



School uniform day

# Mornington Island revisited

*ET finds that great progress has been made on Mornington island*

In the Term 4 issue last year (October 2009), ET interviewed Mona Anau, principal of the Mornington Island State School on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. She was then 18 months into a two-year contract and coming to terms with the challenges of turning around a school that had a history of frequent staff changes, low student achievement and chronic absenteeism.

In this issue, we revisit the island to find out what's changed, what's been achieved and what's on her list of things that need to be done.

Overcoming a 'them and us' culture among islanders and teachers from the mainland was, and to some extent continues to be a challenge, Anau says. Islanders used to seeing police, hospital staff and teachers come and go are not in a hurry to open up to new arrivals. New teachers, on the other hand, can arrive without an inkling of the issues that will confront them.

"Some think that it will be the same as working in a rural school on the mainland," Anau says, "but it's not."

Though teacher turnover has been significant, especially during her first 12 months as principal, the teaching staff has been stable this year. Secondary teachers are in the senior classrooms and primary teachers take the junior classes.

"Dealing with challenging adolescent behaviours requires different skills to teaching a primary class," Anau says. "Our objective is to have teachers teaching the age group and subjects that they have been trained to teach."

Where many educators have doubts about the value of NAPLAN and the *My School* website, Anau believes that testing attainment and publishing the data isn't invalid. "It gives us something to measure our



Parents are encouraged to come along to Freaky Friday

progress," she says but cautions "provided always that you know and understand the story behind the numbers."

The ongoing challenge is to get the students into school every day. Attendance hit a low point in Term 4 2008 when senior attendance dipped below 20 per cent, primary sank to 50 per cent and the school average was a discouraging 46 per cent. From that low point, the attendance graph lines have trended steadily up. The school and primary lines nudged 76 per cent at the end of Term 2 this year and seniors' attendance was not far behind and close to 74 per cent.



Seniors met the Broncos on a trip to Cairns



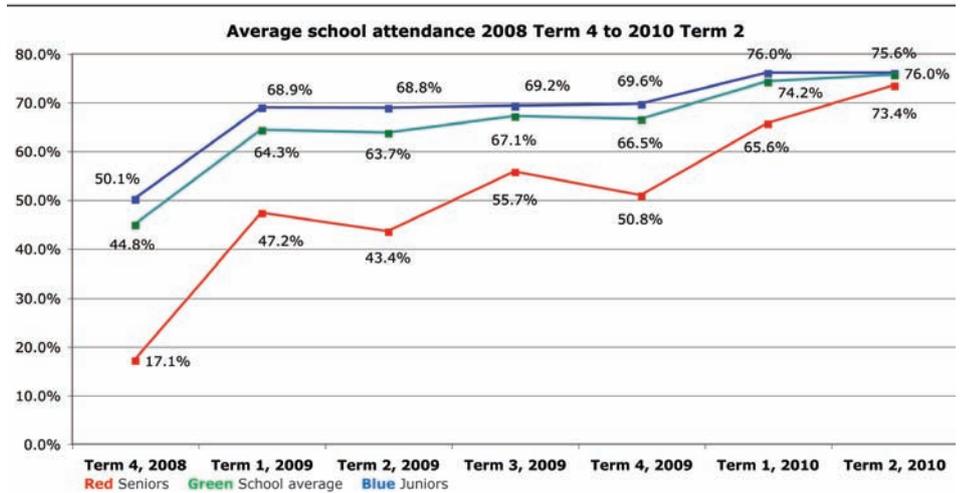
Traditional dance is included in Friday afternoon activities

Children with poor attendance records commonly live in family groups, often with parents absent, where the guardians are grandparents or other family and lack parental authority. School staff regularly “do the rounds” in the morning to urge adults to get the children ready for school. On occasion, Anau says, she has waited in her car outside a home while a child struggled to get out of bed and dressed.

Programs launched last year are paying academic and attendance dividends. The school’s leadership program, *Strong and Deadly Leaders* is aimed at giving students a level of responsibility within the school. It involves fortnightly meetings with principals and staff; projects like beautification of grounds around the school; leading events including ANZAC Day ceremony and Clean Up Australia Day; educational trips off the island and sharing cultural experiences. Thirteen students were involved initially and the number has since jumped to 33 in Years 1 to 10.

Historically, the school’s absent level has soared on Fridays when workplaces shut at noon and families set off for the mainland or go Bush for the weekend. The *Freaky Friday* program (a student dreamed up the name) is about engaging children through activities that are fun and creative... and makes them want to be at school on Friday. It offers an afternoon of learning activities for the younger children and cultural dancing for the seniors. It rewards students who already attend five days a week, while encouraging non-attending students to come to school.

Though Friday afternoons are informal, each activity relates back to the classroom through literacy, numeracy, social skilling, art, music, technology or physical education. Compared to Term 1 last year, when Friday attendance averaged 52 per cent, the Term 2 average this year has reached 72 per cent. Anau says that while this is a big lift, she is determined to drive the average higher by encouraging parents to come to school and get involved in the activities. Posters around town, letters to parents, the school newsletter and the local radio station



have been used to boost parent numbers.

And *Freaky Friday* is a hit with students. This term’s 10-week program includes *Wet and Wild* in week 1 and *Foot Rally* in week 2; the latter involved reading clues, problem solving, following directions, navigation and teamwork. The term program will conclude with *Bush Bash* in week 10.

Student Caigan Darby enthuses: “I love *Wet and Wild* because the teachers let us wet them.” Patty Linden claims: “My brain hurts from thinking so much!”

Practical courses that enhance employment prospects are having a positive effect on senior students’ average attendance. These include TAFE courses leading to a Certificate II in Hairdressing, Engineering or Hospitality.

The hospitality students gain practical skills by working at The Cottage, where government employees visiting Mornington Island are accommodated. Cooking, cleaning and administration are all undertaken by the students. This course is part the Sunshine Coast TAFE’s *Schools for the Future* program.

The hairdressing course is also a Sunshine Coast TAFE course. On completion of the curriculum’s 16 modules, students will receive a Certificate II, plus some attainment certificates in the TAFE’s Certificate IV in Beauty course.

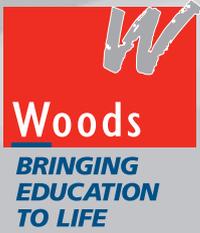
Mount Isa TAFE is backing the engineering course. This concentrates on small engine repairs and maintenance, typically the quad bikes and outboards that the island community relies on.

Anau points to vastly improved attendance by seven of the schools chronic absentees as proof of how sustained support by the school, and the right courses, can turn around a bad situation. These students who, cumulatively, were absent for a whopping 360 days in Term 1 2009, reduced their total days absent to 136 in Term 2 this year. One student, who missed 50 days was absent for only five days last term.

“Improvements like this make it all worth while,” Anau says, adding that there’s still a long way to go.

With secondary school on the island ending at Year 10, and limited opportunities for employment on the island, parents are recognising boarding school as the best option for their offspring. Eighteen islander children are attending boarding schools at present. And, with the number expected to increase next year, a liaison officer has been appointed to assist families and provide support for boarders. This role includes managing school enrolment paperwork and dealing with the complexities of Centrelink and Abstudy funding applications.

A report package is sent to each new student’s



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The small engines course leads to a Certificate II from Mount Isa TAFE

boarding school and followed up with regular contacts to check on progress. Next year, the liaison officer will make regular visits to schools in Mt Isa, Cairns and Townsville to check on students' progress and obtain feedback from their schools.

Recognising the importance of maintaining departing students'



Storytelling sessions with island elders are a regular part of the school week

connection with the island, the school will hold an open day in the last week of the school year to celebrate the success of students that are leaving and to invite them back to the community during school holidays.

Next year the school will introduce *Creating Future Pathways*. An individual plan will be developed for every student in Years 5 to 10 to help them to identify what they want to be and what they need to do to get there. Teaching staff will use a dedicated database to track progress and goals achieved.

The pathways program will include trips off the island to careers expos, visits to significant employers, mines in the region, for example, and to boarding schools that are cooperating with Mornington School. Coming in the other direction, students can look forward to visits from staff of mainland schools and potential employers.

Where to next? Anau says firmly that there's no reason why Mornington Island's students should not, in time, achieve academic levels on a par with mainland schools... and certainly there's no excuse for above average absence levels. "Everyday counts for all students."

## Website states school's vision

The school's vision is Thaldi Bana Merri (Come and Learn) COURAGE, CHOICE, CHALLENGE has been linked to the turtle image, whereby the turtle continues to face challenges throughout its life. The turtle needs courage to make choices, and learns from each challenge, but never forget where it comes from and ensure that the turtle returns to its homeland.

The Mornington Island Community recognises that education is the key to their future and that receiving an education is directly linked to academic performance and future career and life options. The school strategies on how to engage students in life long learning involves the community, agencies, industries and government.

Our school continues to provide an education that is meaningful and relevant. We continue to work collaboratively with the community in creating a school that is inviting.



Mornington Island State School is also committed towards enhancing student outcomes. We are looking for improvement in our Year 2 net and the Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 test results. This can be measured

on an individual basis through distance travelled. We have experienced a marked improvement in writing across the school and hope that this includes reading and numeracy in 2009.

Building School Pride is another focus area, whereby the introduction of students' leadership has been implemented. Our social skilling program *Deadly Minds*, engages students in learning activities in which they gain life skills.

### Our values

Challenge, Courage, Choice and Respect reinforce the prompt language of 'Stand Up', 'Be Strong', 'Your Choice' and 'Fair Go' which is taught to all students at Mornington Island. With the resurgence of strong self-awareness, determination, aspiring to be the best will build pride and a sense of belonging at Mornington Island State School.