

## **One model of Collaborative Care for Students with Medical Conditions**

It is becoming widely recognised that Education and Health need to work closely together to improve the life opportunities for young people with chronic medical conditions. This is certainly starting to happen but has a long way to go.

We are in the fortunate position in the Mater Hospital Special School (MHSS) to work as close partners with the medical profession as well as a range of other allied health professionals.

Andrew Fuller says, "Learning is an emotional experience. We can no longer afford to see 'welfare' and 'curriculum' as separate entities. We need to integrate what we know about supporting students emotionally with how we help them to learn".

The MHSS Support Model is a whole school philosophy that overarches the way staff provides quality educational programs to students. It is a model that draws on research and good practice from both health and education.

There are increasing numbers of young people with chronic health conditions, often resulting in reduced educational, social and employment opportunities. The realities of bridging health and education can be seen daily by the holistic approach throughout the campus to the development and well being of young people. Teachers provide educational services that respond flexibly to the changing conditions and varying levels of need of the individual student.

Strong partnerships are a feature of our school – partnerships with our hospital community, the home schools of our students, parents, other hospital schools and other agencies.

As part of building and promoting partnerships with home schools, MHSS teachers regularly discuss students by phone, fax and email; visit home schools to share information with staff; run education sessions with class groups in regular schools. They also run sibling groups during school holidays to help siblings of children with chronic medical conditions understand the situation and to feel better about themselves.

2005 saw the first one day conference exploring collaborative care for students with medical conditions, run by our staff in conjunction with our medical colleagues. Following the overwhelming response, we are planning on making this an annual event.

The MHSS, based in a Brisbane tertiary health centre, provides educational services to students aged four to eighteen years, from diverse socio-economic, geographic and cultural backgrounds.

Students are hospital patients with a range of medical, mental health, developmental, behavioural and emotional conditions, or the siblings/children of hospitalised non-Brisbane patients.

Educational services are provided in both the hospital ward setting or at the school site where three adjoining open classrooms cater for preschool to Year 4; Years 5 to 9; and Years 10 to 12.

It is imperative in this unique education setting, with an ever-changing cohort of special needs students, that policies and practices provide a learning environment in which all students can expect to feel safe and to be treated with respect.

Our model of service delivery based around the key areas of Engagement, Support and Resilience ensures positive outcomes for students and their families. This model, although developed in this very unique setting, could be used in any school setting. It is about a process and not a destination. It centres on the key elements of school ethos, structures and leadership; policies, programs and procedures; professional development; student support; and partnerships

Our School Support Model was developed on site as a foundation model for all services provided at the school. The model underpins curriculum delivery, program development and professional development. It emanates from the 3 point model for Health Promoting Schools: Curriculum Teaching and Learning; Ethos and Environment; Partnerships and Services.

We believe successful, innovative schools need successful, innovative approaches – this is a challenge for any school, but particularly in such a unique school. Shared values and beliefs came readily with the staff and community's recognition of an agreed purpose. It became clear that we needed a shared vision that reflected underlying beliefs and assumptions in order to intrinsically motivate and ensure long-term change. Without this many great things could be happening but you simultaneously risk connectedness and sustainability.

Our shared vision is our Support Model. The three main components of our Support Model are engagement, support and resilience. Our Support Model encompasses everything we do – with students, with staff and with our school community. It is a dynamic model with strong links to the National Safe School Framework.

The MHSS has a strong sense of connectedness. Evidence of this has been highlighted through the development of the Support Model. The three key areas of Engagement, Support and Resilience compliment the MindMatters model of 'the whole student approach'. Engagement takes into consideration that the development and implementation of programs are built upon the value of authentic participation and contribution. The focus on support and inclusion recognises the importance of having caring relationships, including the recognition of the valuable role of community, family and volunteers. The emphasis on resilience supports students and families, who are currently faced with challenging and tough times, to have high but achievable expectations.

The approaches and practices applied by our school in the area of wellbeing promotion for students with high support needs are valuable tools for other school communities

## **ENGAGEMENT**

Engagement in the MHSS setting is sought through the development, implementation and monitoring of programs which equips staff to support our students, their families and all key stakeholders.

MHSS engagement practices and strategies include:

- collaborative whole school planning
- identification of individual special needs, backgrounds, experiences, interests, strengths, abilities
- provision of meaningful learning experiences alongside regular monitoring, assessment and reporting
- planned opportunities for success
- ongoing communication with all key stakeholders
- supportive induction programs

MHSS Curriculum delivery uses an integrated approach combining all 8 Key Learning Areas. There are established curriculum teams for the early, middle and senior phases of learning. Teachers have one day a term off-line for curriculum teams to plan the following term's context. Planning days are facilitated by the Curriculum Coordinator with a clear agenda, collated resources for preview, as well as an in-service component. The MHSS planning e-template, developed on-site, incorporates the Support Model, Productive Pedagogies, a Multiliteracies focus, a Culminating Activity and Assessment Tasks. The section outlining Productive Pedagogies draws from the School Curriculum Plan's strategy bank and includes strategies for supportive environment, connectedness, recognition of difference and intellectual quality.

This collaborative, whole school curriculum planning framework provides planned opportunities for success through the development, implementation and monitoring of programs. The identification of individual special needs, background experiences, interests, strengths and abilities inform meaningful learning experiences whilst promoting inclusivity. Ongoing monitoring facilitates advocacy and commitment to lifelong learning.

Regular whole school staff meetings maintain open and informed pathways of communication. Efficient and timely dissemination of information and the immediate appointment of school Program Managers (who are responsible for sharing information and leading the support for systemic initiatives and policies) ensure informed staff collaborative decision-making.

New staff is supported with the allocation of a mentor and participation in the Induction Program. School support documents such as School Organisation, School Policies and Procedures, School Annual Report and Operational Plan and Daily Notices are readily available for all incumbents and relief staff. Staff team building is further enhanced by our annual 2-day residential conference. Extensive 6 monthly training in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention Course® is provided for all staff. Invitations are also extended to other agency staff to attend Mater School initiated professional development. A MHSS initiative, the *Blackboards and Band-aids Conference*, exploring the interface of Health and Education, further promotes engagement with the wider MHSS community.

## **SUPPORT**

Productive partnerships are fostered within the MHSS community in order to equip staff to professionally support our students, their families and all key stakeholders.

MHSS support practices and strategies include:

- providing a supportive school environment for our staff, our students and their families
- operating as members of multidisciplinary clinical teams
- developing and implementing programs that reflect the Social Justice Framework
- providing ongoing professional development opportunities for staff
- facilitating ongoing communication and networks for students and their families
- facilitating supported transitions from hospital to home schools for students and their families

Underpinning our ethos is the school's shared vision and belief statements developed with extensive community collaboration. Integral to this shared vision of a supportive school environment is the administration team's commitment to resourcing, professional support and promotion of current policies and procedures.

Creative use of resources enables flexible service delivery areas ensuring students are supported when and where it's most needed. There are explicit staff roles and responsibilities paving the way for clear communication lines, comprehensive services and supported hospital to home transitions.

Liaison teachers operate as members of multidisciplinary clinical teams, which are condition specific, ensuring a holistic supportive approach for students with chronic illnesses. This service extends to providing families with appropriate referrals regarding additional identified support needs.

Cross-sector liaison with external departments such as Department of Child Safety, Child and Youth Mental Health, Disabilities Services Qld, and Centrelink facilitates comprehensive access to support.

The Hospital Schools Advisory Council (in lieu of a Parents and Citizens group), comprising of representatives of all educational parent sectors and health partners, supports and engages with whole school planning , program endorsement and advocacy.

## **RESILIENCE**

Fostering resilience is the fibre that weaves throughout Mater School programs and practices. This creates for our students, their families, our staff and our community a sense of belonging and connectedness, a strong sense of self and a personal resourcefulness to manage the joys and challenges of daily home, school and hospital life.

Resiliency factors targeted in our programs and practices include:

- social skills
- problem solving skills
- personal management skills.

Promoting these skills is paramount. Their incorporation and development permeates all aspects of our curriculum plan. Teaching explicit skills and providing for skill practice and consolidation opportunities occur in whole group, individual and "teachable moment" sessions. Topics covered respond to identified needs in the school setting, promoting purpose and meaningfulness for our students. Development of targeted skills is a key factor in empowering students to survive and thrive in the school, home and community.

Mater School learning programs also offer students opportunities to experience success through the provision of activities which acknowledge strengths and interests, and build on a base of what is known. This approach enables staff to effectively cater for all, including students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties and gifted and talented students. Our flexible programs emphasise potential for growth and development, creating for our students a sense of purpose and a hope for the future.

The Mater School practices reflect the philosophy that resilient learners can't exist without resilient teachers. There is a strong emphasis on proactive staffing practices, for example, whole staff professional development and provision of a flexible and responsive staffing model across all service delivery areas. Access to up-to-date programs and

resources such as *Staff Matters* and *Mind Matters*, which promote school and community social and emotional wellbeing, have guided staff in their personal and professional development and in their provision of resiliency enhancing programs and practices.

Mater School programs and practices have encouraged a mutually respectful, inclusive, safe and supportive environment in which confidence, self-esteem and resilience can grow.

Through the elements of engagement, support and resilience we achieve the following outcomes –

**1. Continuity in education despite the disadvantages of hospitalisation (lengthy one off or regular intermittent).**

Whether a student is hospitalised for a single admission of 200 school days; 100 single school days; 100 five school day admissions; or a three week block admission each term, the meaningful school program, the collaboration with the home school and the supportive transition back to school all ensure that the student remains connected and optimistic about returning to his/her home school.

**2. Improvement in academic achievement particularly in literacy and numeracy for the diverse range of students.**

Achievement is an important part of the support we provide for students at our school. Research shows that there is a strong relationship between self-esteem and achievement. If you increase the student's ability to do well in their academic work, in sport, or in their social relationships, their self-esteem will increase.

**3. Develop a positive attitude to learning and schooling in order to ensure retention despite absences from mainstream school attendance due to medical conditions which affect functioning and longevity.**

Students who are absent from school due to medical conditions are at a greater risk of not completing their schooling. Students with life threatening conditions often see little relevance to schooling. Keeping these students engaged and positive about schooling is essential.

**4. Provide an environment where all students feel safe, supported and respected.**

Both our parent and student surveys rate the school highly as a safe environment. Our Code of Behaviour is at the core of our supportive behaviour management practices.

**5. Improved health and well being outcomes including social skills, confidence, self esteem, and ability to cope with adversity.**

A number of research findings suggest that adolescents with chronic illness have a greater risk of emotional disturbance than their healthy peers. The challenge is to develop effective ways of building resilience in young people with a chronic illness, not only to prevent poor adjustment outcomes but also to promote positive wellbeing and enjoyment of life. Resilience can be defined for these young people as the capacity to negotiate and successfully adapt to the everyday demands of their illness.

The development of resilience, emotional intelligence and social competencies in young people is not only linked to long term occupational and life success but is also associated with the prevention of substance abuse, violence and suicide.

#### **6. Facilitation of transition back into schooling for students at risk because of mental health conditions.**

Research indicates that students with mental health problems tend to spend the longest periods out of school and that reintegration is extremely difficult. Students from Child and Youth Mental Health Services present with a range of mental health conditions such as anxiety, school refusal, depression, eating disorders, psychotic disorders and problems relating to family and friends. They may enrol as part of a Day Program or as inpatients who require intensive immediate treatment. Personalised plans for these students include goals in four main areas – academic, social and daily living skills as well as re-entry to the home school.

#### **7. Be responsive to the medical, social and educational needs of all students through the participation in multidisciplinary teams.**

Our teachers are members of multidisciplinary clinical teams providing a vital link between students, their families and educational services. This interface is essential in communicating and disseminating information between home schools, parents and the Hospital.

Hopefully this snapshot of our school has made you think about the importance of health and education working together to support young people and their families.

Mater Hospital Special School  
Brisbane