Belgrave Heights Christian School provides a warm and caring environment for 450 students from Kindergarten through to Year 12. Its dedicated staff nurture each student to help them reach their full potential. The small school environment allows staff to get to know each student by name. The school provides a broad academic education encompassing teaching the students life skills to ensure they become more balanced and rounded citizens. Learning extends beyond the classroom, and includes field work, excursions, camps and community involvement.

Project

In 2012, Belgrave Heights Christian School decided it was time to change its student reports. The school had calculated that its teachers, coordinators and senior staff, including the Principal and Deputy Principal, collectively spent 650 hours per semester writing, checking and proofreading the comments section of reports for its 450 students.

And those 650 hours were not exactly stress-free.

The school had a seemingly radical idea – remove the comments section from student reports and communicate an increased amount of information through the use of more bar graphs.

Process

In March 2012, three staff members attended a Southern Cross training program. The head of secondary, a primary school teacher, and the school’s Reports Coordinator, Steve Reiher, spent four days off-site focussing on the imminent changes.

‘We had an idea of what we wanted to do,’ said Mr Reiher, who wears several hats at Belgrave Heights Christian School, including Years 7 and 8 Coordinator. ‘The training gave us four days without distractions to hone in on the issues facing us.

‘The training taught us to anticipate the possible problems of the changes we were planning. It also gave us time to support our theories by analysing data and breaking down the issues into clearer, tangible numbers. By the end of the training, we were very clear that changing the reports was the logical thing to do.
'One of the key concepts we learnt to calculate was whether or not something added value. We learnt that the amount of time and effort report comments cost was significantly higher than the value they presented, especially since everything that could be communicated to parents in their children’s reports could be portrayed in the graphs and grades.'

After the Southern Cross training the school spoke to parents – personally and via newsletters and email – about the proposed changes. The school created ‘before and after’ examples of reports, with text highlighted in various colours to show how what was written in the comments section was actually covered in the various bar graphs.

The key changes were adding three new bar graphs to the ‘general progress’ part of the report and, crucially, including each teacher’s email address, with an invitation for parents to contact the teacher ‘if you have any concerns, queries or comments’.

**Results**

So, how did the parents of Belgrave Heights Christian School respond when the new reports were sent out at the end of first semester 2012?

‘There was absolutely no protest from parents,’ said Mr Reiher. ‘Some parents, who are also teachers at the school, welcomed the fact that there was no waffle in the reports. As teachers they, like most of the staff, were relieved to be spared the arduous task of writing comments. Removing the comments also significantly increased the accuracy and professionalism of our reports.’

The 650 hours slashed off report-writing duties, not surprisingly, bolstered staff morale. It also meant that towards the end of 2012, teachers had far more energy to run their Headstart programs in the last weeks of second semester.

Mr Reiher noted that the reports are only a part of the school’s student reporting process, a process that culminates in parent-teacher interviews where student outcomes can be discussed in more detail.

He said that the Southern Cross training in March 2012 was invaluable in not only bringing in changes to the school’s report-writing, but in seeing the possibilities of further change, in areas such as homework, exam policies and the school’s use of technology.

‘It’s been a real and very positive investment for the school, and one very much appreciated.’

*December 2012*