

Chris Sarra and the Cherbourg State School (B)

Chris Sarra commenced as Principal of the primary school in the Aboriginal settlement of Cherbourg in August 1998. After six years under Sarra's leadership the school's performance had improved markedly. Vandalism at the school had diminished to a fraction of the level it was at when he arrived. Absenteeism was now below the state average. Academic performance had increased and student numbers at the school were now rising. Sarra's work was being recognised and rewarded in the wider system. The school was being considered for an expansion plan which would see it being equipped to educate students beyond its current Grade 7 capacity up to Grade 9.

The 'Strong and Smart' vision

Central to Sarra's approach was the articulation of a new vision for the school, which has become known as the "Strong and Smart" vision. He spoke about this at length in personal conversations and addresses to the school assembly with staff, students, parents and members of the Cherbourg community. For Sarra the critical step to achieving a better performing school was to shift the mindset of everybody associated with the school – teachers, students, and the community.

"It was a struggle and the only way to do it was to get others engaged with the vision.

"We could not just sit back and blame kids for not coming to school. I wanted everyone to ask themselves 'What am I doing wrong? Why aren't they engaging? If they are failing, what are you doing that is contributing?' I started asking these questions because I wanted self-examination from everyone involved with the school."

Sarra says he chose the words "strong and smart" because he was deliberately trying to tie these notions with being Aboriginal and being at Cherbourg State School. Parents

This case was written by Tim Watts, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, under the supervision of Professor Amanda Sinclair, Melbourne Business School, as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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told him that they wanted their kids to go on to high school, gain skills and make their lives a success. He believed this meant the kids had to be tough enough to survive in an all-white high school once they left Cherbourg (“strong”) and clever enough to do the learning and pass the exams to graduate from high school (“smart”) (see *Exhibit 2*).

Sarra introduced an Aboriginal studies program at the school, which came to involve two hours of classes each week for every student at every level at Cherbourg.

“There was a woman here when I arrived doing an art program. I thought it was ‘Mickey Mouse’. Again it was low expectations. The message was: ‘You’re not going to survive at high school, we’ll teach you how to paint and see if you can be a painter and do handicrafts’. I replaced it with an Aboriginal studies program where kids learnt about the real aspects of being Aboriginal. We talked about domestic violence and alcohol, child abuse. We are trying to get kids to understand that these are a product of sociological and historical factors, not a result of being Aboriginal.”

Sarra said this program was not occurring anywhere else in Queensland and was initially considered risky because it took time away from the other core parts of the state-mandated education curriculum.

To motivate his students, Sarra has also adopted unconventional approaches. Instead of penalising absences from school, Sarra started rewarding kids who turned up. The class with the lowest number of absences would win an iceblock and then, at the end of the term, if they had missed five days or less, they would go to McDonalds.

“Some people say that bribing children doesn’t work. Well, I’m here to tell you that it does! The number of unexplained absences in term 3 of 2000, was 1185. In term 4 of 2001 the number of unexplained absences was 68.5. At some point, we had to get down to business, and make the ‘strong and smart’ vision translate into the ‘real deal’. And the real deal for any school is results on paper. It meant I had to ride the kids pretty hard, and make them get to class. If they played up in class and stopped other children from learning, I growled at them... or I would go and see their parents and say, ‘Look, your kid’s playing up. We’re trying to change where we’re going with the school, we need your help.’”

At the same time as introducing more robust curriculum in Aboriginal studies, Sarra has also been ensuring the “strong and smart” vision equips students to be at the forefront of technology. In 2004, he and other staff members successfully sought funding to establish a video production facility at the school. Cherbourg students now spend periods of time developing short films and productions in a program that the school calls “cybercamp”. Sarra has also backed a staff member-led program that involved the supply of \$55 second hand computers to the school and to anyone in the wider Cherbourg community who wanted one. The school has dozens of PCs set up in classrooms across the school grounds. More than 100 PCs have been purchased by parents and by other Cherbourg residents. Sarra said:

“This was quite deliberate. I’ve always been conscious of how much our students have been left behind. Digital production, the internet – that is the new literacy. The new power game in the economy. We got left behind in the old days and we’re not going to this time. We didn’t know exactly what we were doing but my approach was full steam ahead and just plunge in.”

“A few of our kids are behind in traditional literacy but many of them are running around doing digital productions and their own editing. We have an IT consultant who comes in to the school for one week every term. We’ve got every kid building their own webpage – grades 2-7. By the time they get to grade 8 they’ll be pretty savvy.”

Now that he has been at the school for six years, Sarra said the last of the children who entered the school under a different principal are departing. He said: “The last few years the older brigade have been getting smaller and smaller. As they go, it’s a nicer place to be. Those kids that have spent all of their time under the ‘Strong and Smart’ vision are pretty well drilled now. They are a nice bunch of kids. Respectful. Three years ago that wasn’t the case. It actually used to be that Grade 3’s were smarter than the Grade 6s.”

Working with the Cherbourg community

Sarra introduced ceremonies involving elders in the official processes of the school over the calendar year. One involves giving a group of elders a traditional message stick with a key to the school buildings attached to it. “The message is: ‘We give you this to you so you have open access to the school. Come and go whenever you like’. They can walk into any class they want.” Elders are often at the school watching kids in the playground, talking with staff, generally passing the time of day.

“I’d had an interest in getting Cherbourg elders involved in the school for a long time. I’d written a paper for Education Queensland before I came to Cherbourg about getting elders engaged with schools. I thought it was key to getting them involved as much I could and in behaviour management especially. I’ve worked hard at getting them in for lots of cups of tea. I’d say ‘I want to restore a sense of respect to the school. What do you think? How do you want us to go about this?’

“Having them on side has been great. When there have been behaviour management issues, they’ve come to meetings with parents. When there has been any trouble at all, they’ve rallied in behind me. I’ve talked about how I want all our kids to be strong and respectful and to have the capacity to do whatever they want all round the world. They’ve been right behind me on that.”

Sarra said: “In the past, the Cherbourg Town Council operated in isolation from the school. There was very limited involvement from the council. To me, this didn’t make sense. They had objectives they were trying to achieve in the community and the school seemed like an obvious and key means of achieving those objectives.”

When he started as principal in 1998, Chris would find that, after weekend vandalism, every Monday morning he would need to call a glazier to come to the school to fix up to 40 windows at a time. Queensland Education had a contract with a glazier based in Murgon, a town 10 kilometres away.

“Cherbourg Council had an award-winning building unit. They’d won construction awards for a quite a few of the other facilities and buildings in the town. I asked Queensland Education why we couldn’t get the local guys to fix the school’s broken windows each week and they said, go ahead.

“This was significant for a number of reasons. It sent a message to them that we wanted to engage with them and for them to provide us with a service. ‘We trust you and want you to

work on our school.’ The money also stayed in the community. It was also a way of getting role models into the school. Kids could see older guys from the town in there fixing windows or doing other maintenance work rather than just seeing them drinking or fighting in the street. Also if it was somebody’s uncle was the one coming in to fix the windows, they’d be less likely to get broken in the first place. If the uncle finds out who is breaking the windows they’ll give them a kick in the backside and it won’t happen again. As I expected, the broken windows stopped happening pretty quickly. Now I’d have to do 35-40 for the whole year.”

About three months into his job as principal, Sarra approached the town council with a proposal. He wanted to create an additional signature block on the school’s official documents for the mayor to register he had approved of whatever policy or program was going ahead.

“This might not seem like much but it was saying that you have a say in the strategic direction of the school. If you don’t like what we’re doing, we have to renegotiate it. They had the leverage to push us on our performance targets. It also gave me the capacity to engage them to help me achieve the performance targets which was important too.

“At certain times I’ve head-hunted people from particular families to work in the school. If some kids from a family have been playing up, I’ll try to get a family member working here. It helps us work with the kids and calm them down. I’ll say we need some help and I’m prepared to offer you a job. Strictly speaking this is outside the boundaries a little but I played around with it and it works. I don’t feel terribly unethical or anything about this – because family connections were what I needed in the person for the job.

“I started asking for the council to give me ‘work for the dole’ people to do things around the school. Up to this point they mostly worked for the council doing gardening and so on, and I said if you give them to me, I’ll top up their wages with school dollars. Give them 25 or 30 hours a week and I’ll take care of their training too. We have a remote area teacher aide training course we run at the school through the local TAFE¹. We’ve got people around the place to help with the kids and the workers are on a career path.”

There are currently 12 ‘work for the dole’ program participants at the school studying for their Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) qualification (see *Exhibit I*).

“There is one woman, Irene, who has been working in the preschool for years and years and we’ve got her on the RATEP program and she has been transformed as a woman. She’s got a sense of power about her. Really changed. Same for a lot of them. It’s been really exciting for me seeing that.”

Outside the school gates

“While I’ve been here the community hasn’t changed much,” said Sarra. He has seen little evidence that the unemployment and other social problems of Cherbourg have reduced in any way.

“There is still murder, bashings, kids getting abused. Nothing has changed dramatically in Cherbourg while I’ve been here. But inside the school the changes have been dramatic. Bad stuff still happens but kids are coming to school happy and buzzing to be black and strong

¹ Technical and Further Education institution.

and smart. I'm not too bothered. If anything it makes what we've done here even more significant. It puts other schools on notice. A lot of places they blame the community for the school's failures."

Leadership and risk

The transformational improvements at the school and the high personal profile of Sarra have brought their own challenges. Since Sarra became principal at Cherbourg, staff numbers at the school have increased by about 50 percent to around 45 with 28 paid employees. "It's exploded really," said Sarra.

"There are a lot of personalities to manage. Sometimes it makes you feel like a football coach. Cruising around the school, making sure everything is on track, keeping morale up. You don't feel like you're doing really hard work, but it's crucial. I'm not on the front line, but I need to be there to back the teachers up in the classrooms. They see me as a leader to turn to when they're frustrated or having trouble with parents. I've had parents say to teachers 'If you pick on my kid again, I'll come in to school and bash you.' I've said we're not going to put up with that. They need to know I'm there backing them up."

Sarra, 36, has a big presence. At 6 foot 1 inch tall, he was a talented rugby player in his youth in the northern Queensland town of Bundaberg. He trained as a physical education (PE) teacher, and still occasionally teaches PE to grades 1 and 2 at Cherbourg. He also likes to play a lot of rugby and basketball with kids at the school and his style is to be physically visible and literally "hands on". During breaks and lunchtimes he will often be found walking around the school, chatting to staff and sitting - on the ground - with the kids. Sarra also uses a distinctive approach to disciplining called "growling". This style, which helps establish connection and respect with the kids, teachers and the community, has also created some problems.

In 2004, Sarra was the subject of a complaint to Education Queensland. He was accused of grabbing and roughly treating two students at the school. The Australian newspaper and several television news stations covered the complaint because of Sarra's high profile as Queenslanders of the Year².

"I guess I had a choice. I could increase the intensity of their reprimand, or I could suspend them for six weeks, and I hate suspending children from school. So I grabbed them from outside the classroom, took them in, grabbed them by the arm, took them inside the classroom in front of the others. I growled them. What that means is I raised my voice at them. I went off, saying, 'We're not going to tolerate this from you. Other children here are working hard. Why should you be any different?' As I'm saying this, I'm banging my fist on the desk and the wall because I deliberately wanted to create a scene to increase the intensity of it all."

Education Queensland upheld four of the seven complaints about Sarra, who made a commitment not to take this approach to disciplining students again.

"I guess it would have been naïve of me to think that I could win such an accolade like Queenslanders of the Year and enjoy such a great honeymoon with the media and everything

² Chris Sarra was named the Suncorp Queenslanders of the Year for his outstanding contribution as an educational leader in his role as principal of Cherbourg State School. He was described as one of Queensland's emerging indigenous leaders.

would be great. It's probably naïve of me to think that there wouldn't be someone out there to try to cut me down because in some ways it's part of blackfellas being crabs in the bucket, and (they've) got to pull each other down. There were questions about how I disciplined students and whether or not I was doing the right thing. And it just kind of blew up into a frenzy.³

“One thing I know for certain is that I will always be an Aboriginal person who is the principal of a school. I will never be a white person. I will always exercise and value Aboriginal approaches to doing things.”⁴

Sarra sees that his approach to leadership is firmly rooted in his Aboriginal identity. His values have encouraged a respect for the community and its elders and a conviction that he couldn't be a principal of the school, in isolation from its community. Indeed, implicit in many of the changes Sarra has made, is a very different model of how a school fits within a community. By empowering the community, he has strengthened the school.

At the same time, Sarra has also been careful not to position himself as a Cherbourg community leader because this brings its own expectations and problems. During the week, Sarra devotes most of his time to management of the school. He made a decision to live outside Cherbourg, about 25 kilometres away, and outside of business hours, Sarra spends most of his time away from Cherbourg. Sarra admits that he cannot assume to speak for the community. “I'm from Bundaberg, not Cherbourg, which means something. There's something different about being brought up on the mission. And that's something I can never pretend to understand fully.”

The future

Reflecting in mid 2004 on the School's success, Sarra said, “We're not all the way there but we've experienced some success when you compare where we are with where we've come from. Other people are wanting to know about those sort of things, and I get invited to speak at conferences all over the place.”

From a personal point of view, Sarra initially took the Principal's job for five years. After six years, he is inevitably thinking about the future.

“When I came to Cherbourg, I came with a clear notion that I would be there for five years. I've been there for six years now, and I'm probably getting close to that time when the school needs something more than I've got to offer. But I know it will be hard to leave.”

There are also questions whether the school's progress will continue after he leaves. How much of the success was due to Sarra's distinctive leadership and how well has he managed to build a sustainable foundation in the community that his successor can build on? Gary McLennan, a former lecturer of Sarra's from Queensland University of Technology is hopeful that the Cherbourg experience can be widely replicated.

“To me, Cherbourg's a single candle that shines so brightly in the dark. We can take the Cherbourg model and spread it around Queensland and Australia, and hopefully, indigenous communities around the world.”⁵

³ ABC Television's *Australian Story* 4-10-04

⁴ *ibid*

The task for talented Aboriginal leaders like Sarra is not to be underestimated. The community is small and leaders like Sarra who aim high, experience intense visibility and scrutiny. There are people – in the Aboriginal and white communities – who are more comfortable with the familiarity of failure. Sarra said:

“There’s probably Aboriginal people out there looking at me and saying: ‘Who does this fella think he is? Or, that school is getting a bit too big for their boots.’ Well, yes, we are getting too big for our boots, because those boots are the boots that white Australia made for us a long time ago. We’ve got every right to be strong and smart, young and black and deadly. That’s our human right, and nobody should take that away from us. If you want to stay in those old boots, you do that, but get out of our way.”

⁵ *ibid*

Exhibit 1: Profile of the RATEP Program

Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) is a community-based teacher education program. It is a cooperative initiative between the North Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education (TNQITAFE), James Cook University and Education Queensland. It provides teacher training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who aspire to become qualified teachers. Studies are undertaken here at Cherbourg through correspondence, teleconferences and on-line learning. This method is augmented with practical experiences, residentials and field trips. The courses themselves comprise Certificates III, IV and Diploma of Education (TNQITAFE) then on to Bachelor of Education (JCU).

Exhibit 2: Pictures of the Cherbourg State School

