

CASE STUDY

Education Improvement Branch
Research Centre
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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 Education Improvement Branch produces case studies to showcase schools that are making significant gains in their journey, and identify factors that contributed to their success.

Connecting curriculum and the community at Albany Creek State High School

Connection is the key to systematic curriculum delivery at Albany Creek State High School. In the words of the school leadership team, 'it's about working together', sharing a 'common language' and enacting 'uniform practices and processes' across the school. Staff connect with each other to deliver the curriculum and build their capability. Through collaboration, teachers and students see an effective alignment of curriculum, assessment and pedagogical practice. The result is a 'connected community' delivering a consistent curriculum.

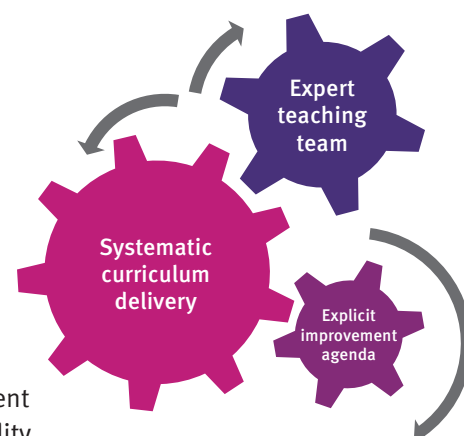
Focus on systematic curriculum delivery

A large secondary school in the northern suburbs of Brisbane, Albany Creek State High is proud of its 'strong community feel', experienced teaching staff and collective focus on curriculum.

These areas have been at the forefront of the school's improvement journey over the past five years. The leadership team reflects that their starting point in 2016 was to strengthen curriculum planning and documentation across the school. Ahead of its four-year strategic planning cycle (2017–20), the school sharpened its improvement agenda to four priorities: curriculum, teaching and learning, data-driven improvement, and culture and community. The school decided to concentrate on these priorities each year, 'traffic lighting' the progress of each improvement strategy as it progressed.

The whole-school curriculum was a focus area for the past few years, with the work continuing throughout 2020. Alongside its curriculum activities, the school fosters

peer collaboration and collegial professional learning – critical factors in its curriculum success story. This collegial engagement builds staff capability and their understanding of the interconnected nature of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. It also increases their desire to build pride and cohesion into their professional practice.



“ There was no doubt across the school what the improvement agenda was and how we were going to move it forward. ”

Principal

Driving connections to deliver a high-quality curriculum



“ There is a common language and understanding across the school. ”

Principal

From the start of its curriculum journey, Albany Creek State High School forged connections across the school. Supporting staff through the different phases of curriculum implementation is a key priority. To achieve this, the leadership team have established a clear direction, common tools, shared ways of working, and partnerships across faculties and with parents/carers and families.

A clear direction

A two-day leadership retreat in 2016 played an important role in getting the entire leadership team on board with the school’s strategic direction. Team building activities and dedicated time gave staff the opportunity to discuss the school’s priorities, develop a shared vision, and map what the foreseeable future would look like. As a result, the leadership team took ownership of the work, developed a deep understanding of why the work was a focus, and returned to school with consistent messages for the rest of the staff.

In the same year, Albany Creek State High School began developing its whole-school curriculum plan. A process in backward mapping from the senior curriculum helped ensure consistency and alignment from Year 7 to Year 12. To balance staff workloads, this process occurred in stages across different year levels. Beginning with Years 9 and 10 (to ensure students were ready for their senior years), curriculum mapping and documentation were rolled out across the school.

Common tools and shared ways of working

“ The students and the teachers understand where it all fits and that I think is probably the best thing we can say about what we do at this school. ”

Head of Department, English

The school has developed a number of shared resources, including common marking guides for assessments across all year levels. To ensure alignment to the Australian Curriculum, they have designed a unit planning template that ensures every unit taught has mapped content descriptions, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. The same template also guides teachers to engage with design questions from the Art and Science of Teaching. This has increased staff confidence in quality assuring the curriculum design process.

So that their processes can ‘speak to and inform one another’, the school has also established a set of consistent routines. These are summarised in a one-page document. The routines include the common curriculum resources (such as creating A and C samples), core pedagogical practices, signature tools and learning and behavioural routines for students. As one of the department heads says, it’s ‘basically everything we do on one page’. This document is displayed in staff rooms and meeting rooms, and can be shared with new teachers coming into the school. Teachers’ classroom expectations reflect these routines.

CONSISTENT ROUTINES

- EVERY LESSON**
 - FIRST FIVE:**
 - Students line up outside classroom ready to work, and enter on instruction
 - Learning Goals and Success Criteria presented each lesson and can be articulated by students
 - Rolls Marked (or least 10 mins whenever possible)
 - FINAL FIVE:**
 - Reflect on Learning Goals and Success Criteria
 - Checking for Understanding
- EVERY UNIT**
 - Learning Goal Tracking Sheet used to reflect on progress at multiple intervals (7-10)
 - Relevant Numeracy elements explicitly taught
 - ACGSIS Curriculum Unit Planner format used across 7-12
 - TUP/Study Plans used across 11-12
- EVERY WEEK**
 - Class Work - Minimum once a week - Content specific to curriculum, pedagogy driven by teacher - Concentrating on handwritten sentence and paragraph construction (handwritten except for IT, Digital Technology, Digital Solutions, ITD, Engineering, Fundamentals, Industrial Skills)
- EVERY ASSIGNMENT**
 - Students expected to A and C samples
- TEACHERS MAKE USE OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY TOOLKIT**
 - TETAS, Paragraph structure
 - 3-5 Star Feedback model
 - THEVES for assessing texts
 - Learning Model for thinking
 - 12 Sentences for writing
 - Structure Strategies for writing
 - Thinkboard for problem-solving
 - Proportional Reasoning for numeracy
 - Reading to Learn for reading and writing (eg Detailed Read, Results, Joint Construction, etc)
 - Write That Easy strategies
- CLASS ANALYSIS PLACEMATS**
 - Updated by Week 3 each semester beginning of the course
 - Updated by Week 3 following each reporting period
- COLLEGIAL ENGAGEMENT**
 - PLCs two per term
 - Pedagogy Scan one per year
 - Learning Support one per year
 - Two further rounds of collegial engagement chosen from all options
 - Monitoring offered throughout the year
 - Annual Performance Review conducted Terms 1, 3 and 4

ALBANY CREEK STATE HIGH SCHOOL

Staff and community engagement

Time is set aside for teacher aides and other support staff to receive professional learning each week, so they too are using the same language and routines when it comes to the curriculum. The school also engages with parents/carers and families, keeping them abreast of yearly overviews and task sheets. Workshops are held to share

information about the curriculum that can help families to support their children's learning at home. A range of topics are covered, including the school's signature strategies, assessment items and marking guides, cognitions and the Queensland Certificate of Education.

Reviewing and refining curriculum implementation



“It's about bringing together all of the things that happen and helping to refine how they all plug into each other.”

Deputy Principal

The connections across the school do not end with curriculum planning. Albany Creek State High School systematically reviews and quality assures its curriculum implementation. Staff across different faculties come together regularly to check and moderate units and assessment items with colleagues.

The school has established a rigorous auditing cycle. Mindful of staff workload and to ensure sustainability in processes, year level reviews and audits are done in consecutive stages, focusing on Years 7 and 10, before moving on to Years 8 and 9.

Rigorous and authentic assessment is a significant focus of auditing activities. The leadership team emphasises that these are 'living documents' and 'need to be continuously reviewed to ensure they're reliable and ask what they need to ask'. To validate the effectiveness and suitability of assessment, teams work across faculties to map and audit assessment pieces, and check if they are achieving their intended outcome. The mathematics faculty, for example, has systematically

reviewed all of their assessment instruments, tracking what aspects of the achievement standards are being measured, identifying gaps, and finding efficiencies (for example, ensuring balance in the number and coverage of assessments for students). In developing senior assessment tasks, the principal, a deputy and the head of department (senior schooling) work with faculty teams to discuss and incorporate feedback.

With peer review processes in place across faculties, staff can share feedback on assessment instruments. This helps those who are 'too close' to the material to spot errors or gaps. As one of the school's deputies reflects, 'when you write assessment instruments, it's really useful to give it to someone less familiar with the content because they will tell you if anything is unclear.' Teams work together to check that assumptions are not embedded in the assessment language. Assessment instruments for a particular year level can be pulled together and the principal, heads of department and deputies will use quality assurance tools to evaluate their validity, accessibility and reliability. Auditors ask themselves: does the assessment make sense to an outsider? Are the assessment expectations clear? Is it ready for use? Assessments are peer reviewed by the broader leadership team.

Marking and moderation across year levels increase staff understanding of expected standards, giving them an opportunity to understand student progress. The school belongs to a community of practice that focuses on



consistent, informed and well-articulated curriculum and assessment practice in the new senior system. This is achieved through the Northern Network Cluster activities and, more generally, through the regularly scheduled meetings of school leaders from the six cluster member high schools.

The school also connects with three feeder schools through principal meetings and leadership team meetings

each term. Staff participate in feeder school moderation and transition activities, so that when students start Year 7 their learning level is understood in advance.

The school's auditing and peer review processes build capability across faculty teams as they work together to ensure all required elements of the Australian Curriculum are addressed. Efforts are also made to ensure that students understand their next steps for learning.

Building curriculum expertise

“ We’ve been able to strategically enrich the practice of each and every teacher at the school through collegial engagement and through the professional learning that we have on offer, which is delivered by our own staff. ”

Head of Department

Albany Creek State High School has a strong culture of tapping into existing staff knowledge to grow expertise within the school. As the principal puts it, ‘the expertise was here. We’ve just really focused it.’ The school looks at the learning goals identified by individual staff in their annual performance development plans (APDPs) to develop a professional learning plan for the following year. As a result, staff feedback directly informs professional learning opportunities. As APDPs are aligned with the school’s explicit improvement agenda, there is a clear connection between the school’s improvement priorities and professional learning activities.

Professional learning is fundamental to the initial and transformative success of the school’s teaching team. Through the school’s professional learning communities (PLCs) and collegial engagement strategy, staff work together to build their expertise.

Professional learning communities

By establishing faculty and cross-faculty PLCs, Albany Creek State High School has forged collegial networking across the school. The cross-faculty PLCs have been particularly successful as teachers can see commonalities across their different subjects.

There is dedicated time for the PLCs to meet. The school moved from one-off PLCs with a rotation of topics to a semester-long focus on a shared practice goal. They now host a mixture of the two. Staff can choose from a range of topic areas drawn from APDPs and requests for professional learning.



The PLCs are considered safe environments for discussion. The school believes that it is ‘incredibly valuable’ for professional learning to ‘have open space for conversation and that people feel safe in the conversation and safe to challenge’. ‘Visiting experts’ (staff within the school) spend time with the PLCs, sharing their knowledge and experience.

Building trust through the foundation of collegial engagement

The leadership team took a consultative approach towards enacting its collegial engagement strategy, introducing this feedback culture to the school gradually. At the start of the process, teachers engaged in focused observation of one another twice a year. The school created an 'open classroom week' when the principal,



deputies and heads of department visit classes, providing feedback to teachers. Open classrooms created a culture where staff became comfortable inviting colleagues into their classroom and receiving feedback. This in turn laid the foundations for the new collegial engagement strategy that includes four rounds each year and the choice of seven different options.

Albany Creek State High School has a mentoring/coaching team that plays a central role in establishing the school's classroom feedback processes. The team's focus areas are aligned with the school's priorities. For example, there is a curriculum mentor and a teaching and learning mentor. As teachers themselves, mentors have credibility among their colleagues. Mentoring is voluntary and mentors first worked with teachers to provide one-on-one support. Word quickly spread about the value of the interaction and now teachers work with mentors on a regular basis.

The leadership team provides clear advice about the purpose of classroom feedback, highlighting the distinction between 'professional growth' as opposed to 'performance assessment'. It is about growth and support. As a result, staff preconceptions about the process have changed for the better.

Outcomes: making connections

From the leadership team's point of view, curriculum and assessment principles 'are more the same than they are different from faculty to faculty'. Working together to implement the curriculum, the school is able to 'tie everything together' and achieve whole-school understanding. Staff see how things fit together and understand the 'why' underpinning their curriculum work. Because of the consistency across classrooms, students can also see 'the big picture' across their subjects. They know, for example, what to expect in a marking guide or when staff are talking about cognitions. As the principal says, 'everyone in the school knows the language that we're using'. With this shared understanding, conversations about curriculum and assessment are more efficient, and teachers can focus on curriculum content.

The cultural shift at the school regarding classroom feedback processes has been significant, with teachers recognising the benefits of having time and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Staff understand that it's 'not about inspecting'; it's 'about working together'. There is 'a lot more trust around what's on offer and what those practices entail' and greater 'confidence in the process and the conversation'. Now, the leadership team is hearing that staff want more classroom feedback from school leaders: 'That's our next piece of work.'

By building connections, Albany Creek State High School has increased staff understanding and confidence in delivering the curriculum. Collaboration with colleagues has also renewed staff energy in delivering the curriculum systematically across the school.

Success factors

- Continuity of focus
- Consistent routines and shared language, objectives and activities
- Capability building supporting curriculum implementation
- Genuine focus on growing and sharing expertise from within the school

Next steps

Albany Creek State High School will continue to focus on the same four priority areas over its next strategic plan. For each area, the school has identified the next pieces of work.

In the curriculum space, staff will be exploring more vocational education and training (VET) options for students, adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of students going into university and training, or entering the workforce.

Professional learning will also remain a priority. From 2021, the school plans to double the number of opportunities for staff to engage in classroom feedback, so that the process of connecting will continue.

“It has been a journey but we still have things to do, and we don’t want anything to drop off.”

Principal



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