

Schools as the Last Village

Our schools are under pressure - some of this pressure is well known from staff shortages, limited resourcing, and a growing curriculum - the work of a teacher is becoming more complex by the day.

What is less understood is their work in supporting, caring for and advocating for vulnerable families and families experiencing distress or crisis.

Across the nation more and more families are struggling due to cost-of-living pressures, mental health, poor physical health, and isolation with many families facing multiple adversities.

At times these are shared with teachers and school staff - at other times they are noticed by staff as they interact with children.

Just this week I heard from a principal that two young boys were observed carrying their belongings to school in plastic bags - quietly and without fanfare school staff went out and purchased two school bags for the students.

There are examples of teachers paying for student's excursions, ensuring snacks are within reach for the hungry, whilst service clubs provide funds for students to attend school camps, local fruit and veg shops contribute boxes of apples to schools and principals advocate for housing for families, drive families to medical appointments and facilitate on-site dental, vision and hearing checks.

Whilst these activities are not in the job description of teachers or school leaders, for many they simply see this as an unspoken part of their job.

The whole child matters

When you become a teacher, you commit to education of the whole child. You understand that certain things need to be in place for learning to be effective.

In wanting the child to achieve their best, teachers, school leaders and the school community are invested in addressing needs. While that used to be the odd forgotten lunch or occasional financial challenge, over time, schools are stepping in more often to support children and their families.

Schools, that were once central to the village, are now the village itself.

Whilst this goodwill of staff within schools and others in the community is to be commended, this has led to a perception that because schools can and will do things, they should.

With the rise in poverty and cost of living pressures biting into middle class Australia, the demand for this support is stretching what are already finite resources to the limit.

This is creating risk, as we are now at the point where positive outcomes for students and their families are relying on purely the goodwill of teachers and school leaders and if it continues at its current rate, something is going to break.

Schools have become the recipients of their local communities 'addition addiction' - when a problem is identified, it's passed onto the schools to solve - from dog awareness, road safety, managing mental health to dental and other health checks; all of this to be managed within existing resources.

The impact of role creep

This role creep comes at a cost and there also needs to be consideration that if a school is doing so many things outside of educating our children, then what are they not doing?

A teacher that spends time locating resources for a family may find that this takes time away from their own family, whilst their own financial resources are depleted in buying lunches, bathers, new books or even giving a struggling parent a voucher to buy food.

Ultimately the teacher will be forced to ask themselves, where do I draw the line in this support?

School staff hear family's stories and because of their personal empathy and compassion, which is the reason they chose teaching as a profession, then want to take action to help.

Where once service clubs or church groups contributed to the village; they now struggle for volunteers as the young turn away from such selfless work or are too busy to commit time.

You cannot teach children to find generosity and compassion, you need to model it.

A shared commitment to children

Let us all take that responsibility to be the model that our precious children and young people need so our service clubs are filled with volunteers again.

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is committed to every child being part of the village, to strengthen existing villages, and to growing villages. The village is the safety net that enables children to have the support and security to flourish.

Schools cannot do this alone. We need the community to help and additional resourcing to schools if we are to ensure that our vulnerable children and their families have access to the village they so desperately need.

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