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Aboriginal Student Action Team
A model for engagement and learning
Mid winter here, and it has been encouraging and warming to hear of many positive examples of active roles for students in both primary and secondary schools. It’s also been encouraging to hear teachers and students being *critical* about these initiatives, and dissatisfied with acceptance of limited opportunities and outcomes.

I’ve recently been in South Australia for some professional development sessions (for teachers and some students) in *Values Education, Civics and Citizenship Education, Student Engagement and Student Initiatives*. There were exciting reports from schools attending, and *Connect* hopes to carry some of these in future issues. Just to give you a taste (though not all of these might translate into full articles; we’ll see): the **Students Working Actively Together (SWAT) Team** at Ocean View College; the student-generated **vision statement** for Port Augusta Secondary School; the development of **student-run internet radio programs** at North Ingle Primary School; the work of the **Youth Environment Council** and of the commitment to supporting **student voice** by Natural Resources Management (NRM) Education. And more. I also bumped into several past contributors to *Connect*, and they’ve promised us updates on their work.

... In This Issue

But here, in this issue of *Connect*, to keep you warmed up for winter, we have a fascinating story of the development of an **Aboriginal Student Action Team** over the past few years, at Northcote High School in Melbourne. This is powerfully illustrating the potential of this model for active participation of students within and outside schools – in ways that go far beyond traditional models of leadership.

And from Resurrection School in Keysborough, students report on their initiatives in environmental and well-being areas. “I don’t know that these are all Student Action Teams,” said Steve Bellisini, the school’s Principal, in a recent conversation; so this has led to the proposal that some groups may be equally valuable but seen as ‘**Student Responsibility Groups**’: exhibiting leadership and ownership, but without that broader community-based investigation and ‘change’ agenda. What do you think?

More here too on the concept of ‘**Outward Facing Schools**’, responding to a challenge to discuss some of the ‘hooks’ that enable students to **lead** a school in ‘stepping outward’. Finally, some results of student-run surveys on environment and bullying issues in a selection of primary schools, reported as part of 2008’s *Frenzy* day.

I hope these stories will keep you enthused until the August issue! Even enthused enough to write about what you are doing!

Roger Holdsworth

**NEXT ISSUE: #178: August 2009**

Deadline for material: end of July 2009
This story is about efforts to promote Aboriginal educational opportunity in a mainstream school. Northcote High School (NHS) is a government secondary school located approximately six kilometres from the CBD of Melbourne, Victoria. The school population is comparable with many metropolitan schools, with 1400 students.

The school demographics reflect the growing affluence of the area, combined with a history of post WW2 settlement. While English speaking Australians comprise the largest sector of the student population, there are up to 70 languages other than English represented in the families feeding into the school. The largest of these groups are students of Chinese origin and the second generation descendants of the post WW2 migration waves, in particular Greek and Italian communities. Recent migration changes have seen a growing number of Arabic speaking families and a small but significant number of refugee and new arrival settlers from the Horn of Africa and Eastern Europe.

Only a very small number of students are Indigenous – also a common feature of schools in this region of Melbourne. During the last five years, Aboriginal enrolments at NHS have hovered at around 10 to 12 per year. The number has varied with the movement of families in and out of the area, with movement of students between family members and with the changing educational needs and ambitions of the students. These features impact directly and detrimentally on Aboriginal student performance, engagement and retention, contributing to the significant educational disadvantage confronting Indigenous Australians.

For many years, the NHS leadership has worked towards building a school that tackles discrimination. This commitment is demonstrated through initiatives such as the Equal Opportunity Officer position maintained by the school. Over the five year period under consideration here, the school leaders and staff have made a concerted effort to improve the responsiveness of the school to the educational, social and cultural needs of the Aboriginal community. Our intention has been to strengthen the ties between the school and Aboriginal students and their families in order to improve the educational outcomes for these students. The central strategy for pursuing this goal has been the formation of the Aboriginal Student Action Team, and it is this that I will be outlining in this article.

Aboriginal educational experience in Australia

National and State educational performance data emerging over the last few years indicate Aboriginal students have performed worse and left school earlier than non-Aboriginal peers. Attendance figures show a sharp decline in Aboriginal school enrolment and completion that becomes most pronounced in the post-compulsory years 10, 11 and 12. Performance in national and state assessment for literacy and numeracy indicates Aboriginal students rate more poorly, lagging behind same age peers by a significant distance.¹²

Victorian State Government efforts to redress the imbalance are focussed on a range of strategies detailed in “Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future.”³
Impetus for action at NHS

In 2005, staff in the Student Wellbeing Team became aware of growing dissatisfaction being expressed by Aboriginal students about their treatment in the school. Reports of racial prejudice were being made to us by some students, while others were becoming involved in disciplinary problems to a concerning level.

The issue came to a head when attempts by a student to challenge inaccuracy of content in an Australian History class led to a heated exchange between the student and teacher. An accusation of trouble making leveled at the student by the teacher was countered with allegations of racism on the teacher’s part. As the incident was being addressed, Aboriginal students and their families expressed anger at the lack of cultural sensitivity being shown by some teachers, who in turn were defensive and affronted by the allegations being raised by families.

In an effort to understand the issues being raised, and to mediate the conflict that was building, the Student Welfare Coordinator (SWC) and I initiated discussions with Aboriginal students and their families. We wanted to test an assumption that, in their expressions of anger, students were communicating the sense of disempowerment they felt in their school life, reacting to the racism they perceived in their treatment at the hands of some students and staff.

We provided a space for Aboriginal students and their families to meet and talk safely and openly about their concerns. They confirmed they felt angry with the treatment by the school and expressed the view that the school was not interested in or respectful of their culture and heritage. I agreed to create a forum through which they could identify issues and take action to address the concerns with administration and teaching staff.

Why an Action Team?

Through this forum, it quickly became clear that the initial concerns were symptomatic of deeper challenges within the school community. Relationships and attitudes among students and staff were reflecting a lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture and heritage, leading to an increasing disengagement of Aboriginal students from the larger school community.

The Wellbeing Team and school leadership wanted to find a way to begin challenging some of the entrenched expectations and perceptions, so Aboriginal students would be supported in achieving their best within this mainstream school. The Aboriginal students and families were in agreement. Shaping the forum into an Action Team offered the means to not just seek ideas from students, but to involve them in real and significant change – to provide a voice with which their concerns could gain legitimacy and currency. In a climate where Aboriginal students had come to be seen, and to see themselves, as fringe dwellers, we wanted to create a view of their abilities as academic achievers and as student leaders.

Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the Aboriginal Student Action Team has been to strengthen the ties between the school and Aboriginal students and their families in order to pursue activity that would reduce the impact of the educational disadvantage confronted by these students.

To achieve this aim, a number of complementary strategies were required. These were:

1. Improve the engagement of students and their families with the school;

2. Contribute to improved student learning and school performance;

3. Provide a vehicle for student leadership for Aboriginal students;

4. Improve awareness and understanding in the school community of Aboriginal culture and heritage.
What makes an Aboriginal Student Action Team?

Initially, the ASAT comprised only indigenous students. A series of weekly meetings was held in the Wellbeing office at lunchtime throughout late 2005, into early 2006. Students were drawn from Years 7 to 10 and, with guidance and supplies of chocolate, they began to identify priorities and pursue action plans.

As a matter of principle, we worked to ensure the decisions of the group were made by the students themselves. Similarly, we were clear that responsibility for following up tasks also lay with the students.

As facilitator, my role was to guide the discussions and to encourage and support them in taking appropriate action towards their goals. Importantly, it was also to engage in discussion with the Principal, leadership team and staff to win support for the group and the efforts they were making.

At times we undertook action in parallel with the students. For instance, while the students were campaigning for the Aboriginal flag to be flown, I arranged for the mounting of a plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of the land on which the school stands. The presence of the school Principal alongside a community Elder at the formal unveiling of the plaque provided a powerful and enduring message of support for students in their struggle.

Professional development was also arranged for the staff team, increasing awareness of Aboriginal heritage and of the impact of prejudice.

Late in 2006, an invitation was extended by the Team to non-Aboriginal students who shared an interest in indigenous affairs to join the Action Team. Planning and running a camp to the Barmah State Forest, home to the Yorta Yorta people, proved to be a pivotal step towards linking Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members together. This represented a significant shift towards cultural recognition for the students and families.

Key elements to the ASAT

In reviewing the operation of the ASAT, there are a number of factors contributing to the success of this model for practice.

1. **Confidence and trust of Aboriginal students in the staff facilitating the group is essential.** The work of the Team requires students to move well outside their comfort zone. For some, the tasks and roles they take on as part of the ASAT are foreign and challenging. Even the act of articulating their thoughts and feelings in a group setting and to staff – non-Aboriginal staff especially – can be difficult.

   Staff must be willing to actively and openly learn alongside the students in order to earn their trust and respect. They must be aware of the power issues that exist in student-staff relationships and in relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and be willing to shift this, or at very least to acknowledge the impact of these issues.

2. **Communication with families plays a crucial part in gaining and keeping their confidence and support.** Often, the parents and extended family have experienced entrenched obstacles in their experiences with the education system. The ASAT invites these families to convey the commitment they bring to their children’s education; to communicate what they believe is important in achieving this; and to bring a valued contribution to making it happen.

3. **The creation of opportunities for ‘real’ learning with visible, tangible benefits grounds the ASAT in a reality that makes sense for students.** To be able to undertake research that directly links to cultural heritage and to see this research contribute directly to curriculum reform and classroom learning; to see the Aboriginal flag flying and to understand the processes through which they made it happen – these things make a powerful impression.

4. **Mentoring and peer support have played a big part in the ASAT.** The evolution of the Team has allowed older students to provide natural leadership for younger students, and for the younger members to grow into increasing responsibility. This mentoring has been structured as a formal activity at times, such as the delivery of sports training by ASAT members to local primary school students. At other times it can be recognised as an innate part of the relationships developing within the Team.

5. **Establishing links within the wider Aboriginal community has also proven to be important.** By building connections through families into the community, the school has had the chance to understand and engage with the intricacies of family and network ties that typify the Aboriginal community. Students have the opportunity to demonstrate to their own community the strength of leadership and communication ability they are developing, to feel the pride of achievement as it is recognised and applauded. This connection between the school and their community also served to foster a sense that the school could become a place of cultural safety for the students.
Challenges

The main challenges facing the ASAT included:

1. Maintaining the focus and engagement of students and families. Life gets busy, priorities change and holding to task is never easy. Naturally, as students reached more senior years of school, they had to prioritise study, leaving younger students who were sometimes ill-prepared or unready to step up. At other times, students simply get distracted by life – this is adolescence remember: all sorts of things can get in the way.

2. Change comes slowly, and adolescents are not renowned for patience. Students struggled with the frustration of long and inexplicable delays – things that should be simple rarely were. Learning to distinguish whether delays are intentional or not, and how to maintain momentum when things are stuck is not easy.

3. Changes in group membership were frequent. Families moved from the area, students moved between parents/careers, shifting school in the process. With each change, knowledge and experience is lost and progress sacrificed.

4. Retaining school leadership support and attention for the issues promoted by the ASAT also requires continuous negotiation and strategic positioning. Access to time, space and influence with school leadership are all hotly contested, and the success of ASAT initiatives relies heavily on the support of the leaders. Change to curriculum, policy and school ethos will not occur without the will of the administration.

Outcomes

The Aboriginal Student Action Team has produced some notable achievements over the last four years, with some lasting legacies in evidence at NHS.

Students who participated in the ASAT report great positive value in the leadership opportunities they have taken. A number have gone on to participate in community advocacy forums, such as Reconciliation Australia and the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advocacy Council. One Aboriginal student successfully completed VCE last year – the first to do so in this region of Melbourne for many years. Another is poised to graduate this year and gain entry to Melbourne University in 2010.

For the school community, the work of the ASAT has been the impetus for widespread improvement in cultural awareness and sensitivity. Professional development has been undertaken by staff to increase racism awareness as well as to begin a move towards greater cultural competency. Strategies for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are now embedded in the NHS Annual Plan. The lead shown by staff of the Wellbeing Team in promoting indigenous education has been taken up by other local schools and agencies. As a result, a regular forum has been running for the last twelve months, bringing these groups together to explore effective learning tools and techniques.

NHS now flies the Aboriginal flag at all times, offers ‘acknowledgement of country’ at all school assemblies and gatherings, and proudly displays the plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of the land on which the school sits. While these may be criticised as tokenistic, these symbolic gestures are highly valued by Aboriginal students and families for the way they represent visible cultural recognition.
Timeline of Key events and activities

2005: Informal discussions initiated with Aboriginal students and with NHS staff

2006:
- Formal establishment of ASAT
- Peer mentoring with Thornbury PS/Joint NAIDOC activities and celebrations
- Plaque acknowledging traditional ownership of land endorsed by NHS Council and unveiled with Elder, Auntie Rochelle Patten presiding
- Racism awareness training for all NHS staff
- NHS initiates and hosts ‘Regional Convention on Reconciliation’
- Links established with local agencies: Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI); DEECD Northern Metropolitan Region, Koori Education Development Officer
- Family participation formalised: planning undertaken for ASAT Camp activity; start of initiative to get funded educational support for students

2007:
- Yorta Yorta Cultural Awareness camp – Barmah State Forest: ASAT members visit country, interview Elders collecting primary source research material; determining action priorities for the year
- Flag campaign leads to Aboriginal flag permanently aloft
- Celebrations/activities to mark key days: Sorry Day; the Long Walk; NAIDOC
- Year 9 Australian History: curriculum revision incorporates source material collected at Barmah camp by ASAT
- Elders in classroom supporting History lessons
- Indigenous Sexual Health program offered to Aboriginal students
- Submission to Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for funding through Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) to employ Aboriginal Education Support Worker
- Acknowledgment of Country offered at major school functions such as assemblies

2008:
- Rudd’s Apology to the Stolen Generation – school community stops to listen
- Aboriginal Education Support Worker employed for 12 month position
- Reconciliation Race Around Town – activity initiated and led by ASAT members – participation by local primary and secondary schools
- Flag raising ceremony to mark NAIDOC
- Aboriginal language and culture lesson for staff/students provided by parent/Elder
As Mick Dodson noted in his address to the Australian National Press Club in February this year:

“So-called symbolic steps like the apology, like acknowledging country, like constitutional reform, like giving a child pride in their culture; these are all practical steps that change the way we think and feel and act.”

**Conclusion**

On a personal note: the benefits of facilitating the Aboriginal Student Action Team have been enormous; the undertaking has changed the way I work, think and feel. To see the growth and development of the students as they embrace a voice of political activism in pursuit of change on behalf of their community makes me feel privileged and proud.

The ASAT has been a rollercoaster ride; at times bringing despair that anything will ever change; at others, elation at the successes we have gained, at the joys and sorrows we have shared. While not without limitations, I believe the ASAT model has contributed to a fundamental shift in the pursuit of improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Rob Mason, 2009

**References**

4. Prof. Mick Dodson, Director, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU - Quoted in The Age, Feb 19, 2009: “Our schooling shame”

**ASAT Staff Acknowledgements**

Shared credit and unconditional thanks must go to a number of people for their work with the ASAT:

- Deborah Pyke has been a formative member of the ASAT at NHS. She has played an integral and invaluable role in establishing and facilitating the Team over the entire period of operation.
- Karen Stott picked up the running in 2008, bringing fresh energy and enthusiasm to the Team.
- Tim Delany was integral to the revision of the Year 9 History curriculum.

**Student Action Teams: Implementing Productive Practices in Primary and Secondary School Classrooms**

**Student Action Teams** - teams of students who, as part of their school curriculum, adopt a community issue that they care passionately about, research it, decide what needs to be changed or improved and take action to achieve that.

In this book (April 2006) primary and secondary schools in Melbourne’s northern suburbs tell how to establish and implement **Student Action Teams**. They describe their students’ work researching and acting around traffic safety and the environment and reflect on what they have learnt: the basic principles of **Student Action Teams**, their practical operation, and the stories of successful approaches and outcomes in two projects. The principles and approaches outlined here can be used to guide developments in any school - acting alone or in a cluster. Includes sample worksheets and pro formas.

Order NOW from **Connect**: $33 or $27.50 for **Connect** subscribers.
At Resurrection School in Keysborough (in Melbourne’s south-east), there are Student Action Teams and Student Responsibility Groups in the areas of Environment, Wellbeing, Social Action (Mini Vinnies) and Spirituality. In Term 1, 2009, they reported to the school about their work. These are some extracts from two of their reports.

Wellbeing SAT

Last term, we had the bullying show called Power of One. It taught us how to not bully others and not stand by while others are bullied. We said an Oath to promise that we will not bully others or stand and watch while others are being bullied.

Each year we also celebrate Cultural Diversity.

We have been collecting awards from classrooms to show who has been friendly lately. The 2007 awards were based on respect, 2008 were based on responsibility and now this year is based on friendliness.

We are really looking forward to doing more fun and exciting things with everyone in the school. The Wellbeing Team will help do this in a safe way!
Environment Student Action Team

_Garden Growing_
This year, the Environment team has been working on our vegetable garden. In our garden we have red Italian garlic, silver beet, radish, some carrots, green dwarf peas, snow peas and many more. In the seed raising kit we are growing cabbage, broccoli and celery. The garden vegetables are cooked by Mrs Frau. She gets vegetables from the garden and cooks with Gavin, Martin, Joseph and Brendon.

_Bird House Project_
One of the things our group did was make a bird house. Firstly, one of the students (from 5/6) came up with an idea to make a house for birds that are homeless or birds that just came to visit. As the plan went on for a few weeks, the teacher gave us a look at an example of the new improved bird house. The project was a complete success and with this we have more birds. Our goal now is to put more bird houses around the school and make sure all the birds are happy.

_Earth Hour_
On the day before Earth Hour, our school recognised this important event in the world. At recess and lunchtime, students went to tell teachers to turn off all electronic appliances (lights, computers, air conditioner etc). Other classes did earth hour activities on the computer or on sheets of paper. We also put posters on the walls outside and inside to remind us about it.

_Gardening Group_
The Environmental team have been participating in the Garden Club every Thursday at lunch.
Our plans for the Environment

Water Tanks!

Vegetable Patch!

Listening!

PATHWAY!

Trees!

Water Buckets!

Art Panels!

Thank you for watching the environment presentation!

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When a student group is planning action around some topic, the first step should always be to investigate. Why? Why don’t you just start organising the action?

The basic reason is that you must be sure that you know what the situation is before you start – otherwise you could go off in the wrong direction, do things that are not supported or even look stupid because you’re not aware of what is already happening. And you could be wrong!

Until you find out more about the topic, you may not be sure what sort of action is needed.

You might have to find out about the current situation, what people think about the issue or about possible solutions (others may not think the same as you), what has already happened or been proposed and so on. This might involve talking with people throughout the school or at the local council, carrying out surveys within the school or community and using the internet to find information. It might also involve using resources like the local print media (by publicising the project, you can encourage interested people to contact you), or sending emails to other schools (in the area, or others who have done similar things) to find out possibilities for action.

Most importantly, you will also need to persuade other people about the action that you want to take, and for that you will need evidence.

So your first step is always to find out more about the topic – to get that evidence that helps you decide what to do.

Support needed

Do you need to get permission to carry out the investigation?

If you are asking sensitive questions, you will almost certainly need permission. You will need to present information about the ethics of your investigation – the rules and behaviours you will agree to use. This will include things like confidentiality, dealing with sensitive questions, telling people clearly what the purpose of the investigation is, and getting agreement from those you are questioning – and their parents and guardians if they are under 18 years.

If you are leaving the school, or going into other classes to do your investigation, you will also need the permission of the school and/or the specific teachers involved. Parents need to be informed and, for visits outside the school, permission forms will need to be completed.

You will need to build this process of getting permission into your investigation plan; your support teacher will be particularly helpful in assisting you with the steps and forms that your school requires. There are also many other tools and books about how to do investigations: your support teacher may be able to help you get access to these.

Roger Holdsworth
Students Lead Schools Outward

What does it mean to be an ‘Outward Facing School’? And what possibilities exist for students leading in enabling a school to be more ‘outward facing’?

Discussions have been continuing amongst some educators – from systems, schools and universities – about the concept of an ‘outward facing school’ (see the editorial, Connect 176, April 2009). The difference has been noted between a school that ‘looks out the window’ and one that ‘takes steps out the door’.

In the first case, a school can be a location for ‘community studies’ and for using community facilities. It can form links with community groups that support the work of the school – though these links are often on the school’s terms. That’s one image of the ‘outward facing school’.

Another and more challenging image is of a school that moves from its positions of control and ‘safety’ to take on difficult and often (though not always) contentious issues within and as part of its community. And this is a form of ‘outward facing’ in which students can take a leading role, as part of their studies.

What might that look like in practice? What are the ‘hooks’ that might enable a school to take those steps beyond its ‘fortress walls’?

It seems that when we think about students leading in this process, we can recognise and report on and imagine the same practical approaches that we have been documenting under the title of ‘student participation’ for some time. Years ago, Connect carried an article on ‘33 Curriculum Approaches Enhancing Effective Student Participation’.

So here are some similar ideas for practical approaches to getting ‘Outward Facing Schools’ into action.

The following ideas are the start of a ‘brainstorm’ around possible hooks for taking schools ‘outward’. All of these have been done recently.

It would be useful to continue building on this list.

Community Safety

Students undertook local research to identify issues of community safety. They investigated these issues and worked with local groups (such as Councils, traffic agencies, police) to improve safety. Safety issues were physical, traffic, social, fears, perceptions and so on. Examples include the statewide Student Actions Teams and those in the Darebin area around traffic safety.

Sustainability/Environment

Students undertook local scientific and environmental studies to examine and report on the state of the local physical environment. These were carried out with local or state-wide community groups. Student research also extended to participation in international studies on topics such as water pollution or destruction of the ozone layer. There are educational and environmental organisations with on-line conferences and projects to support and share the results of such local research.

Examples: students undertook a local Crustacean study; primary school students undertook environmental research, education and action.

Consider how meeting environmental needs can become an on-going productive outcome of studies. In one example, students gathered seeds, grew native plants and sold these back to communities as part of re-afforestation initiatives. This developed into an on-going school-based job creation program.

Media Production

(Often as a second step for the presentation of results of other initiatives)

Newspaper in Community

Students produced a community newspaper, dealing with community issues. They investigated current community papers, and identified needs and gaps. In some cases, this newspaper was published through the school, and in other cases, the school worked in association with other groups. Responding to needs, newspapers have been written in the major community languages. Research and writing occurred in several different classes, as part of an ‘outward-facing curriculum’.
There have been many examples of such school-based, student-run papers: the 5-language Ascolta that operated within a group of schools for over 10 years; the Mallacoota Mouth - the only town newspaper at that time, produced by students and others in the school.

**Book production**

Students collected student and community writing, either generally, or around a theme, and published a book as a community profile and resource. Themes have included creative writing, recipes, oral histories and so on.

**Radio**

Students worked with their local community radio station to present an occasional or regular time slot of news and other items. Students carried out interviews in the school or community around themes and compiled a program; this was broadcast (or narrow-cast) over existing media or through internet podcasts. There are many recent and current examples.

**Television/Video**

The advent of community television provided a similar outlet for student video productions. You could approach groups associated with community television (Channel 31, SYN Media) to negotiate access for students both to broadcast of school-made videos and to involvement in overall production. If there isn’t a local broadcast, set up a ‘video-magazine’ with items from school and community groups – produced by students – that can be shared between groups.

**Internet**

Internet publication enables low-cost dissemination of useful student research, writing and production. In stepping outwards, students have negotiated with local organisations (eg small businesses, community groups, Tourist Offices) to produce, review or supplement their web pages. Students have investigated local facilities, needs and gaps – and decided on the ‘image’ they wished to project or propose to the client.

**Music/CD**

Students linked with local musicians to write and publish a music CD. This built on issues such as cultural diversity or environment, and both presented musical accomplishments within the school, and also provided a productive focus for a class’s consideration of pertinent topics.

**Health**

From their classroom learning about healthy foods, and about food additives and their impact, students began teaching parents, and organising action to increase awareness within the community of what is in foods.

Similarly, schools set up ‘community gardens’ and worked with parents and local community to establish access for planting, growing and using vegetables. This had within-school curriculum aspects for students, but also developed a resource that built connections with parents and with local community groups. Spin-offs included sharing of recipes, food practices and knowledge about growing plants.

Students have led schools in addressing mental health issues amongst young people. Working with community groups, students established a mental health ‘first aid’ support scheme for young people in the area.

**Intergenerational Partnerships**

Students have worked productively and interactively with older residents in local communities. The collection and publication of local oral histories has provided valuable links between students and others, as well as preserving community knowledge and wisdom. This has been a one-off book publication or a regular publication of stories (eg in the local press), and has had both a general focus and linking themes (recipes, games etc). Alternatively, students have used community and oral history research to develop a mural portraying the community, or have helped establish a local museum.

Building on such intergenerational support, students have spent regular time working within the community providing support for older or younger generations. For example, students have worked in nursing homes, creches, child care, and community centres. Such interaction has become two-way, with students both providing personal support (including teaching elderly residents about use of the internet), but also developing oral history documentation, reading resources etc as well as getting advice and support in reading skills.

**Community Resources**

Many forms of community resources have been developed by students. Schools can challenge students to look for productive outcomes of studies through publication and dissemination of leaflets, handbooks, guides, source books etc. It is relatively easy to extend a process of ‘finding out’ by students, to one of ‘telling others.

Examples have included: the documentation of community health resources with the information disseminated through youth-directed pamphlets; students have worked for the local Shire Council to re-document lost information about burials in the local cemetery; students have published a guide to local leisure options; students have investigated and documented employment opportunities in the area.

Students have also worked within disability services to provide personal support and to develop resources such as community facilities that enable wheelchair access; they have written large print books for others to use.

**Researching Community Issues**

Research skills are basic to many subject areas ... and there are important and vital research tasks to be carried out in all communities. Schools can arrange for a community organisation or local government, for example, to commission a specific community-based research study by students. This should involve the production of a report or results that can be presented to an ‘outside audience.’
Examples: students have carried out real and purposeful community-based research on issues such as youth homelessness, local employment, use of railway stations, and the use of recreation facilities.

Similarly, the research skills of students have been used within the wider community to carry out studies of youth needs: recreational, health, transport etc. Where such a local youth needs survey was proposed, a class was supported to bid for the contract to carry out the research, either working alone or in association with other consultants. In other areas, schools approached the local Youth Development worker to find out whether such as study would be useful.

**Community Futures**

Students have been challenged to consider and recommend on future directions for their communities. This involved a class undertaking a local study: investigating, researching, and interviewing; and then presenting their results to a public forum, proposing and taking action, and monitoring outcomes.

**Catering**

Students have set up various small catering initiatives based in their schools. In some cases this started with a community garden and afternoon teas within the school and grew, and in other cases, students ‘stepped outwards’ to deliver sandwiches to local factories and businesses and catered for education and other conferences. There are programs that build such initiatives into structured classroom approaches.

**Arts**

Through their Art classes, students have approached local businesses and community groups and leased framed paintings (of their own art work) to them. They have also provided design and desktop publishing for community newsletters and reports, or for small businesses.

Similarly, schools have looked for real community-based and productive outcomes for their Manual and Industrial Arts classes. The production of community resources with commercial applications have occurred in many enterprise education initiatives.

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**Moving Outwards**

As well as the examples mentioned here (and look through back issues of **Connect** for more detail on their documentation), there have been many other student participatory approaches developed internally within schools. For example, there are many stories about Students as Researchers, students tutoring, students developing curriculum resources, student responsibility groups and so on. And then there are the representative examples of student participation: Student Councils and various other forms of student organisations. These are all valuable.

However, they can all be seen as being ‘inward looking’. Conceptually, we can see the overlap of ideas:

**How can we move some activities from being ‘inward looking’ to ‘outward facing’?**

Firstly, we need to commit to **consciously seeking opportunities** to establish such links and extensions. As we are involved, within schools, in initiatives that enable students to be active learners and which create real and important roles for them, we need to be thinking all the time about how we can take this initiative further. We need to be looking outside. This is a very similar first step to the step required to move from ‘student-centred learning’ to ‘active student participation’. So, for example, if we are studying about healthy foods, the opportunistic step is to ask ourselves (and the students): *“What can we do with this knowledge? How will we use it now?”*

Secondly, we need to be aware of, involved in, and actively seeking to build various forms of **community alliances**. We should be seeking to link our work within schools, with our community’s concerns. So, for example, if we are aware that the local Council is developing a ‘sustainability policy’ or strategy, then we can approach the appropriate Council officers and ask how we (the school or class) can be involved. When, for example, the Council was seeking submissions for the development of a local park, teachers approached the consultant and suggested participation of students in the local research study.

Thirdly, we can build such linkages and contacts into **active challenges and commissions** for the students: about the development of resources, about the conduct of research, about peer education, about the creation of media. The use of such a ‘commission’ can easily move the school to be ‘outward facing’, but can also provide strong motivation for learning and for engagement of students with real and important tasks within their community.

Finally, we need to be ask ourselves all the time: instead of doing this myself, how can I support students to do it? That includes involving students from the start, in visioning what an ‘outward facing school’ might look like. It is, after all, their communities.

There may be many other examples and strategies that we could use. We would be most interested to hear of your ideas and experiences.

Roger Holdsworth

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*June 2009*
The VicSRC has recently held two regional student conferences in Bendigo and South Gippsland. These have been an opportunity for students to gather in local groups, and discuss the local, regional, and even national issues that they are facing both as students and SRC representatives. A Western Melbourne conference was shaping up to be of epic proportions, but due to swine flu fears, was postponed until term three.

The Issue Workshops have been the focal point of engaging and passionate discussions on the day, and some common themes have arisen in both conferences. Solutions have been suggested and debated, and passionate argument has almost always ensued. The most common issues suggested have included:

- **Bullying.** A particular focus has been on cyber bullying, which has been identified as a difficult area to improve. An idea suggested in South Gippsland was for further teacher education surrounding bullying issues, and this showed strong student support.

- **Uniforms.** The age-old problem! Students have had many complaints: the current uniform is uncomfortable, is changed too often or is ugly. Most students agreed that a student consultation on uniform changes should be introduced.

- **Littering.** This proved a hard problem to tackle. Suggestions varied from ‘more bins’ to ‘canteens labeling items sold with student names’, so particular students can be punished. No conference yet has managed to get a motion passed regarding this issue, as it seems schools have tried numerous approaches and nothing yet has been seen to work well.

With four or five regional conferences still to come, more information will be gathered as to what issues students find important in Victorian Schools. These issues will be taken to Congress, and help inform the VicSRC Executive in putting forward student views to government and other bodies.

Thank you to everyone who is participating in these conferences. You are not only improving your SRCs, gaining knowledge and forging links to one another, but making your voice heard across Victoria!

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**State Congress**

Registrations for the 2009 statewide VicSRC Congress are open until the end of Term 2. Get in quickly to have your voice heard at a state level! The Education Minister will attend, so this is a great opportunity for you to discuss student and SRC concerns with her.

Congress is a fun weekend. This year it will be held from 9 am Friday 31st July to 3 pm Saturday 1st August, at the Oasis Camp in Mt Evelyn. Registration is open to Year 7-12 students, and is limited to two students per school.

Congress will debate proposals put forward by students from SRCs across Victoria. Congress decisions shape the work of the VicSRC Executive for the next 12 months.

Congress also elects the new VicSRC Executive (Years 7-11 in 2009 are eligible). Think about whether you would like to stand for election to this important body, to represent and work on behalf of fellow students.
In the last issue of Connect (176, April 2009), there was a report on the motions considered by primary school students during a parliamentary-style debate at the *Frenzy* festival of ideas. This was held last September at Box Hill Town Hall (in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs) for students from primary school Student Councils (see *Connect* 172, August 2008).

In preparation for the day, and to inform their views in debating the motions, students were asked to survey fellow students about two topics: the environment and bullying. The surveys asked:

**Environment**
- What areas of the environmental do you see your school taking action on?
- Do you think your school is doing enough to protect the environment?
- What more would you like to see your school do for the environment?

**Bullying**
- Do you think bullying is an issue at your school?
- Do you think your school is able to handle a bullying issue?
- What sort of bullying do you think happens at your school?
- Why do you think people bully?
- Who have you seen being a bully this year?

In addition to the survey questions, the Student Council of each participating school was given a set of research questions to discover the answers to:

**Environment:**
- Does your school have an environment group/club?
- Who is on it?: (students, parents, teachers, community)
- Does your school have a recycling program?
- What products (eg. glass bottles, paper, computer printer cartridges) do you recycle and how is this accomplished?
- Does your school have a waste reduction program in place?
- Does you school have re-use programs in place?

**Response Key:**
- A Recycling
- B Using less paper
- C Saving Water
- D Reducing Rubbish
- E Planting trees
- F Reducing electricity usage
- G Less car pollution

At least two thirds of students indicated that their school had recycling, water saving and/or waste reduction programs.

Approximately half of respondents noted that their school had a tree planting program.

The least common environment programs at schools (with less than half of students reporting them) were those aimed at using less paper, reducing electricity usage, and reducing car pollution.

Most students took a middle ground in response to this question, with more than three quarters of students indicating that whilst their school is doing something, that more could be done. 56.6% of respondents answered that “Every little bit helps,” whilst 22.2% replied that “Yes, but the world is so big you still wouldn’t notice.”

16.6% of students respond that their school was not doing enough to help the environment, and that so much more needed to be done.

Few students (4.9%) felt that their school was doing all that they could do to help the environment.

This data suggests that while students acknowledge that schools are currently taking action to preserve the environment, overall more could and should be done.

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In the above text, the data suggests that while students acknowledge that schools are currently taking action to preserve the environment, overall more could and should be done. The survey results indicate that students have a middle ground in response to questions related to environmental conservation and bullying prevention. The data highlights areas where schools can improve their efforts in these important social issues.
Environment Survey Question 3
“What more would you like to see your school do for the environment?”

These answers are a complete list of unique responses, with duplicates not listed:

- More scrap paper
- Encouraging less electricity use
- Solar panels
- Drought tolerant plants
- Water tanks
- Power saving globes
- Teachers share newspapers
- Possum boxes
- More bins
- Car pool to school
- No rubbish day
- Use correct bins
- A day without electricity
- Remove pipes and use buckets instead and the water the plants
- Names on packaging so you know who littered
- No more foil package
- Glad wrap
- Put things in plastic containers
- Stay in class until finish food
- Hold events - Australia’s Clean Up Day, or make your own events
- Blinds open for light
- Plant more trees
- Rewards to people who ride their bike/scooter to school
- More working bees
- Using compost bins more often
- All teachers take trams to school - if possible
- Get rid of car parks
- Reduce electricity – use natural sunlight; energy monitors, energy efficient light bulbs
- Turn off computers when not being used
- Less paper for worksheets
- Add a grey water system
- Use only 100% recycled paper

Most suggestions provided by students are relatively simple to implement. They can be broadly categorised into:

- Involving others
- Re-use
- Encouragement and reminders
- Replace existing measures and policies with more environmentally friendly ones
- Events
- Merit systems

Many of these ideas would also provide other benefits to the school (eg there are financial benefits to using scrap paper and reducing electricity consumption).

Almost all schools had a recycling program, with the most commonly recycled products being those traditionally recycled in recycling bins.

It was encouraging to see the number of schools who recycle printer cartridges, which are often difficult to recycle.

Glaring omissions from this list are cans and plastic bags.
More than half of schools had a waste reduction program in place. This number however, is much fewer than those who had a recycling program. It would be an interesting discussion to have with students as to why this might be the case.

Re-Use: Comments:
- Veggie plants
- Signs
- Compost
- VISY bins
- Water tanks
- Solar panels
- Monitors on helping school
- Paper/double sided

Half of schools indicated that they did not have re-use programs in place.

It is interesting to note that some responses provided regarding what re-use programs are in place, do not fit traditional explanations of the “reduce, reuse, recycle” scheme. However, all do involve the re-using of some material, for example re-using sunlight for solar energy. This prompts an interesting discussion as to whether the idea of re-use needs to be extended to incorporate new technologies and other innovations, or whether more education is required to understand the re-use concept.

Bullying Survey Question 1

“Do you think bullying is an issue at your school? (Please circle one answer)”

A) Yes, a serious issue, 318, 31%
B) A bit of an issue, 606, 60%

Most students indicated that bullying was an issue at their school – 31% responded that it was a serious issue whilst 60% felt that it was a bit of an issue.

Given this, it is interesting to note that a significantly large proportion of students also felt that their school was able to handle the bullying issue. It raises the further question of how do students define “handling the issue?” And also, what do students expect of the school in relation to bullying?

Bullying Survey Question 2

“Do you think your school is able to handle a bullying issue? (Please circle either yes or no)”

A) Yes, 777, 82%
B) No, 173, 18%
The most common form of bullying, with approximately four-fifths of students reporting that it happens at their school, is name calling. This was followed by being made to feel left out, which was reported at two thirds of schools.

Between 30% and 40% of students reported that one or more of the following take place at their school: being made to feel bad for being different, physical attacks, being asked for money and things, and being intimidated into doing (or not doing) something.

The least common form of bullying reported was cyber bullying, with about a tenth of students reporting its occurrence.

These results suggest that most bullying that takes place in schools is not the physical attacks that are often reported in the news. Name calling and social exclusion are much more prevalent, and should be addressed in schools.

When asked why people bully, the most common response students gave was that “they do it to be cool.”

Half of respondents gave the reasons that they don’t realize that they’re doing it and/or that they want power over others.

Other responses, in decreasing order of prevalence include that it’s learnt from others, that people who are bullied do not stand up for themselves, and that the bullies are secretly insecure.

The least common response was that some people are just born mean, with approximately one-fifth providing this response.

This data suggests that bullying is a social activity, with those who decide to bully taking in cues from the social environment. Of particular importance seems to be a quest for social status, incorporating power and popularity.

It is important to note that many students feel that bullies don’t always realize that what they are doing is considered bullying. Whilst the reasons behind this are beyond the scope of this inquiry, it would be an interesting discussion to have with students.
Students indicated that males were by far the most likely to bully, with students reporting having seen boys bully twice as frequently as girls.

Boys were most likely to bully when in a group, compared to when alone. On the other hand, there was almost no difference between group and solo bullying for girls.

A group consisting of both boys and girls, was less often reported to bully, than groups of single gender or solo bullying of either sex.

When it came to teachers as bullies, approximately one-tenth of students reported having seen a teacher acting as a bully. A group of teachers was infrequently reported, with approximately 5% students reporting having seen this.

Further Information
A full report of the day is available from Second Strike, the organisers of Frenzy:
115A High Street, Kew 3101
Phone: 03 9853 0600
E-mail: info@second-strike.com
Web: www.second-strike.com

Student Councils and Beyond:
Students as Effective Participants in Decision-Making
The first Connect publication (from 2005) supports effective and relevant participation of students in decision-making in primary and secondary schools.
It brings together a collection of practical ideas and articles about how Student Councils can go beyond tokenism ... and make a difference. Case studies, ideas, worksheets!
Order NOW from Connect: $33 or $27.50 for Connect subscribers.

ISBN: 978-0-9803133-1-4
Creating Student Leaders!

A relatively new (2008) resource kit to support the training of student leaders has been produced by Pam Mathieson through Inyahead Press. While some of the images seem to place this as a book for primary schools, the ideas, materials and training resources can be used at or adapted for any school level.

The resource takes a broad and inclusive view of student ‘leadership’, identifying various traditional school captain positions and Student Council representatives, as well as students involved as Peer Mediators, Peer Support Leaders, Buddies/Cross-Age Tutors and Peer Activity Leaders.

The book is divided into ‘training packages’ for general and specific student leadership options, and each option then contains a session overview, a running sheet for teachers, student worksheets and teacher support material. While it is suggested that such training could occur over a full day, the activities are adaptable to other formats.

Of particular value are the 46 detailed student worksheets, and the collection of 167 games that can be used during the training sessions.

The Introduction notes challenges for schools to:

• provide a wide variety of leadership opportunities;
• engage all students;
• find time in the curriculum to teach the skills;
• break down the concept of traditional leadership roles;
• broaden the vision of students for setting goals related to leadership; and
• build empowerment through leadership into the culture of the school.

Therefore it is pleasing to note that this resource asks schools to review their current student leadership options (and provides resources for this) and also pays attention to the essential issue of the selection of students for leadership opportunities.

Creating Student Leaders comes with a CD-ROM of material, and is available from Inyahead Press, PO Box 32, Queenscliff VIC 3225 (ISBN 978-0-9803916-7-1)

Peer Activity Leaders!

Previously, Pam Mathieson and Brad Green had produced (in 2005) a program guide for the Peer Activity Leaders Program. This program is based on the importance of physical activity, leadership and social skills for students in both primary and secondary schools, and provides a practical approach to skill development.

The program is described as ‘partnerships between primary and secondary schools, but can also include parents, students, local government, agencies and local communities. Senior students trained in the PAL Program work with younger students and run physical activities at lunchtime, during classes or after school... The peer model is utilised to provide valuable skills to senior students and support the concept and positive aspects of peer role modelling... A key aspect of the program is increasing participation among those who may be isolated at school or not normally involved in physical activity. This is achieved through the targeting of specific participants by the leaders, the skills of the young leaders, and the games and activities chosen.” (PAL Manual, p 13)

The importance of peer leadership opportunities are stressed in the support materials. This points to increased student motivation and social interest, as well as the value of ‘authentic, experiential learning opportunities.” “PAL builds on research that suggests that a sense of school community involvement in turn promotes citizenship behaviours and leadership.” (PAL Manual, p 10)

The PAL Resource folder includes a PAL Program Manual, a Teacher Training Manual, a PAL Leader’s Workbook and Support Booklet, and PAL Physical Activity Cards. A CD-ROM includes letters, permission forms, evaluation sheets and adaptable versions of the workbook and support booklet.

There is also substantial information in the kit about program planning and organisation, including PAL Role Descriptions, Program Structure, Links to State-Wide Initiatives, Roles and Responsibilities, PAL Action Plans, School Community Involvement, as well as PAL Evaluation and Promotion. For Victoria, the PAL Resources are mapped against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

Local and Overseas Publications Received

Connect receives many publications directly or indirectly relevant to youth and student participation. We can’t lend or sell these, but if you want to look at or use them, contact us on: (03) 9489 9052 or (03) 8344 9637

Australian:
Creating Student Leaders (Pam Mathieson, Inyahead Press, 2008)
Education for Sustainability (Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative, South Australia) A guide to becoming a sustainable school
Effective Schools are Engaging Schools (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, Vic) Student Engagement Policy Guidelines
Parents Voice (Parents Victoria Inc., Brunswick, Vic) Vol 16 No 1; Autumn 2009
TLN Journal (Teacher Learning Network, Abbotsford, Vic) Vol 36 Issues 2, 3; March, May 2009
YAPRap (Youth Action and Policy Association, Surry Hills, NSW) Vol 19 Nos 4; April-May 2009
Yikes (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, Vic) Vol 7 Edition 2; May 2009
Youth Studies Australia (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tas) Vol 28 No 2; June 2009

International:
Education Revolution (AERA, Roslyn Heights, New York, USA) Vol 21 No 1 (Issue #56); Spring 2009

Documents
The documents listed in this column may be of general background interest. A photocopy is available for research purposes. The length and cost (to cover copying and postage) is listed. Please order by code number.

A full, computerised index of these documents is now available from Connect for $3; this can be accessed and printed by topic, key-word etc or simply sequentially.

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<th>Code</th>
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<tr>
<td>616</td>
<td>NRM Education: Supporting environmental sustainability in schools and What is Youth Voice and why support it? (Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board, 2009) (3 pp; $0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>617</td>
<td>Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Vic) (64 pp; $6.40)</td>
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Reaching High:
A Program Promoting Positive Approaches to Learning Differences
Reaching High tells the story of 14 years’ work around literacy in north central Victoria. Student participatory approaches are central to a program that caters for students with learning differences, with an annual student-run three-day regional camp as the culmination of that program. This camp brings in adult role models who have, or have had, learning differences, to act as mentors for students. Past student participants now also act as leaders, adult role models and assistants.

This inspiring and exciting 120-page book documents the development and operation of the Reaching High Program. It outlines the theory and community links behind the program, and how it is built on the active and strength-based participation of students. Includes a DVD of practical ideas.

Order now: $33 each ($27.50 for Connect subscribers)

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• 2006 Student Action Teams ($33; $27.50 for Connect subscribers) $ ............
• 2006-7 Reaching High ($33; $27.50 for Connect subscribers) $ ............
• 1996 Democracy Starts Here! Junior School Councils at Work Case studies of Primary School SRCs ($6.60 or $11 for two copies) $ ............

Foxfire Publications:
• Sometimes a Shining Moment (Wigginton) ($22) $ ............
• Foxfire: 25 Years (Doubleday) ($22) $ ............

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