

NSWSPC CHICKEN SOUP 2

Jim McAlpine, Bruce Stavert, Bob Stockton, Brian Ralph

NSWSPC Chicken Soup records some of the many wonderful anecdotes and stories that we all hold from our many years as Principals and teachers. If you have a special little anecdote, short story or even a longer story about times past, please take the time to share it with us. Simply email it to principalfutures@nswspc.org.au ☺

Going to Pot – Jim McAlpine

It was a country high school in the Nineties. The IM class loved doing Agriculture and the chooks, sheep and cattle appreciated the students too. It was one class that never caused any problems. One morning a breathless student came into my office, “Sir, sir, sir, you’ve got to come to the farm!” These students were impossible to deny so I dropped my pen and was led across the road and up the laneway opposite to the farm. “Look sir, those are *pot* plants!”... Sure enough, he had correctly identified them. I asked him how they got there and he named one of his classmates with whom he had recently had a quarrel. “He grew them here because the high fence makes them really secure and no-one can steal them!” I thanked him, and then followed Departmental procedure. Unfortunately this was one example of initiative and imagination that could not be rewarded.

Bounders – Jim McAlpine

Back in the days when the school cleaners were effectively part of the staff, I had a phone call at about 6.15am one morning from one of the cleaners at my country high school. There was a kangaroo at the top of the flagpole in the quadrangle, and it was dead and tied up by the flag ropes. Weetbix were left unfinished and I went straight to school (a 10 minute walk). Sure enough, a very large roo was suspended about nine metres above the quad. The acting general assistant, who was also a local farmer, examined the scene then drove his ute so it was parked underneath the roo. He was fit and climbed the pole with the help of an extension ladder. He was able to use the ropes to lower the roo into his ute, and he then drove it somewhere for appropriate disposal. No mention was ever made of this by any of us, and the likely lads who had perpetrated this heinous activity never received any pleasure from reports of shocked students.

The guessing competition – Bruce Stavert

In my first months as a principal in the early 90s my SRC approached me to put on a fashion parade to raise money for AIDS research – great idea. They planned the event well, persuaded all the local fashion houses to loan them thousands of dollars’ worth of clothes and looked set to raise quite a lot of money. I invited all the local politicians and dignitaries and the P&C executive. At the last minute the SRC also asked if they could have a guessing competition at the door to raise further funds – another great idea. Pity I didn’t ask them a bit more about it. Come the evening of the parade I met the official guests in the office foyer and, after some pre-event refreshments, led them to the vestibule of the hall so that we were ready to enter and take up our seats. And there was the guessing competition: *HOW MANY CONDOMS ARE IN THE JAR?* After a deep intake of breath, I and all the official guests bought a ticket and made our guesses. As I sat watching the parade many thoughts went through my head: *How many ministerials would there be to respond to? How many parental complaints? How would the other dignitaries react? Would this be the shortest principalship in the history of NSW? But, worst of all, what would I do if I won?* Happily I didn’t win,

there was not one single complaint from any source, and the kids put on a great show and raised a great deal of money for AIDS research. I knew then that I was going to like this school!

School Development Day – Bob Stockton

The first high school at which I was Principal was located in the South Coast region. It didn't take me very long to realise that School Development Days weren't widely appreciated by almost anyone. I suspect not much has changed. I decided to introduce an exotic twist by bringing my BBQ to school to cook sausages. All was going well until my BBQ was not coping with the load and flames started to shoot out of it. While this had its funny side the flames were not going out. I was in deep concentration until I turned around and there was a fire engine resplendent with men in uniforms bearing down on my little BBQ which had now gone out. The sirens were blaring. A staff member who did not particularly like me had rung 000 and the message was twisted that the school's LPG gas supply was going up in flames. We had a brief bonding moment with the Fireies and the afternoon session went ahead. For many weeks after that I felt people were staring at me and laughing surreptitiously. It was a good way to meet people. I still don't like SDDs.

School uniform – Bob Stockton

The second high school at which I was Principal was located on the NSW mid-North Coast. I spent 16 years there and I loved it. However it was not renowned for uniform compliance. In the early 2000s a really nice Year 10 girl whose name was the same as a flower tested our systems and procedures. It was a typical hot and humid North Coast February day and I was asked by a staff member to come to roll call because a student was non-compliant. This was not unique in that era. I turned up and was greeted by a Barbie Doll look-alike. She was in pink hot pants with a pink bra under gauze crop top. I told her that she could not wear those clothes because it was inappropriate. I got the 'Who moi?' reaction. I was making no headway and finally said, "I know it's hot but I'm in long pants, shirt and tie." She looked at me and lightly held me by the elbow and said, "I don't know how you do it." I was beaten and realised that I was in a community where the norms did not always work.

My first day of teaching – Brian Ralph

It's the early 70s and my first day of teaching. I turn up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to my outer Western Sydney disadvantaged high school which has already earned a somewhat unfair reputation for unruly students. After a morning of introductions, school tour and lengthy faculty meeting, all the first year outs gather in the Principal's office for morning tea. After ten minutes of idle chit-chat the Principal finally gets a little bit more serious. "Well," he says, "welcome to XYZ High School. You've probably heard some bad reports about the school." We all nod. "Well," he says, "we have a great staff here and I can assure you that you will receive every bit of available support we can muster. I'm sure if you stick it out to the end of this week then you'll probably make it to the end on the month." "Mmm, fair enough," we think. "And if you make it to the end of the month, you'll probably make it to the end of term," he continues. "However, if you make it to the end of term you should make it to the end of the year, and if you make it to the end of the year then you can teach without a single worry anywhere else in the state for the rest of your life." By the end of February there were two of us left, and we were still there at the end of the year. Both of us were in the same faculty, evidence of the value of an exceptional head teacher and a great faculty team. I ended up staying there ten years.

2R (Year 8 Repeat Class) – Brian Ralph

It's my first year of teaching and I'm at an outer Western Sydney disadvantaged high school in its early years of development. Apart from a modest allocation of Social Science subjects and the like, I find that I have also picked up what looks like quite a challenge. This is '2R', the 2nd Form/Year 8 repeat class. Apparently this group of 14 girls (most of them already sexually active and out of control at home) were such a problem the previous year that the School Executive has decided to take drastic action. While these girls were spread across all of Year 8 last year, they are now to be put into one repeat class, all together, which is to be taught only by head teachers. There's only one problem – there's one period which cannot be taught by any of the head teachers. It's given to me. It's Personal Development. "This is going to be very interesting," I think. "What on earth can I teach them? They probably know far more than me already!"

Undeterred, I prepare for my first lesson and walk into the classroom to find every girl sitting on a front desk with a big grin on her face and a great big 'FUK' written on the board. I calmly address the spelling issue by putting a line through the word and adding the missing 'C'. I then turn to the girls and ask them, "So what do you want to talk about?" After several unsavoury suggestions my prepared lesson then proceeds in a faltering manner. I flounder on for a few weeks until, one day by accident, we start discussing a falling out between two girls (not in the class) over a boy – it was all sexual stuff. And then it dawns on me – *moral dilemmas*! I collect every past copy of the *Women's Weekly* I can lay my hands on and carefully select a range of interesting/challenging 'Dear Dorothy Dix' letters. Initially they are essentially sexual/moral dilemmas about relationships, but then I gradually move it to non-sexual dilemmas, addressing other major values and attitudes. When the 2R experiment is abandoned in mid-year by the head teachers due to the class being totally uncontrollable, we are still quietly working through our moral dilemmas. The girls, despite all their noise and bravado, have no-where else they can discuss these sorts of issues and sort out their own values and attitudes as to what is right and what was wrong.

The missing hubcap – Brian Ralph

It's my first year of teaching and I've been appointed to an outer Western Sydney disadvantaged high school in its early years of development. My teaching allocation involves only Years 7-9 and the classes are graded alphabetically. Among them are 1J (7J) Social Studies, 2H (8H) Geography and 3M (9M) Geography. Most of the students are really nice kids who you can work with quite easily once they know you actually care about them. One day I arrive at school with a hubcap missing from my old VW Beetle. I'm spotted by one of my students in 3M who's taken a liking to me – let's call him Serge. He races over to excitedly tell me that I've lost a hubcap. "I know, Serge," I tell him, "I lost it last night in the storm on the way home." "Don't worry, sir," he tells me, "there'll be a new hubcap on it tomorrow morning!" "No, no, no, Serge, I can buy one for myself." It takes me another five minutes to truly convince him that I really don't want him to go looking that night for another sad little VW Beetle parked on the street with hubcaps that will match my car.