Matraville Sports High School – Embracing the future

An initiative of the Little Bay Community of Schools (LBCoS)

Background

Little Bay Community of Schools (LBCoS) was established in 2008 as one strategy for the partner primary schools of Matraville Sports High School to work together to support the needs of identified students through some targeted funding. The partner primary schools involved are:

- Chifley Public School
- Matraville Public School
- Matraville Soldiers Settlement Public School
- La Perouse Public School
- Malabar Public School

In early 2012 an approach was made to the School Education Director for Matraville Sports High School, through the Principal of Malabar Public School, by a group of parents concerned about issues circulating in the local community and pertaining to the local high school, Matraville Sports High School.

The parents believed that a local community should have access to a high school which delivered the type of education they wanted for their children. They believed that their local high school did not deliver the type of education the broad range of local parents and students wanted.

A series of meetings took place with these parents and various representatives from the Department of Education and Communities, including: the then Regional Director, Dr Phil Lambert, the then School Education Director, Dr Sylvia Corish and the Regional School Promotions Officer, Ms Ros Bastian.

Development of a Planned Way Forward

Ros Bastian was asked to develop a plan for gauging the following: the secondary education needs of the local community; how closely these needs are being currently met by the local high school; the perception of the local high school in the community; what local parents actually know about the high school and the secondary education intentions of local parents.

Also, a sub-committee was formed consisting of a parent representative from each of the local partner primary schools for Matraville Sports High School and representatives from the high school. The sub-committee was called: Little Bay Community of Schools Sub-committee, Matraville Sports High School, Embracing the Future (MSHS – Embracing the Future).

The terms of reference for the sub-committee included a focus on the development of a response, by the high school, to the concerns of the local community.
One of the strategies suggested and accepted was the collection of data through a series of focus groups involving parents from each of the partner schools in the LBCoS.

Ros Bastian was asked to liaise with schools to organise and facilitate a series of focus groups designed to gather qualitative data which would allow for the development of a strategic plan for the future of Matraville Sports High School.

**Planning and Conducting Focus Groups**

Focus groups were organised by the Principal of each of the LBCoS schools.

Parents were invited, via school newsletters etc, to be involved in and to contribute to a discussion relating to what they were looking for in a local secondary school and how, in their opinion, Matraville Sports High School met those expectations.

In one instance, a group of parents, who live in the Matraville Sports High School intake area but whose primary aged students do not attend one of the high school partner primary schools, contacted the Department and asked to be included in the focus group organisation. An evening focus group was organised to accommodate this request.

**Focus Group Meetings**

Focus group meetings were held between Thursday 9 May and Friday 24 May, 2013. Each group discussion was of approximately one and a half hours duration.

**Focus Group Composition**

Sixty parents participated in the focus groups. These parents came from eight local primary schools and Matraville Sports High School.

Grandmothers, fathers and mothers participated in the groups.

The children of the primary parents ranged in age from preschool to Year 6. High school parents were primarily from the junior years.

**Organisation and Compilation of the Report**

Following the focus group discussions it became evident that the ‘conversations’ resulting from the questions and the discussions could be organised under the following headings:

A. Major concerns when choosing a high school

B. Specific programs / initiatives / focus group participants would like to see in a secondary school

C. Contact with and what was known about Matraville Sports High School

D. Reputation of Matraville Sports High School in the local community
Focus Group findings

The ideas below are listed in order of the frequency with which they were raised by participants in the focus groups. For example, safety was of greatest importance in terms of how highly it was rated by each group.

A. Major concerns when choosing a high school

- Safety of the students
- Delivery of a good, all-round education
- Delivery of an academically focused education
- Co-educational
- Preference for a local high school where students can mix with other local young people
- Good discipline and welfare systems
- Committed and dedicated teachers
- School management which is consultative and reflective of community values
- Students who are involved in community work and socially aware
- School has a good reputation and students and staff proud of the school
- Good infrastructure / facilities

B. Specific programs / initiatives / focus group participants would like to see in a secondary school

- Curriculum - all levels of all subjects, 4 unit - standard
- Teaching - innovative and responsive to individual student needs
- Strong creative and performing arts programs
- Sport - good range of sports, competition to everyday involvement
- Technology - integrated and well resourced
- Good student support
- Challenging and stimulating learning environment

This varied from none to a little through such programs as the primary languages program to having students in the high school.

D. Contact with and what is known about Matraville Sports High School.

- Contact with the school varied from none to a little through such programs as the primary languages program to having students in the high school.
- Parents with no children at the school know very little and 80% of this is hearsay
- There is a great lack of pertinent, correct and verifiable information
- There is virtually no good ‘word of mouth’ information

E. Reputation of Matraville Sports High School in the local community

Most positive comments came from parents with students at the high school. The positive comments about the relieving principal and current changes taking place at Matraville Sports High School came from both high school and primary school parents.
Positive comments about the school currently

- Change is taking place
- Support unit is very positive and well respected and does a fabulous job
- Strongly supportive comments about the relieving/acting principal
- Very good facilities
- Visual art classes
- Student support in terms of school to work/tertiary training
- Bear Island project
- Successful students (these facts are not widely known or recognised)

Negative comments about the school currently

Most primary parents had a negative view of the school.

- Teachers do not have time to teach
- Poor commitment of staff to teaching / students
- Students attending come from low-socio-economic families
- A ‘dumb’ school
- Little to no pride in the school by students / staff
- Mostly Islander and Aboriginal students
- Students look ‘rough’, very poor uniform – looks sloppy / worn badly
- Some children, particularly girls, would not be safe
- Has a reputation for bullying
- ’Matto High’ – has a poor reputation

F. Impact of the designation ‘sports’ high school

- Approximately 20% of parents were not concerned by the name of the school
- Approximately 80% believed that the name indicated that this was a school only for sports focused boys (not girls) and not for academically capable students

G. The ‘School of the Future’

There is a strong groundswell of support for a local high school particularly one which encompasses the needs of the local community as reflected in: A. ‘Major concerns when choosing a high school’, (page 5).

The school should immediately develop a ‘School of the Future’ plan which responds to the findings of the ‘Embracing the Future’ initiative.

Recommendations

1. The substantive position of principal should be filled expeditiously.
2. The development, by the new principal, of a paper in response to the findings of the focus group process.
3. The development, by the new principal, of a ‘School of the Future’ plan.
4. The background, qualifications and vision of this new principal should be the subject of a well-developed and strategic communications plan which should be implemented in the weeks immediately following the appointment.
5. Immediate school and community consideration of the possibility / advisability of changing the name of the school.
6. Immediate review of the school uniform and the policy surrounding the wearing of this uniform.
7. Immediate consideration to be given to welfare and discipline policies and how these are perceived by the local community. Look at some of the ‘myths’ surrounding...
student discipline and welfare and move to debunk these.

8. Develop a three year strategic communications and promotions plan for the school.

9. There was a strongly voiced view that student suspensions do not work. The school needs to look seriously at alternatives to student suspensions.

**Observations**

Running a series of focus discussion groups has provided some very strongly positive responses from the local community. Every group was very appreciative of the opportunity to be involved in a focus group discussion and to state their views and opinions. All parents were supportive of the process.

There is some optimism in the community relating to the outcome of this process. There is a strong groundswell of support for a local high school, particularly one which encompasses the needs of the local community.

**Process recommendations**

Following the finalisation of the ‘Embracing the Future’ Report it is recommended:

1. That an Executive Summary be made available through every feeder primary school
2. That the Executive Summary is available through school websites – secondary and primary and on the LBCoS website
3. That the full report be made available to anyone asking via:
   a. The local education office of the Director, Public Schools as line manager for the Principal of Matraville Sports High School; and
   b. Matraville Sports High School
4. That an open forum be held where the findings of this process are delivered, the school has an opportunity to respond and a plan for the ‘School of the Future’ is outlined
5. That Matraville Sports High School develops a response to the findings of the focus group process
6. That Matraville Sports High School develops a ‘School of the Future’ statement outlining how the school is going to respond to the data gathered during the focus group process
7. That a follow-up evaluation program be implemented in 12 – 18 months to gauge the progress of the school’s response to the ‘Embracing the Future’ initiative

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Ros Bastian  
School Promotions Officer  
November, 2013  
email: roslyn.bastian@det.nsw.edu.au
Contacts

Director Public Schools NSW
Judy Kelly (Rel)
DEC Bondi Office
email: SRBondiRO@det.nsw.edu.au
ph: 9298 2800

School Promotions Officer
Ros Bastian
DEC Miranda Office
email: roslyn.bastian@det.nsw.edu.au
ph: 9531 3900

Principal, Matraville Sports High School
Nerida Walker
Matraville Sports High School
ph: 9661 8000
email: matrasport-h.school@det.nsw.edu.au