

CASE STUDY

BELCONNEN HIGH SCHOOL: RE-BRANDING AND RE-INVENTING THE P&C TO BETTER FIT THE CHALLENGES OF HIGH SCHOOL

Note: This case study was largely sourced from an article produced for the ACT Council of P&C Associations' ParentACTion quarterly magazine, published in Term 3, 2015 http://actparents.org.au/images/ParentActionT3_2015FINAL.pdf

Several years ago, the P&C at Belconnen High School was faced with a dilemma – just what should their role in the school be? Up until that time the P&C had run the canteen, but with parents moving on, the expertise to do so had disappeared and the decision was made to outsource the canteen. Parents were still keen to be involved, to help the school in some way, but how? Principal David McCarthy told the P&C that fundraising was not a priority, freeing the group to look at other roles.

“It is important for the P&C to have a clear role,” he says. “I’ve seen a negative cycle operate at high schools where busy parents can feel discouraged because they perceive that they are ‘not doing much’ for the school and once they feel discouraged, they stop coming to P&C meetings at all.”

After further discussions with parents and the Principal, the P&C decided that their most important role was facilitating the flow of information from the school to parents and back again. It was clear that while teachers communicated well with students about assessment and expectations, the kids were not necessarily passing on the information to parents. The P&C's new role was to help the school communicate with parents, despite the teenagers!

“High school students seem to need less parent involvement,” explains Carolyn Fisher former P&C President at Belconnen High, “but appearances can be deceiving. Being further along the path to independence makes it trickier for parents

to deliver invaluable input. This is the value of investing in the school community. It provides the crucial support, but indirectly. Everyone benefits: your own children, other students, other parents and teachers.”

REBRANDING THE P&C

To get away from the perception of the P&C as a fundraising body, or somewhere parents should avoid in case they were given a volunteer role, the P&C was renamed the “Parent Forum Group.” (This was formally structured as a subcommittee of the P&C). As the name suggests, they began running parent information forums – one each term.

The first forum explored the topic of the teenage brain with the help of an expert guest speaker. It was facilitated by a parent and attended by key staff who were called upon at times to answer questions from the school's perspective. It was a huge success, attracting 30 parents and generating useful discussion. Ways in which the school communicated with parents changed as a result of the conversation.

Other topics for the parent forums included:

- ‘getting organised’ – helping students plan their homework and organise themselves
- digital information and search technologies
- suggested changes to the school uniform
- mental health for teens
- a tour of the school.

The forums have helped parents to better understand their children, how the school works and how to help. They have given parents access to senior staff and the Principal and have provided useful information back to the school.