

Invest in Gold

Miro Martin



Gold Class teachers, Debbie Huxley in middle, Anna O'Brien on left and Maryanne O'Brien on right

Last year I wrote about an outstanding success story with a group of students at my school we call the “Gold Class”. To summarise, we have a large cohort of students with special learning needs at our school and a significant number were causing disruption for the mainstream classes they were in. Two of my staff, John O’Brien and Debbie Huxley, came to me with a proposal to take 12 of our neediest children, those who were giving their teachers the most concern, and place them in one class. I thought they were mad but, now after three years of Gold Class, I am a convert. Gold Class has been such a huge success that I don’t just want to keep it going, I also want to tell others about it and see it repeated in many other schools.

Not only has Gold Class given some respite to the mainstream classes, I have anecdotal evidence as well as hard data to show that it has been a huge benefit for the students who have gone through the class.

How does it work?

The 12 students are all verified and funded accordingly. They attract six hours of aide time each per week from government funding. As well, Brisbane Catholic Education gives schools a Learning Enhancement allocation of funding, depending on student numbers.

Just with the government money, we have 72 hours of aide time (equals 36 hours of teacher time.) We are able to provide a full-time teacher and full-time teacher aide for Gold Class, with hours left over to distribute throughout the rest of the school.

The children have individual learning plans and a significant part of their day is taken up with formal lessons. Another important aspect of the programme is hands-on activities. Anna O’Brien is fantastic at art and craft and cooking also has a major focus. As well as this, Gold Class goes on field trips – fishing, Indy races, camp, shopping trips, etc. Everything is geared towards

the students’ experience of academic success and the accompanying praise and adulation this attracts, and towards their enjoyment of the school experience. Debbie and her team are not constrained by a rigid system of rules and procedures. They think outside the square and I fully support this.

Feedback

I should tell you that I had a fair bit of feedback from teachers across Australia after my first article was published last year (*Education Today* 2009 Vol 9 (2)). Sadly, they expressed their frustration that they were not allowed to try gold classes in their schools. One reason was political correctness... “We don’t want to stigmatise these children by keeping them apart from the mainstream”. What rubbish! Ask a teacher with an ASD child who needs constant one-on-one attention how much easier it is to teach the rest of the class when

that student is away? What use is six hours of aide time when the child is in the class for 27.5 hours? What does the teacher do the rest of the time?

Integrating special needs students in the mainstream is a noble ideal and I cannot deny, a positive experience for special needs children but, too often, the positive experience of one student is at the expense of the other students in the class.

We don't isolate our Gold Class students for the whole time, but make sure that they mix with the other children at least two days a week for sport and various electives. Also, the gold children are buddies for our preps. They often go down and take their prep buddies by the hand for assemblies, church and other activities and go down to prep to work with their buddies. This is a responsibility they take very seriously and it leaves a lump in my throat to see how proud they are when they are looking after their small charges.

Why does it work so well?

The staff are the most significant factor in its success. John has left us for a promotion, but Debbie has taken on Gold Class and is assisted by Anna O'Brien and her daughter, Maryanne. I cannot stress enough that the success of Gold Class is due mostly to the passion, creativity, patience and talent of these wonderful staff.

Debbie drives 150 km a day to work with these children when she could easily get a job close to home. Here lies the secret of success – commitment of staff. It is a fact that the best teachers usually end up in the “better-off” schools.

Remote schools or schools in low socio-economic areas are not on the top of the list when graduates and experienced teachers apply for jobs. This is a tragedy because the poor or difficult schools need the best of the best. But how do we attract these teachers to these tougher locations?

The same applies to principals. Experienced principals usually don't apply for tough schools either, unless they have a stream of altruism running through their veins.

Gold Class is a success because we have top shelf staff running the programme. My experience has also shown that the tough schools are great training grounds for teachers. Teachers who are fortunate enough to spend a few years in a tough school can work anywhere. They have to learn how to motivate and control students who often come to school with a lot of personal baggage as well as significant learning and behavioural problems.

Most teachers would prefer a class with well-behaved, compliant and capable students. Why would you want to give yourself the grief of working with special needs children? Speaking on my own behalf, as well as the rest of my staff, I would say that the results of our intervention



Gold Class has become a fixture

are all the motivation we need. To see children who could barely read two years ago receiving awards for academic achievement in high school is a feeling that could never be bought with pay or other incentives (see below).

Student progress

The children in Gold Class range in age from Year 5 to Year 7. Debbie and her team have designed individual learning programmes for each student. They dote on them like mother hens, but with a firm approach that leaves the children in no doubt about their boundaries.

Some of these children were constantly being excluded from their mainstream classes. Some could barely read and the majority were well behind in their reading. Standardised testing over the three-year period has shown academic growth exceeding chronological growth, e.g. most Gold Class students improved their reading ages by two years in only 18 months.

All Gold Class students can read fluently by the time they leave our school. Their spelling has improved, also by a similar margin. By the end of gold class most are doing the same maths activities as their mainstream counterparts.

The children take great pride in their work and are keen to show me and their parents, where a couple of years ago, we were battling to get them to do anything at all. Their attendance has been exemplary where once they were reluctant to even come to school. The parents are thrilled because they no longer have season tickets to my office because of their children's behaviour.

Secondary school

One of our biggest concerns about Gold Class has been, “where to after Year 7?” Most of our

Year 7 graduates have gone to our local parish college and we have an excellent communication network between the two schools. (My wife is Head of Primary at the college so I have inside information!)

The gold students have assimilated into the mainstream and, even though they still have learning needs, they have settled in without dramas. There are a couple of exceptions, but these students wouldn't settle anywhere.

I attended the college awards night last year and two Gold Class graduates received awards for academic achievement. A couple have gone to the local state schools and their parents tell me that they are doing quite well. Every Gold Class parent has expressed his/her appreciation for the work that the staff have done with their children. The children, themselves, love Gold Class. Their parents don't have a problem motivating them to come to school as they did in the past.

Gold Class is a fixture

The Gold Class pilot learning programme is no longer a pilot. It is now entrenched in the culture and folklore of Christ the King Primary School. I don't know how long it will continue. That depends on the number of students who need it and the availability of top shelf staff willing to work in it.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.