

## The principal's dilemma (B: Epilogue)

### Patterson's solution

In response to significant numbers of children starting school before they were ready, Principal Deborah Patterson devised a two year pre-prep program for Mill Park Heights Primary School. The trial program had 30 students enrolled in its first year and 140 enrolled in straight-prep grades. Pre-prep children concentrated on the literacy and numeracy elements of the prep curriculum and spent the rest of the time developing social and emotional skills. "We have seen a child go from rocking [in] a foetal position in the classroom and in a short time she is just blossoming under the program. I know we are doing the right thing," Patterson said.<sup>1</sup> Pre-prep children who responded well would skip straight into Year 1 classes while those who needed more time would go on to their preparatory year as planned.

Mother Michelle Chapman enrolled her daughter Alana, 5, into Mill Park Heights' program and was thrilled with the outcome. During her kindergarten year Alana had suffered extreme separation anxiety and would cry and scream in the mornings, refusing to get ready to leave. Alana's teacher harboured serious concerns about her readiness for school, but she was ineligible for a second year of funded kindergarten. After enrolling Alana in pre-prep, Chapman saw Alana transform into a child eager to go to school. "I see a different girl now," she said.<sup>2</sup> Pre-prep was also saving Chapman \$300 a week in childcare and kindergarten fees and had given her greater capacity to increase her work hours.

### The view from the top

Mill Park Heights' pre-prep program was reportedly the first and only one of its kind in the Victorian state education system. And it looked as though it would be the last. Despite

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This case was written by Marinella Padula for Professor John Alford, Australia and New Zealand School of Government as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Gough, D. 'Strapped for cash, parents push for two years' prep' *The Age*, 28 August 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the fact that pre-primary programs were available in private schools, the Education Department did not approve and was pressuring Mill Park Heights Primary School to abandon its two-year prep program, saying it breached department policy.

Speaking to the *Age* newspaper, Patterson said she had “been copping a lot of flak over it... It is like you are interfering with the ecosystem when you try to bring in something new.”<sup>3</sup> An unnamed department spokeswoman said students who were not ready for their next school year could repeat. “However, this is done on a case-by-case basis, in full consultation with parents and is not an arrangement which applies to an entire class...The department is working with the [Mill Park Heights] school to move to the case-by-case approach.”<sup>4</sup>

For her part, Patterson was frustrated, especially since teachers and principals were travelling overseas to look at innovative new programs, but came back to find themselves limited by what she felt was a rigid and restrictive state school system. She, however, vowed to push on, saying:

“You get sent overseas to see high-performing principals and the great programs they are running, and then you come back to Australia and your hands are tied to the same old model...I look at the evidence and the evidence shows that we need to do more for younger children...We are getting more and more kids going into independent schools and you have to ask yourself why, and it has to be, in part, because they are offering these kinds of programs and giving parents what they want. This is a brilliant program and a lot of people are just scared of change, but I am convinced it is what we need to do for these children.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2013, Mill Park Heights was still running the pre-prep program and was in the process of evaluating it in conjunction with Melbourne’s RMIT University.

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<sup>3</sup> Gough, D. ‘Strapped for cash, parents push for two years’ prep’ *The Age*, 28 August 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gough, D. ‘School defiant over state’s prep “taboo”’ *The Age*, 28 August 2011.