VALUES NEWCASTLE
New South Wales

Explicitly Teaching Values in Newcastle Government Primary Schools

Cluster coordinator: Wendy Cheek, Booragul Public School

Participating schools:
- Speers Point Public School
- Booragul Public School
- Fennell Bay Public School
- Hamilton North Public School
- Jesmond Park Public School
- Kahibah Public School
- Mayfield West Public School
- Merewether Heights Public School
- Wallsend Public School

UAN critical friend: Dr Kerry Dally, University of Newcastle, New South Wales

Key messages
1. Values education promotes positive interpersonal relationships across the school community and is closely linked to quality teaching.
2. Structured reflection periods for all staff and students create better learning environments – classrooms where students are settled and more attentive and teachers communicate calmly and clearly in a common values language.
3. Teacher understanding of values approaches grows over time: from a perception that values education is about teaching interventions designed to change and improve student behaviour to a more personal and deeper values perspective that raises questions about what and how teachers teach and leads to transformational practice.
4. Developing values-centred schooling requires a global multifaceted approach that includes engagement with all members of the school’s community, a negotiated common values language and repetition, reinforcement and explicitness in all aspects of school life.
Values Newcastle comprises nine primary schools located in the suburbs of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. The school populations represent a diverse range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools adopted their own unique styles of implementing values education, while following a common set of processes and practices.

The cluster’s project, *Explicitly Teaching Values in Newcastle Government Primary Schools*, set out to:
- place values at the core of the schools’ cultures
- develop a consistent values-based language and set of expectations within each school for describing standards for student behaviour
- focus on promoting good interpersonal relationships in the belief that these relationships would promote and support quality teaching practices
- raise expectations within all the schools about patterns of student and staff behaviour, student and staff leadership, and the profile of the school in its local community.

The cluster adopted a whole school approach and wanted to make values explicit in curriculum content, school practices, assemblies and parent interactions. As the UAN adviser noted:

> The ... cluster planned to adopt the West Kidlington (UK) primary school model where children would be taught values explicitly in three-week cycles. After the first term of implementation, the cluster decided that three weeks was not long enough to cover each value and a five-week cycle was adopted in most schools. This meant that two values were covered in each school term. The values cycles commenced with whole staff meetings at each school to develop commonality of understanding and consistency of approach. This was reinforced by whole school assemblies and information provided to parents through school newsletters and display boards.

Supporting staff with appropriate professional learning, the project implementation took on multifaceted approaches and included structured sharing and reflection sessions. Some of these strategies were:
- the creation of values education staff teams within each school
- regular face-to-face meetings between the cluster principals and/or staff teams
- interschool visits by teachers to observe classrooms and teaching practices in other cluster schools
- a combined staff development day for all the staff of the cluster schools
- student forum days for small groups of students from each school
- active involvement of parents in the project.

These focused and ongoing interactions among staff, students and families provided a collaborative and supportive network among the schools. This network played an important role in maintaining momentum, commitment and enthusiasm for the project by providing a forum for solving problems, sharing ideas and resources, and celebrating success.

As the project unfolded, more specific intentions emerged at the individual school level. Four schools decided to adopt a specific values focus during their daily or weekly student assembly structures with the intention of making student classroom behaviour consistent with the values. Others decided they wanted to immediately provide situations that allowed students to demonstrate values through their actions.

All schools involved in the project set about making a commitment to affect positive change within their school communities beyond ‘word speak’, that is, they wanted to transfer knowledge about values into action or ‘lived values’. Their common purpose was to ‘see and feel’ change from within the schools in terms of students doing more than ‘talking the talk’; they wanted students to actually ‘walk the talk’.

Others identified positive student-to-student relationships as an immediate focus area in particular areas of the school – playgrounds and toilet areas. Mayfield West Public School identified a specific values education target:

> to create positive behaviours/values in specifically identified problem areas on the school campus.

All schools gradually came to the position of trying to prioritise the development of a consistent values-based language to be used by all in the school community. Bit by bit all schools developed more purposeful, positive classroom environments...
with a view to measured improvement in student learning outcomes. The UAN adviser for the cluster commented on this aspect of the project:

The responses to the staff, student and parent surveys all indicated that the acquisition of a common language across the school community was a major feature of the program. The use by teachers, students and often parents of this ‘common language’ not only led to greater understanding of the targeted values but also provided a positive focus for reflecting on and redirecting children’s inappropriate behaviour ... There was a perception among most teachers that the introduction and adoption of a shared ‘values vocabulary’ and the explicit articulation of expected behaviour helped staff to treat incidents of ‘misbehaviour’ in a more positive and constructive manner.

Parents also commented on the benefit of the shared language in addressing problem behaviours as this comment from a parent at Wallsend South School indicates: ‘I have found that values education has given us a common language. So we can talk about good and bad behaviours in terms of values. Previously I was not sure how to relate these to the kids or communicate to them about it.’

Another feature of the cluster was the common reflective practices employed by both students and staff during the course of the project. Many of the schools introduced ‘reflection times’ – periods of quiet contemplation where students spend a few minutes sitting in silence and reflecting on what they have learnt throughout the day, their own actions or on positive encounters they may have had with their peers or teachers. This reflective practice relates to values education in that it provides time and a common process for students to take the values learnings to a new and deeper personal or individual level as part of their everyday routine.

Teachers reported that this practice resulted in calmer and more peaceful classrooms, and helped students to be more settled and attentive at school.

The schools also introduced ‘reflective journals’, in which classes record incidents where students have observed others applying the values or, in some cases, not applying the values. As well as providing opportunities for identifying and acknowledging appropriate behaviour, these ‘authentic’ examples are also being used to develop students’ higher order thinking skills, such as analysing problems, understanding and debating different perspectives, and developing solutions.

As the UAN adviser observed:

The student surveys revealed that since learning about values, 96 per cent of students understood why values are important and 97 per cent of students try to be a better person (at least some of the time). Thus, the reflective practices are supporting students to connect with their own thoughts and feelings, as well as helping to create a quality learning environment which recognises effort and encourages critical thinking.

All schools in the cluster reported a variety of positive changes at the conclusion of the project. Some of these accounts cited:

- a decrease in poor behaviour referrals in some schools
- reports of more respectful conversations between students
- observations that students demonstrated a growing capacity to incorporate the values when discussing their own and others’ behaviours – as a consequence, for the younger students, the need for behavioural intervention dropped markedly
- reports of quieter and more focused assemblies with greater respect shown by all members of the school community
- reports that learning about ‘responsibility’ had resulted in students being more independent in their approach to tasks and that students appeared to be working more cooperatively and taking greater pride in their work.

The work of the cluster made impressions on key project personnel. A teacher noted:

I thoroughly believe in the value of an explicit approach to values education and, even though we might have to give it a lot more time before seeing significant changes in the children’s behaviour, I am sure we are on the right track!

The cluster coordinator at Booragul Public School enthused:

I have been thrilled by the changes and new directions for our individual school, and have found this project to be one of the most important and influential things I have ever done as an educator.