Case study of the PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM  
at  
Oonoonba State School  
Completed as part of the  

Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (2005)  

I reckon they should definitely, like 100%, have Peer Support at high school  
(Year 6 student)  

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School Background and context

Oonoonba State School was established 85 years ago and currently has 267 enrolled students (Years 1-7). The school is located in an area of Townsville that in the last 5 years has been largely transformed by two major suburban developments. To accommodate these changes, the school was moved less than 1 km from its original site to a purpose built state of the art school in 2002. This relocation has had significant implications for the whole school community.

The former school site was adjacent to an older area of the city, with many families from a lower-socio economic background. The new suburban development has created a precinct of medium priced housing attracting a different type of clientele to the school. The school population has risen dramatically from around 90 students in 2000, to the current population of 267. The rate of development in the area should ensure considerable expansion for the next 5 years.

The student population is now reflective of the new clientele. There is a declining proportion of Indigenous students (currently 18%) and an increased number of students from Defence Force families (14%). The school has a specialist unit for students with a disability and promotes inclusion of these students into regular classroom where possible. The current Principal was appointed in 2003.

This case study was completed following a two-day period in the school. During this period the following school documents were reviewed.

- The Parent Handbook
- School Opinion Survey data (2002-2004)
- Behaviour Management Plan
- Sample School Newsletters
- Literacy Strategy
- School Curriculum Plan
In addition, interviews were conducted with the Principal, 5 staff members, and 3 groups of students.

The school has a range of very visible reminders of its core values and purpose. The school motto is “seek knowledge and truth” and the mission of the school is stated on each newsletter as follows:

“Oonoonba State School is a small community where children, parents and teachers work together to develop capable, respectful citizens of the future”

The Teacher Handbook outlines the structure of the weekly assembly attended by an increasing number of parents. The assembly commences with the National Anthem, followed by the recitation of the school oath.

“I love my country,
I love my country’s flag.
I cheerfully obey the laws and
am proud to be a member
of the Australian community”.

These are all very visible statements and symbols of the school’s values. These values are explicitly discussed in the school newsletters, and in one newsletter, strong assertions in relation to the importance of teaching values and the ways in which Oonoonba State School ensures their development. The Peer Support program introduced to the school in 2004 is also now a component of this values education emphasis.

Peer Support program –overview

A significant rationale for the introduction of the Peer Support program appears to relate to the sudden expansion of the school following its relocation. The movement to the new school site is noted to have created considerable unease in the community. The relocation occurred before the school buildings were completed and landscaping had not commenced. The computer network did not function and there were lower than expected enrolments. Additionally, the Principal was on leave for much of the relocation year.
Coupled with these considerable problems, 2002 saw a cohort of students in Year 7 who are described as having created “misery” for many students and staff. These students were described as being physically quite large and older than many in their year level. Violence, bullying and intimidation were rife during this transition year.

The current Principal, appointed one year after the relocation, sought to rebuild a school community that was clearly apprehensive about the new location and the possibility that the school would loose its small family atmosphere. The Triennial School Review document was prepared in 2003, and this process involved reviews of a range of data and a consultative process involving staff and the community. There was general feeling that the school community needed extra support in terms of good role models (Principal).

The school’s Behaviour Management Support teacher at the time suggested the Peer Support program might provide a means to support the students and the community.

The school has a long-standing Code of Conduct- the 6 Cs. These are Care, Courtesy, Cooperation, Common Sense, Consideration and Communication. The Principal felt that the Peer Support program would support and enhance the Code of Conduct and further embed understanding of the Code across the school community.

In order to get kids to internalise what that [the 6Cs] meant I felt that the Peer Support program actually would be a good starting point to build relationships and have students interacting and modeling [appropriate behaviour].

Other teachers suggested that the rationale for the program’s introduction was more general and that programs like Peer Support were now needed in most school communities. Long time teachers noted declining student skill levels for problem resolution. Teachers described students increasingly lacking the oral language skills to support the peaceful resolution of classroom or playground disputes.

Following a period of staff consultation, the Peer Support program was introduced and endorsed by staff as a whole of school program. A Year 7 teacher coordinates the program. The Peer Support lesson operates each Tuesday at 1pm. The Year 7 students...
are prepared for their lesson each Monday afternoon during a half hour briefing session. At the staff meeting on Mondays, the coordinator updates staff on the lesson content and format. All staff are involved in supervision of peer groups.

Staff describe the program as being well resourced with an allocated photocopying budget ($500) and adequate teacher aide time. Four teachers have completed the Peer Support Foundation training.

With a relatively new Principal, and a Triennial School Review completed prior to the introduction of the Peer Support program, it is not surprising that the Peer Support program does not appear in some of the school’s planning or support material. There are however, a number of school documents where the program is clearly compatible with the school’s stated direction.

The School Curriculum Plan outlines 3 sets of core learnings. These are

- Functional literacy (Literacy, Numeracy, ICT)
- Social practices (Technology, Self-esteem, SOSE/Citizenship, Relationships)
- Physical and Emotional Health (Sport, Exercise, Nutrition, Well being, Music Science).

While the plan does not outline how Peer Support is integrated into these core learnings, it is clear that the school emphasis on self-esteem, relationships and well-being creates an overarching curriculum framework in which Peer Support can be viewed as integral. This is an important platform for Peer Support creating significant curriculum integrity for teachers.

In addition, the Behaviour Management Plan and the associated Code of Conduct provide a further integrated platform for Peer Support. There is a strong emphasis on promoting student-regulated behaviour within both Peer Support and the Behaviour Management Plan. Four clear steps are outlined for teachers, students and parents as strategies for addressing inappropriate behaviour and there is a consistent emphasis throughout the Behaviour Management Plan on the importance of teacher modelling appropriate social skills.

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Oonoonba State School – Draft Case Study*
Peer Support program –impact

The Principal stated, given the relatively short implementation period, that it would be unlikely that the Peer Support program would have produced identifiable changes in the school community.

To be really honest I haven’t noticed alarmingly successful or things that stand out for me since the introduction of the Peer Support apart from little indicators like noticing bigger kids with younger kids- we are with our Peer Support leader. I have seen a bit of that.

Upon review of the data including the interviews however, it is apparent that there are identifiable changes in the school’s learning climate.

Quantitative data

A review of the School Opinion Survey data, and in particular the measures related to school climate, demonstrate the impact of the physical relocation turmoil described previously. In 2002, the student mean response results were flagged as below ‘like schools’ and ‘state school’ means. By 2004, however this indicator showed no significant difference to other schools. Table 1 summarises the School Climate responses from the School Opinion Survey data (2002-2004) for both parents and students.

Table 1 School Climate mean indicators 2002-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Staff responses to item questions in the School Opinion Survey related to’ morale’ and ‘relationships with students’ also indicate change over this three-year period. These change are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 Mean staff responses to School Opinion Survey items 2002-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Morale</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with students</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.27</td>
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In 2004, the year Peer Support was introduced, there is a measurable improvement in the way staff perceive their relationships with students and item responses for both areas are above the ‘state school’ mean and relationships with students are also above ‘like school’ means.

Given the changes in the school environment, including the school’s physical relocation and the new Principal, it is not possible to quarantine the impact of the Peer Support program. It is clear however, that staff, student and parent indicators of school climate are steadily improving, despite the school’s significant growth.

**Qualitative data**

In addition to the review of school documents, interviews provided insight into the degree to which the Peer Support program is transforming some aspects of the school. A number of areas can be noted as significant here, including the high degree of staff enthusiasm and involvement in the program, the development of inclusive student relationships, and the support the program provides for the primary to secondary school transition stage. Each of these areas is discussed below.

**Staff engagement and commitment to the program**

The school has low staff mobility with many staff having tenure long enough to make comparisons between the two school sites. The Peer Support trained staff now teach in a range of year levels, and this, along with the consultative way in which the program was introduced, may explain the overt support for the program across the spectrum of school staff interviewed.

For new staff, despite receiving no formal induction (there is also no mention in the Teacher Handbook), the weekly discussions in the staff meeting have created a reasonable sense of how the program needed to operate across the school. One of the newer staff members wholeheartedly endorsed the program, despite initially not being sure of her role during the lesson time. Her comment follows.

> [It’s] part of my philosophy, PEERS teaching PEERS (teacher).

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Several staff commented that there had been an increase in “teacher talk” about the program recently. Some staff had expressed concern that the *Program went on a bit of a dive at one stage (Teacher)*.

As one teacher wryly acknowledged, the staff moved to get some *positive self-talk amongst teachers “lets stick it out” (Teacher)*.

These recent staff conversations had led to a revision of the lesson format. Staff were now asked to take the first few minutes of each *Peer Support* lesson, in essence modelling the introduction to the lesson’s concepts and making links to previous learning. One teacher also described how she now modelled a lesson conclusion each week, reiterating the core concepts and praising success. This modelling was thought to support the Peer Leaders. Although no time frame appears to have been put in place to handover these segments to the students, staff were unanimous that this involvement had improved the operation of the weekly lesson.

Several staff described their preparation of students for each lesson. Briefing and debriefing students before and after as suggested by the *Peer Support* Foundation are critical components for the program’s success. As one teacher suggests, her weekly prepping of her students was visible when observing their responses in group tasks.

*I notice that in my two groups, my Year Xs are putting their hands up – they know what they are talking about because I have talked about it beforehand.*

In addition to this “teacher talk” around program improvement, several teachers outlined how they were able to draw on the concepts within the program to support their own class’ operations or the operation of the *Peer Support* lesson.

Using the Peer *Support* language was seen to turn around inappropriate behaviours, particularly with students who have challenging behaviours.

*In Peer Support I can use the Peer Support language with kids. I can bring them around, if they are saying things that aren’t appropriate, I can use the Peer Support language “is that positive self-talk. Is that going to help you get the activity done, saying you can’t do it”? Show me.*

Other staff explained how they incorporated the language of *Peer Support* in their classroom.
I can cue the kids in. I can say, you used perseverance then, (Teacher)

In addition to this willingness by teachers to incorporate the language and concepts, several staff commented on the Principal’s modelling of the concepts during assembly. Staff cited a recent assembly where the Principal and a teacher had modelled bullying. Two teachers indicated that this had been very powerful for their student cohorts.

These examples indicate that even after a relatively short period of time, the program is highly regarded by staff, and perceived as compatible with both the overall philosophy of the school and teachers’ personal practice. Such endorsement creates a high degree of possibility for the program to be quickly embedded in the overall school culture.

Student learning about themselves and others

Most students interviewed appeared very positive about the program. When the students were asked what they learned in the Peer Support program, a range of responses were quickly provided. Here is a sample of the responses.

- Learning about bullying
- Helping young kids
- Make new friends
- Working cooperatively in a group
- You learn about cooperation, consideration and respecting other people
- Positive self-talk-talking to yourself in a good way.
- You have got to keep trying
- Learning about other people and be self-controlled.
- Teaches you how to work as a team.

Teachers of the younger grades believed that most students thoroughly enjoyed the experience of Peer Support. The Year 1 students were reported to excitedly view each Tuesday- “It’s Peer Support today!”

Other younger grade teachers believed that students were happy to work in mixed aged groupings.

I know when the big kids come into my room to get the little kids, it’s all hulos, and the big kids fuss over the little kids and the little kids’ faces light up when the big kids walk in.
In addition to these positive responses, younger year teachers were able to describe how students were internalising the concepts and using the language.

> I can see now, even Year 1 that the students are using that language, “I persevered in this activity or you are bullying me you’re not making me feel very good (Teacher)."

Both teachers and students described changed playground behaviour since the introduction of the *Peer Support* program. These student comments highlight this perceived change.

> Everyone is all mixing up now.
> Everyone knows everyone else’s name.
> There used to be a lot more bullying.

For teachers who had been involved with the school prior to its relocation, the *Peer Support* program was seen as partly restoring the sense of student cohesion not seen after the move. These teacher comments are indicative of this changed playground tone.

> Students are drifting between the designated play areas, since Peer Support.
> I have noticed now since Peer Support that the little kids are coming over and finding the older kids, or the older kids are walking around with the younger ones. Or they find a mutual area (Teacher).

Several students described their relationships with the younger students in quite animated ways.

> All the little kids and all the bright faces looking up at you (Year 7 leader).
> In the playground they are screaming at you and coming up to hug you (the younger kids). Year 7 Leader
> You learn to be their friend, you find about them (Year 7).

Teachers perceived the peer grouping as mirroring real world relationships students would be required to negotiate in the workplace in later life. As one teacher explained, the program

> teaches students to work with students that they wouldn’t necessarily work with themselves. An early exposure to real life (Teacher)
The students described the range of ways they have learned to use to include the students from the special education unit. These strategies included using rattles, speaking slowly, and ensuring that time was provided for students to complete the activities. In addition to these specialist skills, the Peer Leaders articulated how the experience of Peer Support had provided strategies for dealing with family members at home. One student reported

*I have learned not to bash my brother. I just don’t want to get involved anymore.*

**Supporting transitions**

In addition to supporting students’ understanding of peers and other family members, the schools active participation in two professional clusters has provided an opportunity to expand the program’s influence to the feeder high schools.

Last year the school implemented a transition program to support student movement to William Ross High School. The “Changing Tracks” program developed in association with the Tropical Public Health Unit supports student transition to secondary school by the completion of modules in both primary and secondary sites. While not intentionally designed as an extension to the Peer Support Program, the concepts of resilience and anti-bullying are the focus of both programs.

This intentional cross sector development will clearly be valued by students who can already articulate the ways in which Peer Support will support their transition to secondary school. One student described how he would use positive self-talk if he did not get into the secondary school specialist soccer program.

*Positive self-talk - like if you don’t get in the Rhinos*

Another student commented that he would know how to avoid conflict, while others discussed how they would deal with any bullying that arose, or seek out new friendships, or how the program had helped them become more organised. These comments indicate the ways in which spoke about their skills

*I will know not to get into a fight*

*If you need to make new friends, I will know to go and say Hi I’m X what’s your name.*

Indicative of the esteem with which the students interviewed viewed the Peer Support program is the following comment.
I reckon they should definitely, like 100% have Peer Support at high school

**Peer Support program- challenges/future directions**

The Peer Support program appears to have quickly found a ‘home’ in Oonoonba State School, and there are a range of issues the school may wish to explore in order to strengthen the program in its foundation years.

1. **Ongoing revision of the Peer Support lesson time**

With what appears to be an open dialogue amongst staff in relation to the program, it may be opportune to clarify the role of the teachers during the Peer Support lesson and how this role might align with the aim of the Peer Support program to have peer led session. Recent developments initiated by staff to introduce the lesson each week have clearly been welcomed

   *I have been a bit frustrated about how the Peer Support groups are working.*

Some students echo these staff comments.

   *“2% of the group listen” (Year 7 leader)*

One teacher described how she had recently realised that she needed to be more proactive, providing a model to the Peer Leaders.

   *I need to be more supportive as a facilitator, I need to recognise that this has only been going a couple of years I need to cue the leaders in. (Teacher)*.

An addition to the Teacher Handbook for example, might clearly outline the aspiration for each session to be Peer led, but that until the Peer Leaders began to exhibit leadership skills, teacher intervention and modelling would be required to ensure some productivity during the lesson period. It would be anticipated that teacher intervention would diminish throughout a school year and decline with each year the program operated as increasing numbers of students experienced ‘peer’ leadership.

Teacher modelling may also extend to more detailed preparation and debriefing with the Year 7 students to enable them to share management strategies, lesson introductions and conclusions to support peer learning.
2. Parent and community awareness

Teachers interviewed felt that parents were generally positive about the Peer Support program, with no reports of negative feedback except from one parent who asked that his child be excused from leadership duties. One teacher reported a range of parent questions.

*Parents have asked what is this Peer Support stuff? Do you have to pay or anything?*

The Principal notes that since her appointment to the school, the main focus has been on supporting staff. Several newsletter excerpts however provide an indication of the Peer Support program’s goals and it may now be opportune to consider how the program can be ‘sold’ to parents in a strategic manner. The use of the assembly to provide information to parents is one excellent example of an effective parent communication strategy.

Teachers already note that the lesson conclusions encourage students to go home and communicate with their parents about the Peer Support lesson activities

*We are hoping that the students go home and talk about the program with their parents. Take home what they have made etc.*

Students interviewed reported minimal discussions with parents, and the school staff may wish to consider the range of ways parents could come to a clearer understanding of the format and goals of the program.

3. Creating coherence around a vision of Year 7 leadership and responsibility

The interview data revealed a range of differences about what constituted leadership in Year 7 and how leadership and responsibility were fostered in the school. Many of these ideas were inconsistent with the Peer Support Foundations inclusive view of leadership as a requirement for all students.

Most staff and some students interviewed discussed the challenging nature of the leadership role required as part of the Peer Support program. A range of comments made by teachers suggested that the task for the students was simply too hard,
Too much involved in what they do - too hard to juggle all the elements.

They don’t feel competent enough to get people to contribute to the discussion.

At this stage we just have to recognise that our students haven’t got the skills yet.

The degree of difficulty led to one teacher suggesting that most of the Year 7s do not like the program at all. Other staff suggested that girls enjoyed the role and boys didn’t.

Consistently, staff described variable leadership skills of the Year 7 cohort. This student comment summed up the challenges she felt as a Peer Leader.

“You have to control all the kids. They go nuts eh” (Year 7 students).

Staff and students described the fact that some Year 7 students were not designated as Peer Leaders. It appears that following the Year 7 camp, students are chosen as leaders for both overall school roles (School captains, House captains, school council(?)). From the student perspective, the criteria for selection as a leader were not clear. The following are some of the reasons students described for not some Year 7 students not being Peer leaders.

[They] are not confident to talk in front of group.

Only the ones that Mrs X picks

When we go to leadership camp they see who has better qualities to work with little children and teach them things. But the people who don’t get chosen get to be co-leaders

Some kids don’t want to be leaders

I don’t understand what’s happened to some kids who aren’t leaders. I reckon they don’t want to be leaders.

One current Year 7 student who was not a Peer Leader, expressed in the interview a desire to be a Peer Leader, but did not know what he needed to do to become a leader.

One staff expressed a strong view that taking on the Peer Leadership role should be a matter of choice. A choice would allow students to opt out of the program as is reported to have happened with one girl following a parent request that the leadership role was creating too much stress.

The notion of choice in leadership contrasts with other staff members’ views that argued the need to foster leadership skills, and seek ways for all students to exhibit such skills.
One staff commented on the contradictory identity of one student who in the Peer Support program exhibited exceptional leadership skills while in other school areas displayed quite poor behaviour. She recounted how one of her supervised groups in the previous year had a terrific leader. Later she had discovered that the same student showed undesirable behaviour in many other aspects of school life.

*He just had that skill and that was great he could be a good [leader] at something.*

Another staff member noted concerns she had about one of the leaders she supervised, in particular her organizational skills. Consequently she “*tends to let the other boys run the show*”. This same teacher however, had established a goal for both herself and the leader to ensure that this student would indeed be sufficiently organised by the end of the school year.

The leadership skills supported by the mission of the Peer Support Foundation are

- Organisational and responsibility skills in preparation
- Demonstrations of care and compassion of others
- Developing understanding and inclusion of others.
- Group management skills

Even after a short period of implementation, the Year 7 students interviewed could articulate the management strategies they had developed as is indicated in the following comments. They would state:

- *I have been waiting for you.*
- *Split up now.*

They could also identify ways in which they could draw attention to themselves.

- *How to conduct attention to yourself like if they are all talking*

One teacher summed up her view of leadership, clearly aligned to the leadership espoused by the Peer Support program.

*How to be a leader and how to involve other kids. You see a lot of kids get mixed up about what leadership is really about. It’s not just about telling kids what to do and they do it, it’s about a lot of other things, you know, involving all the kids. That’s what I am trying to model (Teacher)*
It is clear that being a peer leader is a demanding task, but even in a short period, students are able identify the benefits they perceive from taking on the role. In a school community that arguably needs to foster models of leadership, there may be a case for some whole staff discussions around the inclusive rather than selective models of leadership espoused by Peer Support. Some discussion questions might include:

- How might students who have had limited experience with leadership develop a vision of themselves as leaders?
- What support might the school need to add to ensure that students are supported in their aspirations to be leaders?
- Do students with limited experience of leadership require more extrinsic or symbolic acknowledgement to aspire to leadership?
- What other visible responsibilities might be afforded to Year 7 students to coincide with the skills developed in the Peer Support program?