

East Meets West in the South



Photo: Courtesy Southvale Primary School

Southvale Primary School sits on the border of Noble Park and Springvale South, an area rich in cultural diversity, but heavy on traffic and major roads.

Offering education for all, and selected as a 'school of choice' by agencies for kids with learning and behavioural difficulties, Southvale Primary has conquered some major challenges in the last 4 years.

The children represent 32 different cultures, with over 80% of them speaking a language other than English at home. Most of the families are from Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer backgrounds.

With a high turnover of students, the school found that cultural intolerance experienced in the community was often displayed in the playground. Concerned about this anti-social behaviour and intent on bringing about significant cultural change within the school community, new principal Sue Barford led the way with a number of initiatives. The first step was the adoption

of Values Education which encompassed a whole community approach to living and learning. Among many things, this included teaching children to work cooperatively with others, to think laterally, make their own decisions and be responsible for their actions.

Noticing the communication gap that existed between the families and the school, the school employed a multicultural education aide and a community liaison officer to help engage these families.

Within 2 years, significant behavioural changes among the children were noticed by Sue and the staff. Contrasting dramatically with events from previous years, no serious misdemeanours were carried out by the children and a new school culture was beginning to emerge.

But there was more to come. With heavy traffic congestion around the school at morning and afternoon peak times, Sue noticed that even though most of the students lived less than 1 kilometre from the school, only 20% of them walked. She couldn't believe it. >>

“The Walking School Buses have resulted in chance meetings with people on the streets. Residents were realising for the first time that they were neighbours and then inviting each other into their homes.”

‘Some kids were being driven from just two streets away. Mothers would put the kids in the car, drive two streets, drop them off and then turn around and drive home again!’

When Sue heard about the Walking School Bus program through the City of Greater Dandenong she saw it as the answer to a number of issues.

‘I thought it sounded like a wonderful idea. We had a terrible problem with traffic congestion and I thought the Walking School Buses would help here. The fact it was attached to the local council was a great opportunity to forge relationships with the wider community. Initially I was the only person who saw this potential in the project. I had to collect the data myself – I found out where every child lived and plotted it on a map.’

At first, parents were confused as they thought the school was going to pick-up the kids with an actual bus. When Sue explained they would be walking, parents were quick with reasons why they couldn’t walk. It was too cold, too wet, too dangerous and so on.

Sue was keen to engage parents from Vietnamese, Chinese and Cambodian families into the school activities and saw the Walking School Bus as a great link to the parents. Information was provided in the school newsletter in Vietnamese, Khmer and Chinese and information sessions were held with interpreters in these community languages. Forty-five Vietnamese and Cambodian parents attended the sessions with 15 parents signing up to be volunteers.

The project started with four parents who were already walking to school, walking with children on two routes. Mei Luong, the school’s multicultural education aide, worked tirelessly to connect with the families.

‘At first the Vietnamese parents were too shy to start a route. They wanted to get involved but didn’t want to take the lead role. Some of the parents dropped off because they were

worried their lack of English would stop them from being able to control a group of children while they were walking.’

Mei and Sue walked on the buses and acted as leaders to promote the project and to encourage other parents to get on board. Sue walked for nearly a year and Mei continues to walk every day.

‘I wanted the parents and the kids to see that the Walking School Bus was very important to the school and that I was going to walk rain, hail or shine. Mollie our school dog would walk with us too – she was a great incentive for the kids to join us’, Sue explains.

The school also organised a Walk to School Day as a teaser.

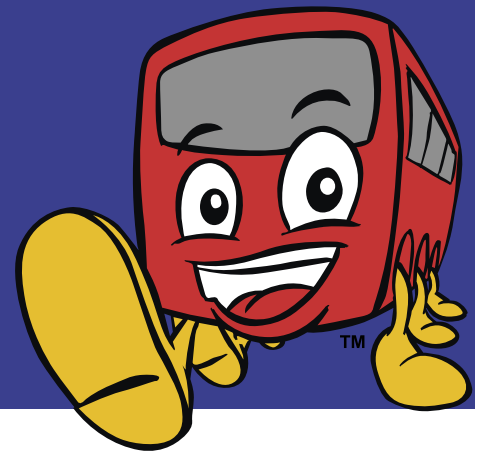
‘We thought it would be a good introduction for people to try and walk just for one day and then they might think, “It’s okay, I can walk to school now”’, Mei says.

Sue has at times had to resort to some unconventional Principal behaviour to get her message across.

‘People just don’t realise that it is sometimes quicker to walk. One kid was late every day because he had to wait for his mother or brother or auntie or someone. I got sick of it and I said: “Right! Now you are going to walk to school”, and since then he has been walking with the Walking School Bus and he’s on time every day because he doesn’t have to wait for someone to drive him!’

The school now has three official Walking School Bus routes that run every day. Sue says there has been a major cultural shift towards walking at the school and estimates approximately 80% of the children are now walking or riding to school independently.

‘Parents were scared of kids walking by themselves. We have addressed this now with the Walking School Buses. Kids who don’t walk with the bus are now walking together with friends.’



In addition, this is the third year that the school has conducted Bike Education for years 4–6. Before Bike Ed was introduced not one child rode to school. Currently nine children do.

‘Bike Ed helps promote the notion of walking to school for others as they realise it is easier to just walk rather than getting a bike out, putting on a helmet and so on’, Sue says.

The Walking School Bus has made an enormous difference to the lives of many of the families attending the school. Parents from Vietnamese, Cambodian and Chinese backgrounds are now engaging in many other activities with the school.

Sue attributes much of this engagement with the hard work of Mei and Community Liaison Officer Dana Chan. Dana speaks Khmer, Thai, English and French and has been instrumental in getting Cambodian parents to walk on the bus and in getting them to engage further with the school.

The Walking School Bus program has also resulted in several spin-offs for the school.

‘Running a Walking School Bus has enabled us to be part of the TravelSmart Program. TravelSmart gave us money to set up the Parents Community Room. We have a lot of parents who come to the school who have smaller children with them. Now we also run a community playgroup – a multicultural one – which is very unusual and is entirely run by the parents themselves’, Sue says.

The school also runs the Breakfast Café, which provides a free breakfast every morning for at least 20 students. It is run by two parent volunteers, with the majority of the food donated by the Red Cross.

There has been a noticeable drop in traffic congestion, footpaths have been repaired and, according to Mei, parents are starting to think about their rights as a pedestrian because of their involvement with the Walking School Buses.

‘The great thing about the Walking School Bus is that people in the community are now getting to know us. People drive past and smile. People at the bus stops smile as we walk past. If we can start the day with a smile we are happy’, Mei says.

A lot of changes have happened in and around Southvale Primary School since the first buses started walking in 2002. For Sue Barford, one significant change really stands out: ‘The Walking School Buses have resulted in chance meetings with people on the streets. Residents were realising for the first time that they were neighbours and then inviting each other into their homes. This is incredible.’

For more information on the City of Greater Dandenong’s Walking School Bus Program contact the council on (03) 9239 5100



Photo: Courtesy Southvale Primary School

What made the difference?

- *Leadership, dedication and hands-on involvement by the Principal*
- *Commitment of Council and the school to engage the school community in the project*
- *Relationships forged between parents and the school’s multicultural and multilingual aides*
- *The trust and connectedness developed between the parents and the school*