



Belgrave Heights Christian School

In 2012, Belgrave Heights Christian School decided it was high 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.

Those 650 hours were not exactly stress-free.

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

Before embarking on such a change, three members of Belgrave Heights Christian School attended a Southern Cross training program. The Head of Secondary School, a primary school teacher, and the school's Reports Coordinator, Steve Reiher, spent four days in March 2012 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 Year 7 and 8 Coordinator. 'The Southern Cross program 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 could be portrayed in the graphs and grades.'

After the Southern Cross training, Belgrave Heights Christian 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.

For example, take a comment such as *Jack is a capable and hardworking English student. He worked diligently in English this semester, producing many high quality writing tasks.* This information is effectively already conveyed in three bar graphs: Jack's A grade marks for two assignments, and a third bar graph showing he works above the expected level in the category 'willingness to complete tasks'.

Similarly, a comment such as *Jack can be easily distracted and needs to focus in class on listening and staying on task* is conveyed in two bar graphs, 'effective use of class time' and 'behaviour in class'.

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'.

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 has been 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.'

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– Steve Reiher, School Reports Coordinator

