

Collaborative problem solving teams

Willandra Primary School

The Centre for Inclusive Schooling has been working with primary schools to establish collaborative problem solving teams. Collaborative problem solving can be defined as an interactive planning, decision-making or problem solving process, involving two or more team members. The team consists of people with diverse expertise, working together to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems. Through engaging in the collaborative process, the outcome is enhanced and solutions and strategies are developed that differ from those that would be produced by individuals working independently.

Collaborative problem solving teams are being created in a number of settings to meet a range of educational needs. No two teams are the same, yet all exist to improve learning outcomes for students. Schools are involved in this process for a number of reasons, some of which are:

1 Teachers have identified a gap in current delivery of services to teachers from non-school-based support, arising from the demands that exist both within and outside schools. Collaborative problem solving teams are a tool to help bridge this gap and retain control of the issue within schools.

2 Teachers need to feel in control of situations within their classes and feel that they have the skills and authority to deal with them. Should this not be the case, the best people to provide support at the initial stages are other teachers.

3 The *Curriculum Framework, the Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting: Policy and Guidelines* and the *Students at Educational Risk: Making the Difference* strategy emphasise the value of collaboration in the delivery of an appropriate educational program to all students. Collaborative problem solving teams enable staff to work together to generate unique, site-specific responses to issues.

4 Teachers need a mechanism that they can apply to issues at a school level, which may stop such issues escalating beyond their control. By being able to address issues quickly, teachers and schools can resolve some issues and identify other personnel that can be involved in addressing these issues.

Outcomes and Indicators for Willandra Primary School Collaborative Problem Solving Team	
Outcomes	Indicators
Improved learning outcomes for students through teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Survey of teacher perceptions and records, e.g. portfolios, work samples, diagnostic tests. ◆ Feedback from teachers.
Increased self-perception of teacher competence in relation to instruction of students at educational risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Survey of staff – pre/post intervention questionnaires.
Teacher use of collaborative problem solving team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Statistical mix of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – teachers – issues referred – needs.

Figure 8: Outcomes and indicators for the Collaborative Problem Solving Team at Willandra Primary School.

Collaborative problem solving provides teachers and schools with a process that can support the implementation of an outcomes approach in a number of ways:

- ◆ Collaborative problem solving empowers teachers by maintaining the focus on the teacher as the 'owner' of the issue and as an equal member of the team. It reinforces that the teacher is the one with ultimate responsibility for the learning program occurring within the classroom.
- ◆ Collaborative problem solving promotes:
 - ❖ Ownership of the issue by the person with greatest capacity to influence the solution.
 - ❖ On-site problem solving as an immediate and timely response to the issue raised by the teacher.
 - ❖ Sharing of the expertise of not only the members of the Collaborative Problem Solving team, but also the expertise of the whole staff as a resource for addressing the needs of all students.
 - ❖ Sharing of problems/issues encountered by teachers and the reduction of the stress associated with the solution of these problems.
 - ❖ Accountability, on the part of both the teacher and the school, through the collection, development and maintenance of detailed and accurate profiles of students as part of the problem solving process.

- ◆ Collaborative problem solving encourages a whole school approach to issues concerning the needs of all students and teachers. While the teacher has ultimate responsibility, the team approach enables a sharing of resources as well as building a supportive and knowledgeable network within the school. This ensures that the student or the issue is known by more than just the teacher and the solution is shared.
- ◆ Collaborative problem solving supports teachers in meeting the needs of all students by

focusing on the needs of the individual and how those needs can best be met.

- ◆ Collaborative problem solving assists in the identification of whole-school professional development needs. By working with teachers, the team is able to identify concerns/issues/needs shared by a number of staff and make recommendations as to how best to address them. Along with this, the collaborative problem solving team is also in a position to provide information to the whole school in terms of policy development and operational issues.

Standards for Willandra Primary School Collaborative Problem Solving Team
Risk Taking
Members of the collaborative problem solving team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ are willing to explore and engage in the change proces; ◆ are receptive to the ideas and opinions of others and support each other through this process; and ◆ are proactive when dealing with conflict and attempt to minimise its effect on the work of the team.
Respect
Members of the collaborative problem solving team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ engage in active listening processes to ensure that all clearly understand the purpose and intent of all communication; ◆ demonstrate their respect for others through responding non-judgementally to suggestions and ideas raised in the team; and ◆ are constructive in their use of criticism, focusing on the idea rather than the individual.
Responding
Members of the collaborative problem solving team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ restrict their use of jargon and use direct and 'to the point' forms of communication; ◆ ensure that feedback, both to team members and to teachers, is timely, relevant and given freely and willingly; and ◆ are sensitive to non-verbal messages – both their own and other people's – and are aware of the impact of such messages on relationships.

Figure 9: Collaborative Problem Solving Team Standards at Willandra Primary School.

The team accomplishes this by leading the teacher through the following process:

- ◆ The teacher presents the issue in writing to the team, outlining background information, results of any assessment conducted, strategies already put into place in the class/school context, contact with parents, contact with other professionals and outcomes that they want.
- ◆ The team then clarifies the issue with the teacher. This involves working with the teacher to refine the issue and

obtain from the teacher any additional information. A written account of this information is kept.

- ◆ The team, together with the teacher, then develops an action plan to address the issue. In most cases, this becomes an Individual Education Plan for the student, detailing specific strategies that the teacher will put into place. However, it can also be a plan for the teacher to use to collect more information, liase with other staff, put a referral in for school psychologist involvement, etc. The action

plan is the response to the issue raised by the teacher and becomes the starting point for the teacher in addressing the issue from that point on. It needs to be specific and limited to two or three achievable items. The function of the team here is to ensure that the teacher does not try to take on too much too soon.

- ◆ A review date is set for the teacher to meet with the team to check on how the plan is progressing. The timeline is short to ensure that the plan agreed to by the teacher and the team is put into effect.

Students at Educational Risk				Date
Collaborative Problem Solving Team				Teacher
Issues to be addressed				Student
Area	Major Issue	Desired Outcome	Priority	
Learning				
Social				
Behaviour				
Emotional				
Physical				
Attendance, i.e. transiency, illness				
ESL				

Figure 11: Issues Sheet for the Collaborative Problem Solving Team addressing Students at Educational Risk

The collaborative problem solving team enables teachers to retain responsibility for the students in their class while at the same time enlisting the support of their peers to identify other possible solutions.

At Willandra Primary School, the collaborative problem solving team has worked with teachers on addressing a number of issues. These include:

- ◆ behaviour and the development of Individual Behaviour Plans for students;
- ◆ writing skills – processing, classroom strategies;
- ◆ academic concerns – specific strategies for engaging and identifying student needs;

- ◆ working with parents – how to involve parents, sharing information with parents;
- ◆ non-compliance in homework completion; and
- ◆ lack of engagement in classwork.

The application of the process has a number of outcomes.

Firstly, teachers report a reduction in anxiety due to the supportive nature of the interaction between themselves and the collaborative problem solving team.

Secondly, teachers are able to develop relevant and appropriate Individual Education Plans for a range of students

that concentrate on short-term, achievable outcomes within the context of the class and within a reasonable timeframe.

Thirdly, teachers are able to clarify and refine issues that, due to their proximity, may seem overwhelming. The team supports and guides the teachers through the process so that the teachers retain control, yet have the support of their peers.

Finally, the teacher and school are able to collect a significant amount of detailed information about what the student can and can't do and what has and will be implemented to support accountability processes.

Students at Educational Risk		Date
Collaborative Problem Solving Team		Teacher
Implementation Plan		Student
Desired Outcome		
Short Term Targets:	Strategies to achieve targets: (what? when? how?)	Progress made:
Desired Outcome		
Short Term Targets:	Strategies to achieve targets: (what? when? how?)	Progress made:
CPS Contact Team Member		Review Date

Figure 12: Implementation Plan for the Collaborative Problem Solving Team addressing Students at Educational Risk