CASE STUDY

NSW GOVERNMENT

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Penrith Valley School

Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

The vision for our school is created by imagining what we want our kids to be when they walk out of the school gates for the last time.

Nic Danta, Principal

CESE would like to thank the Principal, Nic Danta; as well as Jake Matthews – Assistant Principal, and Claudia Mundy – Classroom Teacher, for their valuable input to this study.

Introduction

Penrith Valley is a school for specific purposes (SSP) that demonstrates excellence in relation to student wellbeing. In 2018, the school was externally validated as excelling in the wellbeing element of the School Excellence Framework. They achieved this by placing student *wellbeing*, rather than student *welfare*, at the heart of everything they do. Understanding the difference between the two terms is important at Penrith Valley. Student welfare is about the here and now, and providing students with the essentials they need to make it through each day. Student wellbeing, however, encompasses much more. In addition to focusing on the immediate priorities, student wellbeing at Penrith Valley is also about preparing students for a happy and successful life after school. This case study provides a small glimpse into how Penrith Valley has succeeded in developing and sustaining this culture of wellbeing for learning, which in turn has assisted their students to become contributing members of the broader community. It also tells the story of how the school ensures that each of their students is known, valued and cared for.

Wellbeing is core business. If it's an add-on, then I don't believe it's going to have an impact. It needs to be systematic and really planned and thought out, and a part of the whole experience. Every kid needs it. It's got to be part of everything.

Nic Danta, Principal

What has worked to improve student wellbeing at Penrith Valley School:

- Using Trauma Informed Practice to give students a sense of security by creating a safe and predictable environment.
- Removing distractions, such as mobile phones.
- Establishing consistent practices across the school, which are documented in a 'daily routine' document and 'day sheet'.
- A structured student-teacher mentor program to promote strong, trusting and respectful relationships.
- Setting high expectations and striving to make students 'job ready'.
- Providing additional therapeutic support for students and improving literacy skills by engaging with community organisations, including Nepean Therapy Dogs and Fusion Australia.

Wellbeing is not about kids feeling good about themselves. It's about needing independence. And they need to be able to stand on their own two feet. So for me, wellbeing is about, "How do you have a balanced life?" Pretty much everything we do is related to wellbeing.

Nic Danta, Principal

If kids and staff are feeling unsafe in an environment, no one is learning and no one is teaching.

Nic Danta, Principal

Penrith Valley supports students in Year 4 to Year 12 who have emotional disturbances and behavioural disorders. The school caters specifically to students who have been unsuccessful in mainstream settings. The principal says that when students first arrive at Penrith Valley they are generally disengaged, have low self-esteem and believe that they have failed at school. They are often angry and confused about having been involuntarily removed from their school and community following multiple suspensions or expulsion. The school's students also have entrenched patterns of anti-social behaviours, poor emotional regulation, and lack the skills to establish and maintain friendships.

Penrith Valley currently enrols 49 students across seven classes, which are divided broadly by stages. Male students outnumber female students seven to one, and enrolment is through a strict referral process. Approximately 20% of the school's students identify as Aboriginal. This year, 28% of students are in out-of-home care compared to approximately 1% of all children in NSW, and 38% receive support from Family and Community Services (FACS).

Using Trauma Informed Practice to drive a whole-school approach

Penrith Valley uses Trauma Informed Practice as a foundation for their whole-school approach to student wellbeing. Trauma Informed Practice, which is a strengths based framework, is about understanding and responding effectively to the impact of trauma. In a school setting, this means providing students with opportunities to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. This is achieved at Penrith Valley by creating an environment that is safe and predictable so that students are ready to learn.

Trauma Informed Practice is about creating an environment where things are predictable, things are safe, things are routine. And everything is there to calm the students down because if kids' brains have flipped out they're not doing any learning. So, Trauma Informed Practice is about everything we do to get kids ready to learn. And if we don't do all of that stuff, then there's no learning that's going to go on.

Nic Danta, Principal

Making students feel safe and getting them ready to learn

The school leadership team takes a holistic approach to make sure students at Penrith Valley are ready to learn. The immediate focus is on creating a physical environment that is safe and secure. Fences, for example, are placed strategically to ensure the school is secure, groups of students can be separated when required, and students who are behaving dangerously can be isolated from the group while supervision is maintained. Making the physical environment safe and secure is the first step in creating a setting which optimises learning opportunities for all students. The school also prepares students for learning by removing distractions such as mobile phones. Penrith Valley students are required to hand in their phones at the beginning of each day.

Providing students with regular, nutritious and protein-rich food also plays a key role in creating optimum conditions for learning. Penrith Valley provides students with breakfast, recess and lunch. The shift towards providing students with a protein-rich diet is driven by research that highlights the positive effect a high-protein diet has on the brain. The school also engages community organisations to provide therapeutic support for students. For example, youth workers from Fusion Australia work with students to help them become better at regulating their own behaviour and emotions.

We care about our students. The kids attach themselves to us. Everything's personal for them here and we care. I think that's the biggest thing about everything, we care, and this place does it really well.

Claudia Mundy, Classroom Teacher

Establishing and maintaining routines

Not knowing what will happen next creates anxiety for many students at Penrith Valley, and student anxiety increases the likelihood of problems occurring. The school works proactively to reduce the probability of students becoming anxious. They do this by establishing and maintaining strict routines in relation to all parts of school life. Every day is planned systematically from drop off to pick up, including transitions between classes, lunch and recess breaks, and student assemblies. For example, students at Penrith Valley are never left unsupervised, or solely in the care of a school learning and support officer (SLSO), between lessons. There are designated areas within the school where each group of students waits for their next teacher to arrive. Clear procedures are also in place for when students misbehave and serious or critical incidents occur.

Penrith Valley's routines are explained in a 'daily routine' document and 'day sheet' that staff use to ensure a consistent approach across the school. Providing consistent rules and predictable outcomes enables students to take responsibility for their actions and to begin regulating their emotional responses. This consistent approach leads to calmer classrooms, where students are spending more time on-task, and teachers are spending more time teaching. The school's reduced suspension rate over the last three years indicates that students are spending more time at school and that their behaviours are more pro-social than they had been in previous years.

Effective leadership and management

Successfully embedding a culture of wellbeing for learning at Penrith Valley starts with effective leadership and management.

The role of the principal in leading a culture of wellbeing for learning

Although principal Nic Danta is very modest, his staff explained that much of the school's success can be attributed to his leadership. As principal, Nic leads the development and implementation of highly structured systems that support a whole-school approach to student wellbeing. For example, a highly structured process at lunchtime ensures students receive a nutritious meal, and that they learn about dining etiquette. Regularity and repetition work to reduce student anxiety and thereby improve cognitive functioning. This highly structured approach to all aspects of school life is a necessity within this particular context. Nic's meticulous planning and effective communication have enabled a shared vision to be established within the school that is supported by all staff. The staff at Penrith Valley also articulate clearly why wellbeing is embedded in everything they do, and how their approach supports the school's overarching goal to set students up for a successful life. Nic's hands-on and caring approach has also supported the development of a culture where staff morale is high because the teachers feel supported and valued members of the school community.

Wellbeing for learning – preparing students for a successful life after school

Wellbeing for learning at Penrith Valley means preparing students for what they want to do when they walk out of the school gates for the last time. The school focuses closely on ensuring students are 'job-ready', that they have the literacy skills to engage with work, and that they can behave appropriately in the community. With many students coming from backgrounds where they do not always have this support at home, the school's role in preparing students for their post-school life is critical.

Setting high expectations

Penrith Valley has embedded a culture of high expectations. This culture extends across the school from uniform to punctuality, food etiquette, and effort levels. These high expectations are reflected in the school rules, and there are consistent consequences for breaking the rules. The school's culture of high expectations teaches students to be responsible for their own actions so, for example, they are less likely to be fired from a job for reasons such as tardiness or not abiding by the uniform code.

Everyone's in uniform and that's a part of wellbeing as well. We did get a lot of kickback about that with people saying, "But they're behaviour kids, just get them to school. Don't put them in uniform". It's really about when they go to work, there'll be a uniform. And if that expectation hasn't been set for them, then they'll fight it.

Nic Danta, Principal

Developing student independence

Developing independence is central to student wellbeing at Penrith Valley. There are numerous opportunities each day for students to develop and practice independent living skills that will serve them throughout their lives. If a student is able to perform a task, the expectation is that they will be given the opportunity to complete that task, whether it be making breakfast, cleaning up after food preparation or tidying a classroom at the end of a lesson. These actions seem incidental in isolation, but are crucial if the school is going to be successful in preparing students for their lives in families, workplaces and the wider community once they have completed their schooling.

Developing strong, trusting and respectful relationships

Relationships are at the heart of Penrith Valley's culture of wellbeing for learning. Each student is assigned a mentor teacher who is responsible for developing their Personalised Learning Plan and other documentation that enables staff to cater to their individual needs. Students have breakfast with their mentor twice each week, which provides them with opportunities to set goals and touch base about how they are travelling. Calling teachers by their first name, rather than using their title as is standard practice in NSW public schools, also helps students to develop positive relationships with their teachers. The mentor program at Penrith Valley helps students to develop the skills they need to build strong, trusting and respectful relationships outside the school setting. For example, it helps students to understand the social expectations relating to relationships, and also to recognise the reciprocal nature of successful relationships.

Improving literacy skills using therapy dogs

Penrith Valley's collaboration with Nepean Therapy Dogs has been highly successful in helping students develop the literacy skills required to succeed in their post-school life. The dogs visit every fortnight, and students read to the dogs individually and in small groups with a teacher and a therapy dog handler. Many students at Penrith Valley were hesitant to read at all prior to the school's collaboration with Nepean Therapy Dogs. The strategy, however, has been so successful in re-engaging students with reading that some staff members now bring in their own dogs to provide students with extra reading opportunities in an environment where they feel calm and free from judgement.

We started with the dogs just coming in and the kids would play with the dogs. But then we read some research about the benefits of kids reading to dogs, so then we started doing that. With a lot of the kids here if you say, "Here's an adult, sit down with them and read", they'll go, "No, I'm not going to do that". But they will sit and read with the dogs endlessly. And so then it becomes a benefit for literacy.

Nic Danta, Principal

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