



Helping Hands

Sunshine Christian School, in Melbourne's west, is a small school. Its vegetable garden, for example, measures just one metre by four metres. In a way, those four square metres represent the benefits of the school appointing a Volunteer Coordinator, Nicole Stickland, in Term 4, 2011.

Mrs Stickland contacted a local garden club for advice and a local hardware store for materials. She then asked a parent to look after the patch. What was once just a scruffy patch of dirt is now a fertile school garden.

Before Mrs Stickland's appointment, Sunshine Christian School's Principal, Rebecca Heinjus, may have added the garden project to a growing list of ideas from parents that neither she nor her busy staff of 10 could find the time to coordinate.

Two Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors suggested that the School appoint a Volunteer Coordinator. Craig Dunstan and Di Pekin assisted with the new job's position description, gave planning support and then helped Mrs Stickland with one of her first tasks – a survey that matched parents' skills and interests with volunteer activities.

'Craig and Di encouraged me to see the school through the eyes of the teachers and the eyes of the parents,' said Mrs Stickland, who has brought to the school her experience as a Volunteer Coordinator with a hospital and with The Salvation Army.

Mrs Stickland gleaned ideas from an Independent Schools Victoria workshop about improving school communities and also from a visit to a much Victorian larger Independent school.

A key initiative of Mrs Stickland was coordinating an English language program for parents through Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES). Sunshine Christian School, which has more than 20 different cultural groups, now runs its own specialist migrant education program. Parents, many whose first language is not English, have been trained by AMES and now teach English at the school to other parents.

'The migrant education program has been the most significant outcome of appointing a Volunteer Coordinator,' said school Principal Rebecca Heinjus. 'It means that the parents can help their children with schoolwork and can also be more confident in speaking to teachers.'

Sunshine Christian School is a Prep to Year 6 coeducational Lutheran school in Sunshine with a capped enrolment of 94 students.

Challenge: To create more parental involvement to support student learning.

Action: Appoint a Volunteer Coordinator.

Results: Parental involvement now formalised and coordinated, leading to more parents now able to help their children with schoolwork.

Mrs Stickland described her appointment as three-fold. 'It's about making connections within the school community, making connections between the school and the broader community, and involving the children more in the broader community.

– Mrs Nicole Strickland,
Volunteer Coordinator



'The baseline of Nicole's role is helping parents helping children with their learning. That's what it all comes down to, that's what it all comes back to.'

Mrs Stickland described her appointment as three-fold. 'It's about making connections within the school community, making connections between the school and the broader community, and involving the students more in the broader community.'

Some parents, even though they could not speak English, have come along to morning teas, keen to show their interest in the school. A very successful fundraising barbecue at the local Bunnings store drew parent volunteers who were more confident cooking sausages than, say, covering library books.

A resiliency program, which Mrs Stickland has helped support, sees Year 3 to Year 6 students doing off-site weekly team-building activities with student teachers at nearby Victoria University and with the Western Bulldogs AFL team. (The school site is not much bigger than a large suburban corner block, so off-site activities are much valued.)

One group of parents wanted to run a teacher appreciation function – but they didn't want the teachers to know in advance. The parents first consulted Mrs Stickland, and then, through their own cultural groups, were able to spread the word.

'Nicole is the face of the school for the parents,' said Mrs Heinjus.

'She has really made a difference. Parents are now finding their niche within the school. Our long-term goal is for more parents to be able to help in the classroom, bearing in mind that quite a few of our parents work two jobs or study.'

'The Volunteer Coordinator role has given a voice to parents who want to get involved but didn't know how,' said Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Craig Dunstan. 'It has upskilled the parents so that they can help their children at school and at home. Teachers and students are more supported.'

Mr Dunstan also pointed out that families at Sunshine Christian School are now not only better equipped to deal with schooling and school life but also with living in a new country.

