

Episode 45 - Teaching at Skillset Senior College - Marty

#045 - In this episode we meet Marty, originally from Scotland, who came to Australia as a Science university lecturer then moved on to the independent school, Skillset Senior College in Bathurst, NSW. This school is an alternative to those kids who may not 'fit in' with mainstream high schools, for whatever reason. Marty and his team are doing a great job with these kids, particularly with his research project on mental health, ensuring they have an opportunity to finish their schooling and in some cases go on to further education.

Marty grew up near Glasgow, Scotland, where he went to school and later to the University of Glasgow and studied so he could become a marine biologist. In 2017 he moved to Bathurst, NSW as a lecturer at Charles Sturt University. He then moved to Skillset Senior College and has been there for the past 3 years.

Marty wears several hats at Skillset, which is part of the Australian Independent Schools (AIS). He has a teaching role and is also Head of Research and Development. He is currently conducting a school based research project which has been very rewarding. They do a lot of well being and practical parts to subjects using an alternative education approach. Teachers from Skillset still teach from the syllabus but it's how they teach it.

Skillset is an independent school for Years 10 to 12 with campuses in both Bathurst and Dubbo. Their mission is to partner with students who have experienced homelessness, trauma, bullying, substance abuse, mental health, disability, family instability, to encourage students to finish their high schooling. It was established in 2015 to give an alternate education where well being is at the heart of everything they do. Skillset is part of the Alternative Schools Network.

Skillset offers all students in Year 10 their ROSA (Recognition of School Achievement) as well as the HSC (Higher School Certificate) to Years 11 and 12. A lot of students arrive thinking they will only do Year 10 but end up staying to complete their schooling. When students come to the school they get to learn the way they want to learn and they realise they can learn. Going to Skillset is a choice for students. There are no bells or uniforms, and teachers are addressed on a first name basis. Every student is an individual.

At the school they have a timetable that is mixed up as much as you can. They have a 1 hour lesson with a 15 minute break followed by another 1 hour lesson with a 15 minute break. The day continues like this. A couple of times a week there is a wellbeing session and sports afternoons. The execution is a bit different. It gives students a bit of freedom and autonomy.

Skillset is different in their approach, especially during the lockdown in 2020. They were careful not to overload students with content doing online learning and they also developed a Tribe system where each teacher was allocated a group of students. The teacher was responsible for checking in with these students on a regular basis with simple things like,

- Have you had breakfast?
- Is there food in the house?
- How did you sleep last night?

They have maintained this tribe system. Students' wellbeing always comes first.

Other teachers from mainstream high schools can learn from Skillset Senior College. Instead of being content driven, they could be more process driven, which is difficult in large schools but it can be done. Changing the culture in schools comes from the Principal which filters down through the staff and everything they do, to have that sense of connection and well being.

Strategies used as part of the school research project include measuring things so you can gather evidence to export to other schools. Three activities that have a positive impact on mental health are exercise, resilience training and occupational therapy. Students were grouped into one of these groups at a time and worked on different aspects.

- Exercise - walk for 15 minutes a day. Exercise is good for mental health but the surprise benefit was the deeper conversation that would arise during walking with the students due to the distraction of looking forward and walking in nature
- Resilience training - Discussions on past, present and future. Ask students who they are, where they came from and paint a picture of where they want to be in the future, not only their best selves but also their worst
- Occupational Therapy - These are the unconscious things we do. Simple things like student's swinging on their chair is a sign of an underdeveloped vestibular system.. We need to use and develop all our systems. In class students use tools to correct this, for example using a weighted blanket, ice in glass of water, activate core before coming into school

Students are allocated into 1 of these 3 groups above for 4 weeks of the term. Students did a pre and post test involving a questionnaire and before COVID, collecting a saliva sample to test cortisol levels.

Preliminary data has shown that after 3 weeks there was a 10% reduction of anxiety levels in these kids. The project will hopefully finish in 2021.

The future of Skillset and other organisations like it is very promising. It's important to keep the school to a small size so you don't lose the close connections made with teachers and students. Ideally Marty would like mainstream teachers to take on some of these strategies / lessons, and learn from Skillset's approach.