

## CASE STUDY

School Improvement Unit  
Research Centre  
Case study 1  
November 2019

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



# Making Mudgeeraba magnificent

Check-ins, scanners, passports, aeroplane seats, flight attendants — this is not the beginning of your next holiday trip — this is Mudgeeraba Special School staff at one of their planning meetings, with the principal doing the safety presentation on the school annual report. The school has gone a long way to build a culture of collaboration and fun, where a sense of unitedness helps everyone get on board. No meetings for a meeting's sake or complex plans that are hard to engage with. Instead, there are powerful conversations and collaborative constructing of who they are as a school and who they want to be in the future.

## Background

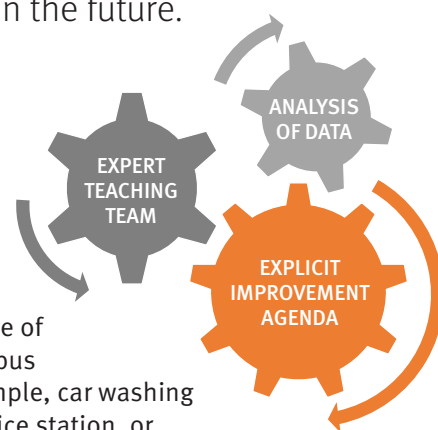
### From Opportunity School to 'the school of opportunities'

Opened in 1985 and originally named the Opportunity School, Mudgeeraba Special School used to be one of the sites of Mudgeeraba State School. When the current principal started in 2004, the school was considered to have a strong community spirit and inclusive learning environment, attracting students with multiple impairments.

Over the years, the school developed strengths in building partnerships with a range of organisations in order to further support student learning and wellbeing. A significant event in the history of the school was starting a Partnership Alliance program. The partnerships resulting from this program support Mudgeeraba students' transitions to future life by providing opportunities for students to build and practise skills in community contexts.

Mudgeeraba students develop skills in a range of industries and off-campus environments, for example, car washing at the Mudgeeraba police station, or assisting at the local aged care facilities and a childcare centre. The support for student, staff and family wellbeing, positive school–community relationships and mutually supportive interactions have become key features of the school.

Since 2004, Mudgeeraba Special School has been on an improvement journey, driven strongly by its commitment to choice theory, and facilitated by the school reviews conducted in 2015 and 2019. The school has made significant achievements during this time, which can be linked to a range of factors in the areas of leadership, staff capability and data.

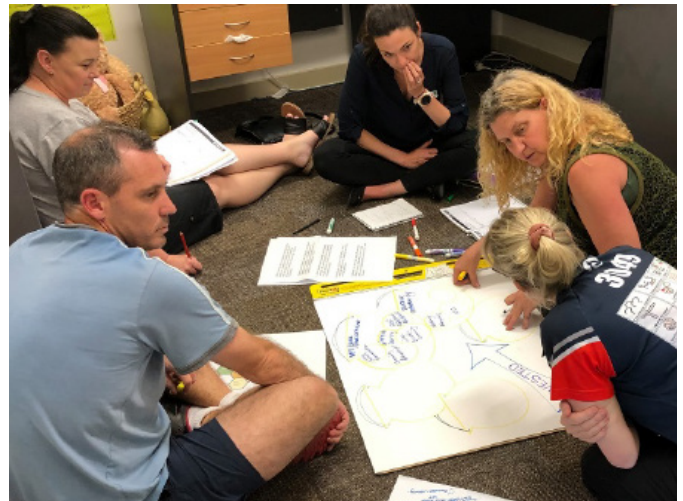


## Leadership

### Vision — the start of ‘blue sky dreaming’

After joining the school, the principal introduced a practice of collaboratively developing a school vision — referred to as ‘blue sky dreaming’. The first vision reflected what the school would like to become over the next three years. This process has been continued, with all school stakeholders (executive team, leadership team, staff, parents and the wider community) involved. Teacher aides are a valuable school asset and are also included in all strategic planning activities. Parents and community play an integral role in shaping the vision of the school. Their voice is sought through the school’s Parent and Community Engagement Framework and reflected in decision making.

With each vision, considerable time is spent on unpacking what a high-performing school looks like. School leaders and staff find working with visual constructs more engaging than traditional planning meetings and tools. The process of developing a vision gives all school stakeholders a voice. Over time, this practice has become the key collaborative activity driving the school’s improvement journey.



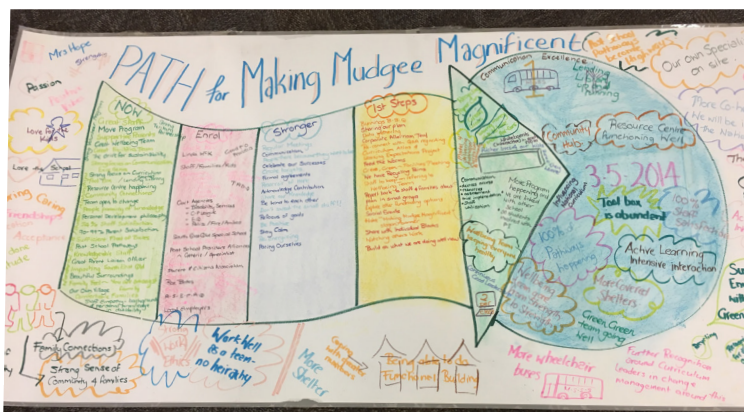
*“ It is change by design. Nothing is left to chance. ”*

Principal

### Direction setting — developing a ‘path’

The collaboratively developed vision is a starting point in the school’s strategic planning. Each vision is backward mapped and analysed in terms of what needs to be done, how, and what school resources, strengths and opportunities are needed to achieve that vision. This is visually developed as a ‘path’ representing the school’s direction. The PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) process, widely used in special schools to create pathways for students to assist in post-school transitions, was adapted by the school for strategic planning. Creating a path starts with school leaders asking a series of questions: What are our strengths? What are we known for? What are we excelling at? This is followed by a meeting in which all school representatives, parents and the wider community are invited to co-construct the path. The conversations during this process are powerful. The final result — ‘A path for making Mudgee magnificent’ — occupies a special place on the wall in the principal’s office and is a point of reference in ongoing discussions. Each path is documented as a strategic plan, connected to the department’s key performance indicators. It is anchored to the previous plan and draws on the recommendations from the previous school review.

The path representing the school’s most recent four-year strategic plan included three ‘big rocks’ (identified in the school review report): a professional learning model, balanced literacy journey and senior school revitalisation. Each year was linked with the school’s annual implementation plan (AIP) and included ‘next steps’ and related artefacts. Towards the end of the fourth year, the school reflected on its four-year journey by creating a comprehensive visual learning wall. The wall was used as an artifact to support its recent school review.



School leaders and staff believe that developing the path has helped them to refine each of the ‘big rocks’, create consistency across the school and stay on course. It also formed a clear basis for dividing responsibilities and accountabilities among teams to further unpack strategies and actions. Finally, the visual path promoted collaborative reflection on the implementation of the previous plan, with staff asking themselves: Have we done it? Did we achieve what we intended to?

## Building a shared understanding — a ‘washing machine’

A central process for unpacking strategic plans, and building a shared understanding of new practices before they are implemented in classrooms, is for them to go into a ‘washing machine’. This is a collaborative practice undertaken by school leaders in a designated open space. When people bring ideas to the table, they are ‘tossed around and cleansed in the washing machine’. Everybody has something in there which will either go back up to the executive team, or be further discussed within teams. This process of continuous intentional collaboration around improving practices helps to clarify what the new initiatives and their intended outcomes will look like.

The ‘washing machine’ room has become a central point for collaboration and key meetings at the school.



## Distributed leadership — ‘leading up, down and across’

Leadership at the school is shared, collaborative and enacted through a team structure. This facilitates broad ownership of all aspects of the school. The school’s executive team consists of the principal, deputies, heads of personalised education and a pedagogical leader. Other teams include: Wellbeing Team, Teacher Aide Leadership Team, Office Administration Team, six teaching teams (junior, lower middle, upper middle, junior secondary, senior and non-contact team), and the Teaching Release Team.

The school’s change management model relies on ‘champions’ taking responsibility for each piece of work and feeding information back to the leadership team before it becomes an embedded practice. Ideas and plans initiated by leaders are shared with all staff who leave their ‘fingerprint’ on them at some stage. In this way, everyone can own the implemented practices. After plans are documented by the executive team, they are unpacked with team leaders who then share them with their teams for further feedback. This feedback is then discussed with the executive team. In that way, the school is ‘leading up, down and across’. Staff are supported with in-school release time to have rich collegial conversations. Each team’s work and meetings are documented in OneNote and available for everyone to view. Teams meet in three-weekly cycles for either a teacher or teacher aide meeting, team meeting, or a professional learning community (PLC) meeting.



**“ Everyone is a leader ... no matter where they are ... we try to build the capacity of every single person to be the best that they can be. ”**

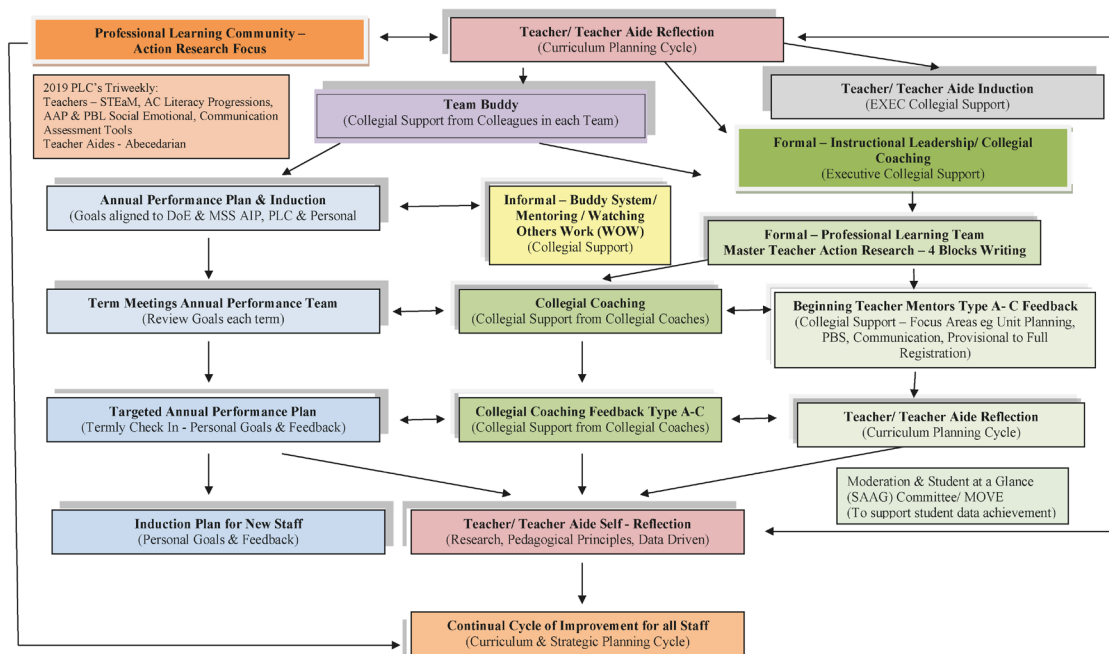
Head of Curriculum

The school has moved from complex AIPs to one-pagers, clearly describing the ‘who’, the ‘what’, the ‘when’ and the ‘why’ of each strategy and action. Getting clarity on the responsibilities and who is the ‘go-to person’ for each portfolio or action has enabled plans to be executed effectively.

## Capability

Over the last few years, the focus at Mudgeeraba Special School has shifted from what students can do to what teaching staff are capable of and how their capability can be enhanced to support student learning. The school has developed a differentiated model of building the capability of teachers and teacher aides. The model outlines a wide range of professional learning opportunities for staff, including collaborative planning, PLCs, instructional walkthroughs, as well as targeted programs such as classroom profiling, case management, collegial coaching, videos of practice, lesson studies, and targeted coaching in writing and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). School leaders are leading learning and learning alongside middle leaders, teachers and teacher aides.

**Mudgeeraba Special School Professional Learning Team Model**



The school's current model of PLCs is driven by problems of practice that are collectively identified and unpacked. Five PLCs are working in the areas of literacy progressions, age-appropriate pedagogies, social and emotional development, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and Abecedarian training (for teacher aides). PLCs meet every three weeks and their work is guided by the department's Cycle of Inquiry.

Something the school does really well is connecting everything. Different school processes are not implemented in isolation, but always aligned to inform one another. The professional development model is connected to the annual performance review (APR) process, as well as teaching and learning in classroom. Planning of professional learning flows from a case management process, which aims to identify student needs. This information is used to identify areas for improvement in staff capability and related coaching opportunities. As part of the APR process, every staff member has an AIP goal, PLC goal and a personal goal. These goals are linked to different forms of professional learning offered by the school.

Mudgeeraba leaders see each new practice or process being developed as a professional learning journey, rather than implementing the 'off the shelf' program. They apply evidence-informed approaches and refine practices until they achieve the best quality.

Building capability is supported by a culture of continuous learning where 'nobody knows more than anybody else' and professional dialogue is valued. Staff are constantly looking for champions and models, and visiting all schooling sectors to learn from them.

### Intentional collaboration

We learn and work together, leveraging our different strengths, skills and perspectives, to address prioritised challenges, measure impact, build expertise and accelerate state-wide improvement in student outcomes.

Department of Education (2019). *Every student succeeding*, State Schools Strategy 2019–2023

## Data

A range of data are collected at Mudgeeraba Special School to inform processes and the improvement agenda. Over time, datasets have been revised and refined. The school's current data plan features a range of diagnostic, formative and summative tools used to assess student learning in the classroom. The plan clarifies what to collect, when, why, for what purpose, and how to make informed and consistent judgements to improve student outcomes. School-developed spreadsheets are used in ongoing data discussions during case management, PLC and teacher meetings.

*“ If we are going to collect data, it needs to be for a purpose and a meaning. If not, why are we doing it? ”*

Principal

Case management is used to determine the next step for every student in their educational journey, and individual student portfolios are developed for all students. All student data from Brigance, Communication Matrix, Mobility Opportunities Via Education (MOVE), First Steps English and mathematics are integrated in Student at a Glance forms completed for every student. The school has an electronic data wall, which is used to display individual learning expectations in literacy.

Data are used widely at the school to track student achievement and inform next steps in learning and student support. They also help identify areas of personal growth for teachers. For Mudgeeraba teaching staff, data cycles are critical for success in improving teaching. They give clear direction of how they are travelling with their students. Knowing exactly where students are at in their learning, and what is coming next, helps teachers and teacher aides to effectively implement curriculum and make necessary and timely adjustments. Data are shared at regular stakeholder meetings to inform families of student progress.

*“ As a teacher, you are on a journey. You know exactly where you are going, curriculum-wise. And it is all data documented ... I am teaching this, this is where my student is at, this is the next goal, this is how I am going to proceed. Then I am going to differentiate my work ... it makes my job as a teacher so much easier. ”*

Head of Curriculum

The school has been constantly working on improving staff data literacy. Leaders and staff are engaged in Lyn Sharrat's Leading Learning Collaborative project and teachers are released for data literacy training.



## Outcomes

The outcomes of Mudgeeraba Special School's improvement journey are impressive. The school has effectively implemented the key improvement strategies from its last school review, reflected in the four-year strategic plan. There is clarity of purpose and a clear line of sight from strategic plans to classroom practice. Everyone knows where they are at and the next steps, which has helped to build high-quality, whole-school practices in teaching and learning.

Significant progress has been made, particularly in implementing the Australian Curriculum. The school moved from 'preschool curriculum guidelines', used in the past as a checklist, to delivering all key learning areas in line with the department's curriculum framework and Australian Curriculum expectations. Individual curriculum plans are aligned with the Australian Curriculum and every student is encouraged to achieve beyond the expectations, including in areas such as coding and robotics.

Common ownership has been built of every aspect of the school. The school has also grown its own set of leaders, which will be crucial for leadership continuity and sustaining implemented changes in the future.

All Mudgeeraba staff are committed to developing their own capability and improving their practice. Collegial coaching and professional conversations have enhanced teachers' knowledge of the Australian Curriculum — they know what they are teaching and where their students are sitting, and it gives them the power to improve their practice. The School Opinion Survey (SOS) data show that 100 per cent of teaching staff feel confident in their knowledge of the Australian Curriculum, and their ability to work autonomously and apply evidence-based teaching and learning practices.

All these achievements have translated to improvement in student outcomes. Individual curriculum plans and levels of achievement both show student growth.

Parent engagement has also improved. The SOS data indicate that 100 per cent of parents agree that the school encourages them to take an active role in their child's education. Also, 100 per cent of teaching staff believe that students receive a good education at their school. These rates of satisfaction are above the Queensland special school results for staff and parents.

## Success factors

- Collaborative vision building and direction setting — everyone's voice is heard and valued
- Developing a shared understanding of changes — everyone owns the new practices
- Distributed leadership structure — there is trust, clarity and ownership of the improvement agenda
- Differentiated capability building informed by problems of practice and student needs
- Alignment of strategic planning with capability building, and teaching and learning
- Refined datasets and individual student portfolios that support effective implementation of the Australian Curriculum, certificate courses, and individualised teaching and learning.



## Next steps

Mudgeeraba Special School is constantly looking for opportunities to grow. At the end of 2019, the school will create a new 'path' for the next strategic cycle. Current plans will be reviewed and key improvement strategies from the latest review will be discussed to inform the new strategic cycle.

A possible next big step considered by school leaders is becoming the first Glasser Quality Special School. As the school has already used choice theory axioms as a psychological base throughout its improvement journey, and they have become well embedded in practice and guided new ways of working, the school may be ready for this to be formalised.

