

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 great practices implemented in schools and regions to identify what contributed to their success.

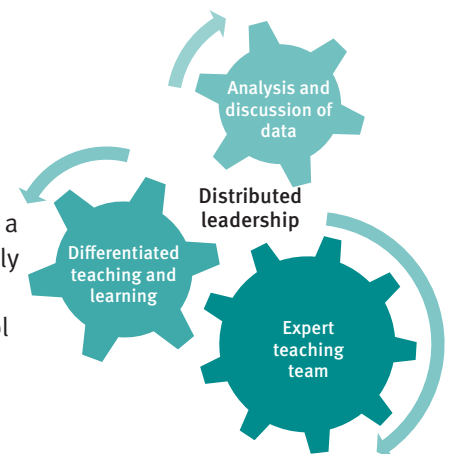


Leading with the head, the heart and the hand

An ambitious vision for learning, a positive and professional school culture, and inspiring collective action are all essential to Wishart State School's approach to school improvement. Students are at the centre of what they do; distributed leadership is how they get there.

Background

Wishart State School was founded as Mount Gravatt South State School in 1964. The primary school is located in the Brisbane suburbs, south east of the city, and educates a growing population of over 950 students. The school operates in a diverse and culturally vibrant context where students from all demographics are included and celebrated. Wishart's 12-year improvement journey has seen a significant change in how the school works, and the change is bearing fruit.



An ambitious vision: moving from good to great!

Wishart's improvement journey began over a decade ago with a desire to lift student academic outcomes from good to great. Student relative gains and Upper Two Band scores had begun to plateau: 'it was a good school but it was coasting'. The local area had also seen population growth from overseas immigration, which led to an enrolment increase of students who have English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D).

With an ambitious explicit improvement agenda, the school's principal has driven a clear and sustained focus on three key pillars of practice and cultural change at Wishart State School – professional learning culture, sophisticated use of data, and differentiation.

“That's the key thing at our school, we've done things steadily, we haven't rushed things, we've been purposeful in the way we've gone about things.”

Principal

Leading a professional learning culture

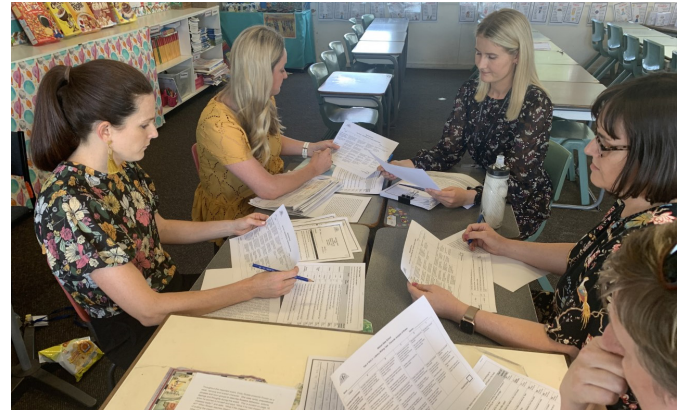
At the centre of the improvement agenda there is a firm belief in the power of bringing the best out of every individual in the school, every staff member and every student.

The school believes that ‘adults learn best when they work together on real challenges in their daily work’. Part of the process is developing teachers as leaders. The school has adopted the *Learning leaders, leading learning* program and made it their own. This has enabled participants to develop their emotional intelligence, to ‘better know themselves, become active listeners, work better with others, and recognise colleagues’ strengths and passions’. The program has created confidence, bolstered staff collegiality, and made for a high functioning and united team. These skills enable people to successfully lead initiatives aligned to the school’s strategic direction, and are transferable to other schools as teachers move within the system.

“ We don’t have two or three leaders amongst the staff, we’re all leaders in some way. ”

Year 1 teacher

Teachers and teacher aides have targeted professional development to respond to needs identified in student data. Deputy principals mentor teachers in the implementation of pedagogical strategies in reading, writing, oral language and mathematics. Teacher aides are trained and refreshed in assessment and support for reading, writing and numeracy. Staff visit other schools, and teachers use their non-contact time to visit colleagues’ classrooms to discover new approaches. Staff share learnings to assist transitions between year levels. New staff are coached and mentored, and teacher graduates contribute with fresh ideas. The school also commissions external research and professional development to ensure it stays open to emerging practice. The school employs systematic processes to provide regular opportunities for staff to receive feedback on their practice, and engage in classroom modelling, observations and professional conversations. Planning and moderation meetings held each term are well attended and provide additional opportunity for collegial conversations and capability building, thereby generating collective efficacy among staff. In particular, staff have increased their understanding of the needs and pedagogical strategies to support EAL/D learners.



Sophisticated use of data to inform teaching and learning

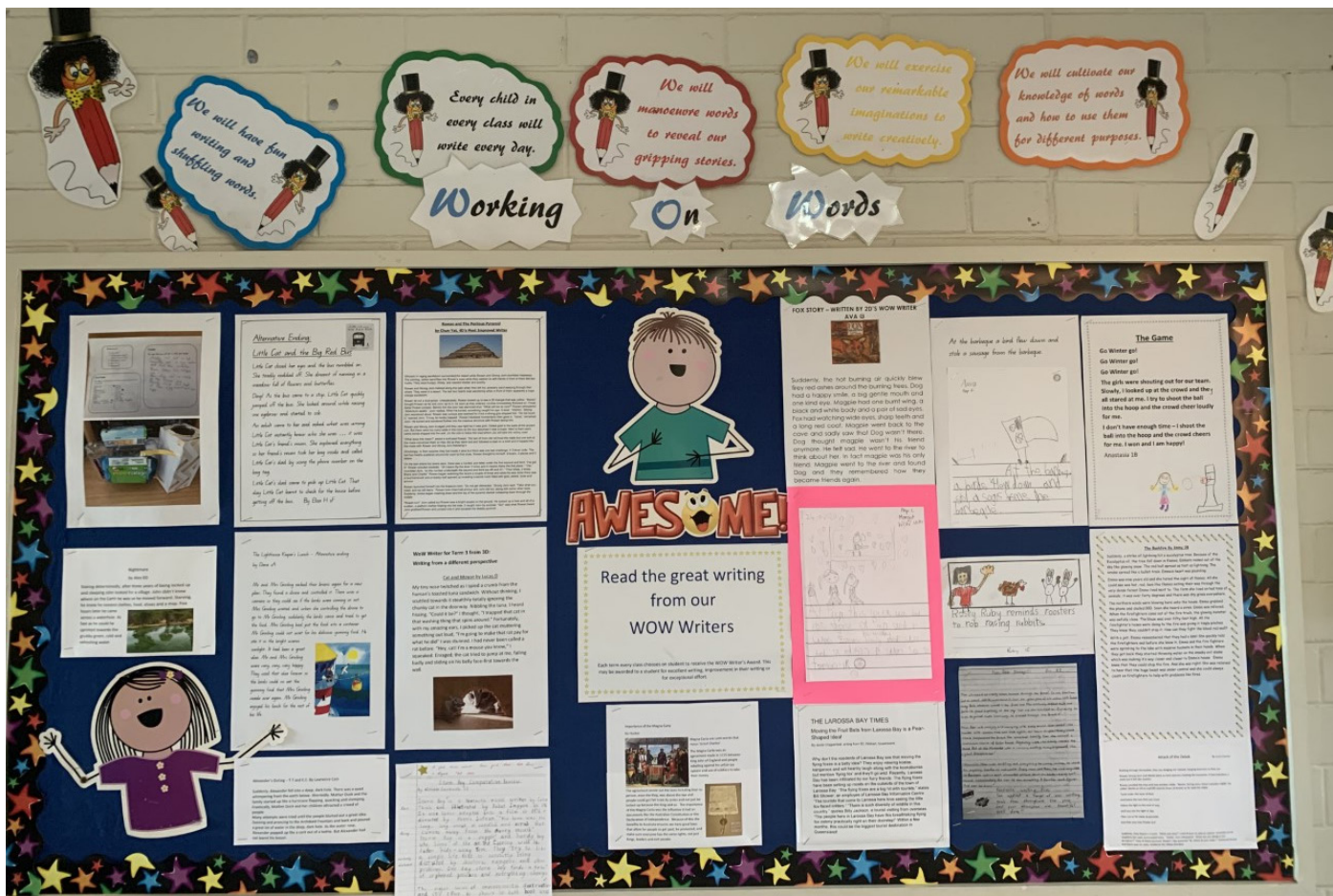
The school has progressively developed a ‘culture of openness’ and collective ownership of students’ success. Teachers regularly engage in structured opportunities to observe, refine, develop and share student data. Each term, year level groups unpack and analyse student progress and achievement data. In reading, for example, teaching teams compare information from class tasks and observations with PAT-R, NAPLAN and reading data. These discussions are used to inform decisions and plan the next steps, including specific interventions, targets for identified students, adjustments to action plans, and resourcing. Staff use data walls, classroom trackers, student profiling and differentiation dashboards to organise and understand the data.

Through consistent processes and routines for collaborative data conversations, deeper considerations of teaching practices and the impact and efficacy of strategies are evident. These discussions inspire the ‘light bulb’ moments that inform and change pedagogical practice. For writing, the school’s approach to data resulted in new pedagogies in explicit teaching.

“ We’ve really had to know our students, know our data and know our strategies. ”

Deputy principal

The collection and analysis of student data is critical. Moderation ensures that ‘everyone is on the same page’. Developing consistency is central to monitoring progress and effectiveness. Without consistency, there is no opportunity to compare information, find ‘the common threads they can monitor’, and see what works. This also gives students the opportunity to speak the language of assessment and understand their own next steps and learning goals, reinforcing efficacy of practice and empowering students in their learning. As the quality and the standard of students’ work has increased, staff have had to revisit the level and rigour of classroom work to ensure they are extending their students enough: ‘that is exciting work’.



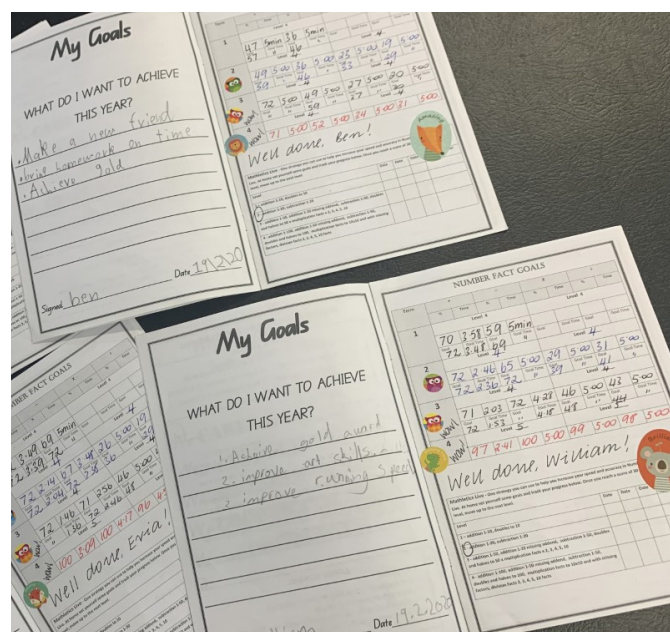
Ensuring rigorous learning through differentiation

The school recognises that teachers make the biggest impact on student learning, and differentiation is critical. The school offers three tiers of support for the children in their care: differentiation in the classroom, focused teaching for identified groups, and intensive explicit teaching for new students. The school has changed the way it approaches interventions as part of its improvement journey. Previously, it was about withdrawal from the classroom: ‘that’s all changed’. Now, interventions occur during reading group times, so students are not being removed from the teaching space and ‘missing out on important subject areas’.

Oral language development is central to the school’s approach to supporting EAL/D learners. Vocabulary is the ‘strongest predictor for writing skills’ and ‘the most important thing possible’ in the early years. The key focus has been in building students’ linguistic proficiency so they have access to the curriculum. Support teachers therefore spend significant time engaging with students in a targeted way to embed these skills. The curriculum is also adjusted and refined with EAL/D in mind, so that each and every student is included.

“EAL/D is not a disability, it’s about diversity.”

Support teacher



“Inclusiveness is not about individuals, it’s about access to the curriculum.”

Support teacher

Implementing the pillars of practice

Staff at Wishart State School pride themselves on being ‘architects of their own improvement agenda’. New practices were introduced incrementally. ‘We wanted a gradual change’, one that was ‘gentle’ and ‘organic’. The idea was to slowly build the momentum for change by achieving small wins and building trust in the process. The whole team began by reviewing the data, where the need to improve reading, writing and numeracy was identified. The school started with reading, then moved on to writing where most of the work had to be done.

The principal focused on building a dedicated, skilled and professional team to implement their improvement agenda. Teachers are encouraged to work to their strengths and experiment with evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning. There is a whole-school emphasis on teachers having a ‘play’ with new ideas, practices or processes in their classroom that might lift student outcomes. At Wishart, this ‘sparks a passion and enthusiasm’ for positive change, and teachers become engaged and invested in what is happening: ‘We all have ownership’. Effective practices are tested, evaluated and shared with the whole teaching team.

The school’s endeavours have been cohesive, documented through strategic planning, aligned to system priorities, and implemented through action plans. The plans are purposeful and agile; the agenda evolves and strategies change to ensure each student is achieving. Interventions, for example, have always been part of the improvement agenda, but the strategies have been refined. Within this framework, actions are developed



from the ground up, with teachers driving the initiatives and teams collaboratively developing the improvement agenda. Governance and consistency are achieved by coordinating the work of moderation, year-level, and planning meetings.

The school provides extensive resources to support staff and specialist teachers, and heavily invests in their professional development. The school has an ‘amazing group of teacher aides’ who help to deliver the extensive initiatives in differentiation and inclusion. They play a critical role in contributing expertise and feedback on the efficacy of practices.

“The structures have allowed flexibility; if someone does have an idea, there will be a place where it fits.”

Principal

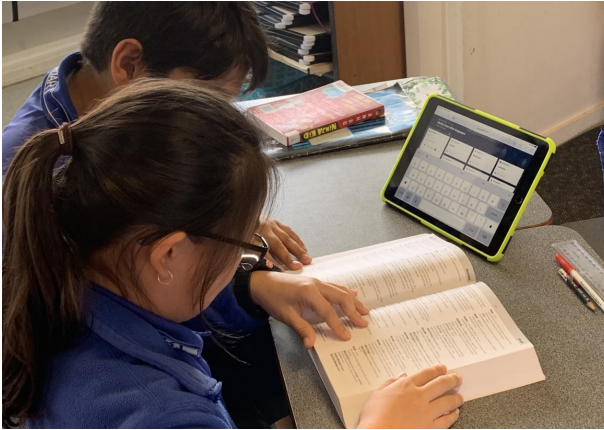
“Everyone shares high expectations with high support.”

Support teacher

Outcomes

Staff have been on board for Wishart State School's journey over the last decade. They have had the opportunity to watch the school grow and see the results. The school has steadily moved upwards in all areas of literacy and numeracy. NAPLAN Mean Scale Scores and Upper Two Bands have all seen growth over the past decade. Achievement in National Minimum Standards has increased in all but one area. Since 2017, student relative gain has been above the state average in all but one strand.





Success factors

- Leadership that provides an ambitious vision, purpose and structure.
- A culture of high trust, high support and high challenge.
- Collaboration in teams where data is analysed and solutions are discovered.
- Collegiality that empowers people to lead, learn from each other and take risks.

Next steps

Wishart State School is consolidating its work in the three pillars, always looking to refine and strengthen its approach to teaching and learning. The principal's vision is to maintain the school's momentum in improving student outcomes by leveraging its successes, staff dedication and organisational know-how in its new four-year strategic plan.



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