

Passion and commitment in pastoral care programs

Mary Asikas, principal Seaford 6–12 School, on helping students through life issues



The current situation regarding pastoral care programs in schools is perhaps best analysed in relation to a zero to 10 scale, with a range of foci.

At 10 we have a large body of professionals who have a strong passion for and commitment to such programs, while at the zero end, too many teachers who do not see it as a key aspect of their work; believe it is not the school's role; believe it is not the subject teacher's role; see it as taking valuable time from the academic program and believe that too much time is spent on "touchy/feely stuff".

While many classroom and subject teachers do value these programs, it is often the student counsellor, the principal and others in specific student-focused roles or in leadership who most value and commit to pastoral care programs. Clearly, where leadership is committed and ensures that time is given, it is very much dependent on the individual views/responses (and skills) of classroom and subject teachers as to whether such programs are successful.

When debate rages about how much time should be mandated for which aspects of a school day, it is not pastoral care as a focus, which is prominent in that debate. This translates to a perception that it is not a priority of "the system", although "the system" does support programs in relation to addressing bullying, drugs, sexual development etc., which are key aspects of the best programs in schools. They are included as

pieces in the jigsaw of pastoral care, rather than as individual or stand-alone offerings, electives or programs.

Pastoral care at Seaford 6–12 School

Seaford 6–12 School has a pastoral care program that has evolved over time and is intended to be relevant to young adolescence. I have watched teachers' estimation of pastoral care increase dramatically. The school opened in 1996 in outer southern Adelaide, by the sea. It was designed and built to deliver on the recommendations of the Junior Secondary Review (Review of Middle Schooling in South Australia in the early 1990s). It is therefore not of the traditional SA primary or secondary model.

In sync with the best middle schooling practices, pastoral care was an immediate and ongoing priority and has consistently underpinned all practices, values and priorities of the school.

Years 10–12 have been developed with a strong underpinning of pastoral care. A recent major state-wide review of senior secondary education (South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE)) has led to the development and implementation of a more contemporary senior school model/curriculum. This has further validated and strengthened the school's focus on pastoral care across Years 6–12.

At Seaford, the program has been re-badged as the *Pathways and Futures Program* to reflect its breadth and depth. This also addresses views about

pastoral care as being "soft, touchy/feely" etc.

The program is timetabled across the Middle School every Wednesday for 90 minutes, delivered on a two-year cycle model in five-week blocks. A five-week "getting to know you" unit enables relationships to be built and classes to be established. During this unit, teachers make considerable use of quality learning tools to establish a Code of Cooperation, as well as expectations and procedures. Other quality tools, such as the "Consensogram", identify the students' commitment to the program and to success at school.

Other options/programs such as "MindMatters" support team building, breaking the ice in a range of ways, and helping develop the level of flexibility required for a successful program. This is followed by a series of five-week units (which fits the four x 10-week terms of the school year), which include:

An intensive course on cyber bullying (cybernetrix – a government initiative program) Supported by students being able to access quality computers. Students explore websites (under supervision), identify cyber bullying activities and work through these as a class/team.

A conflict resolution unit This involves explicit teaching (including terminology), role playing, strategies such as POOCH etc., negotiating a win-win, avoiding violence/abuse and resolving the conflict.

An Independent Learning Plan (ILP) Seaford has given these electronically established plans the greatest chance of success for all students by introducing them and supporting them through the *Pathways and Futures Program*. Aspects in the ILP include: learning styles identification, literacy and numeracy strengths and weakness targets, career aspirations, personal goal setting and life long learning goal achievements.

Student-led conferences While these are a feature of most schools' activity in relation to assessment and reporting and connection with parents, linking them with this program enables explicit (e.g. a script) coaching and a forum for students and teachers to discuss processes, issues, concerns and needs.

Student voice The *Pathways and Futures Program* also includes a process for the appointment of the school's Student Representative Council and a focus on class meetings as an aspect of student involvement and governance.

Sexual health and relationships education (SHARE) This dedicated program, developed by an outside health organisation under government patronage, is delivered across the whole school at the same time (i.e. same block/unit). Teachers opt into ongoing updates about the SHARE program.

Bullying in general A further insight into bullying. A major focus of this unit is to change the culture so it becomes "OK to tell".

Mandated child protection This unit focuses on child safety networking. The SA police are involved and deliver seminars on topics such as *The Youth Justice System; Graffiti in the City and Legal Issues Out in the Community*.

Drugs and alcohol Tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and harder drugs are addressed here. Factual information, risk avoidance strategies and exploration of student-raised issues are the focus of this unit.

Mental health This unit addresses issues such as schizoid behaviour, autism, depression, anorexia (all serious concerns in young people's lives both inside and outside school).

School values The school values are discussed and revisited and part of the day to day language the school uses and are part of all caregroup learning activities.

Year 9

Year 9 students engage in all of the above, but there is a much stronger and deeper focus on the issue and impact of alcohol and how to be safe in a range of situations in which they may find themselves.

Specialists in the area of drugs, and the SA police, also engage more deeply with students, especially in relation to risky situations and what to do in response, how to manage themselves and what support can be accessed.

Year 9 also has course counselling built into the program as students begin to focus in on



future subject choices. Again, building this into the program gives students far more intense support (and a forum to engage in discussion) as they make these life-directing decisions. In support of these decisions, researching three or four different careers of interest is another aspect of the program, with work observation a further support factor.

In the Senior School, many of the above aspects are included, with a deeper focus.

Year 10

The improved SACE requires students to engage in developing a personal learning plan which enables them to clarify, identify and set clear career goals and aspirations and use this as the vehicle for construction of their schooling.

The plan helps identify literacy and numeracy improvement areas for individual students and identify strategies in their personal learning plan to improve these areas.

Students can plan their pathway, subjects and schooling in Year 11 and 12 and beyond and develop personal skills with a focus on the capabilities outline in the new SACE.

Again, success for all is a greater likelihood as teaching, coaching, support, direction, advice etc. in support of this requirement is built into this program rather than leaving students to think their own way though it.

Health matters such as SHARE, drug education, safe behaviour in risky situations, depression, anxiety, bullying and stress management are all taken to another level (as appropriate to the age and experiences of students).

Year 11

Much of the above is addressed further and at a deeper level, while attention is directed to work education/work experience (including issues such as occupational health, safety and welfare and workplace harassment), course counselling (as students narrow down their subject choices) and preparation for the demands of Year 12.

Year 12

Again, the above aspects continue to be taken deeper and students engage in seminars which support their in-school and out-of-school lives as Year 12s e.g. Schoolies Week, preparation for University/TAFE. Given the intensity of the Year 12 experience, individual case management is a significant aspect of *Pathways and Futures* in their final year.

Why is it so successful at the moment?

While Seaford has always focused on pastoral care as a priority, there have been times when it has not been as successful as it now is, or as embraced by all staff (and students).

We emphasise the importance of allocating key people for such programs, a focus on real and current issues for young people and making links with the curriculum. Effectiveness is reviewed and measured, leaderships are all committed and are underpinned by strong philosophical understandings around the wellbeing of our students.

It is essential that the program is managed/led by key staff (e.g. school counsellors) who, with staff support, are responsible for the leadership of the program, designing the program – even down to creating individual "lessons", monitor, review and modify the program and develop resources/materials to support the program.

It is necessary to provide training and development for all staff in relation to delivering the program and its units and engage, connect and negotiate with outside agencies and organisations as appropriate (e.g. SA police, drug education, sexual health and relationships counsellors etc.) and work alongside staff in delivering units/lessons. Teacher comfort is a priority but not a reason to avoid aspects of the program.

The program enables a wide range of issues



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to be addressed within a context that consolidates rather than splinters the “separate” aspects.

It also enables staff and students to work together in a supportive environment (with a problem-solving approach) to address curriculum requirements (e.g. ILP/PLP) and school processes (e.g. course counselling, SRC etc.). Again this is achieved within a consolidated and connected concept, rather than in isolation. So many of the topics are interrelated and are therefore best addressed in such a manner.

The program supports study and life both in and outside school and much of what students are currently facing and will face in the future. It is proactive, structured, explicit and spiral in nature (i.e. a number of consistent topics each year, which get addressed more deeply each following year in relation to the students’ own development and needs). It is never static, more “amoebic”.

Leadership (principal/deputy principal/assistant principals) are all committed to, believe in, support, promote and engage in the program. The pastoral care of staff both in general and in relation to this program is a major priority.

Data informs our practice

There is no doubt that the school’s focus on values education has improved the wellbeing of our students over the last five years. This has been a strong part of the *Pathways and Futures Program*.

Student wellbeing data 2004–2009 demonstrates there was an up to 10 per cent to 12 per cent improvement across all survey aspects. This survey measures the wellbeing of our students across Years 6–12.

Survey aspects measure, self-confidence, relating to others, interest in learning, commitment to community, work readiness, understanding social order and optimism for the future.

Quality of pastoral care programs

Whether it is a politically mandated agenda through policy directions such as the *National Schools Framework* or whether it is a school priority and a whole school approach, pastoral care programs are essential in all schools.

Naturally, there is a strong link between passion and commitment and quality. Again on a zero to 10 scale, at the zero end is a lack of any program in some schools, while at 10 are a number which are whole-school, whole individual, explicit, across a range of foci and given dedicated (and reasonable) time in the school day/week. Further, they are embedded in school values and priorities, continually improved, supported by staff/leadership, well resourced in terms of physical resources and staff learning, connected to outside agencies and organisations and “measured” as carefully and comprehensively as other school programs.

Between zero and 10 are a huge variety of programs with much variation in quality (and therefore impact). Perhaps most worrying are those programs where schools dedicate 10 minutes per day (or week?) and where class teachers are totally responsible for a program and where they (for whatever reason; lack of commitment, lack of skills/knowledge etc.) do not engage in a genuine pastoral care program.

These sessions often see students with nothing to do, engaging in poor behaviours and teachers in the position of “crowd control”, with students and teachers just waiting for the time to finish so they can get on with the “real” business of the school.

In poor quality programs, relationships break down (especially the student-teacher relationship) and more damage is done than anything positive achieved. Such situations also tend to give pastoral care a bad name/poor reputation; again hindering commitment and quality.

While many genuine programs do not meet the “10” rating, they are worthwhile, successful and have a positive impact on relationships and students’ lives. They are worth supporting and improving.

Further reading

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Mary Asikas' leadership skills have been acknowledged both at a state and national level, with Seaford 6–12 School winning a number of schooling awards including the Australian Government Quality Schooling Awards in 2007 and 2008, and the Australian Awards for Teaching Excellence in 2009. Also in 2009, the school won a National Schools First Award. This her first piece for *Education Today*

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