

The Southport School helps students better understand themselves and others with the Myers-Briggs® instrument

How can teachers understand students' learning styles and flex their approach to get better results in the classroom?

A few years ago, The Southport School (TSS), in keeping with its supportive tradition and culture, initiated a special focus on individualizing instruction to the learning needs of the student. Headmaster Greg Wain began looking for ways to help students understand how they learn best and to help teachers understand how they can flex their instruction style to deliver content more effectively. This research led Wain to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) instrument, the world's most widely used personality assessment.

Solution

The MBTI® assessment: creating self-awareness

The MBTI® instrument is a psychometrically validated assessment used by the majority of the Fortune 100 to improve the performance of individuals, teams and leaders. It is also used by high schools, colleges and universities around the world to help students perform better and choose and prepare for satisfying and fulfilling careers.

Business Challenges

- Helping teachers understand different learning styles so they can teach more effectively

Company Profile

Established in 1901, The Southport School (TSS) in Queensland, Australia, is a boarding school for boys that aims to develop tomorrow's leaders through holistic education. Offering a rigorous academic program, it emphasizes giving students everything they need to succeed in life—especially leadership skills.

The values of the Anglican Church, with which TSS is affiliated, are infused throughout the school's culture, which for more than a century has focused on providing a warm, safe and caring environment for the students.

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While the instrument's value in educational settings is well established, what specifically caught Wain's interest was how it was used in corporate contexts. Fascinated by how the MBTI® instrument was leveraged in leadership development, team building, learning, career development and other aspects of professional life, Wain began examining ways the School could use it to help students become better, more self-aware people.

Developing an MBTI® program

Mark Herriman, Dean of Curriculum Innovation, was tasked with investigating the feasibility of implementing an MBTI® project at TSS. To set the process in motion, Herriman established a research team comprising staff members who had expressed interest in such a program. Rather than rolling out a full program and hoping it would work, Herriman's team proceeded incrementally.

They started in 2011 by selecting five classes at the School to pilot the MBTI® program. They began taking students through the assessment process and, with full student/parent permission, populating a dedicated database with the results. After all students had completed the process, the research team gave the teachers a set of strategies and asked them to begin using them in their classes. The team implemented a pre/post survey to assess the value of the program and determined that both students and teachers believed the program had enhanced the ability to teach and learn and helped create a more engaging setting.

In 2012, after a successful test run, the research team rolled out the program on a larger scale, assessing all full-time faculty members and providing them with student MBTI® information. To date, Herriman and his team have taken all Year 10 and Year 11 students through the assessment process and provided their teachers with learning and engagement strategies. Herriman plans to assess Year 12 students as well.

Solution

- Take students through the MBTI assessment and share results with teachers (with parent/student consent)
- Provide teaching strategies for different learning types
- Take teachers through the MBTI assessment to improve their self-awareness and understanding of MBTI type

“ For teachers, the main takeaway is that they have a preferred learning style themselves. ”

Greg Wain,
Headmaster, The
Southport School

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Giving teachers and students new insight

One of the most immediate objectives of the program was to improve the effectiveness of classroom instruction. Herriman's team began by looking at how the MBTI® instrument is used to identify learning preferences and how such insight could help teachers better engage students in the curriculum.

One hurdle was to ensure that the information would not create a burden for instructors. To be effective, teachers would need to be able to quickly and easily access and apply the MBTI® information in the classroom. So, the research team developed a spreadsheet that provided key information from students' assessment results. "The simpler you make the process, the more people will adopt it and see its benefits," says Herriman. The spreadsheet includes a breakdown of the personality preferences of each student in the class, a high-level overview of learning styles associated with those preferences, and tips for more effective engagement based on those styles.

For example, tips for the Extraversion and Introversion preferences include:

- Extraversion: Learn best through variety, including open discussion and hands-on experiences (group work, practical activities and role plays)
- Introversion: Learn best through quiet work, clear instruction and time to think before answering

Teachers seeking greater detail can access a handbook that provides more in-depth information about personality type and how to apply it in a learning context.

The spreadsheet also identifies the "dominant type," or the personality type that is most representative of the student population in the class, and offers a strategy for engaging students of that type. In cases where there is no clear dominant type, the

Results

- More engaged students as a result of adapting projects, depending on type
- Increased self-awareness and understanding of others means students are better prepared for careers in leadership
- Widespread enthusiasm following the program's success it's being rolled out to other areas in the school

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teacher receives a more general strategy. Though all classes contain a variety of personality types, understanding type-based learning preferences helps teachers address a wide range of needs. For instance, a teacher might break up the class for a certain project and allow the students with a preference for Extraversion, who tend to be energized by interaction with others, to work in a group and those with a preference for Introversion, who tend to be energized by internal reflection, to work independently.

TSS has found that while most teachers tend to like being ordered and planned, about half of the boys at the school are less sequential in their thinking. Once the teachers become aware of such differences in learning style, they can give the boys assignments that allow them to take a more flexible approach, which in turn helps them stay engaged. “For teachers, the information coming from the Myers-Briggs® assessment is extra information about the students that helps them tailor teaching to their needs,” says Herriman.


For students, this information has been extremely helpful as well. “I’ve tried for many years to work by myself and it’s not been so good,” commented one student. “I realize now that I prefer Extraversion, so I work better in groups.”

Helping teachers understand the role of their own type in the classroom

Herriman stresses that, in order to effectively use type-based insight, teachers need to experience the MBTI® instrument first-hand and understand their own personality type. For two years now, TSS has been taking staff members through the assessment process. The school has four MBTI® Certified Practitioners on campus and a process in place to assess all new staff members. All current teaching staff have taken the MBTI® assessment and gone through the type verification process.

The certified practitioners at the school have also begun administering the instrument to the school executive staff.

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“For teachers, the main take away is that they have a preferred learning style themselves,” says Wain. “When I started out teaching, I believed my learning style was the one that would suit the boys the best, when in fact there are fifteen other learning styles.”

According to Herriman, taking teachers through the assessment process has been a very effective way of engaging them in the program and getting them interested in personality type. “Teachers are able to communicate type concepts to students much more effectively because they understand them from the standpoint of their own personality type. They’re not just teaching an abstract concept—they’re communicating something that they are familiar with on a personal level, which helps them make it more tangible for the students.”

Results

Developing tomorrow’s leaders

The MBTI® program is just one aspect of a wider emphasis on helping students gain self- knowledge and then using that knowledge to better understand others. All of this, says Herriman, ties back to the school’s focus on leadership, which is promoted in the TSS crest and motto: Learning to Lead.

“Everything we do in the Myers-Briggs® program falls under this Leadership Development framework. We’re getting students to think about the bigger picture—how to communicate with others, work as a team and manage stress, which are all very important aspects of leadership in today’s world.”

One important facet of leadership involves helping the students identify a career path that will enable them to maximize the use of their talents so that they can excel to their full potential. TSS is using information from the MBTI® Form M Career Report to help students become familiar with careers to which people with their personality type tend to gravitate and how their preferences relate to the day-to-day functioning of those specific jobs. Additionally, TSS’s basketball coach has worked closely with one of the School’s MBTI practitioners to help instil principles of leadership in the players. The school credits this application of the instrument as a contributing factor in the team’s success.

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Conclusion

TSS teachers in general report an increased ability to understand their students since the inception of the MBTI® program. Additionally, parents have responded positively to the program, appreciating the insight it has provided into their sons' preferences for thinking, learning, communicating, working and socializing. "We've got the full support of leadership, staff and the students and will continue to expand the use of the MBTI® assessment as we discover new benefits."

To date, not a single parent or student has declined the assessment. In fact, parents consider the MBTI® program a huge strength of the school. From early on, it has been viewed as a success, and in fact it has received accolades from Australian national TV media—Yahoo!7's "Sunrise" co-host David Koch commented: "That's really progressive teaching."

TSS is currently in year two of a planned three-year implementation. It sees the MBTI® program as a way to further extend its values into all aspects of school life. "As we continue to build the program, we will also build type-based insight into our culture," says Herriman.



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