

Leading Schoolwide Wellbeing & Resilience for Student & Staff Success

Ten Reasons why a focus on whole school wellbeing enhances Catholic School Leadership

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Wellbeing has been defined as a positive and sustainable condition that allows individuals, groups, organisations and nations to thrive and flourish (Huppert, Baylis & Keverne 2005). There are many different definitions of resilience but all refer to the capacity of the individual to ‘overcome odds’ and demonstrate the personal strengths needed to cope with setbacks or adversity. Given that wellbeing and resilience are complex concepts, Catholic school leaders are encouraged to take a multi-faceted approach that aligns Catholic values with whole school, class and community practices that connect children and young people to their school, their teachers and their peers as well as ways to embed the teaching of positive social-emotional skills in the academic curriculum.

Ten reasons why a focus on whole school wellbeing enhances Catholic school leadership

1. It will make you a better Catholic school leader

In Catholic schools the school vision is anchored in the values and ethics of Catholicity. These values and ethics are foundational to the spiritual dimension of wellbeing and provide a clear direction for moral leadership in Catholic schools. Catholic schools base their morality on the teaching of Christ, creating a ‘synthesis between school culture and faith’ (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, section 14). Moral leadership in Catholic schools has the capacity to transform all in the school community (Duignan 2006, Starratt, 2004).

An effective school leader, according to Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom 2004, i) defines a clear **vision for the direction** their school should take, ii) develops people and iii) redesigns the organization of their school to align with their school vision. A school wellbeing focus provides a positive, strengths-based framework for whole school and class practices underpinned by a clarity in prosocial Catholic values, and ethical practices and purposes that can energise, and empower people rather than a deficit, problem-based focus that de-energises and dis-empowers. It is a broad umbrella concept that allows school leadership to coordinate the protective school and classroom practices that connect the whole school community

and develop teachers' commitment to teaching the social-emotional skills and understandings that are inextricably linked to academic success.

A principal's focus on schoolwide wellbeing has high probability of school community 'buy-in' given that many schools are grappling with discipline problems, bullying, high student absenteeism, lack of student engagement and student drug and alcohol abuse to name just a few current concerns. Such a focus can synthesise and unify a number of school initiatives such as anti-bullying initiatives, drug and alcohol prevention, mental health initiatives, social skills training, behaviour management and so on. The usefulness of school wellbeing as a unifying construct is illustrated in the Victorian Department of Education project titled *Safe Schools are Effective Schools* where most of the eleven lighthouse schools identified school wellbeing as their school priority and their school vision. To Senge (1990) a shared school vision creates a sense of commonality that permeates a school and gives coherence to diverse activities. A shared vision provides a clear agenda or picture that the whole school community can articulate and 'carry in their heads and their hearts' (Senge p. 206).

The interdependence between setting a direction for schoolwide wellbeing and a leader's capacity to build positive relationships within their school community is highlighted in Hoerr's statement on school leadership.

A leader sets the vision but doesn't stop there. A leader listens, understands, motivates, reinforces and makes the tough decisions. A leader passes out praise when things go well and takes responsibility and picks up the pieces when things fall apart. Leadership is about relationships (Hoerr 2006 p.7).

School relationships were defined by principals as the most challenging aspect of their job in a study conducted for the NSW Department of Education (Scott 2003). The principals ranked the qualities of effective school leaders as follows:

1. *Self management*: This included staying calm, keeping things in perspective and maintaining a sense of humour. Resilience and bouncing back from adversity, learning from errors and being able to take a hard decision also came under this category - along with wanting to achieve the best outcome possible.
2. *Relationship management* included dealing effectively with conflict situations, being able to empathise and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds, a willingness to listen to different points of view before making decisions and contributing positively to team projects.
3. *Skills in being resourceful* included identifying priorities and being flexible, having a clear justified vision for the school and being able to organise and manage time effectively.

These skills are the social-emotional skills that underpin not only successful leadership but also staff and student wellbeing. Another study (Williams 2003) compared twelve outstanding and eight 'typical' principals and found that the outstanding principals were distinguished by their self-management skills and their relationship management skills. The impact of the social-emotional competencies of a leader on the workplace culture is highlighted in a study of 3,781 executives. Almost

70% of their employee's perceptions of the working climate was linked to the leader's social-emotional competency (Goleman, 2000). A focus on schoolwide wellbeing draws the attention of all in the school community to practices that build positive relationships, for example in staff meetings, in classrooms and in parent-teacher meetings and the prosocial Catholic values that underpin these practices.

A shared vision on school wellbeing also provides a positive framework for **developing people's strengths** and their engagement in the school community; teachers, students and parents. Developing people involves building the social and psychological capital of those within the school. The new field of positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. This field is based on the belief that people want to cultivate what is best within themselves and to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. According to Seligman (2002), the founder of the field of positive psychology, a meaningful and purposeful life is best achieved by utilising one's strengths in the service of others. The essence of effective teaching is teachers engaging their strengths in the service of teaching their students. A shared vision on schoolwide wellbeing encourages Catholic leaders to identify different staff and students' strengths and provide opportunities for the development of these strengths through their school engagement and their classroom practices.

Developing people through a focus on strengths also encourages leaders to plan ways to **redesign school organisational structures and practices** to maximise staff and students' diverse strengths and to build a collaborative school culture that values these different strengths. A collaborative culture driven by shared leadership based on valuing each other's strengths in Catholic Schools is inclusive and empowering of all and drives quality teaching and learning (Bezzina, Burford & Duignan 2006).

2. It will enhance your school as a positive organization

Recent research highlights the role of positive emotions in broadening people's capacity to learn and building an organisation's capacity to thrive (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Positive emotions enhance people's capacity for optimistic thinking, problem solving and decision making and leads to more flexible, innovative and creative solutions (Isen 2001, 2003). Positive emotions can also predict the success of an organization. Losada and Heaphy (2001) conducted a content analyses of team meetings in sixty organizations during their annual strategic planning for the number of positive versus negative statements. The twenty flourishing companies made three positive statements to one negative statement and were rated highly in terms of positive emotions. In comparison the twenty failing companies made a high number of negative statements and negative emotions. A leader's positive emotions are contagious and predict the group or organisation's performance. Positive emotions also help people to be more resilient and recover more quickly after setbacks (Fredrickson & Tugade 2004). A focus on whole school wellbeing draws leadership attention to strategies to build positive emotions and a positive school culture that contribute to higher productivity, improved problem solving and better learning. As Fullan has asserted:

If we dig deeper into the roles of emotion and hope in interpersonal relationships, we will gain a lasting understanding of how to deal with change more constructively (Fullan 1997 p.226).

Specific leadership strategies for building positive emotions associated with a positive school 'spirit' or culture are outlined in McGrath and Noble (2003 p.78 -79). A recent large scale UK study (Morgan 2006) on teacher engagement in their profession highlights the positive emotions teachers experience when they are connecting with their students. Most teachers found teaching exciting due to the variety and broad range of interactions 'no day the same'; satisfying due to the pleasure from helping young people develop as well as own self development and enjoyable due immediate and long term pleasure gained from positive interactions and feedback from students, colleagues and broader community. Leaders can facilitate teachers' acknowledgement and reflection of their positive emotions, their engagement and their sense of meaning and purpose in their profession in staff meetings, through dialogue, in newsletters and so on.

3. It will make your teachers more effective educators

The quality of teaching, above all else, has been identified as the key factor in determining how well students learn (Rowe, 2004; Trent, 2001). In these studies it is the quality of the teacher-student relationship that is the most important factor, above content and pedagogy, in influencing students' learning. The following students' quotes powerfully illustrate the significance of this positive teacher-student relationship.

- *Ms xx is a great teacher; she really cares about us. The other teachers at this school are crap! (year 6) Rowe, 2004.*
- *...I thought it was just me. But since I've had xxx (a 'good' teacher) in maths, it's all changed...everythin's better...even other stuff.... (year 11) Trent 2001.*

A shared vision on schoolwide wellbeing draws teachers' attention to the Catholic schools' gospel values such as compassion, respect and acceptance of differences that underpin positive relationships and school and class practices that connect teachers with students and students with each other. Teachers connect with their students by modelling resilient attitudes and skills, establishing a collaborative classroom climate, communicating warmth and positive high expectations, adopting classroom practices such as curriculum differentiation that affirm student strengths, having clear and consistent boundaries, and by taking the time to get to know their students as people, not just pupils.

As Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) declare, students' social and emotional wellbeing is profoundly dependent on their teacher's social-emotional wellbeing. If teachers are not coping well and experiencing strong negative emotions such as anxiety or anger, then clearly that directly impacts on their capacity to teach effectively and for their students to learn. Through teaching their students the social-emotional skills and understandings associated with wellbeing and resilience, teachers also develop a deeper understanding of how to improve their own wellbeing and resilience both personally and professionally (McGrath and Noble 2003). For example in teaching the BOUNCE BACK acronym, ten coping statements in the *Bounce Back Classroom Resiliency* program, not only were teacher's understandings of resilience enhanced, but they also developed a sense of professional competence in their counselling of students (McGrath and Noble 2003). However teachers' enthusiasm for the

implementation of a wellbeing program is highly influenced by the active, engaged support and direction provided by the principal (Kam, Greenberg and Walls (2003).

4. It will improve teacher retention: staff will want to work and STAY at your school

A Catholic school culture that is underpinned by a vision of schoolwide wellbeing will not only connect teachers to their students but to their colleagues and to their school purpose. Two recent studies demonstrated that teachers who use social-emotional learning strategies and programming in their classrooms or who are members of a school community using social-emotional practices schoolwide are generally happier and more likely to stay in the teaching profession (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer 2004; Murray 2005). In contrast Ewing (2006) spoke about the isolation and perceived lack of collegial or leadership support of some teachers that was the main catalyst that prompted them to leave their profession.

5. It will make your students better learners

A focus on schoolwide wellbeing links Catholic leadership with learning. We now know that students' social and emotional learning facilitates their academic success (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004) and that a student's level of social competence and their friendship networks are predictive of their academic achievement (Caprara et al. 2000; Wentzel & Caldwell 1997). Students who experience social-emotional learning demonstrate improved school attitudes, school performance and school behaviour. Improved attitudes to school and learning include a stronger sense of community, higher academic motivation and educational aspirations, better understanding of consequences of behaviour, and a better ability to cope with school stressors. Improved school performance includes improved mathematics, literacy, and social studies skills, higher achievement in overall results, improved learning-to-learn skills, better problem solving and planning ability, greater use of higher level reasoning strategies and improvements in reading comprehension (CASEL 2006; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004)).

The social-emotional skills (outlined by McGrath & Noble 2003) include:

- *helpful and positive thinking skills*, including optimistic thinking which is the capacity to be open and flexible in their thinking, and having a sense of humour
- *skills in being resourceful and adaptive* so students can set, plan and monitor goals, be organised and persevere and not give up when faced with a difficulty
- *relationship skills*
- *skills in emotional literacy* which include empathy for others and capacity to manage strong negative emotions
- *skills in self knowledge and self management*

The recognition of the strong interdependence of social-emotional wellbeing and academic success is leading to more schools implementing wellbeing programs to skill their teachers in embedding the teaching of these skills in the academic curriculum (for example *Kidsmatter* 2006, *BOUNCE BACK Classroom Resiliency Program* 2003).

Aligned with a social-emotional skills-based curriculum approach is a focus on building students' strengths. Strengths are usually either cognitive or personal (ie about 'character'). Promoting wellbeing and growth in students is more than fixing what is wrong with them. It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, their strengths and what they are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best use and extend those strengths. Professor Howard Gardner's model of Multiple Intelligences (MI) is a useful theoretical framework for identifying cognitive strengths. This framework assists teachers to recognise and celebrate student differences but to also develop a differentiated curriculum to provide different entry points into the curriculum for students with different strengths. The MI framework encourages teachers to develop a greater range of learning and assessment tasks than do other models of intellectual strengths. A study (by Mindy Kornhaber in 2003) of forty-seven schools who had been using MI theory for curriculum differentiation for at least three years identified significant benefits of an MI approach in terms of improvements in student engagement and learning, student behaviour, and parent participation. There were particular benefits for students with learning difficulties who, in the MI classroom, demonstrated greater effort in learning, more motivation and improved learning outcomes.

6. It will align your school leadership with National policies in education

The National Goals of Schooling define student wellbeing as the core of school practice. As stated in the goals: Schooling provides a foundation for young Australian's intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development. By providing a supportive and nurturing environment, schooling contributes to the development of students' sense of self-worth, enthusiasm for learning and optimism for the future (MCEETYA 2000). The National Goals of Schooling align with other National policies such as the National Framework in Education, the National Safe Schools Framework and the Health Promoting Schools Framework that all highlight the importance of a whole school approach to schoolwide wellbeing underpinned by prosocial values and practices.

7. It will connect your school to the community

Family-school connections

The two most important protective environments for developing students' wellbeing and resilience are family connectedness and school connectedness. For students who come from a troubled home background their school may be the only environment where they feel safe and connected. Recognition of the importance of school to fulfil this purpose is the essence of the project titled *It takes a village to raise a child* in the Leaders Transforming Learning and Learning research initiative (Gibson et al 2006). A school focus on wellbeing values building strong school-family connections and looks at ways to support parents in enhancing their children's wellbeing and resilience.

School-community connections

Schools are in an excellent position to help young people connect with their local community. Service learning is one strategy schools are adopting to build stronger school-community connections (Noble, 2007). Service learning integrates meaningful community service with student instruction and reflection to help students learn skills such as being resourceful, showing initiative and setting goals, and developing prosocial values and social skills. Such active and meaningful community engagement enhances an

individual's sense of wellbeing (Oishi, Diener, Suh & Lucas, 1999; Shinn & Toohey 2003). Other opportunities for positive youth community involvement such as students' participation in sports teams, art and drama groups and membership of pro-social youth groups has been identified as one of the most prevalent protective factors in enhancing youth wellbeing (Bond et al 2000).

8. Social and emotional competencies are demanded by employers

The self management and relationship skills that underpin social-emotional wellbeing are identified as key competencies for school leavers by employers in the Mayer Report (Australia) and by employers in America (Weissberg 2006). These skills include team (interpersonal) skills such as conflict resolution and negotiation skills, communication skills, self management skills (goal setting, self motivation, initiative), resourcefulness including creative thinking and problem solving and competence in literacy and numeracy. This list highlights that academic abilities are only one part of the picture in determining what makes someone successful in the workplace and in life.

9. It will reduce discipline and bullying problems in your school

The goals of schoolwide wellbeing align with school improvement and school reform objectives to develop effective schools where all in the school community feel safe, and connected (McGrath & Noble 2006; Noble 2006). Research demonstrates that students who experience social-emotional learning participate in class more, demonstrate more pro-social behaviour, have fewer absences and improved attendance, show reductions in aggression and disruptions, are on track to graduate and are less likely to drop out and are more likely to work out their own way of learning ((Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004; CASEL 2006). A school focus on wellbeing provides clear directions for all in the school community to consider ways to build relationships through whole school and class practices as well as ways to teach the social-emotional and academic skills that underpin student wellbeing and resilience.

10. It will allow you to make a CASE for coordinating school initiatives for whole school improvement

A vision for whole school wellbeing underpinned by Catholic values and ethics links leadership in Catholic schools with staff and student wellbeing and learning. This vision has the capacity to transform your school, your staff and your students. CASE is an acronym that organises the key components that lead to effective whole school improvement.

- **Customise** any new initiatives to fit with your Catholic school values and ethics and the policies and practices that are already in place and working well. Also look at ways to customize new initiatives so they suit your specific school's needs, your students' needs, and your staff's capabilities to enhance the likelihood of *school ownership* of the new initiatives.
- **Audit for Accountability:** conduct an audit of what's already in place, what's working, what's not, and document progress (*evidence based*).
- **Sustain:** new initiatives such as a wellbeing program through the professional development of staff, and through resources/strategies that empower teachers and motivate them to embed wellbeing practices in their curriculum.

- **Embed:** the new initiatives in the school culture, in curriculum planning, in teaching practices (for example What does respect look like in our school assembly; our maths lesson? etc) Consider how your vision links to current school initiatives and new initiatives?

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