

Respect, responsibility and being a good learner

Karen Endicott, supported by staff, parents and community is turning around Sarah Redfern High School



Cause for celebration. NAPLAN scores are trending upwards

Karen Endicott, principal of Sarah Redfern High School in Minto NSW, says that her education philosophy 'Everyone can learn' grew from her own not particularly happy time at school. "I didn't actually like school... but I learned to hide it," she admits cheerfully.

Overcoming her uninspiring schooldays and intrigued by the question: 'What is it that enables us to learn?' Endicott completed her Diploma of Teaching at Newcastle Teachers College, graduating in 1980.

Her first teaching position was at Liverpool Girls High School and then Moorebank High. Next, aged 26, she was appointed head teacher

The school was recognised as one of the Education Department's South West Region's most challenging

at St Johns Park High School.

Her long and varied career also includes teaching at Holsworthy High School; developing vocational training while at the Curriculum Directorate at the NSW Department of Education head office; a quality teaching consultancy at Sutherland; working in the Department's state office in a number

of positions; and appointments in the private sector.

Along the way, through 14 years of distance education at Charles Sturt University, she has added BA in Consumer Affairs and Secondary Education and a Masters in Secondary Education to her list of achievements.

She was appointed deputy principal of Menai High School in 2005 and worked at the school for four years until 2009 when the Department, recognising her experience of implementing change, through merit, offered her the principal's position at Sarah Redfern High School.

The co-educational school is located in Minto, 55 km as the crow flies south west from Sydney's



School Captains and Vice Captains set high personal presentation standards

CBD. This is a battlers' suburb and the majority of children attending the school live in the Minto public housing estate. The school's ICSEA value is 912, against an average value of 1000. Of the students, 46 per cent are in the bottom quartile and 6 per cent in the top quartile.

Current enrolment is 437, with 40 per cent of students identified as having English as a second language and 46 per cent coming from a language background other than English (LBOTE) – the top five countries being New Zealand, Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji and the Philippines. Additionally, 12 per cent of students identify as being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

The school was recognised as one of the Education Department's South West Region's most challenging when Endicott arrived in Term 2 of 2009. The principal had retired and seven long-term staff had transferred out; staff and student morale was low; absenteeism was rife; children were being sent out of class and teachers were finding it difficult to motivate students to engage in learning.

"I was faced with the attitude 'there's no point in trying to teach them anything, they are not capable of learning,'" she recalls. "We were not even receiving our share of Year 7 students from the school's feeder primaries and when I went to visit [the primary schools] I was told: 'One, the school is not safe; Two, there is no discipline; Three, there is no uniform; and Four, there is no effective teaching.' This unfortunately was the community perception."

Faced with this uncomfortable reality,



Karen Endicott

Endicott says that for the first two terms she didn't change anything... "I just sat and watched what was going on. I asked 'Why are we doing this or that and if it's not working how can we change it?'"

"The more we studied the data, the more we came to understand that our low expectations of the children were misplaced. In fact, we had

children with high potential that we were not developing."

By the middle of 2009, with several new teachers having transferred in, Endicott says that she felt ready to start the process of change.

"I asked the staff to look in the mirror and think about what you see. Then I asked the key question: Would you like your child to be at this school, and if not, why not? That resonated with the staff.

"We had learned that the children were coming to the school with little understanding of what was socially acceptable behaviour," Endicott adds. "We needed to change the culture and instil a system of values and beliefs... to teach the children, and quite a number of the parents, the meaning of 'Respect,' 'Responsibility' and 'what it looks like if you are being a good learner.'"

She presented a 'Futures Paper' to the staff in Semester 2 of 2009. This was a detailed map for a journey that the school needed to take and laid out:

- A new management structure
- Professional learning teams in place of faculties
- New middle school
- Classes for children with special needs
- School uniform
- A strategy for staff professional development.

A major change from the traditional secondary school management structure was implemented. Through merit selection, some classroom teachers took up senior executive positions. The team, which consists of Paul



Morale improved when uniforms were introduced in Term 1 2010

Gavin as national partnerships manager, plays a key role in analysing data and identifying the strategic directions of the school. Deputy principal Liz Scully, admin manager Alison Millot and three managers have responsibilities for strategic areas – Ross Dummett is responsible for school community and middle schooling; Steve Taylor for student wellbeing; and Dave Rawlings for curriculum.

In place of the conventional faculty-based staffrooms, the school has five cross KLA professional learning teams, each in a staffroom where they are encouraged to provide support for each other and to talk about learning.

The Year 7 middle school commenced in Semester 1 2011, followed by Year 8 in Semester 1 this year, with the focus on literacy and numeracy. “Many children starting their secondary education at Sarah Redfern are deficient in all five NAPLAN domains, so we really need to get them going,” Endicott says.

She points to the school’s use of the 4MAT system as being central to a successful outcome of the school’s professional development strategy and new middle school. “In essence, for the strategy to succeed, our teachers have had to learn how to teach again.

“4MAT is all about focusing on the concepts, or deep knowledge within learning experiences; it provides teachers with a simple structure to plan, organise and conduct lessons that engage students.

“We invited all of our teachers to participate. The first group started their training in Semester



Achievements are recognised

2 2009 to prepare for the first Year 7 middle school classes. By the end Term 1 this year, all of our teaching staff had completed 4MAT training.”

In 2011 four classes that were special needs were incorporated into the school community instead of being in a separate block, to give the children every opportunity to take part in the full range of school life.

Preparing for the introduction of wearing school uniforms started in Term 3 2009, with staff, School Council and P&C all involved. Though paying for uniforms for the first time was costly – student assistance funding was

provided for those in difficulty – Endicott says that there was a visible sense of pride when school started in 2010 and uniforms were worn for the first time.

“Wearing uniforms has made a huge difference to morale.”

Has the hard work and effort of the last 36 months paid off? For Endicott, the proof is in the numbers. This year commenced with 80 students in Year 7, 80 in Year 8... and 70 in Year 11. Having three curriculum strands in Years 11 and 12 is working too, with an ATAR strand encouraging students to set their sights on university; a vocational education strand leading to TAFE training and apprenticeships; and a work ready strand to equip Year 11 leavers with skills that will make them employable.

“It needs to be said that the journey is still continuing,” Karen Endicott says “but I do know that we are getting there. The children and parents at Sarah Redfern High have the right to expect that we provide a quality education and that we will enhance every child’s future prospects.” **ET**

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