Students drive success with innovative Peaceful Schools Program in local schools

Two local schools, Koonung Secondary College and Milgate Primary School, have been involved in a three year pilot Peaceful Schools Program that is achieving significant results.

The Australian first program, which is largely driven by students, has reduced bullying and mean behaviour and increased inclusion in all 12 Victorian schools that participated in the pilot program.

The schools were part of the Creating A Safe Supportive Environment (CASSE) Peaceful Schools Program (PSP), which has been piloted across 12 Victorian government, independent and Catholic primary and secondary schools. Its outstanding success has led to the opening for a second cohort of schools to join the program in 2014.

“CASSE’s approach recognises that problems such as bullying and conflict reflect unresolved issues within a whole school environment,” explained Ms Carolyn Aston, Director of CASSE’s PSP. “But because every school is different, every school needs a different solution.”

“Every student has the right to feel safe at school, the right to be heard, and the right to feel valued,” said Anne Abbott, Deputy Principal of Koonung Secondary College. “That is why we chose to participate in this program.”

“CASSE is now pivotal within our school. Academic results are very important, but educating students about relationships is equally important. If students are not starting the day with a calm, settled attitude, if they have other issues bothering them, they are not going to be able to achieve their best academically. CASSE helps us achieve this with our students and provides students with invaluable tools for life.”

CASSE is a non-profit organisation that uses a psychoanalytic approach. This approach fosters the creation of safer, more peaceful communities and can be applied to a range of environments, such as schools, child care centres, workplaces and communities that are in conflict or trauma.

The PSP focuses on facilitating and empowering students to create their own solutions to addressing schoolyard bullying, conflict and mean behaviour.

The changes are led by CASSE Student Teams - groups of students identified by teachers as altruistic ‘natural leaders’. They also represent various peer groups and are therefore more insightful and influential about student needs. The Student Teams reflect upon the school environment, identify issues and generate ideas for solutions.

While there is support from key teachers and from psychoanalytically trained CASSE Facilitators, it is very much student driven. The result is a shared concern between students and staff.

“The students are proud to be involved and helping to make a real difference,” said Ms Aston. “It is a transformative approach – everyone grows from participating.”

Staff and student teams receive training in identifying and intervening effectively with bullying, conflict resolution skills and recognising, including and caring for vulnerable members of the community. At the cornerstone of this approach is ‘mentalisation’ – a psychological concept that describes the capacity to be aware of one’s own inner mental state and that of another. Intentional mental states (eg feelings, needs, beliefs, desires and reasons) are interpreted to help explain overt behaviour in self and other. Along with greater confidence, students involved are reporting a greater sensitivity and empathy for others.

Milgate Primary in Doncaster East is an International Baccalaureate Candidate School. According to Principal, Debbie Mierisch, incorporating the principles of CASSE’s PSP as core elements of the Student Wellbeing & Leadership program has yielded tangible rewards.

“Core skills include empathy and the ability to reflect when under pressure, promoting peaceful solutions rather than retaliating and making things worse,” said Ms Mierisch.
Year 6 student, Alana, said, “whether schools have bullying or not they should have CASSE’s PSP because it provides a boundary of protection for people to know it’s there - just like a back up for people who are going through difficulties”.

Max, also in year 6, said, “it’s more about shaping the whole community to be a better place as a whole rather than looking at individuals - it needs to have a whole community involved - pretty much everyone – students, teachers and parents”.

According to Ms Aston, these comments demonstrate why CASSE’s approach is student driven. “Students just ‘get it’ – they really understand what CASSE is all about. That’s why they are the best people to lead the change.”

“There is no ‘quick-fix’. This is about a long-term commitment to systemic change. To my knowledge, CASSE’s approach is the first of its kind in Australia,” said Ms Aston.

CASSE’s PSP is based on the philosophies of US anti-bullying experts, Professor Stuart Twemlow and Dr Frank Sacco, consultants to the FBI on school shootings and co-authors of the book, ‘Why school anti-bullying programs don’t work’. These philosophies have also been adopted by ‘Peaceful Schools’ in the US, Jamaica and Hungary, and CASSE has developed close links with these schools.

Applications for CASSE’s 2014 Peaceful Schools Program are now open to interested schools. For more information visit www.casse.org.au.

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**About CASSE:**
CASSE’s mission is to create safe, supportive environments for individuals, families and communities through psychoanalytic awareness. CASSE is a non-government, not-for-profit organization and currently runs a Peaceful Schools Program and an Aboriginal Program.

**CASSE is proud to work with the following schools through the Peaceful Schools Pilot Program:**
St Joseph’s Catholic Secondary College, Echuca; Catholic College Bendigo; Berwick Boys Grammar, Officer; Koonung Secondary College, Box Hill North; Monterey Secondary College, Frankston North; Drouin West Primary, Drouin West; Frankston Primary, Frankston; Stonnington Primary, Windsor; Milgate Primary, Doncaster East; Banyan Fields Primary, Carrum Downs; St Gabriel’s Primary, Traralgon (2nd Demonstration School); Lumen Christi Primary, Churchill (1st Demonstration School)