Southern Cross Program
Case Study

Student Engagement

Plenty Valley International Montessori School
Student Retention

School Description

Plenty Valley International Montessori School is a non-denominational Independent school for students from Early Years to Year 6, set on a picturesque two hectare campus in St Helena. Its primary school has 110 students, while its increasingly popular Early Learning Centre programs have approximately 70 enrolments.

Students are encouraged to develop across all subject areas of the curriculum. Mathematics and literacy are important to the academics, as is music and languages, art and sport to the wider skills and knowledge domains. The school has a specialist learning support teacher who caters for students who are gifted or who require extra support.

In true Montessori tradition, students are free to make choices about their learning, with the direct support and mentorship of teachers, based on systematic observation.

Project

Plenty Valley International Montessori School attended Southern Cross training in July and August of 2012. Five staff were part of the training: Dr Maree Matthews, the Principal, the leader of the school’s specialist teachers, the Pastoral Care Coordinator, and two Montessori-trained teachers.

The team initially intended to audit the school’s teaching and learning programs as a way of addressing the issue of retaining students – The school’s Early Years programs are strong but the declining numbers across the primary school has been a serious issue for five years.

The brief, though, was too broad. On the first morning of its Southern Cross training, the team realised it needed to focus the scope of its project. ‘We had a wide spread of ideas,’ said Dr Matthews, ‘and after lengthy discussion honed them down to the issues of enrolment and retention.’

Process

The team found that it needed data, lots of data, about enrolment and retention. It adhered to the DMAIC process: Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve and Control. ‘These five phases helped us to break down the issues,’ said Dr Matthews. ‘They provided us with a process, a map, as we asked ourselves, “Why are some students leaving?”'
Analysis of preliminary data revealed that there were patterns, including peak times, when families decided to take their children to another school.

‘The DMAIC process is not about whether things are right or wrong. It’s about looking at data in context. We found it a really good way to look at our own scorecard.’

**Results**

After the Southern Cross training, the team reported their findings to the staff and the Board, and then set about seeking solutions to the issue of student retention. Plenty Valley International Montessori School could see that it might need to reorient its branding and advertising, as well as getting back to its initial intention of auditing its teaching and learning programs. It is also surveying the school community to collect more data.

The school has shifted the dates of its parent information sessions and of its parent-teacher conferences and refined its marketing to the burgeoning families who are in the Early Learning Centre programs.

For the first time in five years, the Plenty Valley International Montessori School has families on its ages three to six waiting lists and hopes to run an additional Prep class in 2014.

Dr Matthews said that the processes learnt at the Southern Cross training are now ‘part of the fabric of the school. The whole framework has been a paradigm shift for us. We now have the ingredients to achieve more at the school.’

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