

Woonona High School

Creating opportunities for parents to have an authentic voice in school planning

Context

Woonona High School is located 10 kilometres north of Wollongong in the Illawarra region of NSW and offers a comprehensive education for 590 Year 7-12 students. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) rating of 105 (2014/15 average). Despite the strong cohesion of the community in general, there was not a great deal of community involvement in the school. The executive team felt it was important to re-engage the community in understanding the school's focus on authentic learning.

Enhancing community consultation

To create opportunities for the community, staff and students to have an authentic voice in setting the directions for the school plan, the school initiated a broad examination of teaching, learning, culture and wellbeing. Evaluation teams aimed to ensure the collection of qualitative and quantitative data and ownership of the results by the whole school community. Focus groups, individual phone interviews, [Tell Them From Me](#) surveys and an examination of documentation were used to collect data. Care was taken in the construction of survey questions to ensure broad and valid responses. Parental involvement in individual phone interviews was determined by both random selection and their child's inclusion in specific programs.

The school aimed to achieve a common understanding between students, parents and teachers of the requirements for success in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Year 12. Parents attended regular workshops and participated in interactive assessment tasks, giving them a model for discussions of assessment tasks with their children at home. Three way conferences between each student, their parents and the teacher focused on achievements and future actions in individual preparation plans. A senior advisor ran a study centre twice a week and during school holidays, ensured the involvement of parents in the program and coordinated strategies for students in need of support.

Through the improvement of communication with families, the school aimed to develop parents' understanding of school processes and promote pride in the school. A school app enabled mobile access to school information and a website was developed to promote awareness of school processes and practice. Good news stories were posted on Facebook, promoting pride in the school. Parents were offered the opportunity to provide their email address so that relevant information could be sent directly to them. To achieve strong parental attendance at events, all of these approaches were used, as well as individual phone calls.

Achievements

In a two week period in November 2015, there were over 2,000 hits on the school's electronic media sites, including 580 likes on Facebook. Parents reported that they liked the mobility of the school app and the school's use of email.

As well as the information provided by the school evaluation process, the success of programs was measured by enrolment and attendance data that indicated an increased confidence in and support for the school by parents. Student attendance rates were higher than those of surrounding schools and the state average and enrolments increased. Attendance at parent teacher nights increased and every committee now has parent representation. The school community is more willing to endorse school decisions achieved through consensus.

By November 2015, 65 per cent of the 2015 HSC cohort of students had already been accepted for early entry into university. Parents of senior students were strongly supportive of the approach to preparation for the HSC. Parents of current students now have raised expectations of tertiary pathways as an achievable goal for students.

Sustainability

In 2016, the school plans to develop an interactive newsletter distributed through the website and the school app. The self-evaluation process and the cycle of broad school-based evaluations and smaller, specific evaluations will continue. The process has engendered confidence in the community that the school leaders are able to move the school in the direction of strongly supported local reform.