VCE Continuum of Practice - Principals share strategies for VCE Success Transcript

**INTERVIEWER**

Hello. Thanks for joining us. In a world dominated by easy public access to information relating to school performance, whether that be VCE or NAPLAN, all principals are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to improve student learning outcomes. Depending on the unique school environment, the focus for improvement could be different, but it might include a review of curriculum content. It could be the way assessment’s being developed or how to improve student engagement, encouraging more staff professional development or indeed it might be to reposition your school culture.

With that in mind, what are the opportunities to improve VCE student learning outcomes in your school? Well, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has developed additional resources to help principals, school leadership teams and VCE teachers to improve student success in the VCE. The continua of practice identify developmental stages and strategies to enhance VCE teaching and learning outcomes for your students.

We’re joined by three secondary principals whose successful approaches to implementing the VCE are reflected in the VCAA’s continua of practice, and they are Polly Flanagan, principal of Shelford Girls’ Grammar, Tony Paatsch, principal of St Joseph’s College Geelong, and Linda Maxwell is the principal at Keilor Downs Secondary College. Within the continua of practice, there are references to VCE policies and processes. Can you each briefly describe for me one or two that you’ve used successfully to improve your school’s VCE outcomes or results? And, perhaps, Polly we could begin with you.

**POLLY FLANAGAN**

Yes. Well, the first thing that I would recommend is that staff are encouraged to become assessors of the VCE exams to… If you encourage staff, you have to then provide them with an incentive and some time and support for that marking process. But the knowledge gained from that is quite powerful. It is transferred easily into the classroom, it’s easily shared, and it’s great professional learning. It’s good for the school, it’s certainly good for teachers and, of course, good for students.

And the other thing that I would say is to ensure that you have someone in your school – a curriculum leader, a head of faculty, a head of teaching and learning, whatever you call it – who has the training and knowledge to unpack and interpret the array of VCE data that’s available. Not everyone can do this. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea. But there’s a significant amount of data from the VCAA, and schools should use it to inform practice. At the school I lead, all unit 3 and 4 teachers have a one-on-one with the head of teaching and learning, who’s mad about data, and they unpack it and use it to inform their next year’s teaching.

**TONY PAATSCH**

I would reinforce everything that Polly’s said. In our context, rather than a single person working with VCE staff through that data, we have a range of people in leadership positions, including faculty leaders, who have some skill and knowledge to be able to work through that data with teachers. The discussion is more reflective than it is kind of direct.

Two other really simple things that I’d say have been important for us. The first is ensuring that the assessment schedule is well known. It’s published in advance. Students know it, teachers know it and families know it. And also it’s important, I think, that the timetable and weekly programs are adjusted to make certain that assessments can be accommodated within the program.

**LINDA MAXWELL**

I’d agree. We go back to the policies and the processes for the organisation and the time lines. That really tightened us up and straightened us up. But probably the thing we go back to most often is SACs and assessment. There’s still a big variation in how people interpret the guidelines, so having a really tight understanding, particularly on SAC feedback and expectations and how the SACs fit into the teaching and learning program. So that would be one area. And the other area for us, it’s still amazing how much variety there is in interpretation. We’re in a network in Keilor St Albans with five schools, and it was fantastic to be able to try out, “How do you do your practice exams? How do you do revision? When do you time your SACs? Are they after school or are they in class time?” So, checking that understanding of VCAA policy and process with a group off schools was really fantastic for us.

**INTERVIEWER**

The continua refer to explicit evidence and strategies like curriculum plans, shared teaching approaches and evidence of teacher professional practice. Could you share a couple of strategies that you’ve used successfully to improve student outcomes?

**TONY PAATSCH**

I think it’s important for us, and it has been important for us in our context, to try to make certain not only that the guidelines are there, but that people are accessing them, people are talking about them and people are sharing what they mean when they’re being put into practice. So, being able to leverage from our very experienced teachers, for those who haven’t spent so much time teaching a particular subject, has been important. Knowing the students and their level, similarly, to make certain that we know whether more extension, more scaffolding, whatever it is, that’s needed, and that’s information that needs to be shared across different subject areas for individual students.

**LINDA MAXWELL**

For us, I would say it was the data. The VCE data service is amazing. The breadth, the depth, is astonishing. A few years ago, not everyone in our staff would have an understanding, so we put an enormous amount of professional development into understanding it. What does it mean for your teaching? What is it saying about school organisation? In my school, every teacher has access into the data service. They have their own code, and we do a lot of training on how to interpret it, what does it mean. A lot of work on…with KLAs, key learning areas. No individualised blame. That was a really constant theme.

But I would say now that I’ve got an incredible data literate staff. They look to the data. They make changes based on that. They experiment. They go back and look. You’re never more accountable than with VCE data, and I’ve got a staff now that are really, really comfortable with it and are quite avid, I think, to use the data to bring about change, which I think is great.

**POLLY FLANAGAN**

I think curriculum mapping’s really important, and to see VCE not as a silo. And we tend to, you know, talk about “the VCE” and forget that a number of years – well, really K to 10 – feed into it. But in a secondary school, 7 to 10 feeds into that, and we need to understand what it is that VCE teachers are asked to do. What skills are they trying to promote? So we need teachers in years 7 to 10 to understand what’s required, and how perhaps to prepare students for this.

And it’s a common thing that I hear, a lament in the English department at VCE level, that they say that the students are often not prepared for the kind of essay skills that they need. Well, that’s an easy fix. You can work on that, certainly at Year 9 and 10 level. It would be very rare for a student at our school not to undertake a unit 1/2 subject in Year 10 that demystifies the VCE, gives students a good start, and the transition then into full VCE is rather seamless. I would encourage teachers, who… Often your best practitioners teach just Year 11 and 12. So we try and get them further down, so that they teach one class in…from Year 7 to 10. Or, not one class Year 7 to 10. And I think they then share, with others in that year level, their expertise.

And probably the last thing I could say is to encourage teachers to join professional networks. If you’re in a very big school with a very large faculty, you can have an in-house network, but in a small school, such as the one I lead, people often have to go outside and join with other teachers, and there are some fabulous teacher networks are out there that are really collegial in the best sense of the word.

**INTERVIEWER**

The continua encourage schools to use curriculum plans, agreed assessment practices and shared pedagogical practices. Can you share some examples of the strategies you use as a principal to support best-practice teaching in your school?

**LINDA MAXWELL**

We put enormous time into professional development, and it’s a choice. You know, every dollar spent there is taken away from somewhere else. But we do do a huge amount of specific professional development. The other thing we’ve got to guard against is what Polly was talking about, that disconnect between 7 to 10, 11 and 12. So we put a lot of energy into making sure that if we’re doing teaching and learning, it’s 7 to 12, across the board. But there are a couple of teaching practices that I think have really cut in with our staff. One is the whole idea of flip learning. How you use homework, how the students prepare, them taking more responsibility.

And the other one is we have an instructional model, which is GANAG, and that’s about how you use your time, and making sure that application is the key thing in classrooms. And we’ve done a lot of work with teachers on that. And I think, if you look at a classroom now, it’s quite different. Ten years ago, I would find people writing off the board or doing chapter questions. You’d never see that now. It’s high-gain, high-quality teaching and learning, very considered, very thoughtfully planned out. A lot of sharing. In the early days I’d be lucky if people would get up and share, and now I’d have seven or eight people in an average session get up and proudly show their practice and share what they do. That was a huge lever for our change.

**POLLY FLANAGAN**

I’d certainly pick up on that point of sharing and encouraging the sharing of ideas and practice. And again – time. You have to give people time to do that. And it’s a great battle cry in schools that “We don’t have enough time, I’m so busy”. But when meeting schedules are drawn up, and they are invariably either at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of the term, you make sure that there’s adequate time to meet and in student-free days so that people can share within faculties. And the people to whom you give responsibility for leading curriculum, so at key learning areas, you make sure that they are driving things within the department, and that…so that it’s shared whole-school and shared cross-school and within departments. So, build the capabilities of teachers within and across subject areas.

I think that it’s a great idea to observe one another in the classroom. It’s a collegial thing. Teachers are often… I think they were the last of the professions to say, “Come and give me some scrutiny here.” It became, “My classroom, my students, my room, shut the door and it’s my thing.” I think there’s a lot more open communication now and sharing, and not just within faculties but cross faculties. A good teacher is a good teacher, so good teaching practice is good teaching practice, whether it’s in a maths classroom, a science classroom or a PE classroom. And the other thing that I would say is recruit well. If you’re able to choose the teachers in your school, choose passionate teachers who love teaching, because their students will love learning, and you get the best teachers you can you’ll get the best outcomes for students.

**TONY PAATSCH**

I think that notion of sharing that’s been touched on by both Polly and Linda is incredibly important for us to be able to view each other as we go about our professional duties each day. Also, in our context again, it’s been important for us to have people sharing pedagogy. In our particular case, it’s been around project-based learning, Years 7 to 10, and then moving into flip learning, as you talked about, Linda, at Year 11 and 12.

The other thing that we’ve all emphasised, I think, is the importance of being able to create time, and I think there are some ways that we can do that. Particularly, the way we set up staff rooms, the way we set up work areas, creates environments where people are encouraged to and want to talk about what’s happening in their classrooms. And so, in that way, while it might not be formalised within a meeting context, I think it’s…time is bought, if you like, to enable the sorts of discussion that, as leaders, we want, because we know that they will make our schools better places and our students higher achievers without needing to take time out of face-to-face teaching or ask people for additional time that we know they’re short of after hours.

**INTERVIEWER**

Well, reflecting on your time as a principal, working to improve your school, what would be a key insight, or a pearl of wisdom, that you should share with other principals or school leaders?

**TONY PAATSCH**

The first thing I would say is the examiner’s report takes an enormous amount of time to produce. You’re crazy if you ignore it. The information that it provides around areas that have been done well and not so well, which, in turn, lead into some informed guesses around particular areas that might be emphasised in next year’s exam, is…that’s just priceless. And I know we’ve talked a lot about data earlier, but data from the VASS Data Service, data from your on-demand testing, data from NAPLAN that assists us to know our learners well, meet their needs well and be able to make certain that we’re working together well.

**POLLY FLANAGAN**

I think it’s really important to believe that school cultures can change for the better, and school cultures are incredibly varied. We talk a lot about personal excellence and that everyone in the school should strive to be or perform at their personal best. So we talk about a PB for teachers and for students. And that, of course, includes principals as lead learners. So a PB might be someone going from an E to a D, and that’s celebrated. That’s a really good thing. But it’s not about winning and it’s certainly not about encouraging unhealthy competition.

And with the rise of anxiety amongst adolescents, I do think the VCE is built up to be this kind of nightmare for parents and students. And I don’t think it needs to be, if it’s seen as a group journey and the schools do what they can to help students manage stress, and that means making sure that counsellors and year-level coordinators and parents are all on side and that we are fully informed about the journey ahead.

**LINDA MAXWELL**

Hard to pin it down to one. ‘Cause it is such a complex thing, isn’t it, bringing about that sort of change? And I think it is multifaceted, and I think it really has to be conscious. But I pick up on Polly’s, which is belief. In my school, which is a low-medium socioeconomic setting, we didn’t really believe that we had kids that could achieve at those high levels. Our staff didn’t believe it.

So, I think we put a lot of effort into changing the culture, celebrating successes, taking a collective responsibility, and then as the successes started to come, they snowballed, and it just changed the belief in what our kids were capable of doing. That cultural change is astonishing when you see it happen. And it’s hard, but it happens.

**INTERVIEWER**

Well, thank you, Polly Flanagan, Tony Paatsch and Linda Maxwell, for your advice and your time today.