Evidence-based practice at Blue Haven Public School – video transcript

Hi, I’m Paul McDermott, I have been the principal of Blue Haven Public School since August of 2016.

The importance of school culture

Our school culture is everything to us. We can put great systems in place, we can put great processes in place, but if our school culture is toxic and it’s not positive, that’s going to take away from all the good work that’s happening. So something that we’ve focused very, very heavily on is our school culture.

Our school is a great place to be: it’s a fun place, it’s a vibrant place, and visitors that come to our school constantly talk about the ‘vibe’ in our school, which we’re equally proud of. We work really hard to make sure our staff are supported; we make sure that everybody in our community knows the vision. All of our community have contributed to the vision, so that it is theirs, they own it and they do genuinely feel like they have had a say in what’s happening in our school and the direction that we’re taking. We also make sure that we take the opportunity to celebrate the great results that we’ve had as a school, so that our community understands that there are great things happening. It’s having a big impact on our students and that there’s more to come for Blue Haven.

Partnering with parents and the local community

At Blue Haven Public School we value authentic community engagement with our community. So we do value having our parents through the door and also providing professional development for them about what we’re doing here in the school so that they’re aware of the pedagogy, the systems that we have in place, but also the great things that their kids are doing on a daily basis as well.

We had a wonderful initiative called Bridging Blue Haven in 2018 where we had over 400 community members that came in and engaged with interagencies. We had almost 40 interagency support groups that were here at the school and that community event provided strong links and networks that will last well into the future and is something that we’re really proud of here as a school.

Communicating with the school community

In the mornings we have our senior executive out at the front of the school opening car doors for the children as they come in, giving them high-fives – it really sends a message to the community that this is a fun place to be in. It’s somewhere the kids are cared for and valued, so we really value that communication that we have with our community. It’s a great way to greet people when they come into the school and we do the same thing in the afternoons and that’s one of the most rewarding things for us. And what a perfect start or finish to the day, to have smiling faces coming in and out of the school and celebrating what’s about to happen or what has happened throughout the day. We have a range of communication measures that we put in place for our community. We have a Skoolbag app that we post regularly on to let people know what’s happening around the school. Our Facebook site is regularly used to communicate the great things that are happening with our kids, whether it be in the classroom, in the sporting field or culturally. We also have a Twitter account that promotes the professional development that we’re doing as a staff and the great public speakers that we have at the school or professionally how we’re working, or what we’re working on as the staff. But we also make sure that our foyer is really welcoming and inviting for our parents as well. We have a number of different TV screens and different communication modules that we use to promote who the key people are in our school, but key messages like our school vision and the events that are happening in the school for that week. So people that walk into our school constantly know who the key people are, what the key messages are, and also what we’re doing as a
school. We run a number of parent information sessions here at our school; so we have a lot of speech and occupational therapy, for example, we have run sessions to let parents know what’s happening with those. We regularly communicate our strategic directions and vision through the school executive. So we run sessions during education week where parents come in and engage with us about our school vision, our strategic directions and how we’re going with those, and make sure that our parents feel welcome to come in and engage with us whenever they possibly can about any issues that they may have.

**Support for staff wellbeing**

We value our staff really highly here at Blue Haven. We make sure that we provide the best possible environment – a fun environment – that’s engaging and exciting for the staff to be in, and we provide high levels of support. We’ve got some great initiatives that we’ve put in place to support staff to make sure that they’re being supported along their journey. Teaching can be a stressful job at times and we make sure that we certainly support them and let them know what a great job they’re doing. So some of these include having a wellbeing session every term, once a term. We have a staff meeting that’s devoted purely to staff wellbeing and we let our hair down, we have a bit of fun, we have a laugh and we celebrate the good things that are happening in our school. One thing that we’ve also done is create a bit of an oasis in our staff room, so that our staff have somewhere that’s neutral – it’s engaging, it’s fun, it’s vibrant – where they can really just relax and take their mind off things in the afternoons or maybe at lunch and recess.

**Strategies to support student wellbeing**

In 2016 we identified that behaviour and wellbeing issues were having a significant impact on learning, so we knew that we needed to do something about it. One of the initiatives that we’ve implemented is that we self-fund a deputy principal just for wellbeing. We want to make sure that we’re providing the best possible environment to support our students, so that they can be successful with their schooling and successful in life. One of the initiatives were put in place is structured playground initiatives in the playground at lunch and recess. This avoids the confusion and the conflict that kids often experience when they’re in the playground and things are unstructured. We have all of our staff volunteering to referee games, to pull the games in when they get out of hand, just to help the students resolve conflict and talk through issues and provide them with the social skills that they require to resolve those conflicts and participate in games successfully without having the issues that can cause problems.

We have worked really closely with our community to improve the feedback that we get through the ‘Tell Them From Me’ survey. We’ve had about a six hundred percent increase in the responses that we’ve had in the ‘Tell Them From Me’ surveys over the last couple of years, which means that we’ve got really authentic data now on the perceptions that the community has of the school. But also how the students are feeling at school as well, so that we can really target the areas that need to be focused on in order to make sure that our school is as safe as it can be. Because some of our students here at Blue Haven, they do have complex backgrounds, and school is the safest place and the happiest place that they do have in their lives.

**Instructional and behaviour coaching**

The coaching model that we’ve implemented at Blue Haven has been really successful because it’s based on relational trust, whether it be at an instructional or a behavioural level. Our deputy principals are in classrooms, building trust with the teachers, so that they can provide the feedback that’s needed to help them get to the next level. Our instructional coaching model and behaviour coaching model is separated from the PDP process, so that the teachers know that they can have...
open, honest conversations and be really truthful about how they feel that they're going in their classrooms – whether it be with behaviour, or the implementation of the pedagogy, so that they can receive the support that's required. And that way, our PDP process is separate; we set goals with our staff in order to help them achieve those throughout the year. But the instructional coaching and the behaviour coaching model is absolutely based around relational trust and our team has done a wonderful job in implementing them.

**A focus on staff professional learning**

We've invested a lot of time, energy and money into providing the highest quality professional development for our staff. We make sure that we do it as a whole school so that the message is consistent throughout the school. But what we also do is support that professional development by coaching following the professional development to make sure that there's consistency in the implementation and the processes that have been put in place. The professional development model that we have here at Blue Haven is also tiered so at an exec level we have a set plan for how we professionally develop our staff. That includes rolling professional development at each executive meeting, where each member of the executive chooses a professional reading for all of us to share and discuss and have some robust discussions around. We also have scenarios that we do as an exec as well, so that's constantly upskilling people on different scenarios that they might encounter as a leader of a complex school. So it could be a suspension, it could be something about an attendance, it could be something about an enrolment, or it could be something complex in the community that you have to resolve as a future leader in the school. So we do support our staff to upskill and experience different leadership complexities that we might encounter as leaders.

As a staff we have a professional development plan, where we roll through our different professional development sessions each week and that's a big focus for us at school. We're not looking to just manage the day-to-day runnings of the school, we're looking to upskill and professionally develop our staff, so we focus a lot of our staff meeting time on professional development and giving us staff the skills to apply that knowledge in the classroom – to get the best results for their students. What we also do really well here at Blue Haven is professionally develop our support staff. So our school learning support officers receive constant professional development in order to upskill them, so that they are the best resource possible to support our staff in the implementation of whatever practices they're putting in place in their classrooms.

**Evidence-based practice**

I commenced in my role as principal at Blue Haven in 2016. At that point in time we were one of the lowest performing schools in the state – so out of 2,200 schools, we were in the bottom of 70 schools for performance and value-added growth. So as a leadership team, and working with the staff, we decided we didn’t have the chance to, or the opportunity to, experiment with kids’ education – we had to get it right. So we engaged very closely with evidence and evidence-based practices and knew that we needed to implement things that were proven to work. As a result of that we implemented explicit instruction as our signature pedagogy and we’ve supported that with really strong support measures like the RTI model of intervention. As a result of that, we’ve worked really collectively and built a really strong sense of collective efficacy across the school in the last two years. We’ve moved from the bottom 70 schools to the top 150 schools in the state as a result of the improvement measures that we've put in place. What we’re excited about where we are in the journey: we know we’ve got a long way to go and we haven’t certainly reached the finish line as far as what our expectations are of the potential of our students here at Blue Haven. We're continuing to look for evidence-based measures to make sure that we can improve what we're currently doing, in order to provide every opportunity for our kids in the future.
A tiered leadership model

So at Blue Haven Public School we introduced a tiered leadership model. We have a senior executive that consists of myself and four deputy principals, we also have an executive that consists of our assistant principals, and then an aspiring executive for those people that aspire to lead in the future. The role of our senior executive is to promote a positive school culture and drive school direction.

Our deputy principal instructional leaders are constantly in classrooms where they’re demonstrating lessons. It’s a gradual release model with high levels of support for staff so they demonstrate the lessons then they gradually release that responsibility back to the teacher, so the teachers are then able to take over and introduce those quality lessons for their students as well. Our deputy principal wellbeing works very closely with staff as well: he puts in strong systems to support positive behaviour, but he’s also in classroom supporting teachers to implement systems that are going to promote positive behaviour and support the pedagogy as well in the classroom. Our deputy principal implements strong policies and procedures throughout the school; we almost have a co-principal arrangement where we support one another and share the load between each other, which has been fantastic. He does an amazing job supporting things like student attendance, and making sure that the systems are strong to support students to come to school, feel safe in school, and be supported in all areas of their schooling.

Our assistant principals work closely with their stages to create a strong subculture in the school as well. They’re constantly looking at data, they’re analysing the progress of their students, and working at a stage level to make sure that we’re doing all that we can to support the needs of our students: socially and emotionally, academically, physically and in any other ways they may need to be supported throughout the school. In addition to that we have our aspiring execs, so they have the opportunity to participate in executive meetings and to take on different leadership roles throughout the school. They also engage in a lot of the professional reading that we do here at the school, and also we run rolling scenarios with our exec meetings as well so they’re constantly being upskilled and given the opportunity to experience what leadership is like in a large complex school.