

#Whatever-It-Takes

Michael Hansen^a, Cathy Nixon^b,^aPrincipal, Cairns West State School, ^bDeputy Principal – Student Engagement, Cairns West State School, Queensland Australia.

The COVID-19 pandemic was acutely stressful for student’s their families and their teachers in a primary school with a high migrant population in Cairns, Australia. In this paper the authors describe how they strategised to support these families, many of whom had backgrounds that included complex intergenerational trauma, so their children continued to make learning gains at school. The authors report that their work provided an opportunity to increase capacity to connect with community and build strong and supportive relationships based on shared experience.

At Cairns West State School, we are proud to champion the region’s #Whatever-it-takes priority; it’s the attitude we bring to our work every day. ‘Whatever It Takes’ means the staff at Cairns West State School have the courage to do things differently to achieve required outcomes. The school’s Engagement Hub, created as part of the Student Engagement Explicit Improvement Strategy, is an excellent example that served our community well throughout the COVID-19 response.

The challenges the pandemic presented to schools in Far North Queensland were compounded by the socioeconomic disadvantage of many of our region’s families and discrete communities.

Students’ lack of access to technology effectively removed the option to deliver curriculum online during the five-week lockdown at the beginning of Term 2, 2020. The divide between ‘those who have and those who have not’ was never more apparent. At Cairns West State School, thinking outside the box is the norm; it was the only way we could approach the question of how to ensure all our students were able to access and participate in Learning@Home programs.

Of the school’s 680 enrolled students, 66% identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; 18% are refugee students (mainly Bhutanese from the camps in Nepal and African refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo); 9% identify as Pacific Islander, Papua New Guinian or with Asian cultures; the Caucasian student population is 7%. The school’s ICSEA rating is 784. Many families experience long-term unemployment; less than five families in our school have a mortgage. All the parents, however, have high hopes, dreams and aspirations for their children.

Why Was COVID-19 So Serious for Our Community?

The COVID-19 pandemic was acutely stressful for many families at Cairns West State School. Most families at our school have backgrounds that include complex intergenerational trauma. Some have survived Ebola virus, plague, genocide and the effect of disease and malnutrition in refugee camps. For others, entire generations have been lost through the impact of colonial settlement and policy, including the stolen children generations. The Queensland Government's creation of biosecurity zones patrolled by the Australian armed forces and police reinforced the seriousness for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. This also meant that some were cut off from their support systems, unable to celebrate cultural events, join in traditional hunting practices, or attend funerals. Within the community we noticed houses boarded up and children not being allowed outside. There were also many signs on doors stating that a vulnerable person lived in the household.

Five Key Strategies

The Cairns West State School Engagement Hub is guided by five strategies that, we believe, positioned the school to innovate and to meaningfully engage with families throughout the COVID-19 response:

Family First | Strong connected relationships are crucial; no discussions are begun, and plans or decisions made, without the full consent of family. Students receive the strong message that the family and school are on the same side.

Story Matters | Time is intentionally allocated to listen to and unpack individual student's stories. Case conferencing, case management and care team meetings are purposeful and outcomes-focused and occur regularly both internally and externally.

Permission to Innovate | A whole of school social emotional skilling program is timetabled and supported by a teacher coach. A variety of support provisions offering therapeutic outcomes and intensive social skilling are used.

It Takes a Village | Twenty-seven external agencies provide programs and support either during or after school hours. Place-based services exist with four major partners so that families can access support onsite. A local finance company has provided a seven-seater vehicle to the school.

100% the Best | Staff have weekly opportunities, during school hours, for training and development. We prioritise and grow capable staff who are 100% mentally and physically fit.

How Did The Plan Work?

At the onset of COVID-19, the school's executive team met to plan how students would be supported, taking into consideration each team member's specific set of skills and expertise. Each family in the school was assigned a case manager, with families identified as being 'especially vulnerable' being case managed by the most appropriate member of the administration team.

The Deputy Principal – Teaching and Learning led a process that saw teachers prepare Learning@Home packs containing two weeks of work. This included a student booklet and a parent booklet. A pick-up/delivery day was organised, with some families attending the school to collect their packs (with social distancing measures enforced) and staff home delivering packs that could not be collected. Teachers called every family to discuss how the booklets were to be utilised.

By the end of the first week, staff were able to recognise at-risk families and plan strategies in response. This work was led by the Deputy Principal – Student Engagement and included conducting home visits, 'letterbox conversations', translation of the parent versions of the Learning@Home booklets into four languages other than English, and the translation of all information into seven languages for use on the school's Facebook page.

Three engagement sessions, at targeted times, were scheduled on Facebook each day with the catchcry 'For us, by us'. (This has continued to generate unprecedented engagement with the school community.) Cairns West State School also delivered additional services when regular support agencies had shut down and were unable to offer on the ground support for families.

By the end of the second week, teachers' calls had focused on connection and wellbeing. This allowed the school team to review and continue to identify the families who required additional support. Extended responses included:

- > Establishing, in partnership with the Queensland Police Service, COVID-19 community classrooms held five times per week in two high density vulnerable housing communities as a wellbeing check strategy.
- > Increased 'letterbox conversations', notes and messages, with some families receiving daily check-ins (many houses were boarded up with signs displayed that indicated genuine fear of the virus). Every school family was contacted at their residence via telephone or at the school during booklet collection.
- > Children who engage in regular alternative support provisions (including Individual Curriculum Plans, Behaviour Hub, or English as an Additional Language or Dialect) were provided with hands-on kits including driveway chalk activities, cooking packs with recipes and ingredients, card and board games.

- > Intensive English lessons continued via telephone for all families who were recently arrived from refugee camps.

From Week 3 of term, teachers focused their telephone conversations on wellbeing first, and then academic work. Once again, additional support was planned for those families who self-identified or who had indicators of stress. If a teacher could not speak directly with a child via telephone, the engagement team followed up with a visit. These ‘check-ins’ assisted in monitoring for domestic violence, concerns about diet, mental illness and the general wellbeing of families living in possible high-risk circumstances.

What Was Learned?

The impact of COVID-19 was significant in our community. However, the work undertaken in response provided an opportunity to increase capacity to connect with community and build strong and supportive relationships based on shared experience. It is important to appreciate that the work that had already commenced in our priority area of student engagement placed the school in a position to engage meaningfully with families during this distressing time. This work laid the foundation for our success.