

THE SAFE SCHOOL, FRIENDLY SCHOOL ACCREDITATION PROJECT

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Over the years greater awareness has developed of the importance of schools being not only physically safe for students, but also psychologically safe which involves being friendly, inclusive and responsive to their needs.

The *Life Framework*, *Second National Mental Health Plan* and the *National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health Activity* have identified schools as key sites for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. There is strong evidence that targeting these approaches to the child and adolescent population results in improved school achievement as well as improved mental health outcomes.

The Safe School Friendly School Project utilises the World Health Organisation (WHO) Health Promoting Schools Framework, which involves a risk-focused prevention model, and the prevention-intervention spectrum as an effective approach to promotion of health and well-being and prevention of mental health issues in schools.

In order to enhance and recognise school efforts in establishing safe and friendly learning environments the Safe School Friendly School Project was developed to provide guidance to schools, through the provision of documented indicators and pointers on how to increase and maintain a safe and friendly school environment. The project promotes that students are better able to achieve educational outcomes and values within an environment of inclusion, friendliness and safety.

The program culminated in a self-reflection tool for schools which has now been developed into a manual called *Safe School, Friendly School: A Framework for Developing Safe and Friendly Schools*.

The program involves schools in a process of working with the school community to ascertain strengths and weaknesses in the school's planning, operations and ethos through surveys for staff, parents and students, consultation, discussion and professional development. Once a school considers that it has achieved the criteria, an application is made to go through the process of accreditation. A multi- professional accreditation team awards Safe School, Friendly School Accreditation to schools judged, after a high level of external scrutiny, to have achieved a required standard in safety, inclusivity and customer service. It also provides a framework for schools that aspire to excellence to achieve this goal.

Project Purpose

The project aims to:

- support schools in providing a safe and friendly learning and working environment;
- provide a framework that encompasses the Curriculum Improvement Program, students at educational risk strategies and other major government schools initiatives;
- provide a tool that assists schools to reflect on their current practices, examine their strengths and weaknesses and plan for improvement;
- identify and share successful school practices; and
- promote Government schools.

It is expected that the project will result in enhanced student learning outcomes, student retention in education, school reputation and customer focus.

Project Vision

The Safe School, Friendly School Project is based on an overarching vision that our schools will be safe and friendly learning environments for all students. It is a vision of quality leadership, inclusion, effective partnerships, student participation and the provision of quality educational programs within a safe and friendly working environment. It incorporates the values of the Curriculum Framework and enhances schools' ability to achieve the overarching learning outcomes.

Schools are increasingly seen as having a significant role in the identification of risk factors in children's development and the provision of preventative strategies to reduce the long-term impact of these risks on their future development. Certain health and well-being issues that occur later in life can have their roots in early childhood and the school years, such as crime and substance abuse (Rapp, Carrington and Nicholson, 1992). The provision of safe and child friendly organisations is seen as one of the keys to the long-term reduction in the prevalence of these issues.

The Safe School, Friendly School Project does not envisage schools taking on full responsibility for the wellbeing of all students or that they must cater for all of the needs of their school community. It is recognised that although parents have primary responsibility for providing care and guidance for their children, that schools can support parents in their role (The United Nations, 1989). Schools can achieve this by providing a strong customer-focussed service, encouraging parent and student participation in school-based decision-making, and promoting their involvement in effective partnerships in assisting all students to achieve the educational outcomes.

This project empowers the school community to take the initiative in developing workable and sustainable solutions to promote health and well being and counter issues such as bullying, violence, retention and participation issues, and other factors that place students at educational risk.

Project Development

The project is a culmination of a range of initiatives running in the Swan Education District including; Positive Peer Relations, Peer Mediation Project and the Countering Bullying in Schools Training. The framework has been developed with extensive consultation and feedback from a range of professional and community groups. The response from schools has been positive beyond expectations. The number of schools that responded to the call for nominations was impressive. Their willingness to be scrutinised and reflect on criteria for safety and friendliness proved the projects worth. Swan Education District Director, Steffan Silcox, School Psychologist Tracey Weatherilt and Student Services Manager Coosje Griffiths worked to engage schools, private organisations and sponsors into a collective partnership to create the accreditation tool and to implement the project.

The development of the indicators, pointers and the framework involved contributions from administrators in the Swan Education District, Professor Sven Silburn and Jenny Cugley (TfW Foundation for Child Health Research), Dr David Indermaur (UWA), Dr Ann Sullivan (Curtin University), Professor Michael Furlong (UCLA, USA) and Dr Jan Gray (Edith Cowan University).

Survey instruments were also developed for schools to gauge their parent, staff and student beliefs and feelings about the school's safety, curriculum, behaviour management, atmosphere and bullying issues. The survey questions were reviewed by researchers and trialed in schools before being included in the Safe School, Friendly School manual. The following two tables outline the results

from the comment sections on the survey for trial students in year levels 3, 5 and 7 (males and females).

Table 1. “This school is safe and friendly because...”:

Reason	3m	3f	5m	5f	7m	7f
Good Teachers	5	5	4	4	8	11
School facilities	2	2	1			1
No bullying Occurs	5		2	1		
Nice students/friends	2	2	2	3	4	5
Safe Places to go	1					
Good School Rules	3	2	2		4	2
Security Cameras		1			1	
Caring & Sharing behaviour (Motto?)		3		1	1	1

Table 2. “This school could be made safer and friendlier by...”:

Reason	3m	3f	5m	5f	7m	7f
Stopping bullies/bullying behaviour	4	5	1	3	5	6
Gates & Fences	1		1			
Better Rules	2	1	2			2
Supportive Older Children		1				
More Duty Teachers			3		2	1
Police at School			1		1	
Better Punishments			1		1	1
Special Programs			2		1	
Remove needles/rubbish/graffiti					2	1
Improve equipment eg pad goal posts					1	1

The Framework: Principles

Characteristics that are evident in safe and friendly schools, and that have been proven to be effective, form the basis of The Safe School, Friendly School Framework.

Safe and friendly schools have:

- quality leadership;
 - a solution-focussed rather than a problem-focussed approach;
 - a vision and culture that strives for excellence in learning and teaching;
 - democratic processes that encourage active citizenship;
 - an ongoing ethos of review and ongoing planning for improvement;
 - involved the whole school community in planning;
 - plans that are comprehensive;
 - policies and plans that aim to assist all members of the school community to feel safe and valued;
 - collected comprehensive data;
 - a range of strategies across all levels of operation: preventative measures, early intervention and case management;
 - policies and plans that are communicated and applied; and
 - applied the strategies to all settings including whole-school, playground and the classroom.
- (Adapted from Furlong, Morrison and Clontz, 1993).

The Framework: Eight Key Areas

The Safe School, Friendly School Framework grouped the characteristics of safe and friendly schools into eight key areas:

- School Ethos and Culture
- School Organisation and Planning Processes
- School Policies and Procedures, Levels of Operation
- Classroom Application
- Out-of-Classroom Application
- Staff Training and Support
- School Physical Environment

Each of the key areas has an overarching principle and a set of performance indicators, with associated pointers to assist schools to reflect on their current structures and practices.

The Framework: Indicators

Each of the key areas has a set of graded performance indicators, with associated pointers for Excelling Performance, to assist schools to reflect on their current structures and practices. They are set out in a checklist that outlines the characteristics associated with schools that are achieving within one of five developmental levels:

- Excelling
- Achieving
- Establishing
- Developing
- Undeveloped

It is expected that schools will be at different stages of development across each of the eight key areas. Schools that have reflected on their practices and consider that they are operating within the top two levels are invited to apply for accreditation as Safe School, Friendly School. Every school that can then successfully demonstrate consistent performance within the *Achieving* or *Excelling* levels will be awarded accreditation as a Safe School, Friendly School.

Schools that achieve accreditation are expected to continually review their procedures and practices in order to maintain their accreditation status, with a formal review being undertaken by the Safe School, Friendly School Project every three years.

The Project Trial

In the initial trial conducted by the Swan Education District Office, Girrawheen Primary School, Durham Road School, Forrestfield Senior High School, Cyril Jackson Senior Campus and the North East Metro Language Development Centre were the first schools to have won accreditation as a Safe School, Friendly School.

The following is a summary of findings from the accreditation process and provides some insight into the unique ways that schools have achieved a safe and friendly school environment.

Cyril Jackson Senior Campus

Cyril Jackson Senior Campus is structured to reflect an adult ethos and caters for students from 16 years to mature age, providing an open learning environment for students studying year 11 and 12 curriculum. A Campus Council is being developed in 2002 and currently a Student Guild is an integral part of the decision-making processes of the Campus.

Some of the key features of this outstanding school include the flexible timetabling that allows for the open learning model, collaborative teacher/committee time, and student guild activities. Staff demonstrated their commitment through flexible teaching times, including running night courses. Their students are drawn from all socio-economic backgrounds, with students from homeless and refugee backgrounds not uncommon.

The school seeks to cater for some of the non-educational needs of their students to improve the educational outcomes for all students. A Breakfast program opens at 8.00 AM each day, where all students are welcome. The school uses a Collaborative Problem-Solving model, where the student is assisted to gather all of those who play a part in their education to develop solutions to pressing issues that may prevent them achieving to their full potential, or even prevent them from continuing in school.

The involvement of staff at all levels in a school ethos and culture that values diversity and the concept of "second-chance" education means that the Cyril Jackson Senior Campus is able to demonstrate a fully inclusive and flexible approach to education. Students report feeling valued and treated respectfully as equals by staff. Problems that arise are taken seriously and handled sensitively. Consequently suspensions are rare and students value the school as a safe haven.

Durham Road School

Durham Road School caters for students from Kindergarten to 13 years that have an intellectual disability, with many students also having physical disabilities. As all students are identified as being at-risk, policies and procedures have been developed to meet the individual needs of all of the students. The role of the parents and caregivers is vital and all planning involves them in the student's support team.

One of the key features of Durham Road is that the physical environment has been carefully planned and developed to assist in meeting the very complex needs of the students. The plants in the junior playground are edible and fragrant, and are therefore both safe and provide the opportunity for the students to both touch and smell. The junior playground incorporates play equipment and settings that allow students to stimulate all of their senses. The senior playground is currently undergoing renovations to better meet the more social needs of the older students at Durham Road, with more seating and walk areas being developed.

Inclusivity and catering for individual differences is embedded in all teaching and learning programs, from the physical school environment through to the classroom curriculum and individual education planning.

Girrawheen Primary School

Girrawheen Primary draws students from a culturally diverse population catering for students from Kindergarten to year 7. Verbal and written communications to parents from Non-English speaking backgrounds are translated to ensure all parents can participate in the development of policies and procedures and activities run by the school.

Girrawheen Primary has introduced an effective social skills and behaviour change program through the establishment of the Personal Best Club. For club membership the students self-assess before nominating themselves. Each member wears a membership badge. Members work towards set achievements and are rewarded with a series of medallions. The medallions represent excellence and personal achievement, which have been well received by all students.

The organisation of student movement has been modified. All class groups assemble together after each break to set the tone for the next learning session. During the assemblies students receive recognition for their achievements (academic, social, and behavioural) with the awarding of the Personal Best Club achievements included. Special Day programs are regularly organised where the students are grouped vertically and engage in cooperative activities to foster the development of social skills.

Feedback from teachers, parents and students through surveys and interviews indicated very strong support for the school and a sense of pride in the school's achievements. The school administrators were able to demonstrate a multi-faceted and responsive approach to the unique student population where most students felt safe and valued most of the time. When problems arise, parents indicated that the school acted in a timely and effective way where parties involved feel heard and valued.

North East Metro Language Development Centre

The North East Metro Language Development Centre caters for students with significant language disorders from kindergarten to year 4, with their students travelling from all over the district to attend one of the school's three campuses.

The school is child-centred with a pastoral care orientation, as all of their students are identified as at educational risk. Students and parents are actively involved in the educational planning, with both staff and parents attending regular professional development opportunities provided by the school.

The social skills program and behaviour change mechanisms are an outstanding feature of the school's program, enhancing the inclusiveness of students experiencing significant difficulties in these areas.

The school utilises social stories, personal goal setting and conflict resolution strategies to assist their students develop their communication and social skills, while also providing for effective behaviour change where needed. These strategies provide students with clear visual assistance in developing their skills, with the conflict resolution process involving a floor chart so that the students can 'walk' through the steps of problem-solving.

The integration of relevant curriculum including social skills and behaviour management programs has resulted in the North East Metro Language Development Centre demonstrating how it has been able to establish a safe and friendly learning environment for students at risk, resulting in marked improvements in their learning, behaviour and social skills.

Forrestfield Senior High School

Forrestfield Senior High School is a large secondary school which has systematically reviewed and developed a wide range of policies and procedures concurrently with the Safe School Friendly School accreditation process.

Student participation in school decision-making is facilitated through the establishment of a Student Parliament. This group has contributed to the planning and development of the environments adjacent to the entrance to the school, liaising with local government and other local bodies, and fundraising to improve the school's front outlook.

The school took on the Safe School, Friendly School program to review their existing policies, procedures and practices and to implement the necessary changes to improve communication, physical safety, student participation in decision-making, and the overall atmosphere and culture of the school.

The changes they have implemented are significant and extensive, involving collaboration between staff from all of the faculties, student services and the school's administration, with student and parent participation also through surveys.

Project Evaluation

The project is still in its first year of operation. However, those schools that participated and were accredited as a Safe School, Friendly School have reported that they have received very favourable responses from their students, parents and staff, and positive media publicity. Project evaluation is being continued into the second year of operation.

Although five schools went through the process for accreditation, three other schools nominated themselves for the process during the trial. These schools after reviewing their school against the framework provided, felt they were not fully ready and delayed their accreditation process to put in place strategies for improvement. The project has clearly resulted in schools measuring themselves against best practice in education and encouraged them to plan for further improvements.

The project has received the enthusiastic support of principals in the Swan Education District who have reported positive outcomes for the school community and students. Some schools have found it particularly useful as a tool for integrating system imperatives. The project has achieved a high status amongst schools and the school community with the official launch and media coverage as well as the presentation of a certificate, brass plaque, posters, badges and access to the logo for school advertising and publications.

The project has also drawn interest from other education districts around the state of Western Australia, other Australian states and overseas, with numerous requests for both training on the framework and accreditation process and access to the manual.

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