Parliament of Victoria

Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

a) The number of students from Lakes Entrance Secondary College going on to University Courses is negligible. While a number of our students have received offers of places they are not confident enough, or ready to take them up.

b) The retention rate to year 12 and the completion rate of VCE/VET/VCAL have dramatically improved in the College since we have become a 7-12 school. I am confident that this improvement is because students are more confident completing their Secondary Studies in their home town, in a school and with teachers they know. Building their confidence and the expectation that these young people will then move on to Tertiary Studies will require a cultural shift in the thinking of the whole community. Unfortunately too many of the parents with high expectations of their children enrol their students in Private Schools in Bairnsdale or beyond. This deprives the remaining students of the example and expectations of this cohort of students and their parents. VCAL participation in the College is higher than the state average and perhaps higher than we would like this can be related to low student aspiration. The issues for our Koorie students are similar; however they are multiplied many times. We have a learning team of staff addressing issues around Koorie engagement and success. As a college we are making some ground on developing individual student learning plans, building staff capacity, developing leadership capacity amongst the students and building connectedness with the Koorie communities. The college has committed a further leadership position to re-engagement and Koorie education. This is an in which much work needs to be done and significant resources expended to address enormous disadvantage.

c) Within our community it is quite acceptable for a student to enrol in TAFE, take up an Apprenticeship, or similar training even though the student is perhaps capable of greater academic achievement and higher education. Being able to highlight examples of role models who have moved on to complete further education is important in changing this culture.

d) Our aim at the College is to encourage greater participation in further studying by changing community culture. High expectations and role models for our students and our community are essential to achieve this. Having years 11 & 12 students at the College has brought about a noticeable change in the aspirations of our middle school students. Seeing their older mates succeeding is an important stimulus for students who come from families with no history of education beyond year 10. We have very few families in which the parents have Tertiary qualifications. Our students meet and mix with very few Tertiary qualified people, with the exception of their teachers. Tertiary qualified role models for our students, work placement or experience in professions will clearly demonstrate to our students that they can be successful in education and they can rise to the challenge of education beyond year 12.
The cultural change in our community won’t happen quickly but it will happen. An annexe of the school in Melbourne where we take students from years 8, 9 & 10 for extended period, to explore educational opportunity and vocational options in Melbourne would accelerate the rate of change.

There is a cost for students to travel to Melbourne or elsewhere to further their education. The economic cost is beyond many of our families and because of the small number of students doing so, the personal cost for our students is high as they leave family and friends to a situation in which they perceive they will get very little support. There is also the social cost, students leaving sports clubs etc at a time when their contribution is significant. Many would need to work part-time to cover their costs and with all the other stresses of living away from home and studying, it can easily be seen as overwhelmingly difficult.

e) One of the most significant challenges for our community is to raise our educational capital. By that I mean the number of people in the community who have tertiary and qualifications resulting from further education. Education beyond year 10, apart from a small presence of TAFE, was not available within our local community. This reinforced low aspirations and expectations regarding the education or level to be attained by the majority of our students.

f) Our experience and in talking to various employers, people can be attracted to the positions on offer. However these are often not local people. Importing skills into a community may well solve the immediate skills shortage; however unless these people are engaged with our youth, it does not directly raise the aspirations of the young people in the community or their parents to go onto further education.

g) The strategies that we are using to raise the expectations and participation of students in Tertiary Education revolves around limited transitional support e.g. attendance at university Open Days etc. Building in higher expectations in our students and families will require a cultural shift over time. Higher Education is “not on the radar” for the majority of our students. To change this quickly we would have to have the resources and capacity to case manage individual students within the context of family and social situation. Access to paid travel and accommodation for extended work experience/mentoring for receptive students would begin the process. Or funded “salaries” in those areas would make them more attractive propositions. Support for arranging and promoting these opportunities needs to be better supported within the school and through external agencies.

Craig Sutherland – Principal
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Lakes Entrance Secondary College
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