



# Changing tack

Old habits are hard to break.

Generations of school teachers have clambered onto chairs and desks, even cupboards, to display children's colourful interpretations of the world around them.

But Inga Booth, teacher and OHS representative at St Rose Catholic primary school on Sydney's northern beaches, has made it her job to change all that.

"I remind teachers to use ladders, rather than get up on a child's desk to hang work up. It might be easier to climb on to a desk, but if you keep doing it there's a good chance you'll get sore shoulders or sore arms or have a fall," she says. "Some things are slow to change, but once things are put in place, after a while they become second nature."

St Rose, a school of 14 staff members and 174 children between kindy and year six, has made occupational health and safety a priority in recent years.

Although teaching is not a high-risk profession, there are occupational hazards; and the presence of children means safety needs to be front of mind, says principal Josie Vescio.

The playground is an area where accidents can occur for children and teachers. "It's important for teachers to be able to monitor the children and walk around without any obstructions," says Vescio.

Disruption due to extensive building works have provided extra safety challenges in recent years, with classes taking place in demountable rooms and barrier fencing protruding into the playground.

"I was the port of call for the site manager and I would pass information on to staff," says Vescio. "It also worked the other way. There were a couple of things that staff, even parents, were

concerned about and they just came straight to me and I approached the site management."

Consultation has been central to the school's efforts to boost the profile of OHS. At St Rose, the small staff size is a bonus for creating effective, open channels of communication.

The primary means of consultation is through the weekly staff meeting, where OHS is raised as part of general business.

"Everyone's point of view is sought if there's an OHS issue raised during a staff meeting," says Louise Mitchell.

"We talk about things like changing equipment or procedures, why we're changing the approach and how people feel about it. Then there's consultation after a change has taken place where we check how it's all going. People are very open and will say what they think about it."

Recent safety initiatives prompted by consultation include the installation of a floodlight in the staff parking area; and the purchase of OHS-approved ladders for displaying work in classrooms.

Discussing OHS regularly with the whole staff, rather than in a private committee meeting, is the biggest factor in effective consultation at the school, says Booth. But it's backed up by systems – including weekly staff memos, risk assessment forms, and an OHS book – to make sure that once reported, concerns are dealt with.

"The paperwork involved in establishing the OHS system was overwhelming, it felt like we were drowning in paper and post-it notes and highlighters.

"But now things are in place it's easy to maintain. Having a united approach to OHS and putting it in writing means we're working to make everyone safe: not just students, but teaching staff, admin staff, parents, visitors, priests and anybody that comes here to the school."

St Rose Catholic Primary School



*Josie Vescio*

“I think consulting with staff has a concrete impact on safety. Staff always want to be heard and want to know that you are following through - that’s the biggest thing.

It’s well and good for them to come and say ‘Look Josie, that ladder’s not high enough,’ but if I just say ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’ and do nothing, it’s meaningless.”

*Josie Vescio*  
Principal

“There was a lot of consultation around where to keep the ladders and how to use them.

We had to think about where we could store the ladders where no-one would trip over them; but also so that staff didn’t have to carry them too far – especially when we have staff who are pregnant. Now we have them in resource rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs.”

*Inga Booth*  
Teacher



*Inga Booth*

“The awareness of OHS issues is very high across the staff. People know the procedures and they know where to access the relevant paperwork.

In the classrooms we have forms people need to fill in regarding accidents, incidents, risks, and potential hazards in the playground and classroom. The process is to hand it to the principal or the OHS rep.”

*Louise Mitchell*  
Teacher



*Louise Mitchell*