

Third Annual- Non-profit Forum: Strategies for Sustainability

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Session 5 - Award Winning Case Study

“Taking your organisation into the 21st Century by employing best practice funding and support strategies”

by

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Sometimes – just sometimes – dreams do come true! I'd like to share with you a dream – a vision – that I've had for some time. This vision has come to fruition. It's a vision that has caused me to look at 'leadership' and community partnerships from many perspectives.

I'm going to give you a little bit of history first. I became principal in 1988 of a small school of 20 students & 6 staff. The school was known as South Melbourne Special Developmental School. It was housed in a 3 room, white ant infested, Jennings house in Middle Park. We had \$8000 in the bank and very few resources with which to implement any sort of program. Fast forward to today, we are known as Port Phillip Specialist School. We cater for 150 students aged between 2.8 to 18 years with a wide range of disabilities. We employ in excess of 60 staff with a variety of backgrounds. The school is located in a former primary school that was closed in the early 1990's. This derelict and unsafe site as it was then has been transformed into a state of the art, fully serviced school. In 2005, the Visual and Performing Arts Centre was opened at the cost of \$2.2 million with funding from the Victorian Government, a range of organisations from philanthropic and private sectors and the Pratt Foundation. It is the process of developing the Arts centre that I want to highlight to today.

Our student's needs are such that duplicating and trying to emulate mainstream curriculum does not make sense. Our children are different. Their needs are different. Our aim is to do whatever we can to enable them to have a rich and rewarding life during their school years and beyond. Obviously we would love all of our students to be able to move on to normal employment, but this is not generally possible.

In considering the needs of the children at Port Phillip Specialist School over the years I became increasingly convinced that we must approach teaching and learning differently. What did stand out was the *power of the arts*. I realised that teachers can achieve things through the arts – and children can achieve things through the arts – that they can't

achieve using more traditional approaches to learning. For our children, the arts – music, dance, drama and visual art – are an extremely powerful tool for learning.

Artistic expression is essentially non-verbal – and this is an important consideration for our students. Through the medium of the arts our children – in fact all children - can express themselves in ways that are not possible in words. Through the arts *plural* we can say things that we can't say in words. Through the arts we can see things that words don't tell us. Through the arts we can feel things that we can't feel in any other way. And through the arts we can experience things that formal education often denies us. And it is this belief in the power of the arts that has caused us to turn our curriculum upside down and come up with a radical alternative to teaching and learning.

We haven't turned to the arts as a soft option. Far from it! We've embarked on an experiment that we believe will have great benefits for our students. It's an experiment that will be the subject of ongoing evaluation and refinement over the coming years.

Just as we can see in works of art the reality and the vision of the artist, the composer, the choreographer and the playwright, we can also see the reality and vision of our students through their artwork. Their creative endeavours, their performance abilities, their interpretive qualities and their overall participation in the arts all enable them to communicate and comment on themselves and their world. What a powerful tool the arts provide for teaching and learning!

My vision has been to put the visual and performing arts at the core of the curriculum. About two years ago I set about encouraging others to embrace this vision. It has been a massive process involving the entire school community – and beyond.

It needs to be stressed that in wanting to put the arts at the centre of the curriculum my aim was not to teach the arts *per se* and neglect the Key learning areas: on the contrary, the aim was to use the arts as tools to learning across the broad curriculum perspective. It also needs to be understood that in a special school the arts do have another role, other than their normal educational role –that is a therapeutic role. For children in our school arts therapy is extremely important. And so another aim of the project was to strengthen the school's commitment to the arts as therapy as distinct from an emphasis on arts education. The goals of these two streams – arts education and arts therapy – are not the same.

In addition to these two approaches to the arts, my vision brings in a third stream: the arts as a *tool* for learning – again, as with therapy, understanding of the arts *per se* is not the primary goal in this approach.

Armed with these beliefs I set about convincing the broader school community of the possibilities offered in making the arts the basis of our curriculum. I needed to make the staff the owners of the end product. And in the process I needed to gather support from all stakeholders.

At this point I need to say that my vision was a 2-sided one. I realized that if the arts were to become the basis of learning the school needed to provide the appropriate resources. And this is where the 2nd part of my vision came into being: we needed to build an arts complex. This, of course, would require a lot of money. And it was here that I had to use every entrepreneurial skill that I have to convince private donors and the government of the importance of the vision. As a result, the school community has raised over \$1 million and the government has contributed a further \$1 million. You can imagine the enormity of the task: we are a government school with 140 students. I have relied heavily on our School Council and our Port Phillip Foundation. Together we boldly developed a new strategic direction for the school.

My next task was to confront the challenge of the actual design of our new arts-based curriculum. I was working at a macro level: but I also needed people who could work at the micro level. It was at this point that I engaged the services of Pam Russell. Pam is an extraordinarily clever educationalist who has had vast experience in assisting school's to engender change and develop new curricula. I reached out to Pam and engaged her in the vision. Once convinced of the merits of an arts driven curriculum. Pam took up the reigns to ensure that the vision would come to fruition. Effectively, I handed the baton over her to lead this part of the process.

Pam gathered around her a team of specialists who, between them, represented extensive expertise in the arts and curriculum development. The process began with an audit of the school's curriculum. Focus groups with teachers, specialist support personnel and the administration were formed. Many teachers were also interviewed individually. Alongside this the specialist team had access to the printed curriculum. This process also involved paramedics working in the school, in particular the psychologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist and specialist arts therapists. Staff comments were carefully analysed and fed back to them to enable them to provide further input and, in the process, ratify change.

The groundwork for the design of the curriculum took place over the first two terms of 2004 year. By early Term 3 a draft curriculum model had been developed and a curriculum day was dedicated to present it to the staff. This provided the opportunity for further feedback and refinement of the model.

The next stage was that of actually writing the curriculum. It needs to be stressed again that the team was not writing a curriculum for a regular school. And there were no appropriate models for writing a curriculum that had the arts as the basis of teaching and learning.

What the team came up with is inspiring. We officially launched our arts-based Port Phillip Specialist School curriculum on the 2nd of December 2005 and implementation commenced at the start of 2006.

You know, when people talk about schools they talk about primary schools, secondary schools, and the 'other', I resent being put in the category of the 'other'. We're not the 'other.' I see Port Phillip Specialist School as being a world leader. We're leaders because we have a deep knowledge about how kids learn and about setting goals because of the uniqueness of our students. We're in the process of implementing a world class curriculum based on sound principles that could be effective for all children in all schools. We're certainly not the 'other'!

So you see my friends my friends, dreams *can* come true!

When I speak of this project there a number of questions I'm frequently asked. Let me share a few of these with you.

- **Why would you bother when you've got a fantastic school and things are going really well?**

I was convinced that there was still room for improvement in the way we delivered the curriculum. Despite the excellent work being done I *knew* that we could get better outcomes for our students.

I believe that the minute we say things are "great the way they are" we have given up. Just to accept where you are and not want to go beyond is to stagnate.

Sure we have a fantastic school, but I'm delighted that our collective passion, drive and commitment continue to lead us towards ongoing improvement.

- **What were the obstacles and to what extent did you anticipate them?**

The resource was a huge undertaking - \$2.2 million! When I first muted it to the Friends of Port Phillip Specialist School there was a stunned silence. You know what it is like - the eye brows go up, the nervous giggle....

Having planted the seed I had to step back and remind my audience that Rome was not built in a day and that I was prepared to wait for at least two days!

So the first obstacle to be overcome was to get the immediate community **to accept that there was value in the project**. The next stage was **to get it accepted by the broader community**. This included the local council, the Department of Education and Training, and a number of other stakeholders.

Another major issue was how to approach a **philosophical and cultural change** of this magnitude. How to go about getting staff and others to accept that there was value in the vision? Although the staff weren't involved in securing resources, they had to be involved in the curriculum design and be willing to change their modus operandi. **Negativism** will always be an obstacle in situations like this. People don't like change. They like to preserve the traditional way of doing things.

- **How did you go about it?**

The beginning was getting the story right. What is the school on about? And why is the school important? It wasn't good enough for me to believe it. I had to make sure that the staff and the broader community came along also.

The first step was to make sure that my administration team could tell **THE STORY**. We then worked with the team leaders to make sure that they were clear about THE STORY and could tell it clearly and succinctly using the same tune that was coming from administration. The task was a bit like that of a conductor having to coordinate all sections of the orchestra and making sure that they play the tune all in harmony. But it was more than that. Like the conductor we had to be responsible for all of the nuances. As with an orchestra the parts were practiced separately, but then we had to come together as a whole and make sure that all the parts fitted. And if I may continue with the analogy, it was more than this: we then had to ensure that all players – all stakeholders – continued playing the music, culminating in the crescendo that we have today.

We had to work in three directions; one was changing the curriculum, two the culture and three, the hard core resourcing of the vision: raising \$2.2 million. The first crescendo came when the government gave us \$1m through the Community Facilities Fund. It was more than just the money – for us it was an imprimatur that we were on the right track.

I should add that we had been planning the building with the architect for two years – even though we didn't have a cent to afford it!

To address the change in culture the theme of the arts flowed through our curriculum discussions, our planning discussions, and all of our sponsorship endeavours. For example it was evident in our fundraising efforts at the school level. Every function was themed by the arts. We had a fashion show with a dance segment performed by our own students. We had an art exhibition where our own children exhibited alongside known artists. We also formed a partnership with the Victorian College of the Arts. They work with us for the mutual benefit of students at both places, even though the focus and goals of both places are different. For the VCA it is to produce prima ballerinas or concert pianists; for us it is to enhance learning through these specialist channels.

- **How do you know the entire venture has been successful?**

In the simplest form I will know through observation of student development and feedback from parents and staff. In a stricter sense I will know because we were successful in receiving an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant with the Melbourne University Assessment and Reporting area together with Department of Education & Training. The grant will fund two Ph.D. students to work with us to set appropriate individual goals and developing meaningful profiles as ways of recording and measuring student progress.

We also went one step further and employed as an Assistant Principal (Curriculum), one of the consultants who worked on the team, who is now responsible for the implementation of the project and monitoring and reporting of the outcomes.

- **What are the risks of a project of this magnitude?**

- Obviously people can lose sight of what is happening if it doesn't happen fast enough.
- It can be sabotaged for various reasons.
- It might become too challenging or confronting for some people at different stages of the project.

Fortunately none of these have been issues for us.

- **To what extent is there synergy between what the parents want and what the teachers want?**

There is total synergy. Both groups are on side. We all want what is best for the children. It's a shared belief that our children *can* and *will* learn.

- **How will you document the experiment?**

Already articles have been planned and published targeting journals in leadership, management, curriculum, the arts, and arts therapy. We have presented our vision on both national and international stages, and plan to host our own Symposium 'Re-imagining Special Education through Arts Education & Arts Therapy' in 2008.

In addition, we have the ongoing support of Professor Brian Caldwell who has made a very generous commitment to supporting the vision. (refer Caldwell, Brian Re-imagining Educational Leadership 2006)

The two Ph.D. students to whom I have referred will also be part of the documentary phase.

- **Why the arts?**

Because they are our enabling mechanism - they provide a tool that is ideally suitable for our student's learning. Conceivably, similar models for other institutions could be developed using the Arts, or indeed, some other enabling mechanism based on the same principles.

No doubt you will have other questions. But I hope I have given you enough to think about as I have shared with you my vision. Yes – dreams *can* come true.