

Building trust and wellbeing

For Minna Denholm, student wellbeing is key to flourishing at school. Siena College, the Catholic girls' school in Camberwell, has built a significant wellbeing program and, as leader of such programs, Denholm works with students and teachers from all year levels. It is an area she has been passionate about since she studied science and teaching at Deakin University.

"While I was at university, I met someone who is now a good friend who came from a very different background to me. She experienced stereotyping and unpleasant behaviour based on her ethnicity, and I witnessed some of that," Denholm says.

"But I knew her life story and what she'd been through and I realised how, if you learn about other cultures and learn who people really are, that can change attitudes. You can build empathy and connectedness. As a teacher ... you have the power to let students see people and events in a different light. That can change the world."

Denholm says a growing body of research has proven the intrinsic links between healthy student wellbeing and better learning outcomes. She says building trust is part of this process.

"Unless you make connections with students and get to know them, it's hard to build trust. Until you have trust, it's hard to push for better learning outcomes," she says.

"The best tools we can give our students for their wellbeing are the skills they need to pull themselves out of troughs. As adults, we have times when life goes well and times when we're challenged, and students need skills to pull themselves through those challenges."

Safety and respectful relationships are at the core of Siena College's wellbeing focus. A dedicated team of teachers, school leaders and students meet regularly to discuss how the school can continue to foster healthy relationships in the classroom. Safety is also embedded in the school's programs.

Denholm oversees a pastoral program each Thursday morning where students spend an extended session with their home group teacher. It's a time for students to share experiences and earlier this year the program celebrated International Women's Day and Harmony Day.

"Harmony Day fell just after the attacks on



MINNA DENHOLM

LEIGH HENNINGHAM

mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, so we used that to discuss connectedness," Denholm says.

"The girls brought in a family photo and talked about their family's journey to Melbourne. Everyone listened to each other's stories and learnt things they didn't know about each other."

Denholm also arranges professional development sessions for teachers with a wellbeing focus. Most recently she organised a session on anxiety to help teachers understand signs of student anxiety and how to offer support.

Part of her role also involves helping grade 6 students transition to high school. She works with the head of admissions to ensure new students feel

welcomed, settled and safe. "We visit every grade 6 student so they know a face and feel comfortable when they arrive. They're entering a whole new world and we want them to feel respected and safe," Denholm says.

As year 7s, students also take part in a support program that further settles them into the Siena College community and prepares them for the years ahead.

"[Helping] students make a positive transition into year 7 can be a turning point in their lives," Denholm says.

"Being part of that is very rewarding." ●

SARAH MARINOS

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