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CALISTA GIRLS’ SCHOOL: ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY

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Each year since 2008, Australian school students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 have been required to sit for a battery of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy. The tests bear the ubiquitous acronym NAPLAN, which stands for National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy. Detailed individual student performance information is released to schools, and less detailed information is released to the public via the federal government’s My School website. One of the most interesting sets of data is the ‘like schools’ comparison, whereby a school’s results are compared with those of schools with a similar socio-economic index (SEI). A more general ‘league table’ of results is also published and good results are regarded (unofficially) as a valuable marketing tool — in much the same way as year 12 results are used. Such was the case with Calista Girls’ School, one of Australia’s most prestigious private schools.

Established in 1919, the school had a fee and social structure that deterred all but the very wealthy and well connected. Demand outstripped supply and even though Calista could pick and choose its clientele, the daughters of ‘old girls’ always had priority. Academically, Calista girls seemed to do well, but the ethos for as long as anyone could remember was that academic achievement, though important, was secondary to social achievement. This comfortable, non-threatening approach to a young lady’s education continued year after year and no-one thought it necessary to upset the status quo — until the first set of NAPLAN results proved otherwise. Compared with like schools, Calista’s results were well below the norm; compared with all schools, the results were little better than the best government schools and some low-fee private schools. The press had a field day and when questioned, Calista’s long-serving principal, Jane Westfield, maintained that the school’s holistic approach was more important than NAPLAN results, which, to quote the principal, ‘are not the only measure of a school’s worth’. Mrs Westfield’s response was a standard response, but deep down she knew a better answer was required. Under pressure she was unused to, Jane, her deputies and her learning area heads attempted to unravel the data. This was the easy part; the hard part was what to do about it. With the Board’s support, an organisational development consultant with expertise in education was hired. What follows is part of a conversation between the consultant — respected former principal Ben Pasarelli — and Jane some three months into the 2009 school year.

Ben: I started with your staff and it proved interesting in many ways, not the least of which was that most of your teachers are former students. When I asked them how they came to be employed, it appears they were referred by other teachers or by parents. For example, when you promoted your year 7 teacher to the position of middle-school head, she recommended her good friend Jessica who, like her, was an ‘old girl’. Jessica, it seems, had not taught for many years because she was raising a family; the oldest, incidentally, is in year 2 here at Calista. There are other examples but I think you get the picture. Anecdotally, the few who are not ‘old girls’ feel they are regarded as outsiders and do not have much chance for advancement. I gather there is quite a high turnover amongst this group.

Jane: Well, when I was appointed it was apparent this was how it was done. It saves time and money. I also find that our ‘old girls’ know the culture and ethos. From what I have seen, the system works well.

Bob: Right . . . let’s continue. Do you realise how little teaching your teachers do? Let’s start with the teachers in years 1–6. Their students have specialist teachers for physical education, French, art, IT and science. This specialist time equates to 2.5 days a week — which means each classroom teacher sees her pupils for 2.5 days, during which time she teaches literacy, numeracy, society and enterprise, technology and health education. In some cases teachers job share, which means even less contact. In fact, if you deduct time for the weekly assembly and a fortnightly chapel service the face-to-face time drops further. Your specialist teachers and middle- and upper-school teachers have the same conditions, if not a little more generous. I gather these conditions are considered a trade-off for camps and compulsory attendance at weekend sports days, fetes and the like.

Jane: Well, the parents pay for and expect specialist teachers just as they pay for and expect small classes. Anyway, the 2.5 days non-teaching time means teachers are readily available to parents. The generous conditions also help us attract and retain quality staff. All you have to do is look at last year’s staff survey to see how satisfied
the teachers are. The fact that so few staff leave shows that we are doing something right.

**Bob:** Okay . . . let’s continue. I also looked at the reports teachers write and, invariably, the marks and comments were at odds with the NAPLAN data. I have one here: Samantha, year 5, spelling — the teacher gave her a ‘B’ with the comment ‘Samantha makes very few mistakes but learns quickly from them’. Her NAPLAN spelling result showed she was only just above the minimum standard. Why is this so?

**Jane:** Well, NAPLAN is simply one test on one day. Maybe the girl wasn’t concentrating.

**Bob:** One maybe, but the whole school!

**Jane:** You are probably exaggerating. I suppose we will have to look into this but I do not see it as a big issue.

**Bob:** Moving on . . . I was interested in how little professional development and collaboration is undertaken. Other than your year 12 teachers who have to moderate work, most teachers do none and the few who do attend courses pretty much choose what they like and when they like. Last year you paid for five teachers to attend a conference in Auckland on behaviour management. Because it was during the first term holidays, the teachers were given time off in lieu — generous indeed. I wouldn’t have thought, though, behaviour was much of a problem here.

**Jane:** Teachers use their professional judgement as to what they attend and we offer time off in lieu as an incentive to attend during holidays or on weekends. But you know this.

**Bob:** Even so, not many take the time and trouble to attend professional development courses. You have to wonder why. I gather, too, there is no obligation or follow-up on the part of those who attend courses. You know, did the course make a difference? Did they present the information to others? Was the new knowledge transferred?

**Jane:** Look, you were engaged to investigate our NAPLAN results and all you are doing is talking about the teachers and how easy they have it. You are also implying I do not know what is going on.

**Bob:** To be frank, my perception is that you have little idea of what your teachers do and what happens in classrooms. As a matter of fact, what do you do?

**Jane:** Most of my time is taken up liaising with parents, going to meetings, overseeing the budget, public relations and attending conferences. Teacher performance and curriculum matters are in the hands of my deputies.

**Bob:** And do you monitor these?

**Jane:** I ask them and they tell me.

**Bob:** How often?

**Jane:** We meet a couple of times a year to go over things.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Where do you think Bob’s discussion is heading?
2. In the context of competency standards, what can Jane do to address Calista’s poor NAPLAN results?
3. In pairs, continue the conversation between Bob and Jane to the point where you think Bob will have achieved his purpose.
4. In small groups, discuss the contention that satisfied workers are productive workers.
5. With reference to figure 5.3 on the job analysis process, what methods of data collection should Jane employ to become fully informed as to what her teachers actually do?