Leadership Starts from Within

A discussion with Rob Banfield, Principal of Huonville Primary School and Primary Vice-President of the Tasmanian Principals Association.

A Principal in both the Primary and District High settings, values education caught Banfield’s attention about 5 years ago when Tasmania attempted to devise what was virtually a new curriculum called “Essential Learning”. Until that point, values education was often an unstructured, ad hoc affair. Analysis of leading curricula internationally prompted a fresh approach – one that looked not at what should be in the curriculum, but why. It entailed the development of a clear values framework that was consistently referred to when making decisions about curricula and school processes.

Banfield’s experience of ensuring values education was not simply preached, but was put into action. It involved posing the question, “How do we actually directly teach students? What does the pedagogy look like? Is every child engaged in something? Does every child have the chance to be involved in decision making? Using our values to drive those processes in schools is where you embed them – otherwise they simply become a list on the wall that everybody nods to and agrees with, and that’s not a useful use of having a well articulated set of values”.

In acknowledging the crucial role of Principals in creating success, Banfield believes it’s important that they develop and know their own set of values. “Unless an individual has thought and discussed and reflected on their own values, sometimes they’re very hard to articulate”. Gauging the effectiveness of communicating values can also be achieved through personal reflection, along with conversations with peers and others. Banfield says he invites reflective assessments of his performance every couple of years to see if his behaviour is in step with his espoused values.

One particular technique he explores in digging down into a school’s value structure is that of repeatedly asking why certain things are being done in schools. An initial answer to a question may prompt a further question of why, and that answer likewise – peeling away the layers to arrive at the core values underpinning decision making.

He believes that the growing realisation of the importance of core values creates great opportunities for school leaders to take time to interrogate and articulate values - and to bring that approach into the training regime of Principals and teachers instead of trusting it will evolve through experience. Banfield contends this approach could play a valuable role in the early stages of identifying and nurturing leadership potential. “It may be a way of helping some people step up to the plate and say well, some of the values that you’re espousing are very useful in a leadership capacity. And it may actually help some people step away from the plate and find that the values they hold or espouse may not be robust enough to help them in the very complex role of school leaders.” He believes this sophisticated approach may deliver significant efficiencies. “And occasionally, someone may have to come in and say you are very, very good at your job, however you seem to be challenged in this territory, and this is a really core element of the job…is this really
what you want in your work life or do we need to think about going somewhere else. And I think sometimes we have to ask the tough questions, to be honest …otherwise the important job of leadership is left to a superficial, ad hoc process”.