CASE STUDY

School and Region Reviews
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School improvement is a continuous and highly contextualised process, with every Queensland state school at different stages of their improvement journey. The School and Region Reviews branch produces case studies to showcase schools that are making significant gains in their journey, and identify factors that contributed to their success.

Leading the teaching and learning at
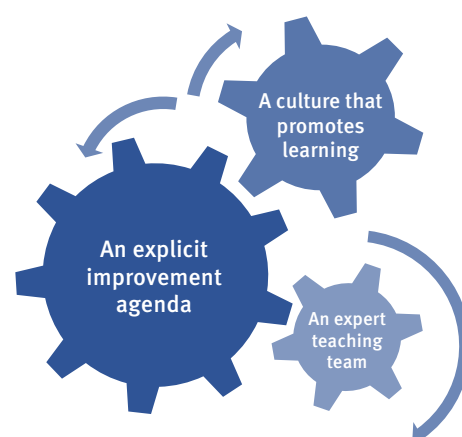# Pacific Pines State School

Strategic leadership is central to teaching and learning at Pacific Pines State School. By providing the space for strategic ideas, the school is able to drive its operational work. As a result, documentation, collaboration and culture are aligned, enabling teachers to bring their very best to the classroom.

Background

Pacific Pines is a primary school of just under 1000 students on Kombumerri country in the northern Gold Coast. The school was reviewed in 2018 when it reconsidered its approach to teaching and learning through the lens of inclusive education. The changes that followed have resulted in a coherent and unified school dedicated to producing quality outcomes for all students.

Pacific Pines has developed a whole-school approach to leading the learning. Through a strategic leadership model, the school has created cultural norms about collaboration and consistency, and professional expectations about trust and responsibility, which have supported continuous development of expertise and excellence in the classroom.

The big shift within the school was to separate the strategic work from the operational work. This meant clarifying explicit areas of focus for school leaders and supporting and challenging teachers to develop their teaching expertise. Leadership at the school means leaders knowing their staff, deftly leading change and knowing themselves as leaders.

A culture that promotes learning

An explicit improvement agenda

An expert teaching team

Queensland Government

The key interrelated mechanisms established by the school are:

- **strategic documentation** that defines and communicates shared expectations

- **staff collaboration** that supportively provides feedback on instruction, monitors student progress, promotes professional learning and maintains purposeful visibility of school leaders

- **cultural conditions** that sustain a positive school learning environment and inform the shared expectations of how people work together.

Strategic documentation

The school's shared expectations are defined and communicated through three interdependent guiding documents: the school's pedagogical approach, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) teaching standards, and the school's collegial engagement framework. The school-wide pedagogical approach, which supports a sequenced plan for curriculum delivery, outlines four pillars of practice on the use of data, high expectations, differentiation and behaviour. The school uses the AITSL teaching standards that most closely align with high expectations to identify sector needs, orientate teachers' professional learning goals and inform the annual performance review (APR) process. The collegial engagement framework guides the school's planning, review and professional learning conversations for each year.

The school's four pillars pedagogical approach is the main point of reference and is at the forefront of everything the school does. All other documents, tools and practices link to this, supporting the school's explicit improvement agenda and informing the various aspects of professional learning. It anchors everyone's work and supports consistency in thinking and action.

'*When you talk to teachers, they reference the school's pedagogical approach. It's in their everyday language. It's not … on the shelf gathering dust … this is in everyone's room; they all talk about it. It's a real-life document.*'

Head of Inclusion

Staff collaboration

Intentional collaboration activities among staff and leaders are strategically aligned. This work is about supportively providing opportunities for feedback on instruction, monitoring student progress, professional learning and maintaining purposeful visibility of school leaders. It connects people across the school, aligns the work and develops capability.

The deputy principals have data-focused conversations with every teacher each term. This is an opportunity to discuss approaches, monitor student progress and inform the next steps for teaching and learning. Teachers present their data and discuss their planning, and this is mapped against teachers' APR goals. The leadership group is also engaged in walkthroughs and observations in classrooms, checking in with students about how they are going.

The school has an 'engaging in greatness' peer observation process and a group of teaching and learning mentors. Engaging in greatness is where structured classroom observation and feedback occurs. It is a peer-to-peer process of professional, non-judgemental conversations guided by a coaching framework and reflection tool that links back to data conversations and the whole-school pedagogical model. The school's

teaching and learning mentors coach teachers across a term to support their capability development. This may involve modelling, mentoring and inclusive practices, which are linked into supporting teaching expertise. The school intends to extend the peer-to-peer collaboration across year level cohorts.

Members of the leadership team meet with an executive coach twice a year to develop and refine their attributes as leaders. This also supports developing specific skills to coach others and support teachers in achieving their goals. This is essential to good communications, solving complex tasks and advancing school improvement. Each member of the team has their own leadership plan and these are progressed with the principal against the AITSL standards.

'*I think what's made a difference for us is the networks across our leadership team ... [and] ... across our school so we can share that great work that's going on in every classroom.*'

Principal

Cultural conditions

The school places a lot of emphasis on creating the right cultural conditions. This is the background work about language and mindsets that promotes a positive school learning environment and informs the shared expectations people have about how they work together. Collaboration is a key incentive in this work for both teachers and students.

The school uses a world thinking model to facilitate collaboration among teachers (see document right). It shifts people away from absolute truths, proving themselves right and blame (world one), towards thinking that emphasises interpretation, inquiry and solutions (world two). The model enables staff to recognise how they work with others and approach problems of practice. The key to the model's application is in reminding staff when conversations reflect world one thinking and celebrating adoption of world two thinking. The school has expanded the model for considerations among non-teaching staff.
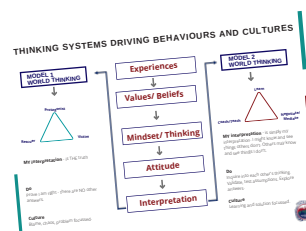
World thinking model

Collaborative placemat

These cultural conditions extend to the classroom. Here, collaboration is informed by a placemat (see document above), which provides structures and processes that encourage student cooperation and engagement in their learning. The model gives teachers a meta language to talk to their students about collaboration, encourages students to take ownership of their learning, and provides students with a common pedagogical language as they move through year levels.

'*We've had to … set those cultural conditions and give people the language and the space and the environment to allow them to solve those problems collaboratively.*'

Principal

Outcomes

The school has increasingly become a unified place, with school-wide leadership structures that are aligned and integrated from Prep to Year 6. Teachers have ownership of their teaching, specialists and deputies lead their portfolios, and the leadership has oversight, guiding the strategic direction and whole-school improvement agenda.

Staff collaboration is paying dividends in effective teaching and school practices. The school opinion survey shows that 98 per cent of staff agree that the school encourages coaching and mentoring activities — an increase from the previous year. Sixty-four per cent strongly agree. One hundred per cent of staff agree that they modify their teaching practice after reviewing student assessment data. Staff retention is now at 100 per cent.

Collaboration has also expedited school improvement in inclusive education. For example, there is excitement among staff about seeing students with disability among their peers as a part of a class, and teachers expressing a real responsibility for those children. Seeing the progress of students – self-actualising their goals and achieving

at their peer level – has been, in the words of one deputy principal, 'mind blowing'. As the staff survey indicates, nearly all staff agree that the school has an inclusive culture where diversity is valued and respected.

Importantly, Pacific Pines has experienced a general lift in student academic achievement; there is a growing proportion of students achieving a C or above in all learning areas in all year levels.

Success factors

- Strong and stable leadership team and focus — this created an opportunity to stay the course and sustain momentum of the improvement work.
- Incremental change — the language of the school is about the next little step, not doing too many things at once. This approach sees progress while ensuring change is sustainable, keeping people in the game so that they can move forward.
- An external lens — the school review in 2018 was very important to developing an understanding of how the school could approach change, whereas the executive coach is an ongoing instrumental piece that enables the leadership team to get better at what they do.
- Staff commitment and expertise — the school has a wealth of skills and collective commitment among the teachers, office staff, cleaners, grounds people and leadership group. Without these people nothing would happen.

To generate discussion

- Is the school's leadership strategic in orientation? Are there regular opportunities for school leaders to collaboratively define, align and sustain the school's core work in teaching and learning?
- How can we individually and collectively use our staff expertise to improve student outcomes? How does the school identify strengths, develop capability and align these with school priorities?
- How does our whole-school documentation foster commitment and clarify expectations, and draw staff together as a coherent teaching team?
- What are our school's approaches to providing opportunities for all staff to engage in classroom observation and feedback? Are we engaging staff collaboratively in the work of teaching and learning?

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