

LEADING SCHOOLS FUND (LSF)

PHASE 3

2006 PROGRESS REPORT (ABREVIATED)

APRIL 2007



1 Description of school and geographic characteristics of the 'catchment' area

Sebastopol College is a forty-year-old secondary college, which started life as Sebastopol Technical School. We service more than a thousand students from a predominantly lower socio-economic area, where 44% of our families qualify for the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Our cohort is basically white, English speaking and geographically stable, with many students second or third generation residents of the area, though a recent influx of African students have added to the diversity of our mix. We have roughly double the state average of single parent families, low income earners, rentals and indigenous families. Our students rarely aspire to university and even more rarely consider study beyond Ballarat a real option, though there have been some small advances in recent years. We acknowledge these issues, but they do not determine the tone of the College or our goals.

Sebastopol College has developed an ethos of forward thinking and forward planning. Over the last five years, the College has undergone enormous change in terms of curriculum development, pedagogical practices student management structures, staffing and timetabling. Some of the changes have included longer class times, different length classes over the week, vertical structures to enhance access to all studies, individualised timetables for all students from year 8 to year 12, implementation of a new study across all year levels to address organisation, personal, study and work skills, meta-cognition and wellbeing issues; a focus on recruiting flexible enthusiastic staff willing to take on challenges and new directions; expanded and refined curriculum offerings to address student needs and interests (e.g. Specialist Basketball, Whole School Production, Medieval Mayhem, Youth Advance Program, Pet Science etc.); and under the LSF umbrella, the implementation of a year 9 Applied Learning Program which has dynamically improved year 9 engagement, motivation and learning outcomes.

We have an excellent relationship with our local community and receive regular feedback that we are seen as a school which has shifted from having a poor reputation to having a positive image and being highly regarded. This is a school which looks to the future and embraces change. We start with significant disadvantages, but are absolutely committed to providing our students with the best educational experiences we can provide. We are now at a pivotal point ready to launch into development of a whole school redevelopment which will begin with the LSF and continue under the Building Futures program. Growth in enrolments over the last five years has meant that we are now at full capacity for the existing buildings and that are physical environment and inadequate resources are hampering further innovation.

In the last Charter period the College has made improvement in both English and Maths strands. While the % of Students Below the expected level is between 17-25% (English) this has improved from the 20 – 35% recorded in 2002 for English strands. By comparison the number of students reaching better than expected CSF levels has improved from 33 to 56%. CSF means are now similar to or better than our LSG. The College has yet to see an impact on VCE performance, however the current Year 12 Cohort is displaying excellent signs of providing a positive shift in the 2007 VCE results.

2 Areas of school specialisation/ interest

Our background as a Technical school has left the college with a legacy of trade facilities which have been well maintained and utilised, but are very dated. The local community still

tend to think of the college in terms of technology and our forward planning involves building on these resources and expectations, rather than rejecting them. We are actively involved in the early stages of a master plan which would combine state of the art maths, science and technology facilities in an integrated program to meet the needs of our students both now and into the future.

The current school buildings are generally of the old style, long, low corridors with fixed standard sized classrooms on either side. These buildings tends to enforce a system of classes of 25 with one teacher and little opportunity for variations such as small cooperative groups, individualised learning, team teaching, large group presentations etc. Considerable effort is expended keeping the buildings looking clean and tidy, but the fact remains that they are inadequate to our present, and certainly to our future needs. The Leading Schools Fund provided an opportunity for us to radically change these physical barriers, though the scaled down project that we were finally able to fund (we planned for \$600,000 but were granted \$400,000) will only go part way toward meeting our requirements.

The College curriculum is organised around Key Learning Areas, with a strong tradition of separate delivery and little cross curricula development. Implementation of VELS will challenge this structure, and we have identified an increasingly urgent need to find approaches at the Middle School level that engage and enthuse students as well as offering them genuine pathways into the senior years. Our teaching staff are passionate about their own faculty areas and committed to high quality outcomes, but this can result in an unproductive focus on the equity of distribution of resources and time. The College has undergone significant staff turnover, mostly due to retirements, in the past five years. We are now well placed with many enthusiastic and capable teachers on staff, who are not entrenched in previous attitudes, to initiate major change.

3 Brief summary of issues leading to development of an initiative

In the last five years, we have undertaken reviews of both our middle school (Years 7 to 9) and our senior school (Years 10 to 12). We have undertaken detailed analysis of our school level data including staff, student and parent opinion surveys and results data. Student engagement has been identified as a significant problem. This is reflected in poor retention rates and the student opinion survey. Our Community Challenge program is one of a series of initiatives now being implemented to address these concerns.

Our real challenge now is to alter long-standing pedagogical practices which are no longer proving effective. This means changing the understanding of students and parents, as well as teachers about effective teaching and learning practices, incorporating applied learning and the thinking curriculum. We have introduced a timetabled class each week, the Tutor Group Program, where all students work through a sequential program of activities focusing on organisation, personal wellbeing, study skills and meta-cognition. Some teachers have begun redesigning their curriculum to cater for different learning styles, but progress has been inconsistent. A major shift, rather than small steps, is needed to truly change the way our staff relate to and engage with students.

Our Professional Development structure has shifted from a passive one where presenters delivered and staff absorbed information, to a model of active participation and small group, self managed activities focusing on self reflection, peer support and practical outcomes. This shift mirrors the changes we are making in our own classroom practices. Our staff are now very familiar with the PoLT principles and VELS structure, not just as policy documents but as frameworks within which they have developed some inspiring and exciting activities using thinking curriculum approaches and effective teaching practices.

We have undertaken exhaustive discussions, visits to other colleges and research into current best practice and have determined that the concept of Applied Learning, as encompassed in our Community Challenge class, is appropriate to our needs.

4 Central aims/purpose of the initiative

Applied Learning involves students in problem solving real life challenges as a vehicle to connect them to their own learning and to their community. This has become the focus for our interdisciplinary teams of teachers who are undertaking shared curriculum planning, classroom activities and assessment utilizing thinking skills and meta-cognition. These teachers act as resources and facilitators as students take on responsibility for their own learning. Through co-analysis of practice, teachers are learning how to equip students with skills and strategies for problem solving, rather than simply providing answers. Teachers need to develop the skills to sustain learning in a context that is not driven by the timetable and is not primarily teacher centred and directed. The approaches and techniques developed in the Applied Learning Centre environment will become embedded as staff cycle through the intensive focus of the Applied Learning Centre and back through their regular classrooms. Teams of teachers, formed through the experience of the Centre will have an ongoing role in mentoring other staff, modelling new practice and revising established curriculum.

In the first year, eight teachers have been work with 100 Year 9 students in the program for half of their class time for one semester. By the third year, some 500 students and 25 staff will have used the facility. During their Community Challenge time students choose from a range of community and industry-based projects, which will result in real products for real audiences. Within their project groups, students have been setting personal goals based on their skills, interests and learning styles. Working with teacher teams and a community facilitator, students undertake the planning, development, and production stages of their project, incorporating thinking curriculum approaches to problem solving. Specific skills workshops provide the necessary knowledge and skills relevant to the projects. Teacher evaluation and student self-assessment occur throughout the project and at its conclusion. In the following years, some of the core staff will continue to work in the centre, while other staff cycle through.

Improvement targets for this proposal are:

- To reduce student absence rates.
- To improve student connectedness to school from
- To improve retention rates
- To reduce the Seeking Employment category of the student destination data
- To improve teacher effectiveness as measured in PoLT feedback and parent and student survey data.

5 Describe work completed in 2006 for P& D Culture Accreditation

In 2006 we undertook a “dry run” through the accreditation questionnaire, and identified several areas where further work was needed, including clarifying for staff the links between the terminology used in the survey and our own processes. This year we expect to become accredited for P & D culture, with work currently focusing on high performing teams and data sources. We have adjusted our College-wide Professional Learning Plans to incorporate all elements of this process.

6 Indicate the status of the LSF capital works program at the end of 2006

In progress Expected date of completion: 22nd November

When we prepared our submission, we costed the new centre at a very conservative \$600,000. We were granted \$400, 000, with no explanation as to how this figure was arrived at, or what components of the project we were expected to jettison in order to manage on this figure. When it became apparent that we would have to severely reduce the floor space in order to meet the budget limitations, undermining the whole purpose of the facility, our principal appealed for extra assistance, explained our situation, and the figure was raised by \$40,000.

By reducing window area, selecting the cheapest possible building materials and systems and removing all fitting out and furnishing costs from the proposal, we were able to minimise loss of floor space, but it remains to be seen whether the resulting building will really be able to cope with our needs. This is a cause for some anxiety.

7 Major achievements of the last 12 months with respect to curriculum development, units of work created / acquired and 'classes' run with students

- Timetable adjusted to allow for whole day delivery of CC program and to ensure that the program has equal status with other programs within the College
- The CC program was widely promoted and has been extremely well received by parents, students and staff
- Successful implementation of negotiated, inquiry-based learning
- Completion of more than 40 different learning projects incorporating cooperative learning, dealing with issues ranging from hopelessness to alcohol abuse, environmental issues and teaching the elderly
- We have established links with 19 different community agencies and organisations including Lead-On, the City of Ballarat, the Highlands LLEN
- Use of Bloom's Higher Order Thinking Skills to assist in scaffolding curriculum design
- Development of Personal/Interpersonal learning units with a specific focus on multiple intelligences, brain exercises (e.g. teaching juggling) and the range of strategies from the Mind Matters program
- Students have (in many cases for the first time) been challenged to not only set goals, but to be accountable and accept responsibility
- All students have undergone Peer Skills Training through the Kids Help Line
- The program has enabled us to establish valuable links with the Australian Catholic University, who have supported work on literacy, oral presentations and debating skills.