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"I sometimes say that I'm a single married woman," laughs Dib's wife Erin, a teacher of Japanese at Sydney Secondary College's Blackwattle Bay campus, with whom Dib has three children. "He's busy but he's a completely dedicated father and when he is at home, he is solely focused on the kids." Dib's father, a community leader and former board member of Sydney's largest mosque in Lakemba, reckons his son is unique in a family that includes Dib's brother Billy, the current world IBF featherweight boxing champion. "I'm very, very proud of him," says Ali of son Jihad, "but he's the only one that turns up late to our weekly family dinners."

In the middle of 2012, Dib finally had a decent excuse for his dad. He became one of only two school principals in Australia seconded to Canberra for six months to help the federal government formulate its new, and controversial, Empowering Local Schools policy. Over the next seven years, the \$475-million trial initiative aims to support individual schools in choosing how they spend their state and federal funding. Dib knows the program has rankled many of his peers.

"It's a bit like hearing my name and thinking it means holy war," he says. "People hear Empowering Local Schools and think it means hiring and firing teachers. Both things can be taken to the extreme and portrayed like that, but the reality is far more complicated."

Maurie Mulheron, the president of the NSW Teachers Federation, thinks the policy is simply a cover for funding cuts. A former Punchbowl Boys High student himself, Mulheron believes that the program, in concert with a similar drive for school autonomy by the NSW state government, is "a deceit designed to cover the loss of staffing positions and the reduction in schools budgets that will force principals to wear the opprobrium and the blame [for the cuts]. There would be very few principals now who believe there is anything benign about the agenda."

Still, as one of the architects of a new policy that could profoundly change the way Australian schools are run, Dib believes in the notion that funding needs more local input. "I don't think any school needs full autonomy," says Dib, who admits education funding is far from perfect. "But I think school communities need a greater say in the operation of their schools - after all, the school principals know better than anyone what their school needs. Over time, we'll find the right level of autonomy, but I think that people are focusing too much on the polar extremes of the debate."

Punchbowl Boys High School is pushed in hard against the Bankstown rail line in Sydney's southwest. Three storeys of red brick look out over gnarled eucalypts to a mosaic of suburban rooftops. Paint peels from the school's window frames while the 1950s interiors have been brightened by recent licks of glossy white and blue. By the entrance, a handful of roses bloom in the red-brick flower beds and a Jacaranda tree towers in the playground. Reflecting the school's catchment suburbs of Punchbowl, Greenacre and Lakemba, about 70 per cent of its students have an Arabic-speaking background.

When I arrive just after 7am, Dib greets me in the asphalted playground with a lively, purposeful stride and a wide smile. Despite being constantly, exhaustingly on the move around the school all day, his smile rarely wanes and for the next 10 hours his pace doesn't slow. He is the Punchbowl Boys version of a fluoro-orange safety vest - all high-visibility and ubiquity.

A typical day at the school is far from the typical day I knew as a student. At 7.45am, Dib and his deputies Chris Griffiths, Dorothy Kindis and Joumana Dennaoui (the school wangles two additional deputies by shifting around extra funding) formulate their "game plan", dealing with staffing, discipline issues and administration. Then, from the moment students begin to file into the school grounds, senior staff wait by the gates, greeting each boy by name. (This routine seems so ingrained that many of the kids instinctively offer me a hand and a quick hello.) They chat with parents dropping their

children off, tell the kids to tuck their shirts in and rib others over antics in a recent student-teacher touch football game.

"Once you have that close relationship, it makes teaching so much easier," says Dib, who has a quick, raucous laugh and teaches the occasional history and English class. "The students think, 'This person does care for me.' And that's all they want to know - that someone cares for them and believes in them."

Dib and his deputies also practise a proactive approach to discipline - trying to spot trouble before it escalates - by pounding the corridors, joking with passing students and moving on loiterers. On his rounds, Dib picks up empty chip packets, hollers hello to teachers prepping for their next class, and troubleshoots problems on a battered, ever-buzzing BlackBerry. Nearing lunchtime, while he is quietly counselling a year 8 student who has been in strife that morning, the father of an African student turns up needing a reference signed for his citizenship application. "If I sit in my office for 20 minutes during the day, I feel guilty," says Dib, who deals with most of the school's administrative work once the students have left. "I need to be out and visible for the team - I'm not the ivory tower."

Kallie Flex has worked at Punchbowl Boys High School since 1985, when the school had 1200 students. She has seen a huge change in the past few years and believes it's Dib's ability to meet the kids on their level that has generated trust and warmth between teachers and students. "He plays handball and footy with them, he makes them feel part of the family," says Flex. "He's the authority, but there's nothing he's not going to do for individual kids."

Family seems to mean a lot to Dib and his team - they use the term regularly, with near cult-like fervour: the students as family, the staff as family, the community as family. Through school programs for parents such as basic computer literacy, they, too, have become part of the Punchbowl Boys family. "We used to get three or four parents coming to the P&C nights," says Flex. "Now we get 30 or 40. The community feels welcome in the school and accepted for who they are. The school really does function like a big family."

As we walk the lino-lined corridors on a stinking hot Sydney day - by mid-afternoon, some of the west-facing classrooms will top 40 degrees - Dib points out a newer-looking classroom. Thanks are due, again, to the extended family. "The teacher in this room asked me if he could paint it and I said, 'Can you what!' And see those blinds - they were made by his mum." At the end of 2012, almost 20 staff pitched in during their holidays to strip out the library, paint it and reconfigure it. "The money we saved doing that," he says, "means we could get some new carpet in there."

For Dib, the improvement in the school has also helped lift the local population. "For me, public education is the only education," he says. "In a community that is struggling, the public school becomes the lighthouse, the shining example of the community. The school can build the community instead of the community building the school because the success of the school rubs off - it reaches out like beams of light."

The eldest of seven children, Dib was born in Lebanon and came to Australia with his parents when he was two years old. He attended Hurstville Boys High School before switching to Heathcote High School when his parents, Ali and Ahlam, bought a corner shop in Engadine and the family, then numbering eight, moved into the three-bedroom house that was attached. In the predominantly Anglo area, the Lebanese Muslim family endured more than the odd moment of racist invective and copped a number of broken windows. "I saw some graffiti near the shop once," recalls Dib, "that read, 'Woges go home'. And I laughed to myself, 'You can't even spell!'"

Dib would often rise early on school days and run the shop to give his parents an extra hour in bed. In the afternoons, he would sit by the shop's till and read whatever he could get his hands on, or do his homework. "Joey," says Dib's brother Nasser, a senior constable with NSW Police, using Jihad's

family nickname, "was always the responsible one." After finishing his Diploma of Education at the University of Wollongong following his Bachelor of Arts degree, Dib was posted to Ulladulla as a teacher of English and history. "I thought I'd landed in Summer Bay," he laughs.

But after six successful years in the south coast seaside town, during which time he married Erin, who had graduated as a teacher in the same year as Dib, a nagging sense of responsibility began to tug at him. "There were a few things happening in Sydney - the drive-bys, the drug dealing - that made me feel like the community was falling apart," says Dib. "The Muslims and Arabs were struggling. I thought that maybe I could help people see that there were better alternatives in life."

While Punchbowl still hits the headlines, police say Dib has been instrumental in helping them work with the local community, as part of police programs targeting issues ranging from domestic violence to traffic offences, as well as a source of community feedback. And police haven't been called to an incident at the school for years.

"Jihad has a very strong sense of community well-being and he understands what it takes to keep the equilibrium in the community," says Commander Dave Eardley, the head of Bankstown Local Area Command. "He's a very straight talker. There's no waffle and he's not concerned with saying something just to make you feel good. He will say the thing that needs to be said."

Joumana Dennaoui, one of the deputies at Punchbowl Boys High, has lived in the school's catchment zone for 35 years. "It's amazing how many people in the area are proud of him," she says of Dib. "He's very charismatic and he's got a high sensitivity. If someone's in trouble in the local community, even if they don't go to the school, their parents will make an appointment to see Jihad."

As head of maths, Dennaoui has also seen the attitude of the entire school change. "There are things you can't measure, such as the kids' happiness and belief. There was a shooting in Punchbowl the other day; before, it would really affect the kids. Now they're saying, 'It's a different family, it's got nothing to do with us.' They actually have the belief to push it out of the school."

While, as in any school, issues with discipline remain, the hostility has gone. "Our boys aren't malicious," says Dib. "But boys are blessed with an extra gene, the silliness gene." Dib and his deputies still need to call parents, visit their homes and suspend kids. With all the outside responsibilities, Dib rarely relaxes - except for an annual camping trip to the Hunter Valley, where there is no phone coverage, and while watching cricket or his beloved St George-Illawarra Dragons.

Erin Dib reckons her husband can absorb more stress than anyone she knows. Dib just says that it's all about being positive and then switching off completely. "I'm an intense person," he says, "but I relax intensively as well. As soon as the board shorts and T-shirt are on, I am totally in that mood."

But with the proposed changes to education policy and funding models being rolled out, Dib won't switch off for long. And while he's happy heading Punchbowl Boys High School at the moment, he has considered switching his principal's hat for a possible political role in the future.

"I'd only do that if I thought I could make a difference and be a positive role model," he says. "Especially from [the Lebanese Muslim] community, which is continually looking for a great role model who perhaps isn't a sports person such as my brother Billy or [former rugby league player] Hazem El Masri, who are both great role models. We need the intellectuals we have to also come out and inspire the next generation."

Eighteen months after he turfed half the classroom out of the window, Tamer Bani-Mohammad has turned his life around under the close eye of Dib. He is one of the school's two 2013 vice-captains, sporting his blazer and newly minted badge with a young man's laconic pride. He has his eye on university and dreams of becoming a pilot. Over the summer holidays, he and his co-vice-captain took a group of troubled year 8 students on a leadership camp to the south coast.

At the annual presentation day late last year, the school hall was packed with parents watching their sons receive awards for everything from music to metalwork. Three Islander boys played a beautiful reggae version of the national anthem, and later the sound of Arabic singers and drummers reverberated through the halls. A haka concluded the day like a clap of thunder.

But for Bani-Mohammad's father, there was one moment that stood out above all others, and when his son's name was called he moved from his seat to kneel in front of the stage. It could have been mistaken as a gesture of thanks, but he was just getting the best vantage point to take a photo as his son received the Regional Director's Award for the most inspirational senior student. "If it wasn't for Mr Dib, I would have been on the streets," says Tamer Bani-Mohammad after the ceremony. "Back then, the principal was the only person who stood beside me."

This story first appeared in the (sydney) magazine.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/a-matter-of-principal-20130121-2d2ej.html#ixzz2JgOP1XQb>