

## A SCHEME THAT PAIRS EXECUTIVES WITH SCHOOLS CONNECTS PARALLEL WORLDS. AND THE SUITS ARE FINDING THEY GET AS MUCH AS THEY GIVE

STORY ROSE-ANNE MANNS // PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW QUILTY

**A GROUP** of senior executives from some of the country's biggest companies got together in 2004 to use their business skills to help the most disadvantaged schools in south-west Sydney, NSW. But it quickly became clear that the Australian Business and Community Network (ABCN) wasn't just a sop to charity.

The rule was the companies couldn't be involved unless the CEO was personally active in mentoring a school principal. At first a small group of 13 CEOs participated. Then some students were matched to other staff. In the three years since, ABCN has touched the lives of almost 14,000 students, and has exposed almost 1500 professionals to some special experiences and a world many didn't know existed just a few kilometres from their comfortable inner-city offices.

ABCN's low-key programs now include Partners in Learning, where CEOs or chairmen are matched with principals or deputy principals; the GOALS program, where professionals mentor Year 9 students, and the SPARK program, where corporate volunteers buddy-up to tutor primary school kids in literacy. The network has mushroomed to cover 28 businesses, including some of Australia's biggest listed companies, working with 63 schools across four states.

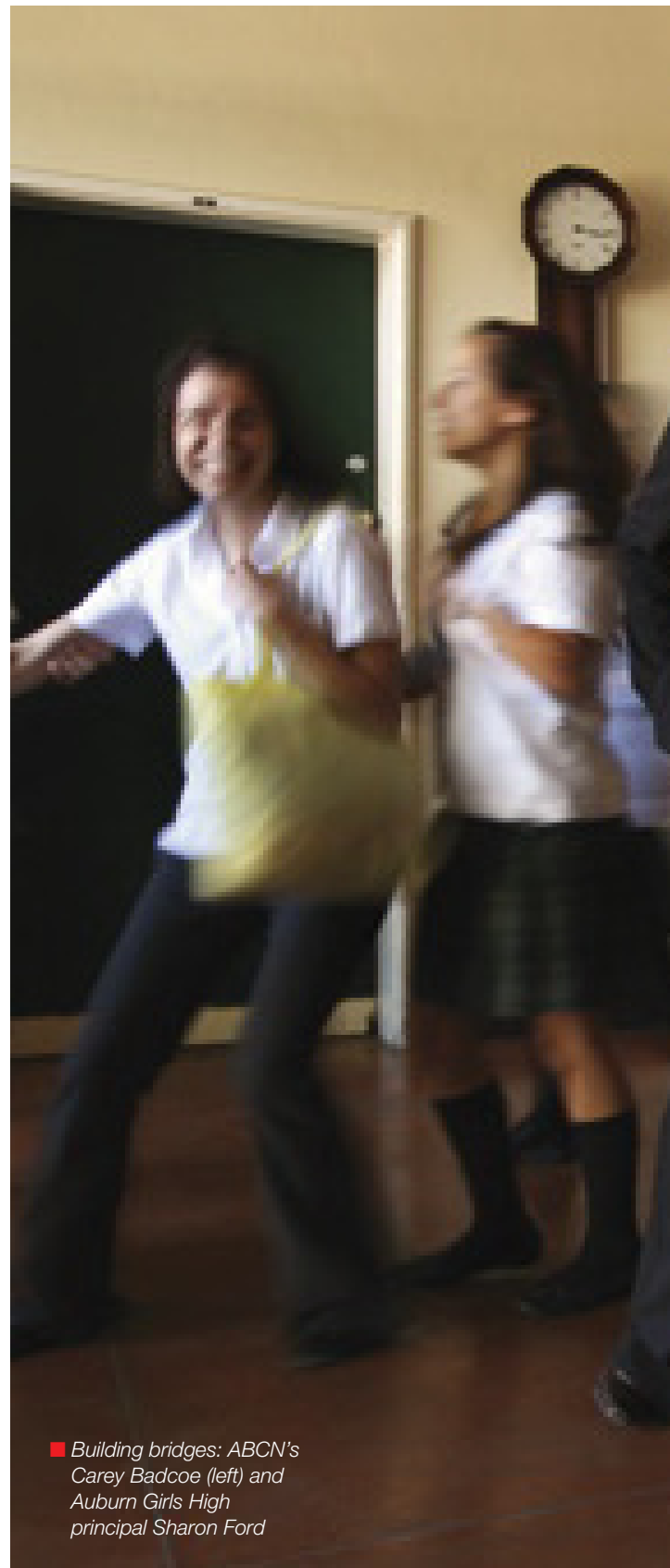
Doug Jukes, until recently the national chairman of KPMG and now global head of people, was one of the founding members of ABCN. He partnered with Sharon Ford, the principal of Auburn Girls High, a school where 92 per cent of the students are Muslim. "I was impressed with the tone [Ford] set, the way she mentored her staff, the way she communicated," Jukes says. "A good head teacher is not dissimilar from a CEO. I learned a lot. To call me a mentor isn't right.

For her part, Sharon Ford feels the program's main benefit is it inspires the schoolgirls to contemplate careers outside of Auburn. "If we can continue to stretch their horizons then we're well on the way to helping them be much more employable," she says.

"ABCN is the best thing I've ever been involved in," Jukes enthuses. "Because the CEO or chairman is involved, it sends a great message to employees."

It's a message employees are increasingly demanding to hear. Catherine Hunter, KPMG's corporate citizenship director, says the business reason for being involved with such community initiatives is to make the company an employer of choice, especially for the 500 Gen-Y graduates KPMG takes in each year. "We've had some young graduates stand up and ask the CEO, 'Well, what are you doing on a personal level in terms of your community involvement?'" she says.

ABCN's chief executive is Carey Badcoe, formerly head of community at insurer IAG, who has a background in community, arts and indigenous programs. "I'm a person who goes in and starts things," she says. "I like opening doors that are closed for no good reason." While Badcoe was at IAG, CEO Mike Hawker – one of the 13 founding members of the network – asked her to research what community initiative would deliver the highest value. They decided education should be the focus. "It was important the initiative not be just a feel-good exercise," Badcoe says. "The gaps were around professional development for principals and teachers."



■ Building bridges: ABCN's Carey Badcoe (left) and Auburn Girls High principal Sharon Ford



# Two-way street

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In many ways, the business challenges faced by CEOs pale in comparison to some of the challenges principals face. Public school principals don't hire their own staff, they can't reward them with bonuses or pay rises, they have to deal with lots of difficult people, all the while managing on very small budgets. As one principal put it, they can only trade on sheer inspiration.

After starting at the top, the partnerships began to filter down to the next level, involving corporate volunteers, teachers and students who would not otherwise have the chance to encounter a professional from the CBD. The two worlds are starkly different. “These kids have no relationship with the city,” Badcoe says, citing the example of a student who couldn't grasp where the CEO parked his car – he had no concept of underground carparks. For example, in Sydney, even though students live only a few kilometres from a capital city CBD, some have never been to the beach or over the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The ABCN also runs Career Choice Days, where they bring groups of school kids to meet their mentors in the city, learn about interview skills and tour workplaces. Many are agog at the lifts or office showers, and surprised at the new skills they learn. “These are our customers, and our future workforce,” Badcoe says. And, she adds, these potential recruits are more resilient, often coming from poorer homes and having to straddle two cultures.

The scheme opens the eyes of students (and their parents) to a world of possibilities. Studies into their school behaviour before and after involvement in the program indicate it is having a positive impact. Schools report a decline in unexplained absences and detentions for Year 9 students involved in the program, and that their academic marks increase. Even more

important, 85 per cent of the Year 9 students say the scheme changed their future aspirations, with a big jump in those planning to go to university or learn a trade instead of leaving school at the end of year 10.

Mentors of the students also benefit, and not just because of the feelgood factor. “I've learned how to listen better,” says Cameron Sojan, a senior manager with American Express. “You go through a lot of training in big corporates but I found it so challenging mentoring Year 9 students. Typically, 14-year-old boys grunt. Sometimes you can fill silence with empty words and meaningless talk. I've discovered how to ask probing questions and pause to allow space. I apply it to the management of my team and colleagues now. I could shut up more.”

For Kevin Farmer, community relations manager with Goldman Sachs JBWere and another foundation member, the benefits are about making staff – often from very privileged backgrounds – more tolerant of true diversity. The corporate volunteers must travel to outer city suburbs to meet their charges, forcing them to take public transport and ask directions from people who look and sound very different from them.

“[Our company] is in just CBD locations,” Farmer says. “We've got people who come in and climb into these towers and sit here all day and go home. This reconnects them – reminds them there's the rest of the world out there.”

The reciprocal nature of the ABCN scheme is nowhere more visible than at property group Stockland's headquarters, adorned with artwork done by students from Fairfield High. The school is building a specialty in art and its students take art commissions to raise money to buy materials. Siobhan Toohill, Stockland's general manager of corporate responsibility and sustainability, says the company commissioned the school to produce artwork for its new head office: “It teaches the kids about project management, dealing with a timeframe and working to a budget.”

Bob Dunne, the former principal of Fairfield High School, has been a CEO mentor. During a speech he summed up the depth of impact the program has had with his reflections on bridging the gap between the corporate world and the real world. “Fairfield High School was, in many ways, an island,” he said. “Walk around and you will see and hear that 96 per cent of the students come from a non-English speaking background. In many senses my students had been invisible to the corporate world. They were invisible with their hijabs, their black skins, their backgrounds and ethnicity. In the same way the corporate world was invisible to them. Replace the hijab with a suit, the colour of skin with the closeness of networks, the socio-economic background with the large glass-fronted buildings.”

Carey Badcoe says there's a 10-year plan to extend the network to include small businesses and public sector organisations. She envisages expanding the range of programs to include a concept that pairs science, maths and engineering specialists in business with teachers of those subjects. As with the other programs, the idea is that this collaboration will trickle down to the pupils. **B**

