

# Staff surveys: what they reveal about working in schools

*Louise Parkes*



**S**chools are an environment for student learning and development, yet they are also a work environment for staff. Voice Project research in over 100 schools highlights some unique characteristics and challenges of working in schools. We will outline these and share the experience of one school that has been using the *Voice Engagement Survey for Schools* to develop their workplace.

Inaburra is an independent Christian K–12 school in the Sutherland Shire, NSW. The school's Principal, Tim Bowden, introduced annual surveys in 2012 to inform management's strategic planning process and to evaluate progress. He explains: "I was looking for a way to gain input from staff with reference to their experience of working at Inaburra; I wanted some way to test my impressions against objective evidence. Having been in the school for 18 months at that point, a number of the results confirmed my impressions but others were genuinely surprising."

## **High engagement, purpose and progress**

Bowden says that he was encouraged by the early Voice reports that indicated strong staff alignment and engagement. Compared to other industries across Australia, schools have some of the highest proportions of engaged staff, with around 80% of teachers passionate about their job and their school and intending to continue working at their current school; only community housing and aged care have similar levels of engagement.

This engagement can be attributed to several key characteristics of the school work environment: a shared belief in the values and work of the school that provides meaning and purpose, and a sense of progress towards the school's objectives and individual student outcomes. Most staff report that they are proud of the high quality, innovative education and care they provide.

## **Retaining high performers**

While *purpose* and *progress* are strong in

schools, the third key driver of engagement, *participation*, is often missing. Few staff express satisfaction with involvement in decision-making and consultation around change. While professional development is mostly strong, this tends not to be supported through performance evaluation and feedback, nor clearly linked to career planning. These are key opportunities for schools who want to sustain the motivation of, and retain their high-performing staff.

At Inaburra, a gap analysis of Voice Survey results showed that similar areas needed attention. Seeking feedback through the survey, and responding to the results, was one way of improving staff involvement. Bowden resolved to be as transparent as possible about the results, to engage staff in analysing the results and identifying the way forward.

"Each year we have trialled engaging staff in the results through a different approach. We have consistently made a public presentation and published the results online. However, in 2013 we conducted debriefs through cross-faculty groups

facilitated by an Executive Team member. In 2014 we conducted focus groups facilitated by the Voice Project, concentrating on a couple of specific areas. In 2015 the primary debrief was through a meeting of all our middle leaders.”

The input from staff has had a significant effect in shaping priorities in the life of the school. In the 2012 survey the staff indicated that they were not aware of the school’s wider goals and objectives. Over the last four years Principal Bowden has made a point of frequently and explicitly identifying, explaining, justifying and highlighting what the school’s management hopes to achieve.

Input from staff has also generated significant initiatives aimed at improving the staff experience. For example, it was evident that staff were not confident and did not feel supported in their use of technology. To rectify this, Inaburra increased the staffing allocation of ICT integrators, made professional learning around technology a major focus, provided laptops to staff, strengthened the Wi-Fi network and increased internet bandwidth.

#### Staff wellbeing

A challenge identified in the research as common to most schools was lower levels of staff wellbeing and work-life balance – particularly in independent schools. Unlike many other organisations, schools can find it difficult to provide flexible working conditions for teachers such as working from home, flexible hours, part-time work, or control over workload... but flexibility and control over work conditions is strongly correlated with greater wellbeing.

Bowden says the open-ended comments [in the survey] were particularly helpful in understanding the experience of staff. “We were alerted to a range of issues associated with workflow management that were having a negative impact on wellness and work-life



Tim Bowden Principal Inaburra School

balance, including lack of consultation regarding change, deadlines being imposed or changing with little notice, and a range of calendaring issues.”

Middle leaders often experience the most challenging workload issues, leading Inaburra to institute work-flow changes for this group. Splitting the survey results by role enabled the school to demonstrate the effectiveness of these initiatives, with improvements of more than 15% for middle leaders between 2014 and 2015 in workload, work-life balance and flexibility.

#### A work(place) in progress

As Tim Bowden reflects on the data provided through the Voice Survey over the last four years, he comments that real progress has been made on a number of fronts. Between 2012 and 2015 Inaburra saw significant improvements (more than 5%) in 11 of the 32 work practices and outcomes. These include: Technology (+20%); Learning and Development (+12%); and Performance Appraisal (+12%). “In all of these areas we are able to identify improvements associated with specific initiatives.”

He encourages staff to share ownership of the survey results: “While the feedback is immensely

useful for the school’s management, it should also be something that informs the practice of all staff. If we want a more encouraging culture that acknowledges the efforts of the staff, we all have an opportunity and responsibility to build that culture.

“There are also challenges that emerge simply from naming an issue and making it public. The temptation around the implementation of staff engagement surveys is to be less than fully transparent about the results, knowing that once something has been named, an expectation emerges that the ‘problem’ will be solved. We have resisted the temptation to obscure the results, but I can understand its powerful attraction!”

“A key priority area for us in the latest iteration of our strategic direction has to do with investing in and building the capacity of our staff. As the educational landscape continues to be disrupted by all sorts of influences, we need to make sure our staff are able to thrive in the work, not just survive.”

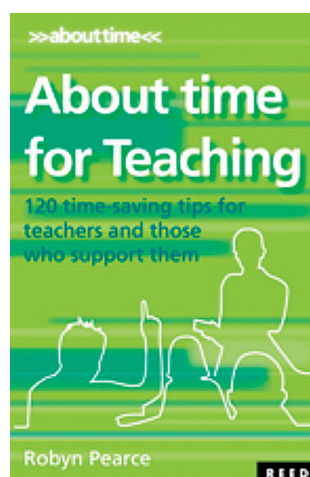
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#### About the author

Dr Louise Parkes is a senior consultant and psychologist with Voice Project. She is passionate about improving the work environment of schools by ‘giving people a voice’, and with Voice Project has developed employee engagement and leadership surveys specifically for the education sector.

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