

Finding the Right Recipe to Empower Student Agency

*Empowering student agency at Broadmeadows Special Developmental School through a specially designed **Cake Catering** program within the Secondary curriculum, through which our students truly shine as motivated, engaged, invested and driven learners.*

The Broadmeadows SDS Secondary curriculum framework is specifically designed to meet the needs of a diverse Secondary student population. The major goal of the Secondary Program is to educate students to their maximum potential and equip them to be valued and connected members of their community. A core focus of the Secondary Curriculum is providing students with meaningful and authentic teaching and learning experiences that empower each young person to be autonomous, resilient and valued for their individual strengths, skills and personal qualities.

A new Cake Catering program has become a core element of our Internal Work Experience programs as a direct result of student led interest in cooking, learning new recipes and particularly cooking for others. The Cake Catering program provides Secondary students with an authentic opportunity to develop cooking skills that can be applied throughout life and skills that can support students to be more actively involved and engaged in cooking at home/family life - skills that are valued and recognised by others and that ensure that students can meaningfully make a contribution to their personal or extended community. A significant feature of the program is providing a platform through which students can develop personal interests for leisure and possibly open up post-school experiences and build self-esteem, self-worth and for the students to view themselves as active and skilled young people who are valued and highly respected.

The students are highly invested in the program, as they know the focus or goal that they are working towards and are driven to see their work come to life and love the idea of making a 'birthday cake' for someone. They show their investment through their actions - by asking to see the cakes once out of oven, giving up their free time to make and decorate and deliver the cakes, asking about who the cake is for, asking about their party afterwards and wanting to know if they enjoyed the cake. The school publicly recognises their commitment to the program, their abilities and their contribution to the community through regular articles in the school newsletter. This not only celebrates the work of the students currently involved in the program but also recognises and thanks the families that have ordered a cake, thereby supporting the school and its programs. The newsletter celebrations have a further impact by showing younger students, and indeed their families, the learning opportunities ahead of them in their Secondary years.

As part of the program, students have requested to make cakes for particular staff members, when it is known that their birthday is approaching. The strength of the positive relationships between students and staff saw a group of students choose to work for all of their break times for 3 consecutive days to create a specially chosen cake for one particular teacher's birthday. After baking and assembling a 5 layer cake, they decorated it using frosting spatulas, piping bags, decorations and fragile fondant. The students then delivered the cake to the teacher on her birthday, beaming with pride and joy at the exchange. After sharing an afternoon celebration with that teacher as a spontaneous 'thank you' for their gift, the teacher wrote each student a thank you card, which they treasured. This truly symbolised the power the program has had, resulting in the students feeling valued as skilled, able and thoughtful young people who contribute to their world and to others around them.

As further recognition of their efforts, skill development and true teamwork, a small group of Secondary students attended a very special community based excursion in 2018 to see Sugar Republic – a food based, interactive art installation. To formally and powerfully acknowledge the students for their work but also their enthusiasm and focus within their catering work, the school wanted to do something special to acknowledge their part in this important Internal Work Experience program and the many skills they have developed. The Sugar Republic exhibition was a wonderful way to continue their joy of food and cooking and to celebrate their engagement in their learning. This was planned as an extra-curricular excursion, with the students staying back after school and travelling together for an evening booking at the exhibition - the darker twilight and evening light made it incredibly special and atmospheric. This experience was not only recognition of what they have done, and something to inspire the students to continue to engage in these tasks that they are experiencing so much success in.

The Cake Catering program has created powerful teaching and learning experiences within a highly authentic environment (using specialty tools and equipment) in which the students thrive and actively choose to give up their free time to engage in the program. The Cake Catering program has truly represented a program which reflects the knowledge that "young people who find their own voice in supportive school environment are more likely to develop a confident voice, a capacity to act in the world and a willingness to lead others. By empowering students [we have been able to] enhance student engagement and enrich their participation

in the classroom, school and community ... [and have helped] students to 'own' their learning and development and [created] a positive climate for learning." (Victorian State Government Department of Education and Training, 2018, Amplify, pg. 6).