CESE podcast – Supporting students’ learning transcript

Hello and welcome to CESE’s podcast on supporting students’ learning.

In this recording, CESE talks to school leaders from two NSW schools to discuss how they successfully provide a highly supportive learning environment for their students.

We have Helen Polios from Whalan Public School, and Murray Kitteringham and Melanie Check from Sir Joseph Banks High School.

These schools were selected as case studies as they consistently demonstrate high levels of advocacy at school, as reported by their students.

Before we begin, here are a few key facts about each school:

Sir Joseph Banks High School is a comprehensive coeducational government secondary school located in Revesby, in south-western Sydney. It has five hundred and ninety-one students, with 90% of their student cohort from a Language Background Other Than English and 2% Aboriginal students. The school’s Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage value is lower than the state average, with around 60% of students in the bottom quarter.

Whalan Public School, a government primary school located in Mount Druitt, western Sydney has three hundred and seventy students, with 21% Aboriginal students and 31% students from a Language Background Other Than English. The school’s Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage value is considerably lower than the state average, with around 75% of students in the bottom quarter.

Let’s start with a brief introduction to Supporting students’ learning.

Research tells us that teachers, and parents and carers, are key sources of support for learning. Greater levels of support are associated with better academic and wellbeing outcomes. And students learn better when the home and school environments form complementary and supporting roles in learning.

Our qualitative research shows that schools that provide high levels of advocacy at school are also committed to strengthening parental engagement. The case studies of Whalan Public School and Sir Joseph Banks High School highlight some of the strategies these schools have used to achieve high levels of advocacy and support for learning at school, and strong home-school partnerships for their students.

Tell Them From Me is an online survey system that collects the views of primary and secondary students, teachers and parents, in New South Wales government schools. One of the aims of the surveys is to capture how advocacy and support for learning is experienced at school and in the home.

CESE produced a publication based on the survey results, which drew on all three perspectives (students, teachers, and parents) to explore the provision of advocacy and support and how this varies for different groups of students and at different stages of school.

Here are its key findings:
Students’ perceptions of teacher support start to decline in the final years of primary school. Secondary school students perceive teacher support to dip in the middle years of school, before improving in Years 11 and 12.

Students’ perceptions of parent support decrease over secondary school. This decline is observed for both boys and girls, and across all socioeconomic groups.

Teachers report that they increase the amount of classroom support they provide to students in key schooling years – that is, Years 5 to 6 and Years 10 to 12.

Parents report a continual decline in the frequency of their interactions based around supporting their child’s schooling, starting from early primary school.

At primary school, girls report more support at school from teachers than boys. The opposite occurs in the early and middle years of secondary school, with boys reporting more support at school than girls.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds report receiving significantly less support from both parents and teachers compared to high socioeconomic-status students.

For more details, you can find the publication on the CESE website. To understand what advocacy and support for learning looks like at the local level, the publication is accompanied by ‘Supporting students’ learning – resources for schools, teachers and parents’, which provides two in-depth case studies of the schools we will be hearing from today: Sir Joseph Banks High School and Whalan Public School.

Now let’s hear from these schools.

Here’s Helen Polios, deputy principal of Whalan Public School, to talk about what she thinks contributes to their positive school advocacy results:

HELEN: I think that our community, and this has happened over time, it hasn’t always been this way, have bought into the brand of believing in more, and wanting more, having higher aspirations for their children, and we’ve seen that shift as we moved the school away from a behaviour focus to a learning focus.

We’ve got trusting relationships with families. We’re very inclusive. Open door policy. We see – parents can become upset very easily sometimes, but all they want is someone to listen, and hear them. And they’re happy to work through. So we sort of view those times not as the negatives, but as the positives, because it’s a collaboration, then, it’s a partnership. It’s an opportunity, it’s an opportunity for us to improve our systems and improve what we deliver.

We are consultative. I think that’s a strength. We do – staff, students and parents – we consult as much as we can. And we’re learning-focused. So they’re the things I see as the strengths.

All you really need is people who will listen to kids. And we do spend a lot of time listening. Teachers are committed to it, leaders are committed to it, community’s committed to it. And our P&C are a great conduit. They run our canteen and they’re a great conduit between school and community. They really push our message, if you know what I mean. Because parents will listen to other parents. And I think that’s been part of creating the positivity and the trust in our relationships.
Whalan Public School attributes its success to committed and caring staff who are attentive, encouraging, and who value what they do because they know it is going to make a difference:

HELEN: We have high mobility. But we also have staff who are – who really care. And who are really committed to making a difference. While they’re here, they buy into the brand, and they buy into the fact that they’re serving a community that has probably entrenched poverty, and who do it tough quite a bit, but they know that as teachers, they’re going to make a difference. They hold that position of – while children are in their care, they are the main factor that’s going to help them build their capacity.

According to the deputy principal, Whalan’s staff focuses on nurturing their students’ interests and wellbeing which, in turn, feeds engagement and perseverance in the classroom. The school uses its free extra-curricular activities and clubs program as a way of creating a safe space for its students:

HELEN: Every semester we’ll provide a range of clubs and that’s just to offer the children who sometimes find playground difficult, other options. We also do run an outreach room during break times, which is a quiet space to play. We have our biannual MAD concert and art show, which drive our arts learning. We’ve got a Living Deadly programme for our Aboriginal children, and we’ve got a Stephanie Alexander kitchen garden. So in terms of the provision of a wide range of extra-curricular activities, I think we do alright.

And I think children really appreciate that, because if you give them opportunities to do the things they love, and the things that they’re interested in, then it just promotes perseverance in learning. I really believe that.

Despite its high staff turnover, Whalan Public School has structures in place to ensure it provides a learning environment that is consistent for its students from year to year, and between teachers and classrooms. This consistent approach helps to alleviate student anxiety by providing familiar classrooms and learning frameworks year on year:

HELEN: We have a very strong induction programme and one of the other things I’m going to talk about is the school-wide practices. Because we implement those in all classrooms so that children feel supported, and year to year they don’t have to be learning new ways of working, we induct our new teachers when they first come to the school. So that happens in a multifaceted way, in terms of a person provides professional learning, and then the rest happens through their stage teams – stage team leaders.

So the school-wide practices are things like knowing and understanding the eight ways pedagogy, because what’s good for Aboriginal is good for all children. The START comprehension strategy. So we use START from kindergarten all the way through. Editing code, problem-solving steps, writing processes. Those are taught at all levels using the same delivery, if you like, the same one strategy.

They have that familiarity. We could – our staff are familiar with the Super Six, they’re familiar with other comprehension strategies, but we want all classrooms to be delivering one type of comprehension strategy, because that way you’re building, and children can become very anxious quite quickly, so alleviating the anxiety by having the familiar strategies really supports them.
At Sir Joseph Banks High School, they are strongly committed to personalised learning and providing a supportive environment for all their students. The school aims to have appropriate structures in place when students join Sir Joseph Banks so that every student knows how and where to access the right support. A strong partnership with their feeder primary schools allows Sir Joseph Banks to form a relationship with their incoming students so that academic and wellbeing needs are known and planned for, which has helped to make students feel supported as soon as they arrive at the school.

Here’s what Murray Kitteringham and Melanie Check have to say about this process:

MURRAY: Mel and her team also assess every single student that comes into the school, to find out where they’re at and our learning and support team put structures in place as soon as they hit the ground, they hit the ground running.

MELANIE: We give them literacy and numeracy pre-assessment tests so we can place them. In that it’s also that whole approach to the student if there’s any mental health, any behavioural issues, any family issues that are identified. We specifically link them up so if they’re struggling, if there’s a bit of anxiety, it might be a case of we’re lucky to have a student support officer on site. We might link them up there, whatever we think they might need and they express what they need – we put in place right from the get-go. That’s been really successful in being able to make kids feel supported as soon as they arrive here.

Sir Joseph Banks uses its equity funding to employ additional teachers and Student Learning and Support Officers to ensure a targeted and personalised response to student needs. The school community appreciates that this allows the school to be responsive to student needs through targeted employment and staffing flexibility:

MURRAY: For us we’re able to, because of the bits here and the bits there, we’re able to actually target the student needs through the backgrounds and the types of teachers we can employ to fill those specific needs. So that flexibility is there and as the need changes we’ve got that ability to address the need that’s there.

MELANIE: Because we are very fortunate in getting extra funding obviously to support our community and our clientele, that does enable us to have more of those temporary teachers and target them. We see it as a benefit.

MURRAY: We’ve got a student support officer who is a youth worker employed by equity funds so she’s a youth worker in our school and she sits in the drop-in centre, that’s where she is in the school at the moment. And she works with a team of people to try and, when the kids are really feeling that anxious and acting out and they’ve used their time out pass, to bring them back down into that green level of being able to access learning. She’ll sit with them, work through the strategies. It might be music, it might be playing a bit of cards, it might be an app on a phone or whatever, have the conversation that needs to be had and pack them back up and as quickly as possible get them back into class. So the kids that are in the class can get along with their business of teaching and learning and –

MELANIE: Teachers feel supported too.

MURRAY: Teachers feel supported because they’re not going I’ve got to manage this kid and those angry conversations aren’t happening. Every school has these incidents but what we do is we don’t react, we act. We’ve got the structures in place so that when these things happen everyone just
switches into plan B mode. Well this kid goes here and that’s going to happen, the teachers are supportive of that, they don’t see them as getting away with things. Trying to manage someone when they’re angry in class is really difficult.

MELANIE: And with the goal of them being back in class within that lesson, that’s really the goal.

MURRAY: It is the goal.

MELANIE: So come down, having the talk, straight back in.

Murray and Melanie talk about what why one of the school’s Strategic Directions is to create a school environment where the interconnecting relationships among its students, staff, parents and community are valued and nurtured. Over the last few years, the school’s philosophy has shifted to ‘collective efficacy’ – a shared vision for learning and teaching, and purposeful, focused teacher collaboration:

MELANIE: I think too it’s those incidental conversations and support mechanisms. So with some of the equity funding that we have, we’ve got as I mentioned before, we’ve got our student support officers, we’ve got our CLO’s, we’ve got our learning centre coordinator. If you’re feeling as if you’re having a particular issue with a cohort or as individual students you have that support that you can go to and bounce ideas off. There are people around to lend you support so that you can get the learning done and the teaching done, which I think that’s really fundamental.

MURRAY: Look, teacher collective advocacy is, if there is one thing – that would be it. The staff are working together, consistently the left hand knows what the right hand is doing. In a high school, I think the siloing of high schools is a big barrier for our kids that have relatively low literacy and numeracy levels. Connecting curriculum for them is a problem in a high school and although they might be getting the expertise but the expertise is dislocated. So connecting that curriculum from one KLA to another is really important and how we go about doing that, that’s what we’re looking at.

The leaders of Sir Joseph Banks recognise that it has not been one of the area’s preferred secondary schools in the past. In response, the school executive has focused on building relationships with partner and feeder primary schools through the implementation of its Primary Partners program. This program invites local primary schools to Sir Joseph Banks to participate in learning events. Principals from the primary schools select programs for their students in Year 3 onwards from an extensive range of activities led by Sir Joseph Banks teachers and using the school’s facilities.

The Primary Partners program has been crucial in communicating the opportunities that are available to students at Sir Joseph Banks, and the school has seen an increase in Year 7 enrolments for the last two years:

MELANIE: For me it gets back to the relationship, so the relationships we’ve set up previously are now coming into fruition. We need that expertise from the primary schools and we’re looking at ways that we can better support students before they get here, so we’re ready. We’ve made those links with the primary schools through some really solid foundations that we’ve created over the last couple of years. For example, we know in the past we haven’t been our area’s school of choice, for various reasons, so we’ve really gone about trying to change that. We’ve worked with our primary schools on creating programs where they can come and access very freely. We negotiate with them
what kinds of programs they would like their students to access so we’re very committed and in that we’ve been able to manage to form relationships between our teaching staff and our local primary school’s teaching staff. They can ring up and say look, we know you have this going on, how about we do this and that’s been really fantastic.

In 2018, the school introduced a Transition Team to focus on personalised pathways as students move through and beyond school. This teams works to ensure that ‘every student leaves with one foot into their future’ in a career pathway that begins with either employment or further education in a tertiary institution. The creation of the Transition Team helps help to show every student that their needs will be catered for at Sir Joseph Banks:

MURRAY: Look, if you want me to go even bigger picture about what we’re looking at wanting to do. So we’ve already had a lot of success with that – now where are we going to take this. So transition for me isn’t just about year six into year seven and it’s not about year ten into the workplace and then year ten into 11 or 11 to 12. It’s from year four all the way through to post-school, and working not only with the school, working with the primary schools and us becoming the school of choice for our local community, seeing what we’re actually doing here is we’re getting every kid into university that wants to go.

However that’s part of the picture, the other stuff that’s just as important is if you want to go into a life and a world of business we’ve got a pathway for you. If you want to go into an apprenticeship, an employment in that direction we’ve got that pathway, we’ve got the connections with the local community and down that VET pathway. So what I’m really interested in driving and our school is working towards every single child has a future and they can start to plan that future from primary school, see what we offer, know that what we offer here is best practice and that every single child is catered for, not just the ones that want to go to university.

We’ve got a support unit up there, a big support unit with 70 plus kids in it with intellectually moderate and mild disabilities. Every one of those kids leaves school and goes into a pathway. We’re not about just, well you get through school; we’re really invested in what they do beyond school so that we can cater for that pathway during their school life. Our disengaged kids, what programs that we’re offering for them as well so that every student who comes here, they’re an individual, they’re unique, and their life is important no matter how engaged or disengaged they are with school. School is not for everybody but when they leave here they leave with the next step very clearly organised and the transition to that organised for them. Within that comes the structures of the school and how we develop those pathways, without trying to funnel kids in too early but looking at the surveys that exist about where are you at right now and sitting down and doing that one-on-one mentoring. If you’re at this point now what do you need to do to get to the next step and how are we going to go about doing that and that language of ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘our’.

Sir Joseph Banks is also seeing that positive data can be used to engage the community and shift previous perceptions of the school. School and student successes are celebrated by sharing results and outcomes with staff, parents and the community. Sharing information and positive results about the school have increased its profile and status within the local community as the school of choice:

MURRAY: Points of interest about what’s happening, what’s happening on the website, what’s happening next week – that now gets emailed. So this school newsletter, the parent buy-in has really improved with that, we didn’t do a weekly newsletter before. It’s a bit of a punish trying to get it
together and get it out but without fail it goes out every Friday, it gets emailed to all of the parents, it gets put up on the Facebook site, the website and a copy to every staff member as well.

Yeah, it's a nice little document that comes out every week and I think the parents are appreciative and it starts conversations around the dinner table from reading the feedback. Not what did you do at school today, oh nothing, you know, saw the debating team won-

MELANIE: They feel, they try because they feel really empowered because before students were intercepting these things so whether it be sent mail, students would get home first, take the mail out of the letterbox. And now they're actually feeling really involved and they feel very open about communicating with us now which is fantastic because that has been a struggle in the past.

MURRAY: The next step is for us to get that on the link into primary schools and get them, so how we grow what we're doing. And I guess what we're trying to do is celebrate what we're doing as you say, to show what we think is best practice, that we're aspiring to something that's not just a little bit ahead but we're looking years down the track.

MELANIE: All invested in the wellbeing and the learning outcomes of all the students in our community, as a combined group.

MURRAY: And the advocacy and the purpose of the reason behind why we're doing all of this is to connect people. Connected people learn better.

Similarly, Whalan Public School has worked hard to engage parents with the school and their children’s learning. Scheduled open classroom time every morning allows parents to speak to the teachers and look over their child’s classwork before the start of school. Teachers encourage students to put their day’s work on their desk and invite them to bring in their parents the next morning to see it. According to Helen, this has had a positive impact on both student and parental engagement:

HELEN: As far as community engagement goes, we do lots of things throughout the year that invite community in. But to engage a little further – we’re still working on that. But they love special events. They’ll come out for those. We do barbecues and breakfasts, things like celebrate Harmony Day and NAIDOC, and all of those things bring them to our school. And then we have an open classroom time in the morning. So 8.30, there’s a teacher on duty. At a quarter to, the bell will go, and at that time, children can choose to remain under the shed for the remainder of that morning play time, or go to classrooms. A lot of our children, probably actually 85 per cent, go to classrooms. And lots of parents go into rooms at that time.

Parents go in, they get access to the teacher, they can look at kids’ work – so teachers will do little things like, you know, say to kids the afternoon before, ‘put out on your table your writing from today’, and the next morning say ‘bring mum and dad in in the morning to have a look at it, it’s on the table.’ So things like that. That’s been our way in to begin that engagement with the learning. So we’re improving all the time.

The school’s community days also provide an opportunity to showcase the learning and teaching taking place at Whalan. More recently, these community days have included workshops on how parents can support their children with numeracy and literacy, and how to help their children
develop other capabilities, for example, homework-related skills. These events are welcomed by an increasingly engaged parent community who are interested in how they can support their children in their learning. Helen describes this as an indicator of the school’s successful shift to a focus on learning in both the classroom and in the community:

HELEN: Our community days now have begun to provide – how can you support your child with maths, how can you support your child with literacy, how can you support your child to develop in a broad way, homework skills and things like that.

And in the last few years our parents have really come on board with the learning stuff, and they’re more interested. We did a quick, we had our mini fete the other day and – our stage three amazing job, as always – getting ready to write the school plan, we documented a series of statements about what we want to provide. We put them on some boxes, Michelle and I walked around and we gave every single parent we saw, every single community member, three tokens. And we said ‘vote for the three things you value most for your kids’. Because we want to make sure that we’re delivering what’s important to our community, and not just what teachers think. And overwhelmingly, literacy/numeracy came out. Overwhelming. Now years ago, I reckon we would have got sport, and more sport, and give me more sport! So for our community to overwhelming vote strong literacy, numeracy – the shift is done.

And that concludes our podcast.

CESE would like to thank Helen Polios from Whalan Public School, and Murray Kitteringham and Melanie Check from Sir Joseph Banks High School, for their valuable input.

To access more evidence-based strategies, and to read the CESE paper and the two case studies in full, please download CESE’s ‘Supporting students’ learning publication and resources for schools, teachers and parents’, at cese.nsw.gov.au/publications.

This podcast was written and produced by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation and is read by Samuel Cox.

Thanks for listening.