Leadership Develops a Rich Learning Environment

A discussion with Tony McGruther, President of the Association of Government Primary Principals in Queensland.

Experience as a teacher and principal has led McGruther to the conclusion that the issue of values is “almost critical” to the priorities in establishing meaning, purpose and a rational basis for decision making in schools. The very means by which a curriculum is devised and interpreted is all based on a set of values. But which values? McGruther says it’s possible to select and refine the values that will frame a school’s operations and shape the lives of all those in its community, students and educators alike.

In his view, it starts with defining the school’s purpose. “What is the difference that we want to make in children? That’s what we’re there for. Once we start to unpack what our purpose is and what our responsibilities are, then we start to grill, expose, tease out the values that come from that bottom line. What are we here for? What does a child look like when they leave our classes in year 7? What is it that parents want – we are agents for their dreams, we are holding the thing most precious to them, their children – what is it that they want? And what is it that professionally we want for them?” McGruther describes it as getting back to bedrock, at which points schools can select the values they desire according to the nuances between government, Christian and Islamic schools for instance.

And while acknowledging the inevitability of values clashes, he says schools can mitigate their impact by having a soundly constructed and clearly expressed set of standards. “If the values are explicit in both word and action, they almost become intuitive in a school, and when a school works well people operate not from the set of rules and processes, but from a sense of what the school standards are for, and they intuitively make decisions based on that set of values. And when that happens, the school hums. People at all levels of the school can therefore exert leadership and make coherent decisions, and the school operates at peak performance.”

The implications for success can be found in the concept of faith. McGruther says when a school has an espoused set of values there develops in parents a deep sense of faith in what happens. “There is coherence between what the school says it’s on about and what it actually does – and when that happens you get a deeper sense of trust between parents and teachers in a way that makes the perfect partnership happen. When parents and teachers are working from the same palette, you remove a source of a lot of the conflicts.”

McGruther debunks that myth that certain schools – think religious or wealthy private - have a monopoly on values. All schools have values; it is more a matter of how effectively they’re articulated that determines the regard in which the school is held. “There is an absolute appetite from parents in looking for school settings that provide for their children what they might call a safe learning environment.

What they mean is an environment that not just makes their child physically safe, but that parents feel safe in their decisions to send them to that school because of the values they’re exposed to.”