

STRONG SCHOOLS SAFE KIDS

RESEARCH PROJECT 2011–2014

Strengthening student social and emotional health and creating a safe and supportive school environment



SCHOOL CASE STUDY 3

Cape Naturaliste College is a recently established independent public school in a regional area. It became a senior high school in 2011. It has experienced steadily increasing enrolments each year.

WHERE DID WE START?

Building a safe and caring school environment was already a priority in the school's strategic plan, as was establishing a positive rapport with students. Further, as a growing institution, the school recognised the need for support structures to be reviewed as student numbers increased. In 2011, the student services team appointed a coordinator, Mandy Carey (Year 7 Team Leader and Society and Environment Teacher), and the team subsequently met weekly to facilitate the process of planning and implementing actions for whole school improvement.



WHAT DID WE DO?

Upon analysing data collected from Friendly Schools student and staff surveys.

Four initial priorities were identified:

- ➔ school, staff and student responses to bullying
- ➔ a safe and caring environment
- ➔ staff approachability
- ➔ peer-support programs

To improve school culture in these areas, actions implemented within the school in 2011–2014 include the following:

- ➔ Evidence-based professional learning was delivered to all staff. Topics included social and emotional learning, strategies for responding to bullying and ways teachers can be more approachable to students.
- ➔ Lower-school students received resilience training as well as cyber-safety education.
- ➔ Students were regularly consulted about safe and unsafe areas within the school environment.
- ➔ New basketball courts, outdoor seating and shade sails were provided to occupy students and reduce break-time bullying.
- ➔ A reward system was implemented to encourage students to make positive choices.
- ➔ A new building was constructed for students in Year 7 as a way to ease the transition between primary and high school.
- ➔ External support agencies such as Youth Focus and Lamp were brought in once a week to work with individual students, in conjunction with school support staff including the chaplain, nurse and psychologist.

“Anything that gives us the opportunity to look at what we are doing and to question our practices – we need to take that on board.”
— School leader

“We have four priorities in the school. One of them is a safe and caring environment, and that's the priority we have implemented as a result of the Strong Schools project. I think that it is really important that we're able to implement that as a priority, and it is directly a result of the project.”
— School leader

“The principal and the associate principals don't always sit in their office; they're on duty. They're always out there welcoming kids or saying goodbye to them at the buses. They are very approachable.”
— School leader



WHAT CHANGED?

Despite some personnel changes, strong leadership support and the school's existing culture of care helped to build capacity for improvement. One key factor was the school's flexibility, as an independent public school, to establish student support positions. In addition, the Strong School Safe Kids model of evidence-based practice and the data generated through regular Friendly Schools surveys proved to be powerful planning and decision-making tools.

Comparing Friendly Schools student survey responses over three years (2011–2014) shows a notable growth in students' feelings of connectedness to their school as well as a significant decrease in their exposure to bullying, especially during break times. Surveys also reveal that by 2014, more staff held positive perceptions of the school's climate; felt that bullying was a high priority for the school; believed the school's actions were effective; and believed that bullying-prevention education was important. Staff members were more likely to state that they had the skills necessary to manage bullying incidents and make a difference.

There have recently been a number of cross-boundary applications to attend the school, which school leaders surmise to be a result of its strong pastoral care ethos. In a continuation of its emphasis on social and emotional wellbeing, the school will work towards becoming a Mind Matters school in 2015.



“We’ve built a completely new building, pretty much separate from the rest of the school, that will be a transition centre for Year 7 students.”

— School leader

“Having a really strong administrative team and having a really strong staff that work cohesively have been keys to it.”

— School leader

“Being an independent public school gives us a lot more flexibility to distribute the resources where they are needed, and that’s exactly what we did this time. We were able to create positions so that lots of teachers could get involved.”

— School leader

“There is direction and leadership from the Strong Schools team. There’s somebody else banging the drum, there’s somebody else walking through and saying, ‘Here’s what we know, here’s what you do’. The strength of decision-making is only as strong as the data that supports and leads you.”

— School leader

