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|  | **Case Study:** **Roxburgh Secondary College**  |
|  | Whole family support to decrease transition anxiety  |

**Description of context:** This case study examines the successful transition strategies of Roxburgh College (RC), a Middle (Years 7-10) and Later Years (years 11-12) Secondary School in the heart of Roxburgh Park, a relatively new locality in the Northern Area of Melbourne. The current enrolment of 1300 students is diverse with a large percentage of students from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) including a sizable proportion from Arabic and Turkish speaking backgrounds.

While there is strong focus on the successful transition of students from Year 6 to Year 7, the transition program (*Ready for RoxC*) in RC also places emphasis on the transition of newly arrived migrants of non-English speaking backgrounds who may join the school not necessarily in Year 7. There is also a concerted effort on the part of the school to support both the students and their families in their transition not only to RC but also to the Australian culture and way of life.

**Aims of the transition strategy:**

To strengthen primary/secondary school connection to facilitate institutional adjustment

To support at-risk students as they transition into secondary school.

To support students who are new migrants and their families in their transition into the Australian culture of schooling

To develop supportive relationships between peers and teachers for transitioning students

To provide a curriculum that supports all students in their learning as they transition into secondary school.

**How the strategy is implemented in the school:**

*Activities held in the secondary school for Year 5 and 6 students [Strengthening primary secondary connections]*

RC organizes activities to engage the Years 5 and 6 students from their feeder primary schools. In 2015 the College hosted a group of Year 5 avid readers in a forum with an author and organized a science morning for more than 200 Year 6 students. These activities enable the students to associate the college with positive learning experiences and make the thought of college less daunting. At these events, the Transition Coordinator and the Year 7 Level Coordinator are also present. This helps to create a sense of familiarity for the students with the school and staff when they eventually join the school in Year 7.

*Visits to the primary schools by the transition team [Strengthening primary secondary connections]*

In Term 4 each year, the transition team from RC visits their feeder primary schools. At these visits, they show the Year 6 students a video showcasing the Year 7 students and conduct a Question and Answer session with them. To encourage the Year 6 students to ask questions, each of them is given a piece of paper and a pencil to write their question. The questions are put in a box, drawn randomly and answered by the transition team. This helps to address concerns and anxieties Year 6 students have about secondary school.

*Sharing of student data by primary school [Sharing and using student data]*

Having established a close relationship with their feeder primary schools, RC is able to obtain valuable information about their prospective Year 7 students. Through face-to-face conversations with the Year 6 teachers, the RC transition team is able to obtain information about the students such as integration needs, need for speech therapy (as RC has an in-house speech pathologist), welfare needs, language needs etc. Such data is compiled into a database by the transition team and used to inform decisions such as groupings as well as teaching and learning.

*Providing peer and adult mentors for at-risk students [Establishing new relationships]*

Using the data provided by their feeder primary schools, RC piloted a program – Ready for RoxC – with one primary school last year with the aim of identifying and supporting at-risk students before they start secondary school. Led by a Project Worker and the school’s Student Services Manager, RC identified a group of at-risk Year 6 students and gained insights into their respective risk factors for disengagement through speech and literacy tests, attendance data and inputs from their primary school teachers.

With the aim of establishing positive perceptions of school through the formation of friendships, a group of Year 9 students from RC was selected and trained by the Project Worker to mentor the at-risk students. The interaction between the Year 9 mentors and their Year 7 student partners (mentees) started in Term 4 last year and has continued into the school year in the form of regular meetings during lunch hours. The student mentors also meet a Project Worker regularly to update her on the progress of their mentees. The at-risk students are also allocated an adult mentor who they can approach for help in getting organized or in their homework. These mentors form the regular significant adults that these students can turn to when they encounter problems and challenges.

*Providing key information and assistance to new migrant families [Communicating effectively critical information]*

As there is a sizable proportion of students who are new migrants from Arabic and Turkish backgrounds, the Principal sees supporting these students’ transition to RC as part of a larger process of supporting them and their families to adapt to an Australian culture of school and learning. Through *Learning Walks* where parents go on a guided walk in the school when classes are in session, migrant families learn about how teaching and learning take place in the Australian classroom. The focused group discussions following these walks also shed light on these parents’ concerns about their children’s education and allow the school to address them. For instance, when some parents found the notion of not physically punishing a child as a way to discipline disconcerting, the school was able to address their concern and more importantly inform the parents of the implications of physically punishing children in the larger Australian context.

In addressing the possible language barrier to communication, RC also employs Multi-cultural Education Aides (MEAs) to facilitate communication with non-English speaking parents. MEAs help to translate documents that students need to bring home to their parents. They also render assistance when parents approach them to help with Centrelink and, for example, medical referrals. The MEAs have also created a network for parents of non-English speaking background. Through this network, these parents have been able to participate in food handling classes, ICT classes, jewellery making classes etc. While the above measures do not appear to have a direct link to a student’s learning, the Principal of RC strongly believes that “If parents are assisted, the kids have a better chance because they are less stressed by the parents’ problems.” Moreover, the positive relationship that the parents have with the school can also enable the students to be more confident about school.

RC also collaborates with community groups such as Foundation House to support the new migrant families. The desktop guide - Schools and Families in Partnership - is the product of a joint project between Foundation House, RC and four other schools in the area. The advisory group at RC, made up of mainly Assyrian and Chaldean parents also provided their input. This compilation of resources and good practices serves as a reference for teachers and schools in their effort to engage families from refugee backgrounds in their children’s learning.

*Year 7 and Year 12 students starting school together [Enabling new relationships]*

RC has an ongoing practice of a staggered start to the school year. Year 7 and Year 12 students will start school on the same day. They will then have a session together in the gymnasium where the Year 12 students will welcome and guide the Year 7 students. This enables the Year 7 students to ease into the school and not be overwhelmed.

*Homeroom Program [Nurturing positive teacher student relationships]*

In supporting Year 7 students to form strong relationships with their teachers and peers and cultivate in them a sense of belonging to the college, RC has established a Homeroom program wherein students only leave the classroom when they have special subjects (such as art, music) and are able to have a space of their own. In this Homeroom setting, teacher allocation has also been deliberately modified to enable the teachers and students to establish stronger bonds. Two main teachers teach two core subjects each in the same room and hence students become very familiar with these teachers. This makes the transition from the learning space of the primary school to that of a secondary school setting more gradual for the students in that it minimizes the number of venues that the Year 7 students have to navigate to and the number of teachers they need to get used to. The Homeroom Program also embeds the concept of ‘interesting spaces’ wherein students get to display their work and learning cues in the homeroom, giving them a sense of ownership of the space. In such a setting, the teachers and the students know one another well and this forms a trusting relationship between the students and their teachers.

The homeroom is also the setting for pastoral care through Managing Individual Pathways (MIPs) based on the principles of Positive Education. Every fortnight, the students have a MIPs session with their Homeroom teacher and the Year 7 Level Coordinator. These sessions could take the form of a discussion of a concept such as gratitude, or issues such as cyber safety.

*Year Level Assemblies [Foster opportunities for student control]*

Every fortnight, the whole Year 7 cohort has an assembly together. These assemblies serve to forge a common identity for the cohort and create a sense of belonging. The focus of these assemblies is to enable the students to share their learning with the cohort. For instance, the Homeroom Captains could share their reflection on the different events that have happened or the music students could perform what they have learnt. The Year 7 Coordinator may also plan a mini presentation or activity around a theme such as social responsibility or goal setting to share with the students at these assemblies. As many primary schools have the weekly get together of the whole level, this practice is again one that is familiar to the Year 7 students and contributes to their ease in settling in.

*Providing a challenging curriculum for highly able students [Using engaging pedagogical approaches]*

RC’s curriculum aims to meeting the learning needs of students of varying abilities. Highly able students can enrol into the SEAL (Select Entry Accelerated Learning) program. The application, test and selection are carried out when students are in Year 6.

*Adopting familiar reading strategies for literacy [Establishing and developing cross-institutional curriculum consistency]*

The reading component of the literacy program in RC builds upon the existing knowledge and skills that the students bring from their primary schools. The C.A.F.E (Comprehension, Accuracy, Fluency, Expanding vocabulary) reading model is being used in the primary schools and RC has integrated it into the reading component of their English program. Teachers have observed that familiarity with the model has played a significant role in enabling students to transition more smoothly.

*Establishing a network for numeracy [Establish and develop cross-institutional curriculum consistency]*

RC is part of a numeracy network with primary school teachers. Starting with a conference attended by both primary and secondary school teachers at the start of the year, the network of teachers continues to meet throughout the year to discuss how certain strategies for numeracy be implemented in both primary and secondary schools. In so doing, there is good understanding of what students are expected to know and how they have been taught. This information can in turn be used to inform the teaching and learning decisions of RC to better engage students and scaffold learning.

*Providing speech and language support [Using engaging pedagogical approaches]*

As transition in the context of RC includes the transition of newly arrived migrant students, there is a strong emphasis on language support. The 3 key programs for speech-language support at RC are the Restart Program, the Speech-Language Support program and English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes. The students are grouped based on their score on the Preliminary English Test (PET) that is administered to all Year 7 students.

* Restart

The Restart program is a one year program targeted at Year 7 students who have difficulty in reading and decoding and hence comprehension. Teachers in the program use the *Phonologically Awareness program for High School* to teach students decoding and comprehension skills.

* Language Support Program

The Language Support Program at RC is handled by the speech pathologist and students in the program are usually those with a language disorder. The curriculum for this program is a tailored to what the student can or cannot do.

* English as an Additional Language (EAL)

To ease the transition of students joining RC from English Language Centres, the EAL class sizes are small, typically comprising 18 students. Teachers create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Aside from the formal curriculum wherein the teachers use themes and news items to teach the language, teachers also join in when students ‘hang out’ with the MEAs so that they have some informal interaction with the students they teach and can find out more about their interests. MEAs also play the crucial role of assisting students with very high needs in class as well as assist newcomers to the class who may join the school at any time of the year.

*RC Staff Focus on Orienting Students and Their Families to Life at RC*

The overarching message conveyed by the Principal and staff when this case study data was collected was one of a school totally engaged in providing opportunities for their learners to be able to engage with education in an environment that supports their needs and encourages their learning.

**Evidence of learning outcomes and/or impact:**

The visits to the primary school by the transition team do make an impact on alleviating any anxiety that the students may have. One student remembered vividly that ‘The Year 7 Coordinator came to the school, told us not to be nervous’ while another shared that, ‘She made it comforting and relaxing to come into high school.’

The Homeroom program and allocation of 2 homeroom teachers to teach the core subjects is also well-received: one student mentioned that it helped to have one teacher teach more subjects because the teacher could refer to the other subject and remind them of their homework.

In terms of learning, the students from the SEAL class shared that they enjoyed their learning and the extension. One student described the fun he experienced through completing a math portfolio task wherein he not only learnt about different types of graphs but had to reflect on his learning process and apply his skill to a real life situation.

With regard to students at risk, there has been an improvement in attendance, suggesting an improved sense of connectedness with the school.

Students in the Restart program typically improve in their reading levels after working with their teachers over the course of one year.

**Steps for future improvement:**

Having piloted *Ready for RoxC* this year, RC plans to expand the program to include four more feeder schools and strengthen the training for the Year 9 mentors. RC plans to train the Year 9 students by getting them involved in a community project (childcare centre etc.) so as to imbue in them a sense of communal responsibility. They also plan to set up the training for the Year 9 students earlier. However, this will mean getting more staff onboard and providing adequate training for them.

In terms of the year level assemblies, the Year 7 Coordinator aspires to have more student-organized assemblies so that it is focused on showcasing the work and achievement of the level.

To further strengthen the Restart program, RC aspires to train more teachers to work with the students to increase their competency in reading.

**Advice to other schools:**

In the context of the large migrant population at RC, the Principal views the transition for students not in isolation but as part of a larger transition process of transition into a new culture and context of Australian society. As such, there is much emphasis on collaboration with the community, extending from feeder primary schools to community groups such as Foundation House.

RC believes that in reviewing and refining any school program, it is important to engage with the various stakeholders and hear what they have to say about it. For example, based on the insights gained from a focus group discussion with a random sample of Year 7 students, the Principal rescheduled the Year 7 level camp from Term 1 to Term 4; the reason being that students were concerned that they had just gone for a camp in Year 6, and that parents might not be able to afford another camp in such a short space of time.

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