**Celebrating guidance officer week with Dominic Towler**

*In recognition of Guidance officer week Dominic Towler provides an insight into this unique career and explains why becoming a guidance officer was the best decision he has ever made. Dominic is a former classroom teacher, year level coordinator and head of year. He has been a guidance officer in Queensland state schools for more than 20 years.*

**Announcer:**

This is Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Guidance officers play an important role in Queensland State Schools. For more than 70 years, guidance offices have supported, guided, and inspired our students. Hi, I'm Virginia Bowdidge from the Department of Education. Joining me to talk about the role of guidance offices is Dominic Towler. Dom has more than 20 years’ experience as a guidance officer. Thanks for talking to me, Dom.

**Dominic Towler**:

That's all right. Thank you for having me, Virginia.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

Why did you choose to become a guidance officer?

**Dominic Towler**:

I guess the main reason I chose to become a guidance officer was because I wasn't very happy in the role I was in. I'd progressed up the ladder of being a classroom teacher to a year level coordinator, and then a head of department. I guess it just wasn't doing it for me in terms of satisfaction. I looked around at other things I could possibly do. I did a bit of extensive research by contracting a company to look at career exploration, and one of their suggestions was that I should consider being a guidance officer. The more I looked into it, the more I thought this sounds like a great job.

The way I did it was I was still... I was actually doing an acting deputy principal role at a big high school, and I undertook one subject in the Masters of Guidance and Counseling at QUT. It was introductory counseling, and I absolutely loved that study. It was the first time in my whole studying career that I really loved what I was learning. It was a bit of a no brainer then to leave my role and take a year off so I could dedicate my whole time to becoming a guidance officer. It was great. I really, really enjoyed it. And the more I did it, the more I loved it.

It really taught me a good lesson about finding something you love, study becomes a lot easier then. Whereas if it's something you do because you think you like it, it can be a bit laborious and a bit of a chore.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

How long have you been a guidance officer?

**Dominic Towler**:

I've been a guidance officer for about 22 years now. That makes me feel old saying that, but I've absolutely loved my role as a guidance officer. It was the best decision I made to go back and retrain and become a guidance officer.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

In the past, guidance offices focused on career guidance. How has this focus changed in the last 20 years?

**Dominic Towler**:

That's a big question, Virginia. I think there's been considerable changes in the way the guidance officer role is being conducted in schools. There's a much greater emphasis now in looking at the overall child and the overall student and trying to help students reach their potential really. I see my role very much as someone who looks and works in, probably as an advocate, with students to try and help them achieve their potential and choose a pathway that's going to give them the best possible outcomes.

Parents do get to see the breadth and depth of our role. Because one week we might be working with students involving their subject selections and planning for their senior courses down to working with students who might have suffered a serious setback or significant loss, the death of someone important, or a critical incident has occurred. We enable special provisions to help students reach their potential.

We do a lot more work with parents, so it's much more a partnership now. It's not uncommon for me to have mother or father or both in a session with me with students because mom's and dad's sometimes they can't get through or get the message across or can't communicate with their child. I think that's one thing guidance officers do have a good ability to do, and that is to connect with teenage kids. If you're a primary school GO, it would be children. Sometimes the messages we impart to kids are exactly the same as what the parents might be saying.

I think we have that ability to sort of connect with students and help them see it from a different perspective. We very much try to let students see that we're their advocate. We don't try to be their friend. I try to draw a very clear line with students and let them know clearly, "I'm not your friend, but I am certainly someone who's going to advocate for you and fight for you as best I can and help you achieve the best possible things." And sometimes that means giving you messages or talking about things where you've made really bad choices.

I usually say to kids, "I'm going to tell you straight. My job is to really support you. You're never going to get in trouble with me. You never will be disciplined. It's really about trying to help you make better choices if you've made bad choices, or get your message across if you aren't able to get it across and you feel people aren't hearing or listening to you."

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

How do you describe your role to parents?

**Dominic Towler**:

I explain to parents that basically my role is to help students. It's a problem-solving role to help them reach their potential, be that through counseling one-on-one or in small groups, associated with things like grief, as I explained before, or maybe trauma or some critical incident. Things just happen all the time. This week alone I've talked to students about a parent dying, talked to students about a car accident where they were extremely traumatized. Right through to things like psychometric testing, where we assess students' abilities. We do an IQ assessment and other adaptive behavior tests. I explain to parents that our role is a technical role, but also we're trained as counselors to try and join with kids to try and help them achieve their potential and their goals. Sometimes that involves us counseling students for a number of sessions over a long period of time, you could call it mentoring, I suppose. But it's more in depth than that because we're specifically trying to target a thing we're trying to help that student improve in.

It's a confidential service, and I guess that's what makes us a little bit different to teachers. In a closed environment, we can offer students an opportunity to talk one-on-one with someone and be really heard. And I think that makes a big difference. Of course, we explain to parents and students there's limits around that confidentiality. We are bound by student protection protocols and policies. But at the end of the day, most students understand that you're there to try and help them.

And if you explain that if they talk about some form of abuse or some form of harm, that we're not going to keep that a secret. It's in their best interest for us to do something about that.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

What do you see as the most important aspect of your role?

**Dominic Towler**:

Well, I think it is to be an advocate for students and make sure that their rights are 100% catered for, but it's also, as in the name describes, it is about guidance. Sometimes guiding students and helping them see that what they've done is not good is actually a very helpful thing in their development, because we all make mistakes. I don't try and minimize students' mistakes when they make them. I just basically say that we all make mistakes and talk about my own ability to make some pretty serious mistakes in my lifetime.

And I think everyone has the same experience. It's about helping students see that we're there to try and help them and work with them and advocate for them to try and get the very best outcomes we can for them. That's not just in terms of educationally and academically. It might also be in terms of their social skilling, their networking with friendships, their ability to pursue careers and choose the right sorts of careers or pathways for the next steps after they've finished school.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

What do you love about your job?

**Dominic Towler**:

Okay, that's a good question. What do I love about my job? Look, I love everything about my job. I really do believe it's a brilliant job, and it's an incredible privilege to work in our role. I never take for granted the trust that students and often parents place in us or in me, in particular, in my experience. It's sort of like being allowed in. I think that's an incredible privilege to be in that situation where students will talk about really important things that happened in their lives or things that they're struggling with.

I sort of see my role as holding their hand and working with them to try and sometimes overcome those adversities or their confusions about things. But I love the way it's student focused and your work in a team. It's not just me. I can liaise with teachers, and being a teacher, that's very valuable having that in your background. You understand the pressures on teachers, and you understand the pressures on students, but you work as a team to try and bring about change.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

What do you find challenging about your job?

**Dominic Towler**:

I guess helping kids see their own potential. I see every student has got flecks of gold in them. I really think that. And sometimes they're a product of what's happened in their environment or their situation they're living in that's led them down to that path where they're at.

Sometimes sanctioning them and ask them to leave the school is the best thing for them because it helps them see they've made really bad choices, but at the end of the day, I do believe every student has goodness in them. Our job is to try and amplify those good things that is in every student and try and help them see that themselves, because sometimes students don't see that. They are given messages that they are not worthwhile and they have nothing good to offer, and so they turn to other ways to try and make sense of the world, I think.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

What have you found surprising about the role?

**Dominic Towler**:

One thing I do find surprising is the trust that students do place in me. What students will confide in you - and parents as well - is amazing. They really do take you into their lives sometime and share probably the most intimate most things. That's a real privilege. It also was a big surprise to me just how busy you are all the time. You're multitasking constantly and trying to prioritise what's to be done when, because multiple things cross your desk or come on the phone or on the emails.

People knock on my door and you just have to try and prioritize what is best. And you have to make that decision yourself, because you are the best person in that role to make that decision.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

Do you think you need a certain temperament to become a guidance officer?

**Dominic Towler**:

Not really. I think a good guidance officer uses their unique personality to carve out their own style and their own strategies and techniques they're going to use to cover the breadth of temperaments and personalities of all the different students and teachers and parents you'll see. I think it's good to have a variety of temperaments in the role actually, because then it matches the variety of temperaments you'll have with kids. I think the important thing is understanding yourself. It's interesting because this job has given me, I would argue, a lot more than I'd given it.

You learn a lot about yourself in the role. Through a lot of professional development that you do and soul-searching and thinking about things that worked and didn't work, you learn a lot about yourself. I love that aspect of the job because I believe we're always on a pathway to continual growth and learning about ourselves. You never really ever fully know.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

Would you recommend it as a profession?

**Dominic Towler**:

Yes and no. You need to be very calm and directional in a crisis, and you will be confronted with some extremely difficult information and news. I think that sometimes can be incredibly demanding and taxing both professionally as to know what to do and also personally. You can't help but get deeply affected sometimes by some of the things that do happen. It's a great job if you are prepared to take that sort of thing on, if you'd like to do that.

**Virginia Bowdidge**:

Thanks for your time today, Dom. It's always inspiring talking to someone so committed to helping Queensland students.

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