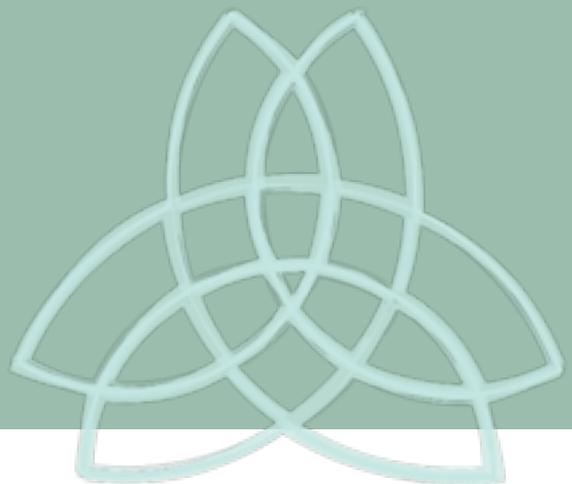


Booloroo Centre District School

Building community and
improving communication

8 November 2017

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Process



In 2017 the Governing Council at Booleroo Centre District School was awarded a Parent Initiative Grant to look at ways to build a stronger community and better communication throughout the school community. Booleroo Centre District School serves a large and geographically dispersed community of families which leads to a number of challenges in building this positive, cohesive learning community, including:

- students coming to school by bus, meaning that parents have limited face to face contact with the school community and staff.
- many of the parents who are more involved and in leadership positions tend to be those who are geographically close to the school, which can lead to over-representation of some and potential blurring of boundaries between teachers' and parents' unique roles in both supporting education and in building a successful learning community.

The Governing Council approached Mel Lambert Consulting to facilitate a community-building process with students, parents and teachers. This process had three phases, delivered between August and November 2017 as follows:

Phase 1: The Community Conversation: What do we want for our school community?

- Preliminary communication with the school community about the process and intentions from school leadership
- Focus groups in the school over two days to explore what the different players in the school community want for themselves and each other & what currently helps and hinders this happening. I propose at least one focus group each for staff, students and parents respectively.
- An online focus group and telephone interviews to draw in geographically-dispersed families who would find it hard to engage in person.

Phase 2: Synthesis and development of ideas: What does it tell us and what could we do?

- analysis of work done and preparation of a workshop to share back findings, propose a range of solutions and make decisions about next steps
- a workshop with representatives from school leadership and Governing Council to share back learning from Phase 1 share ideas for next steps and to make decisions about implementation.

The process engaged approximately 50 parents, 40 students and 20 staff in feeding in comments, priorities and ideas about the future of communication and community at Booleroo Centre District School. Parents were a relatively even split between local parents and parents from surrounding areas. This paper summarises the main themes, priorities and ideas emerging, for discussion and action in the final workshop to be held in November 2017. The final section outlines the outcomes from the final workshop.

It should be noted that this paper contains aggregated insights and descriptions of desired and undesired state rather than direct quotations or actual descriptions of current state.

Key themes & ideas



The benefits of home-school partnerships are many, with research consistently finding that teacher and family relationships are important for young people's social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement (Desforges & Aboucher, 2003).

Theme 1: Improving communication between parents and teachers

What we don't want	What we do want
staff feeling threatened or under siege from parents	stronger positive relationships between staff and parents
parents feeling disconnected from their children's learning & unable to contact staff	easy & timely two-way communication in the best interests of the student and their learning

What we think might hinder	What we think might help
formal appointments for all communication	spontaneous conversations to deal with small things
only one method e.g. diary notes which can take a long time back and forward to resolve things	use of different communication methods (e.g. email, text, diary note, meeting) depending on urgency or severity of issue

Theme 1: Ideas to respond

	<p>Parents able to 'pop in' at start or end of day for a quick conversation Pros: immediate, builds genuine connection Cons: more suitable for local families</p> <p>Direct email contact to be able to work small things out quickly (both ways) pros: instant, one of most widely stated 'preferred communication methods' for families cons: relies on staff & parents checking emails daily</p> <p>Shared agreement to check & respond to messages in the communication book each day pros: uses existing methods, accessible to all cons: relies on staff being able to access info they need to make a decision/ response; not instant so not suitable for urgent issues</p>
	<p>3 way interviews (already happening) pros: already in progress; builds relationships and sense of partnership cons: formal and pre-arranged; not suitable for day to day communications</p> <p>Develop clear guidelines for all about decision-making delegations e.g. "What can a teacher help with?" "What do I need to talk to leadership about?" pros: allows parents to go to the right person for an issue rather than wasting staff and their own time; empowers staff & frees up leadership time cons: may not always be clear-cut; risk of being too rigid</p> <p>Develop strengths-based communication skills and agreements pros: ensures interactions don't only deal with problems; can lead to positive feedback for all parties cons: may require additional training & support for staff and parents</p> <p>Parent, student & teacher working group to develop positive communication principles pros: ensures ways forward take account of all view points; focuses on the spirit and values of communication rather than a 'do and don't' rule book approach; already started through this work cons: takes time and effort to coordinate</p> <p>Use of a communication app pros: easy and quick to use; accessible anywhere cons: relies on access to technology; may require some active support from the school to encourage adoption</p> <p>Publishing statistics and celebrating resolved issues and positive communication across the school community pros: turns issues & positive communication into something to celebrate together - 'we fixed it!' 'We're doing well!' cons: requires data capture and a willingness to be vulnerable - not all data will be good</p>

Theme 2: Improving communication across the whole school community

What we don't want	What we do want
Parents feeling out of the loop, uninformed and disconnected	a connected and informed school community that works well together
Teachers weighed down with onerous bureaucracy and time-consuming communication methods	Reliable and dependable communication systems that are easy to update and easy to access, for staff and for parents

What we think might hinder	What we think might help
unreliable or inaccurate communication	students involved in technology and communication solutions
assuming that information sent has been received (both ways)	using a range of communication methods to suit different needs
communication methods that aren't accessible to the whole school community	seeking input from the whole community for decisions that affect the whole community

Theme 2: Ideas to respond

	<p>Making the newsletter more 'mobile friendly' pros: more readily accessible on the move (when people might have better internet coverage than at home); greater reach cons: doesn't address the people who prefer a paper copy; requires technical skill to redesign format</p> <p>Print a small number of newsletters for non-internet-connected families pros: allows everyone to access; gives a message that the school is committed to all parents cons: requires students to pick it up on behalf of parents who aren't local</p> <p>Surveys to understand perspectives of students & parents on decision-making pros: inclusive, reaches everyone, takes on board varied perspectives cons: low return rates on surveys is normal; doesn't always capture the 'why' sufficiently</p> <p>Question and answer wall where people can post questions and where answers and feedback are shared pros: is transparent and allows parents to see what is happening or what something can't happen; is cheap and quick to do; can be shared as a photo via newsletter, social media or text; can be virtual; could also be used by Governing Council for greater transparency cons: requires regular updating; only seen 'in the flesh' by people on site</p>
	<p>Use of a communication app pros: easy and quick to use; accessible anywhere cons: relies on access to technology; may require some active support from the school to encourage adoption</p> <p>Parent, student & teacher working group to develop positive communication principles pros: ensures ways forward take account of all view points; focuses on the spirit and values of communication rather than a 'do and don't' rule book approach; already started through this work cons: takes time and effort to coordinate</p> <p>Open Days & community events (with student involved in planning and hosting) to explore new initiatives & to share in community together pros: facilitates real connection; encourages students in leadership roles; draws families in cons: involves big commitment from whole school community; may be more geared to local families</p>

Theme 3: Culture and community: building a strong, safe and welcoming community

What we don't want	What we do want
parents feeling unwelcome at school	Students, staff and parents feeling safe to be part of & contribute to the school
teachers feeling parents are interfering in their jobs	Positive and hospitable interactions between parents and school
Parents or teachers feeling their contribution isn't valued	Everyone feeling they 'fit in' and are welcome
Students not wanting to come to school	

What we think might hinder	What we think might help
Inflexibility in how communication and connection happens	Flexibility in how, when and where the school community interacts face to face
Holding on to stereotypes & assumptions of what teachers or parents are like	Strong role of front office in creating welcome and safety
Not keeping the students at the centre	Students involved in shaping a safe and welcoming culture that is attractive to them

Theme 3: Ideas to respond

	<p>Welcoming committee of parents for new families to the school pros: builds relationships between parents; gives new parents peers to ask questions rather than channeling everything through busy staff cons: doesn't help build staff/parent partnerships; could preference local families if not managed carefully (could be alleviated by use of phone/email communication or a family Facebook page)</p> <p>Say g'day - a campaign to build connection and conversations in school pros: quick, easy, fun cons: limited to those in and around school grounds</p> <p>Offering hospitality for meetings at school (tea, coffee, water) pros: easy and effective way to help people feel welcome; helps make some more difficult meetings into more comfortable experiences cons: requires small investment of resource (minimal)</p> <p>Creating opportunities for quick catch ups between staff and parents before or after school (in person or by text/email) pros: requires no prior organising; enables issues or questions to be dealt with quickly; builds positive connection through regular informal contact cons: assumes both parties can be available at this time (not always the case)</p> <p>Open times for parents to come into school and classrooms pros: encourages in person interactions; allows parents to interact with classroom environment in a positive way cons: may favour local families; requires coordination and resourcing</p>
	<p>Welcome night in first term each year pros: on site activity for whole school community to set tone for the year cons: requires investment of time and resource</p> <p>Changing the physical environment to create more welcoming spaces (e.g. creating informal conversation spaces, rethinking use of spaces) pros: easy and quick to do (doesn't always require more investment for powerful changes) cons: more significant changes may require investment; hard to shift habits of how space is used; may be limited by space that is available</p> <p>Co-creating communication principles & values for & with the whole school community pros: builds shared commitment to how we want to relate to each other; involves students as active part of solution; gives us a shared language; makes explicit what we expect of each other; work already begun through this project cons: requires someone to lead and coordinate process</p> <p>Student mentoring or buddying of younger and older students pros: encourages positive and supportive relationships across school year levels; gives students someone to go to other than teachers to problem solve; gives older students leadership roles cons: requires some clear guidelines and support for older students; requires some staff leadership to ensure it is supportive and meets desired objectives</p>

Theme 4: Culture and community: Exploring student contribution

What we don't want	What we do want
No boundaries or limitations on what students feel they can do at school - a 'free for all'	Students having opportunities to lead and take on responsibility
Students not wanting to come to school	More control and ownership over their own learning
Students not feeling like the school community recognises their achievements	Students respecting positive school rules / norms
culture of punishment	culture of encouragement

What we think might hinder	What we think might help
Over-emphasis on certain subjects	focus on & celebration of broad skills, achievements and contributions
Strict focus on rules versus building positive norms & behaviours	encouraging less assertive kids to take on positive roles

Theme 4: Ideas to respond

	<p>Student of the week showcase, for contribution to school community pros: celebrates non-academic, community contribution; is something any student can achieve; opportunity to focus on the community aspects of school cons: requires clarity on what the criteria is; requires someone to take on leadership and coordination</p> <p>"Gotcha wall", celebrating quiet acts of kindness & positive behaviour pros: something any student can achieve; allows a lot of students to be celebrated; encourages kindness and care; can focus on different behaviours or principles that the school community wants to encourage at a given time; anyone can put up a (positive) gotcha; can be photographed and shared with whole community via newsletter etc. cons: requires monitoring and trust not to abuse the positivity</p>
	<p>Monthly student initiative, voted on by parents and teachers pros: allows students to lead and take initiative within some agreed boundaries; may encourage students to try new things they wouldn't otherwise do; can be on a small scale e.g. set constraints re. no budget; focuses on student development cons: may require some investment; takes some coordination & communication</p> <p>Student Choice awards, peer voted and student led pros: very student-centric; strong opportunity for student learning and growth in leadership cons: requires large amount of leadership from and trust in students</p>

Workshop outcomes



The school leadership team and representatives from the Governing Council met on 13th November to consider the contents of this summary report and respond to the insights and ideas it contains. Together they worked through the following steps:

Activity	Purpose
Reflection & discussion: in the context of this report: -what stands out to you? - what excites you? - what worries you?	to enable people to see & discuss what has been said and what is desired by the school community (staff, students, parents)
Ideation: creating ideas to respond to what has been read and discussed	to identify ways the school community can respond that are both achievable and would have positive impact
Prioritisation activity to work out what is most important to tackle by theme, and generating ideas for action	to enable school and parent leadership teams to react to and identify what's most important and why

From this process, the following four priorities emerged as most critical to address and explore in the school community:

Idea	Vision	Next steps	key points to address	ideas to excel
Adopt a comms and parent portal app	to ease communication of whole of school as well as student-specific issues & information	App already in process, but some implementation issues to work through.	in the roll out of the app, attention should be paid to 'how' the whole community is supported to adopt and embrace it. Staff noted that this has been a journey for colleagues and it should be assumed that parents will need similar support and guidance to adopt and use it to its full potential	explore workshops and support sessions for parents to learn and try out the app with peer and staff support involve students as technology mentors for both staff and parents

Build a feedback system that focuses first on process, then on grades	to ensure students all have positive engagement with learning and achievement and have time to reflect on what went well with staff and parents, before focusing in on grades	prototype with a discrete class or year group via 1 or 2 interested staff	draw on experience described by Leanne to ensure this is designed for maximum positive impact e.g. giving initial feedback and grade on different days	draw on existing research in this field to design a robust feedback system and train staff in its effective implementation Explore ways to measure and evaluate impact on students' self-perception & self-confidence
Ensure that kids come first in everything	to have a clear set of values or principles that the whole community agrees on and rally behind, led by this one	set up a small working group of students, staff and parents to draft positive principles & test with the broader community	principles need to be owned and embodied by the whole community, be unambiguous and encourage positive behaviours. A collaborative approach to developing and then 'sense testing' them will be critical.	
Recognition system for students taking risks, trying hard and making progress beyond academic achievement	to encourage all students to feel proud of achievements and progress and have something positive to look to & build on in their school experience	set up working group of students, parents and staff to explore ways to test and try a broad and inclusive recognition system	Student voice is important to understand more deeply what and how they want to be noticed and encouraged beyond current measures.	This could involve peer voices in recognition e.g. peer tickets for noticing positives in each other, and could feed into student awards for next academic year

Other ideas that emerged and are worthy of consideration include:

- improving teacher communications in the morning about current issues or new relating to students e.g. ext messages received by the front office being effectively relayed to relevant staff at morning briefing
- building more informal opportunities for parents and staff to interact
- making changes to the newsletter schedule e.g. sending out on a different day, less frequently, clarity about what info is included or not included
- 'opening up' Governing Council e.g. question box for issues to be raised, twice a year 'open session'
- creating a dedicated parent space on the school campus
- peer student choice awards