Mitchelton Special School

Our Values and Principles

June 2010

Live to learn – Learn to Live
Our Philosophy and Beliefs

At Mitchelton Special School we believe in a holistic, outcomes approach to education which focuses on independence, functional communication, social competence, and learning for both present and future environments. We believe that optimum outcomes for students are best achieved through collaboration with the school community and the broader community and through the development of partnerships with governmental and non-governmental agencies. We believe that providing a relevant individualised curriculum, and having or accessing appropriate resources and facilities are central to enabling each student to achieve relevant and functional educational outcomes.

All students at the school are diagnosed with an intellectual impairment with some having additional disabilities. We aim to deliver individualised programs designed to maximise social competence with an emphasis on:

- Providing opportunities to learn skills necessary for daily living and community life with the goal of functioning as independently as possible in society.
- Communication through programs primarily targeting functional language, including Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) eg. Use of VOCAs and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).
- Expecting socially acceptable behaviour and encouraging age-appropriate interests.
- Providing access to appropriate specialised teaching and learning facilities and resources essential to maximising appropriate learning outcomes.
- Providing an environment that is safe, supportive and meets the National Safe Schools Framework.

Generalising appropriate skills, attitudes and behaviours from a school into a community based environment is a fundamental component of teaching and learning for students with an intellectual impairment. This is because our students have difficulty transferring skills and learning from one context to another and therefore these skills are best taught in real life contexts. The implication of this is that Community Based Instruction (C.B.I.) - where skills learned in the classroom are also taught in real life settings in the community - is a crucial part of program delivery at Mitchelton Special School.

Our Belief Statements

In relation to STUDENTS, we believe that:

- Individual student learning must be our primary focus.
- Each student is an individual whose unique intellectual, emotional, cultural, physical and social diversity is considered and valued.
- Each student will be supported in developing acceptable social behaviours.
- The development of necessary skills for effective functional communication is essential (refer to Communication Bill of Rights).
- Students have a right to be treated with dignity and respect and to participate in decisions that affect their lives.
In relation to TEACHING & LEARNING, we believe that:

- We provide a meaningful and effective curriculum that reflects state and federal government’s framework requirements and international best practice in Special Education.
- Learning experiences must occur in meaningful contexts and be appropriate to the needs, learning styles and ages of students.
- Programs should be flexible, challenging and responsive to the needs of students and in accordance with our wider community.
- A variety of assessments should provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of expected outcomes and that tracking, documenting and sharing information in regards to student development is an expected and important teaching requirement.
- An integral part of the school program is to provide and create opportunities for students to learn skills essential for being included into daily living and community life which includes post-school leisure, living and work options.
- It is necessary to provide opportunities to develop and enhance positive self-esteem.
- Priority goals in a student’s IEP should be determined by that student’s needs at that point in time in consultation with other stakeholders.

In relation to the LEARNING ENVIRONMENT we believe that:

- Facilities and resources must match student needs and contribute to a comfortable and safe environment.
- A stimulating and challenging environment includes the use of technology and relevant and adequate resources.
- The learning environment is not always structured or controlled and is not confined to inside the classroom or school grounds.
- Our school is inclusive in that all students have access to appropriate teaching and learning facilities and resources essential to maximising appropriate learning outcomes.

In relation to PERSONNEL we believe that:

- When parents, staff, specialists and the community share their knowledge and skills through a team approach, positive outcomes for students are more likely to occur.
- Sufficient specialised support and service providers must be available.
- Responsible specialised support and service providers will engage in ongoing professional development.
- All personnel are advocates for the rights and opportunities for our students and this includes educating families on issues and support services regarding disabilities.

In relation to the School Community we believe that:

- There must be an open and transparent sharing of information to ensure a trusting relationship is established.
- Community development involves connections between the school and parents, service providers, governmental agencies and businesses to ensure acceptance and optimal outcomes for our students.
- That staff and parents need to advocate for our student’s acceptance in the community and participation in accessing community facilities and in gaining work skills.
What do we mean by Independence?

Teaching should aim to maximise all students' capacity to function by themselves, regardless of ability level. Hence our school motto which reflects this philosophy of independence: “Live to Learn, Learn to Live”. As in all aspects of life, considered risks are sometimes required to achieve growth and become an active participant in community life. Management procedures which include risk assessments are put in place to ensure students are in a safe and supportive, yet challenging learning environment conducive to the development of optimum independence.

Examples of this are:

- Independent self-care may target skills such as toilet training, managing money or cooking a simple meal.
- Independent choice-making may target skills such as selecting from two offered objects, choosing a library book or choosing what to buy at an eatery.
- Independent work-skills may target such behaviours as remaining seated at a task, running an errand or doing a work experience session in the community.

What do we mean by Functional Communication?

Functional communication is the ability to initiate and respond to a communicative act. It requires that the communicative act is received by another person in the way in which it was intended. This may involve speech, signing, non-verbal indicators (e.g. gesture, body language), use of augmentative communication devices (e.g. VOCA – Voice Output Communication Aids, switches) and/or picture/symbol systems (e.g. PECS- Picture Exchange Communication System, pointing systems).

Functional communication empowers students to express choices, convey needs and desires, interact socially and influence their environment.

What do we mean by Social Competence?

Social competence refers to the socially-accepted norms of any given environment or situation. This includes language, dress, manners, general behaviour and appropriate interpersonal skills within family, peer and community groups.

What do we mean by Age-appropriate?

Chronological age should be considered when designing and implementing learning tasks including themes, strategies and resources. For example a 12 year old child who might be a beginner reader should not be reading ‘Spot’ but have access to books of interest to that age level such as machinery or sport, but presented at a level suitable for that child.

We believe that an individual’s ability should determine what a student learns and chronological age should determine the resources and strategies used to achieve targeted goals.

What do we mean by Life-long Learning?

We believe that as educators we need to have both a short and long term view of students’ learning goals. We need to keep in mind the students’ future school and post-school options including future school placements, work, leisure and living environments. These longer term goals impact on the identification and prioritisation of current school programming and IEP goals. E.g. appropriate social behaviours, work skills, self-care skills. Due to the nature of our students' learning, it is necessary from the very beginning to lay the foundation of complex skills needed for adult life.