School Context and Background

Salisbury High School was established in 1959 as a large co-educational secondary school (Years 8–12) in a low socio-economic area in Salisbury North, a suburb of Adelaide, South Australia (SA). The school is in the City of Salisbury, and is part of the SA Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS). It is in the Salisbury District, one of 12 districts in the decentralized administrative arrangements in DECS.

A High Level of Disadvantage

Salisbury North has a significant transient population and a high proportion of residents live in housing trust (subsidized) accommodation. It has one of the highest gambling, youth unemployment and crime rates in Australia, and many families are third and fourth generation unemployed. The area has been undergoing urban renewal in an attempt to build a more stable, sustainable community.

Salisbury High School is currently designated a Category 2 school, due to its multiple disadvantages (on a 7-point scale with 7 being the least disadvantaged). The school has approximately 1,000 students, with 35% designated as disadvantaged; 18% from non-English backgrounds; 14% with special needs, including two severe multiply disabled classes, three special classes having about 90 student on negotiated educational plans; 7% Indigenous (Aboriginal) students; and 3% participating in an off-campus alternative program for post compulsory at risk students (Paralowie House). The school’s 120 staff include a Student Services Team, a Chaplain (who is a full-time police officer), a Student Employment Services Officer, a Youth Worker, and many other voluntary or part-time people who contribute to the school (e.g., Work for the Dole program, Friends of Salisbury High School, trainers, musicians, mentors, researchers, filmmakers, artists).
In the mid-1990s, the school faced a number of challenging and complex issues, including negative community perceptions, high welfare dependency, and low attendance, retention and achievement rates. There was discussion of the possibility of the school being closed due to declining enrolments (around 500) and the existence of three other secondary schools in close proximity. At this time the school had no clearly understood or articulated vision, mission or values; had low expectations; and was operating in financial deficit. Unclear policies and inconsistent practices, difficult student behavior management and general complacency contributed to low staff morale and a high staff turnover.

A one-size-fits-all curriculum which was not well documented meant that, while staff intentions were good, approaches to teaching and learning tended to be “hit and miss,” depending on the commitment, expertise and innovation of individual teachers. Staff did not generally choose to teach at Salisbury High School but were sent there under the Education Department’s transfer process (I was one of those, arriving at Salisbury High School in 1983 in my fourth year of teaching, and I have never left). There was no school improvement model in place to address the challenges that were being faced, and there were punitive approaches to dealing with behavior management. Few students completed secondary school or entered university, and data were not collected on student destinations after leaving school. Despite all this, there were staff and leaders who were committed to social justice and who wanted to provide a safe, supportive learning environment and successful learning opportunities for our students.

**Getting Started**

The first and most enduring change was the introduction of the “care group” system. Although there had been a home group structure in place, this was changed to involve every full-time teacher and leader, including the principal. Care group sizes were reduced to less than 15 students, who remained in the same care group for their 5 years at the school. The care group teacher became the first port of call for families and the advocate for individual students. The aim was to develop positive relationships between parents, students and staff, to support student wellbeing, monitor student achievement, develop pathway plans, encourage community service, and develop citizenship. In addition, the care group teacher was given the power to broker behavior management, including determining if the student needed to be suspended.

Initially, there was negativity and skepticism among many staff towards the care group system. Some staff felt they lacked the skills to participate and a few refused to do so, requesting a transfer to another school. However the introduction of care groups was positively received by families, particularly as the only person they really needed to connect with was their child’s care teacher. Parents were invited to collect their children’s reports from their care teacher four times a year. As support, training and development were provided by year level leaders, counselors, and school leaders, more staff saw the value of this structure and built meaningful relationships with students. The care group system has been one of the most significant initiatives the school has introduced and has underpinned the success of the school to date.

During the mid to late 1990s, there was a focus on developing a “Success For All” culture which valued and acknowledged a wide range of student and school successes.