Leadership Builds Professionalism and Management Capacity (Interview 2)

An interview with Murray Geddes, Principal of Doveton North Primary School.

With the unenviable classification as one of the lowest socio-economic postcodes in Victoria, there was no ready-made formulaic solution to the challenge of establishing a values framework in Doveton North Primary School. So Murray Geddes explains, the school developed its own, and developed the leadership structure, standards and methodology necessary to achieve its aims.

The school’s do-it-yourself approach resulted in a program tailor made for its circumstances, and with goals that reflected its particular desires as a community. Its yardsticks were student engagement and achievement, and it measured its success according to how well those goals were attained. Geddes says kids now “love being at school”, and parents have a genuine willingness to get involved in school programs. “Parents believe their kids are getting a rounded education including the social and emotional stuff and I think that’s where work in values education comes in.”

Geddes says creating competent, professional leaders was critical in achieving solid results. The school worked with the APAPDC to put a leadership framework in place that “shared the load”. Geddes says this distributive leadership is now at the heart of the school’s operations. “I think that’s been pretty much the key – it’s not one person’s responsibility, it’s everyone’s responsibility, that’s how the joint runs.”

Geddes says he set about creating his shared vision from the time he took up the principalship in 2000, and says most people, whether they are teachers, SSO’s or volunteers are committed to it, with only a few choosing to opt out. However he says the strength of the program is that even the unwilling are dragged along in the wake of those who are committed and enthusiastic. “I think I’m a bit spoilt because I’ve got only a couple who aren’t as committed to the vision… compared to some of the horror stories I hear from around the traps, we’re going pretty well”.

One important and deliberate decision was to regard professional development as a valuable investment and to make specific provision for it in the school budget. That’s no small feat, as Geddes’ takes a “whole of school” approach based on two understandings – mutual respect, and the notion that no-one has the right to interrupt anyone else’s learning. “It is literally everyone – the administration, the business manager, receptionist, it’s everybody. The first couple of times it was a bit weird because people were thinking: ‘ hang on, why are we here?’ But now I think everyone gets it”. Geddes says “the feedback has been great, the word of mouth’s terrific, but hard data is also really, really good…I know some of my colleagues who’d give their right arm for some of the survey results”, but he adds he knows many leaders in all sorts of industries and professions who set lofty standards for the people around them, but their own conduct is “ordinary”.

It is not only the academic results that have shown remarkable improvement, but attitude. There’s a spirit of appreciation and respect and even pride. Geddes says at the end of the
most recent school holiday, no vandalism occurred. “In an area with a history like ours, that’s phenomenal. And that’s because people do feel like they’re part of the place – the school community feels like it’s theirs.”