

# CASE STUDY

Education Improvement Branch  
Research Centre  
June 2021

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.

## Inquiring to learn and learning to improve at Peregian Springs State School

*While their school improvement plan aims to bring more inquiry into students' learning, staff and leaders at Peregian Springs State School are mastering their own inquiry skills. Not afraid of taking risks, testing new approaches and asking for help, they lead their way empowered by choice.*

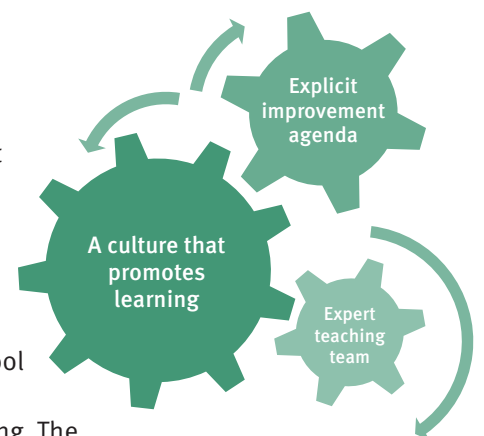
### Background

Opened in 2010 with 265 students and seven teachers, Peregian Springs State School has quickly grown to become one of the biggest schools in the Sunshine Coast area. Today, the school provides a learning environment and 'a happy place to be' for 1110 children and 120 staff.

The growth of the school and its community has been the biggest change in the last decade. With that came the challenge of building and sustaining a shared, cohesive school vision and culture. While adapting to changes, the school has maintained the continuity of the principalship and a clear, consistent direction. The priority of school leaders has always been for teaching teams to work well together, but professional sharing was one of the biggest challenges. In the past, with seven teachers across year levels, it was occurring naturally and easily. Now, with seven teachers at each year level, a scaled-up, more inclusive and differentiated approach is required.

In 2016, significant work was undertaken at Peregian Springs to establish parameters for teachers' and school leaders' autonomy and decision making. The priority was to trust in teachers' knowledge and their ability to make professional judgements to teach relevant and engaging curriculum in a way that is focused on students' growth, rather than solely following prescriptive programs.

Through its years of rapid growth, the school has always looked for ways to preserve a small school feel, a sharing mentality and high levels of collaboration.



## School culture — creating ‘togetherness’

### Empowered by choice

Since its opening, the school’s vision has been underpinned by choice theory — its values have been promoted to shape positive relationships among staff, students and families, and to empower students and staff to best use their potential. Choice theory is a ‘universal system for empowering individuals ... to take responsibility for their choices and support others in taking ownership of their choices’ (GICT 2021). Drawing upon a choice theory is also reality therapy (GICT 2021), which provides the framework for counselling conversations that help people identify what their needs are, what they are doing to address them, and if what they are doing is working. The school’s philosophy acknowledges that recognising students’ emotional needs and addressing them is key to unlocking their potential in learning.

The principles of choice theory inform daily practices at Peregian Springs, and the reality therapy conversation framework is used to recognise individual needs and address them. Everyone at the school is at a different stage of their journey with choice theory. Some staff have completed formal training, while others naturally learnt it by osmosis. This way of thinking is not imposed, but quickly becomes a preferred choice of staff and students who learn to empower themselves and each other to reach their highest potential.

Choice theory forms the basis of relationships with students at Peregian Springs who are given a choice. But with a choice also comes a conversation about possible scenarios and potential consequences. It is through this process that children learn to self-reflect; recognise, understand and manage their own needs; and make decisions regarding their actions, and own them. Not all choices are always good, but students learn through them.

Student individual needs and intrinsic motivation are used at Peregian Springs as key drivers in the teaching and learning process. Students know that the feeling of being the best person they can be is the most precious reward. For this reason, the school has no rewards system. Instead, there is a feeling of student self-fulfilment, acknowledgment and recognition.

Choice theory informs the language staff at Peregian Springs use on an everyday basis with their teams and students. Daily conversations are respectful, caring and always focused on helping people achieve what they need in a way that is worthwhile to them.

Similar to students, staff at Peregian Springs are empowered to exercise their professional autonomy, and make judgements and decisions about their pedagogy.



*‘A lot of people think it is all kind of airy-fairy. They hear the word choice theory and think we are just giving kids choices, but it is not that at all. There are parameters around everything, it is linked to the system, and it is linked to our school planning.’*

*Principal*

*‘The relationship is the focus, because at the end of the day, if you do not have a relationship with someone, you have no hope of teaching them anything or expecting them to behave in any particular way.’*

*School leader*

*‘For me it is just how I live my life and it’s a useful framework for framing-up human interactions.’*

*Teacher*

Choice theory also informs a socio-emotional wellbeing program for staff. The program is differentiated and adjusted to the needs of particular classes — teachers can choose what is best for their students.

## Trusted to learn and grow

The key to establishing the ‘Peregrin Springs ways of working’ was the acknowledgment that a great deal of teachers’ professional satisfaction comes from being trusted – the feeling they can make decisions about their classroom practice based on their knowledge of children and their teaching expertise. It was about acknowledging that the role of leaders is to model the culture of trust, and to support teachers in improving their practice. This included providing relevant professional development, guidelines and documentation, or establishing collaborative structures within the school, such as a project team, when needed.

*‘Trust is paramount here. The teachers wouldn’t have shared with us ... if they didn’t trust us ... We keep listening to them and keep evolving with their needs.’*

*School leader*

Because they are trusted, staff at Peregrin Springs are not afraid to acknowledge their areas for growth and seek help. This encourages everyone to learn, grow and collegially trial new approaches to explore what works and what doesn’t. Peregrin Springs staff are confident in facing problems and challenges that arise. Every situation at the school is re-framed as a learning opportunity.

*‘Instead of saying problems, we look at most events as an opportunity to improve something we are doing or to get better at something we are doing.’*

*Principal*

Feedback is another thing that is done well at Peregrin Springs. Staff members are comfortable to offer feedback to others and appreciate constructive feedback from peers. When offering feedback, staff ensure they show respect for each other. Every school practice, from student behaviour management to annual performance reviews, is collaborative, with respectful relationships as the focus, and growth and improvement as the ultimate goal.



*‘There is a distinct way of working in this school – that real togetherness, that we are all doing this. Everyone is in charge of every kid; no one is on their own with a kid or a parent ever. They know there is a whole team of people with vast expertise in different things that they could call on to help them at any time.’*

*Principal*

*‘It is positive, happy, allowing us to grow, supportive. We can do our job the way we want to do it, but you have to be accountable, but we are allowed to teach curriculum in the best way for our children.’*

*Teacher*

*‘At the end of the day, our school culture is the most precious thing that we have. And I would guard that with my life.’*

*Principal*

## Inquiry cycles and learning sprints

Growing in this strong, collegial culture at Peregian Springs are inquiry cycles and learning sprints — the practices inspired by the work of Simon Breakspear (Breakspear & Jones 2021). While many Queensland schools have implemented similar practices, a unique psychological foundation and school culture at Peregian Springs have made them a powerful vehicle of school improvement and professional growth.



### Driving school improvement

Inquiry cycles and learning sprints are conducted each term for each year level, and involve all teachers from that level, as well as school leadership representation. The purpose is to collaboratively identify a narrow area for improvement and strategies to address it, implement those strategies, and monitor their impact. Sharpening of the improvement focus is done in three steps to identify:

- **boulders** — overarching area or concept — usually linked to the priority area in the school’s annual improvement plan (AIP), driven by student needs and established through teachers’ conversation
- **pebbles** — narrower focus within the overarching area, specific for the year level
- **sand** — specific question or problem that needs addressing (this may change every three to four weeks).

Three meetings per term are held as part of each inquiry cycle and they are led by a teaching team. At the **first meeting**, staff establish the agenda and collaboratively discuss data — this could be systemic, regional, school assessment data, or any evidence of student learning collected by teachers. They identify boulders, pebbles and sand, discuss their current teaching approaches and determine potentially relevant and effective strategies, informed by research and evidence. Then, each teacher starts a learning sprint by setting more specific targets for their class and selecting a few students for whom these

targets will be monitored throughout the cycle. During the **second meeting**, staff bring available data and look at what has worked so far — they may adjust approaches, if the expected improvements have not occurred. At the **last meeting**, teachers monitor data and celebrate success. Although each learning sprint looks closely only at a few students from each class, all students benefit from the changes it brings about.

At any point in time, there could be a few teams running inquiry cycles in the same area, developing solutions to issues specific to their year level. Some teams may complete an inquiry cycle within a term, while others continue learning sprints for longer. All staff are in this improvement journey together, but teams may use different ways of achieving their targets, depending on student needs and classroom context.

*‘This isn’t top-down, leaders telling us what to do. This is actually staff members, as well as leaders, being able to sing from the same book.’*

*Teacher*

Inquiry cycles are a key tool in addressing priorities from the school improvement plan. They have been used to support the implementation of new approaches, such as iPads or play-based learning. But most of all, they have been the driver of continuous improvement in teaching practice at Peregian Springs. Informed by student needs, research and evidence, their simple and achievable method is providing endless opportunities for reflection and change.



## Unleashing professional learning

The powerful effects of inquiry cycles and learning sprints do not end with driving school improvement. This practice has also brought fundamental change to how Peregrian Springs staff develop and grow professionally.

Part of professional learning at Peregrian Springs occurs during formal activities. When needed, staff access external professional development modules, but it is expected they will share their learning with others upon return. Internal learning opportunities include a comprehensive induction program for new and returning staff, classroom visits during which teachers observe good practices implemented by their colleagues, and coaching — one-on-one sessions with trained growth coaches, which may also include modelling and observation. Coaching at Peregrian Springs is very powerful, as most staff are trained in growth coaching, skilled to help each other use their personal resources to plan and implement improvements in their teaching. Thanks to this, all staff have easy access to high-quality professional support whenever they need it. Everyone at the school has a coaching partner — a go to person with whom they can have a deep conversation about their practice.

While formal professional learning opportunities are valued by staff, the most important professional learning at Peregrian Springs occurs informally, every day, in-situ. Inquiry cycles and learning sprints are the key vehicles of that learning. Each cycle provides a platform for professional discussions, sharing knowledge and approaches informed by research and evidence. Everyone walks away feeling listened to. Staff challenge their ways of thinking and become motivated to search for the best

way of addressing problems of practice, whether it is through undertaking their own research, or participating in professional development programs.

Learning and sharing of knowledge and resources continues beyond inquiry cycles. Staff run deep professional conversations and challenge each other on Microsoft Teams. During annual performance reviews, school leaders mix teams within and across years so that teachers can share their professional learning journey and get to know where to access expertise.

*‘Something that we’ve fostered is that the PD isn’t this one-off thing that you might do on a student-free day or you may want to go off and do one afternoon. You are actually doing it all the time; you are learning on the job all the time. It is in-situ PD and a really natural, organic way of doing it, which is also related to annual performance plans and reviews.’*

*Principal*

Inquiry cycles brought professional learning at Peregrian Springs to another level. While school leaders work in the background collecting requests, helping to match needs with expertise and arranging release of teachers, professional learning is driven by teachers and their genuine need to improve their practice.



## Outcomes

### A strong and united professional learning community

The values embedded at Peregian Springs State School, as part of choice theory, have helped to create a needs-satisfying environment, in which staff are happier, because their needs are recognised and addressed. The result is a strong team of passionate professionals who choose to stay with the school, and who genuinely want their students to progress.

*‘They don’t just want to work hard; they actually really care about the kids in their classrooms, and the effort they go to is because of that care.’*

*Principal*

In 2019, Peregian Springs State School was declared a Glasser Quality School — the second Glasser Quality School in Australia. Embedding choice theory was one of the foundations of this award.

By providing a platform for identifying, sharing and accessing internal expertise, inquiry cycles have enhanced the collegial culture and helped create a professional learning community that includes everyone at the school. Staff learn from each other, easily moving between teams, and within and across year levels.

### A learning organisation

A strong culture and cycles of inquiry have helped Peregian Springs become a learning organisation. Peregian Springs staff ‘engage in forms of inquiry to investigate and extend their practice’; they view problems and mistakes as opportunities for learning (Kools & Stoll

2016, p. 45). The school has advanced significantly at each of the five dimensions of a learning organisation (SIU 2017, p. 241):

- shared vision and goals
- collaboration and teamwork
- continuous, in-situ professional learning
- learning-focused leadership
- culture of inquiry, exploration and risk taking.

Having developed a high organisational capacity to learn, the school is better positioned to sustain changes related to school improvement. It also provides a favourable environment for implementing innovative practices, such as the recent *mLearning* program that enabled Peregian Springs students to learn anywhere at any time. The school has been recognised as an Apple Distinguished School for 2020–22 for their continuous innovation in learning, teaching and school environment.

### Self-managed students

Staff at Peregian Springs take great pride in their students. Growing in an environment that promotes respect, trust and freedom, students progress academically, and as responsible, caring and emotionally intelligent human beings. These values do not go unnoticed — local high schools commend Peregian Springs students on their respectful behaviours and self-management skills.

Despite the changes in the school community, student achievement measured by percentage of students receiving C or higher has improved in most areas between 2016 and 2019.



## Success factors

- Consistency of leadership and school direction.
- Focus on addressing individual student and staff needs to unlock their potential.
- Culture promoting trust, respect and collegiality.
- Acknowledging learning as a continuous process, and ways of working and responding to problems.

## To generate discussion

How can we build a culture of trust to enable open, constructive feedback and discussions about the ways of working that positively impact student outcomes?

How do the practices at our school link to the dimensions of a learning organisation?

How can we leverage, share and enhance the expertise within our school for peer learning and professional development?



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

*Principal*

## References

Breakspear, S & Jones, BR 2021, *Teaching sprints. How overloaded educators can keep getting better*, Corwin.

Glasser Institute for Choice Theory (GICT) (online), [wglasser.com/what-is-choice-theory/](http://wglasser.com/what-is-choice-theory/) [accessed 12 March 2021].

Kools, M & Stoll, L 2016, ‘What makes a school a learning organisation?’, *OECD Education Working Papers*, no. 137, OECD Publishing, Paris.

School Improvement Unit (SIU) 2017, *Queensland: a state of learning. School Improvement Unit 2016 annual report*, Department of Education and Training, Brisbane.

To subscribe to our mailing list and receive copies of our latest insights papers and school case studies, email the Education Improvement Branch at [eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au](mailto:eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au).

Previous publications are available at [schoolreviews.education.qld.gov.au/research-and-reports](http://schoolreviews.education.qld.gov.au/research-and-reports).