

When you enter the stately building of Toowoomba South State School it is tempting to be transported back to a bygone era. Indeed the school has links back to 1860 when a site was first reserved for a national school in Toowoomba. In the 1960s the Toowoomba South Girls Schools and Toowoomba South Boys School boasted a combined enrolment of 1000 students. But what goes on behind the school gate at Toowoomba South has far more to do with the future than the past. It represents the changing face of our community and is I believe some of the best educational work happening right in the heart of our city.

The faces of the students today are very different to those of 145 years ago. The school has an Indigenous student population of close to 9 percent. One in five students come from a non English Speaking background and they can trace their heritage to Vietnam, Pakistan, Nigeria, the Congo and Southern Sudan. A number of students do it tough and children from all backgrounds participate in a breakfast club run by St Joseph's College and Students in Free Enterprise from the University of Southern Queensland. New Hope Church provides free fresh fruit each day as part of a healthy break.

The school is part of a National Partnership Literacy Project which is designed to give extra attention and focus to reading comprehension development. Each student has an individual learning support plan and a number of steps have been taken to track student's academic progress. Students from a refugee background take part in an after school homework session run by volunteers at the neighbouring Toowoomba Refugee and Migrant Support Centre.

The lessons being taught in the playground at Toowoomba South also have a key role to play in the future harmony and prosperity of our community. Just like learning, approaches to behavior are based on evidence. Earlier in the year it became apparent that behavior problems and incidents were occurring at certain times of the day – the main one being lunch time. As a result of this, Principal Evan Willis introduced a structured lunch time where students select an option to participate in. Social skills are taught through drama groups, tennis, sketching, netball, cricket and other games.

With a diverse student population it is expected that conflicts and misunderstandings will occur. They occur in all schools and often the media leaps to label a school with a bullying or drug or racism problem rather than take the time to see how the educational community is dealing with it. A few months back a number of students reported feeling very hurt by racial taunts suffered at school. Evan Willis stepped in and took the matter very seriously. He spoke to all students involved and carried out a forensic investigation that any detective would have been proud of.

He found faults on all sides and called sport off for the week making it very clear to the whole school population that every student had the right to enjoy their time at Toowoomba South

regardless of their skin colour or ethnic background. He calmly conveyed the message to parents of students as well. In such a situation it is easy to sweep it under the carpet or claim it is all too complicated to deal with.

The school acknowledges its history and also the history of its students. It is a Dare to Lead school focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous students. Murals don't only reflect pride in Indigenous culture but efforts made to strengthen relationships with Indigenous parents and community members.

When I ask Evan Willis to sum up the school he talks of opportunities rather than challenges. I meet two stars of the show. The first is Joseph Deng. Joseph is a talented athlete. He recently competed at the State Cross Country Championships where he came 6th. This week he travels to Townsville where he will represent the Darling Downs in 800m. Money for airfares and travel has been sourced by front office staff at Toowoomba South. Probably not in their job description – but just gives you an indication of the commitment that the staff have.

The second champion I meet with was Hung Nguyen. Hung is in Pre Primary and Principal Willis speaks glowingly of this young guy. When I met him I know why. He is full of life, positive, exuberant, wanting to help, wanting to learn, wanting to belong. He sums up the spirit of what is happening today in this hidden little treasure called Toowoomba South. It mightn't be perfect and I am sure it has it's bad days like the rest of us but the lessons being taught each day on this Southern part of Ruthven St ensure that the future is looking very bright for all of us.