surveys of staff, students and parents have been conducted every year for 10 years. The data assists staff in reflecting on practices and making adjustments to the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The 2013 Cultural Review survey showed a high degree of student connectedness and engagement with learning. Both items were rated above 85 per cent and demonstrated the strength of relationships in the school community.

One of the survey questions asked of staff was about identifying effective ways to link with the community. This emphasis on linking key goals in the SIP with the work of individual staff highlights how the school drives continuous improvement.

Potter says: "We ask staff, 'How are you working with the community? What more could you do to build links?' The answers help us think through what we can personally do to work more closely with our families, organisations and agencies in the community."



SCHOOL VALUES AND SYNERGY

The decision to identify school values was part of a whole-of-community process when Potter first became principal. The eight values at Glenorchy are: positivity; love; resilience; professionalism; integrity and respect; diversity and equity; creativity; and striving to be the best we can be. The synergies between the values are vital and build a vision for the school community that has been evolving over a decade. Selecting the values was an important step in building connections between the school and families. Since then, the focus on values has been a continual cycle of action and reflection. For new staff, this begins in an initial meeting when Potter asks them, 'How do these values sit with you?'

The eight values are also standard agenda items for individual staff professional development planning (PDP) meetings held at least twice a year.

"The values are integral to building synergies, with everyone pulling together to support students," Potter says. "We look at the values set that informs and builds the culture of the school. I ask teachers to identify which ones are easiest to enact with students and the school community."

The follow-up questions invite staff to set goals, based on the values, that incorporate behaviours and dispositions that are

modelled with students. "For example, thinking about the idea of positivity," Potter says, "we model it in our interactions. We know that it assists students in building resilience and strengthens their mental health. It is also key to building and maintaining a happy and sustaining work environment for staff."

SYNERGIES IN THE COMMUNITY

Potter says it is essential to build links and partnerships beyond the school to benefit students. In 2010, Glenorchy amalgamated with neighbouring Brent Street Primary School, which had an enrolment of about 100 students. At the time, it was an opportunity to use Building Education Revolution funds to construct facilities to serve the combined communities. The transition involved extensive consultation with the two parent groups, and as Potter says, "It was essential to listen, really listen, to the expectations, hopes and fears of the parents at Brent Street. We all wanted the best kind of education for the students." Shared values were integral to building links and uniting everyone to work together for the amalgamation.

WELLINGTON ALLIANCE

Another example of building synergies is the ongoing work Potter has participated in with the Wellington Alliance, which she has belonged to since its inception in 2009. The alliance comprises four primary schools and one high school, with a shared aim to support all students and their families and in improving educational outcomes. The alliance schools build partnerships with the local government and other institutions in the region. The group's goals are to improve education, retention, attendance and teacher quality, share resources, and support students and families through their schooling and beyond. The current strategic plan focuses on four areas: community; teaching and learning; literacy and numeracy; and respectful schools. The plan uses data-driven research strategies to develop equitable opportunities for students.

The development of synergies is supported by the alliance's structure, in which each of the five schools takes responsibility for particular focus areas. For example, Glenorchy takes the lead in building respectful schools and works with the other institutions to train staff

and implement frameworks such as KidsMatter Primary, Restorative Practices and Tribes. The annual Alliance Conference enables staff in each school to select from a professional learning menu to build capacity and develop leadership. The most recent strategic plan outlines working with the community for the success of individual students. Other local institutions and groups, such as the Glenorchy City Council, businesses, churches and the Museum of Old and New Art support the work of the alliance.

OPPORTUNITY'S CHILD

A new development for the alliance involves the Sydney-based ten20 Foundation, which selected the Glenorchy region in late 2014 as one of 20 centres around Australia to engage in the Opportunity Child Learning Community. This program provides a structure for 'collective impact'. The term describes building collaborative strategies and outcomes in a specific community.

The ten20 Foundation seeks to transform opportunities for vulnerable children and young people in 20 Australian communities of greatest need. Funding for the alliance will be provided over three years and includes support for the role of project co-ordinator, who will work with the five schools and local community to develop shared goals and create synergies. As Potter said in an interview with Tasmanian newspaper *The Mercury*, " 'Every child' is our mantra. We're aiming for a cradle-to-career focus, with all of the community supporting every child."

Since the alliance's inception, there have been many changes to the principalships within it. Potter is one of two founding school leaders. She is clear that the original values and culture have been sustained. She also values the working arrangements, which are marked by high trust, sharing of data and commitment to generating positive change. The agreement to develop local solutions has strengthened the shared purpose of school leaders, staff and community organisations to achieve whole-school change and improve disadvantage.

And Potter herself has a personal goal for students: "I want them to be so engaged that they *run* to school!" ■

Madeleine Regan is a writer at Principals Australia Institute.