

Chris Sarra and the Cherbourg State School (A)

Chris Sarra was appointed principal of the primary school in the town of Cherbourg, three hours drive north-west of Brisbane, Queensland, in August 1998 (*Exhibits 1 and 2*). Sarra had previously worked as a high school teacher, university lecturer and in a teacher support role for the Education Queensland, the body which administered schools in the state. There were no other applicants for the job.

Cherbourg is an Aboriginal settlement of fewer than 3000 people, which had considerable social problems and high unemployment. Its primary school had been losing students to other schools in the region and was performing badly on almost every measure including academic performance, rates of attendance and transitions to high school. Sarra, whose mother was Aboriginal, had some ideas about how to run a school in an Aboriginal community and wanted to try them in practice. Six months into the job, the full complexity of the leadership challenge he faced was becoming apparent. Change was required in just about every aspect of the school's operation. It was hard to know where to start, but Sarra knew he had some difficult decisions to make.

The town of Cherbourg: a brief history

Cherbourg sits about 10 km from the largely white community of Murgon and is surrounded by scrubland and rural pastureland. It has about 15 main streets. The town was originally established as a government reserve for Aborigines from south-east Queensland in 1901. People from tribes in the surrounding regions were forced through various means to settle in the town which was nominally governed by residents but in practice run by the Church of England as a Christian mission. An award-winning history of the town published by a Queensland academic, Thom Blake,

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in 2001 explained how Cherbourg had been viewed in the past. Blake chose to call his book *A Dumping Ground*.

Conditions in the town currently are mixed. There is a range of newly-built houses and well-presented public buildings in some streets. However there are also decrepit buildings with missing roofs, walls and broken windows. A number of homes appear abandoned or in very poor condition. Some footpaths and streets are strewn with broken glass and litter. Social problems which are affecting life in Cherbourg include high unemployment, alcohol and other substance abuse and domestic violence.

Cherbourg State School before 1998

Mrs Rae Long, a long time Cherbourg resident and a teachers' aide at the school prior to Sarra's arrival said that previous principals at the school had taken a "do-gooder" approach to their job. "They were going to do their thing, whether the community thought it was right or not. They wouldn't listen."

"Their attitude was that the problem was out there in the community – there is only so much that we can do here in the school so our hands are tied." Their view, she said, was that the real reasons for the underperformance of the school were found in the children's homes and were too complex for teachers and principals to do anything about. Of the principal immediately before Chris, Mrs Long said: "A nice lady but she wasn't respected by people in Cherbourg."

Hooper, a Cherbourg local in his 50s who was hired as a teacher's aide shortly after Sarra's arrival said: "Before Chris came, the school was a jungle basically, papers everywhere in the schoolyard. Kids showed no respect to the teachers, answered back... They were always threatening just to quit school and go home. Kids made threats, there was violence towards the teachers."

Mrs Long added: "The school was basically a child-minding centre. All the staff were women."

Academically, the school was classified as one of the worst-performing educational institutions in the state of Queensland. Parents had begun voting with their feet and many were sending their kids to the school in the nearby town of Murgon. Enrolments were down to about 60 percent of their level at the start of the 1990s. Total enrolment was around 150 students in 1998.

Sarra's decision to take the job

Chris Sarra went to high school in the Queensland regional centre of Bundaberg. He was the youngest child in a big family. His father was of Italian origin and his mother was from a local Aboriginal family. Sarra had nine older brothers and sisters, none of whom had gone to university. He was a good football player and played in the school team and with a Bundaberg team as well.

"They were happy to have me because I was good at sport but no-one was saying you're pretty smart, you could do better." He completed year 12 with an average score on his final exams. He wanted to be a physical education teacher but didn't have the

marks to get into university. A guidance counsellor encouraged him to apply through a special entrance program for Aboriginal students and he was offered a place at Queensland University of Technology.

“I got through the first semester OK,” he said.

“I was prepared to work hard. I started to believe in myself. I had a few other people around me who believed in me too. And I got through it, I worked hard and I passed everything. I’d got in there on special entry, but I graduated like everyone else.

“That just made me realise that for a long time I’d been selling myself short in school. I’d been sold short by schools and people who were involved in schools. So, I guess from that point on I became determined to see that other children wouldn’t sell themselves short. I worked in all sorts of places. I worked as a career and guidance counsellor, and I worked as a lecturer at the university in Toowomba.”

Sarra enrolled for a PhD and started writing his thesis on Aboriginal identity and education; about how Aboriginal people formed their identity and how negative perceptions were so commonly a part of that. “Young kids subscribe to the same negative stereotype that is perpetrated in the general community.” He said he was interested to see if he could get black kids to confront their own views about Aboriginals and themselves. “I wanted them to expect more – to demand that the school was valuable.”

“Before I went to Cherbourg, I spent a lot of time out there all around Queensland trying to help other educators of Aboriginal children to achieve greater things for our children. I used to say: ‘Why don’t you do this?’ ‘You could try this.’ And it was very frustrating for me in that I didn’t really find people were listening.”

In 1998 he got a phone call out of the blue. “This guy from Education Queensland calls and says, we’re looking for a principal at Cherbourg State School, are you interested? And I said, yeah.”

Gary MacLennan, one of Sarra’s university lecturers from Queensland University of Technology, said he spoke with Sarra at the time and made his views about the wisdom of going to Cherbourg very clear. “My advice was not to go to Cherbourg at all, not to risk his academic career. Cherbourg was a total shambles. You’re being stupid, I said. Mad. Don’t do it. Don’t go there.”

Sarra explains his decision this way: “I guess I wanted to be back in the front line, and to feel like I was working again.... I knew it was in a mess. I wanted to test my own theories about learning. Move beyond theory to practice.”

Cherbourg’s principal had been there for five years and was basically leaving before she was pushed, said Sarra. “I did not have to fight for the job. It was the sort of place where you were sent, where teachers get sent to. A lot of people who were here had been for a long time. Most had found somewhere they could wallow undisturbed basically.”

Sarra had visited the school in the past in his work with Education Queensland.

“It was always a disappointing place to visit. Things could have been done, you could see that, but it just made you cry the standards were so low. It didn’t look like a school. Papers everywhere, kids running everywhere out of control. And no one seemed to give a shit. I used to think it wouldn’t take much to change the place. A few small things would make a big difference. They could trigger a few things off and restore some pride in the place.”

He said he did not have any role models he wanted to emulate. “I’d seen a lot of principals in a lot of schools. No-one was doing what I thought should be done.”

However, his parents clearly shaped his determination and his vision. “My father, one thing he taught us was to work extremely hard. And you don’t stop till the job is done. My mother would listen to us all the time, and we’d come home and talk about other kids calling us ‘black coon’, ‘black nigger’, ‘black boong’ – all of these sorts of things. And she’d say ‘yeah, you are black, but you be really proud of that, and don’t let anybody ever put you down because of that.’”

Conditions at the school upon Sarra’s arrival

Sarra commenced as the first Aboriginal principal at Cherbourg in August 1998. “I committed to myself that I would give it five years.” He chose not to live in Cherbourg, instead renting a house in a nearby town. His wife was lecturing at the University of South Queensland in Toowoomba and most weekends he drove back on Friday night to spend the weekend there with her.

Unexplained absenteeism was very common at Cherbourg School at the time Sarra arrived. In 1999 the rate of absenteeism (non-attendance without a note from parents) in the most senior class averaged 37.75 percent across the four school terms. He said that staff at the school did not seem to consider it unusual that more than one third of their students were absent from class at any particular time, morning or afternoon.

Sarra said he observed in the students a complete absence of pride in the school, in themselves as students and as Aboriginals.

“In my first week, I remember seeing things like children running along the roofs of two storey buildings, in and out of the main office, staffroom and principal’s office. It was impossible to leave your lunch in the staffroom fridge because students would steal it well before lunchtime.

“A few indigenous teachers were on staff and there were several indigenous teacher aides too. However they had very little say in the operations or strategic directions of the school. As crazy as it may sound, their classrooms were never as well resourced as other classrooms that boasted many flash computers and deadly classroom resources. When I asked why they would tolerate such unacceptable circumstances, they expressed a sense of despair and powerlessness to make any meaningful and productive change.”

Academic performance from Cherbourg students was well below average for Queensland. Sarra said 93 percent of students were “caught in the Year 2 diagnostic net” for reading (they did not meet expected minimum student performance standards when tested). “Really, school classrooms looked more like baby-sitting facilities, with children coming and going as they pleased, and classroom numbers often dwindling to about four children on average by mid-afternoon.”

“There was no point comparing our school’s performance to other schools because we were embarrassingly way behind. When it came time for children to participate in the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests for literacy and numeracy, most would jack up and walk out of the room, or not bother to turn up for school in the first place.”

“The Year 7 students left for high school like lambs to the slaughter, with no idea about how to conduct themselves in a regular classroom and nowhere near the personal skills, or the literacy or numeracy skills to survive,” said Sarra. In 1995, a detailed Education Queensland analysis of student record cards of 4260 kids leaving Cherbourg State School for the high school in the nearby town of Murgon found they lasted an average of nine months before dropping out.

Every Monday, Sarra would go around the school grounds and count the broken windows. It averaged between 35 and 40 broken windows each week.

“The school was subjected to continuous acts of vandalism which was having a dramatic impact on the condition of the school and the ability to maintain a safe school environment. Senior officers within Education Queensland were having serious discussions about whether or not the school facility should be closed down.”

Sarra’s early days at the school

Early on, Sarra had a lot of difficulty with discipline and the kids, according to Mrs Long. He started tracking attendance more closely and the statistics were very bleak. “It was because the product was shonky. It wasn’t worth anyone’s while to come in and engage. They weren’t learning anything.”

Sarra hired a teacher’s aide called Hooper. “Although he used to be the town drunk, he was an extremely bright man who had a hard life as a child and was keen to see that his children had a better childhood than him” said Sarra. Hooper knew everyone in the town and Sarra asked him to help tackle the absentee problem. The school gave him a car and got him driving around the town chasing up kids to bring them into school. Sarra said:

“Many of the non-indigenous staff had been at the school for many years and seemed to enjoy being there. Several had been there for longer than expected periods in such a school (ranging from 4-15 years) and no desire to move on because they believed they were performing satisfactorily given the complexities of the school and the community. They would describe their performance to me as something that should be valued, despite the desperately poor outcomes generated by the school. For me it was difficult to value such efforts when what I observed was contradictory.”

Sarra began spending a lot of time talking to Mrs Long and Mrs Langton, two elders from the community. Mrs Long worked as a teacher’s aide and Mrs Langton as a teacher at the school. Sarra said: “Outside the school gates these women were powerful people. They had a lot of clout. But in the school they were ignored. They had had no say in the strategic direction of the school or the way it was being operated day to day... It was really a matter of examining your assets. I saw these people as assets that were being underutilised. I thought if you give them more opportunity to have input into the school you might get somewhere.” He used Mrs Long and Mrs Langton to find

out in more detail about what was going in the community and in particular families. He also asked their advice on how the school should be run.

Sarra talked very directly to parents and to staff members about his high expectations for the school.

“I said if I challenge these kids and the community about how they perceive being Aboriginal then we are going to get positive outcomes. We are all black here, I would say. We deserve a good clean school that works. We are not mongrel dogs. We are not going to wait for white people to come and clean it up for us. There is no dignity in that. Let’s clean it up for ourselves.”

People in the community liked what they heard from Sarra. “I had no problems convincing people in the community about this.”

Most of the staff group argued against the vision he was outlining. They said it wasn’t possible in Cherbourg because of the social problems in the town and that it was not sensible to talk this way in the school. “The staff didn’t agree,” said Sarra. “They were the powerbrokers in the school and they were determining the vision without paying attention to what the community wanted. They saw it as a downward spiral and what we were getting was as good as it was going to get. I was challenging that. I was saying it wasn’t acceptable, that we had a human right to expect more. Other schools don’t put up with it, and we shouldn’t here.”

“This was very problematic – the engine room, the front line, wasn’t on side. They were pretty chummy with the last principal. I don’t know why they accepted this but they did. If this was a white suburb in Brisbane, people would be jumping up and down.”

“I didn’t think I was lacking anything in terms of nuts and bolts – facilities and buildings etcetera. Only thing I was missing was teachers, talented teachers. I had no background in primary school curriculum, I knew this. But what was needed was a culture shift. We had to get on and do something else. I didn’t have a team that was prepared to accept that they were part of the problem. If you’re a plumber and you’re doing bad work, people don’t call you up next time. We didn’t have that feedback. We were getting paid even if we were offering a bad product. The staff thought it was the community’s problem really.”

“In the end I had to say: If you don’t believe it, get out. Because things were so desperate, I was given a lot of latitude.”

More than half the teachers in the school left in Sarra’s first six months. “The (teachers’) union response to me was that I was pushing too hard, I should value what I had. I said, ‘Give me something to value and I’ll value it.’”

Early on in Sarra’s arrival in Cherbourg, many people in the community were trying to rope him into all sorts of other things going on in the community. “People thought he was capable and had respect. This was the police, courts, family custody battles, abusive husbands – everything you could think of... I pulled him in,” says Mrs Long.

Where to from here?

After six months as Principal in Cherbourg, Chris Sarra had taken the first steps in his plan to improve the performance of the State School. Poorly performing teachers had

left after the first twelve months and others were given advice and assistance to improve their performance. He had begun speaking openly about his ambitions to change the culture of the school and to increase the expectations that the people of the town had for its performance.

The departures of so many teachers generated considerable fallout in some parts of the community. There were a lot of complaints to the school. Jon Stanley, an Aboriginal groundsman at the school said: “Chris took a lot of verbal abuse. He took a lot of physical abuse. He could’ve went and charged them, but he didn’t.”

“People just don’t like change, they didn’t know who this guy was,” said Mrs Long.

Exhibit 1: Map of Australia with Queensland highlighted



Exhibit 2: Map of south-east Queensland with Cherbourg circled

