

Closing the gap: Aldavilla Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Aldavilla Public School has achieved high learning growth for Aboriginal students. In particular, it looks at the ways in which Aldavilla Public School is focussing on high expectations, literacy and numeracy, and engaging Aboriginal students, parents and community, to achieve high growth for Aboriginal students and students across the school.

The 'Closing the Gap' strategy is a formal commitment made by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008 to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through setting measurable targets for improvement. The Closing the Gap framework will reach its tenth year in 2018. Four of the existing seven Closing the Gap targets are due to expire in 2018. This includes the target to halve the gap for Aboriginal students in reading, writing and numeracy.

The Council of Australian Governments has agreed to work with Aboriginal leaders, organisations and communities to refresh the Closing the Gap framework. As part of the broader Closing the Gap refresh, NSW committed to undertake a 'deep-dive' analysis of what works in schools to assist in lifting the performance of Aboriginal students.

To this end, CESE has produced a series of five case studies on primary schools that have closed the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The case studies highlight strategies that the schools identify as contributors to their success.

Background

Aldavilla Public School is a primary school located in the Kempsey Shire on the mid-North coast of NSW. It has an enrolment of around 312 students. Twenty-four per cent of students are Aboriginal and three per cent of students come from a Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) (NSW Department of Education data 2017). The school has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) with over half of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter. The school has increased in size by around 25 per cent over the last five years, and has a growing proportion of Aboriginal students. The proportion of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter has also increased in the last five years.

The attendance rate for both Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in 2016 was 93 per cent (My School 2016). Eighty-one per cent of Aboriginal students say they feel good about their culture at school and 75 per cent of Aboriginal students feel their teachers have a good understanding of their culture (Tell Them From Me data 2017). The school employs two full-time Aboriginal Education Officers. Aldavilla gains results close to similar schools across most NAPLAN domains (My School 2016).

Aldavilla Public School is a founding member of the Macleay Educational Community of Schools, a group of 17 local public schools committed to working together to provide the best possible education for all students. Aldavilla describes itself as a modern school with well-resourced classrooms and excellent facilities. Its classrooms make use of technology including interactive whiteboards, iPads and robotics programs and it has an extensive kitchen garden program. The school has a good reputation in the local community according to staff and parents. The school has a relatively stable student population, with most students staying from Kindergarten through to Year 6. The teaching staff is also stable, with a reasonably low turnover rate.



Closing the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

The school attributes its success in achieving high growth for Aboriginal students, and indeed all students at the school, to the initiatives and changes that were brought about under the previous principal¹. These changes included: a focus on instructional leadership, improving teacher capacity, data-driven programming, a focus on literacy and numeracy, high expectations for teachers and students, and a focus on health and community engagement, including the establishment of a Stephanie Alexander kitchen garden. The school's three strategic directions as articulated in the 2015-2017 school plan are: great learning – individual students reaching their full potential; great teaching – creating life-long learners; and great communities – creating a strong learning culture for all.

The practices that appear to be particularly relevant in increasing outcomes for all students, and particularly Aboriginal students at Aldavilla Public School, are: high expectations; a focus on literacy and numeracy; and engaging Aboriginal students, parents and the community.

High expectations

The school attributes much of its success in improving outcomes for students to a focus on high expectations. The students are constantly reminded that they can be whatever they want to be. One way that high expectations are encouraged at Aldavilla Public School is through goal setting. Students are expected to have attainable learning goals that they are working towards, and staff are constantly encouraging students to push themselves to reach their next goal. All Aboriginal students have personalised learning plans (PLPs) with goals that have been determined by parents, teachers and students.

The school also fosters high expectations through establishing consistent and explicit policies and expectations. For example, Aldavilla has behaviour expectations that are common across the school. Every classroom has exactly the same behaviour management system, in the form of a chart for students behaving appropriately and a name on the board with a cross if students are not meeting behaviour expectations. Mutual respect, according to the school, is generated when everyone is following the same policies and this leads to high expectations for both students and staff.

The importance of relationships was also highlighted by the school as an important part of its high expectations culture. This was particularly noted in reference to the relationship between teachers and students. All teachers make an effort to get to know the students at Aldavilla and demonstrate that they care about their students. This can be as simple as knowing who a student's siblings are or asking questions about what they

did on the weekend. It can also involve watching the students play soccer or football on the weekends, or simply chatting to students in town. The knowledge that teachers also have lives outside of school helps students see them as 'real' people who are there to support and encourage them.

Explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy

Aldavilla Public School has a strong focus on the explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy, with an emphasis on individual learning programs. All students at the school, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have access to additional literacy and numeracy support programs. These include the learning and support teachers, extension programs, and intervention programs such as QuickSmart and MultiLit. Program outcomes are monitored by an experienced learning support team. The school also works in partnership with parents to assist students who have special learning needs.

The school was a Low-SES National Partnership school, and focussed initially on numeracy for the first two years before switching to literacy for the last three years. The school became an Early Action for Success school in 2017. Several significant changes in teaching practice have occurred since this focus on literacy and numeracy began. These have included: the willingness of teachers to speak with each other about their practice; the drive to improve results for all students; and an increased focus on using data to inform practice, especially with the introduction of Early Action for Success.

Aldavilla Public School has graded maths groups from Years 1 to 6 which are run across each stage. The school regularly reviews these groups and makes changes as necessary. The school also funds an additional teacher for these classes. The school invests in a numeracy intervention program which has had a significant impact on outcomes for targeted students who have previously experienced difficulty in their learning. In terms of literacy, the school runs reading groups from Kindergarten through to Year 6. It runs a 'Read To' program which focuses on vocabulary and comprehension, as poor performance in these areas is seen as limiting the achievement of expected literacy (and numeracy) outcomes. The Aboriginal Education Officers read with targeted Aboriginal students every afternoon as part of this program. The school also uses MultiLit for targeted students who are assessed as needing literacy intervention. The support officers (including the Aboriginal Education Officers) provide one-on-one classroom literacy and numeracy support, as well as group support to all students who require it. Support staff enter comments for each student they have worked with into the school's Sentral database at the end of the year, so it is clear for next year's teacher where each student is at and what support they have received.

1 This principal, David Munday, left at the end of 2016 after eleven years at Aldavilla Public School. He has taken up a position as principal at another local primary school.

Engaging Aboriginal students, parents and community

Student engagement

Aldavilla Public School employs two full-time Aboriginal Education Officers. These staff are both young men from the local area². According to the school, they provide excellent role models for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Education Officers spend a lot of time in the classroom, assisting with literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students. Both the Aboriginal Education Officers also spend a lot of time encouraging participation in sport at the school, be it basketball, rugby league or the school's Aboriginal boys dance group, and they are frequently seen in the playground interacting with students. They both play football themselves for opposing local teams outside of school, according to parents, and the students often go and watch them play on the weekend.

Aboriginal students are also engaged through the set up of spaces like the 'yarning circle' in the school's playground. The yarning circle is a place where students can come and listen to each other's stories. A 'talking stick' is passed around and students must listen to the student with the talking stick. According to the school, this practice is a good way to engage students and to teach respect (i.e. when one person is speaking, everyone else is listening). The yarning circle is for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Several staff members at the school have been trained in the '8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning' pedagogy to help engage Aboriginal students in learning. The 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogy is a framework that allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives in lessons by using Aboriginal learning techniques such as learning through narrative, and connecting learning to local values, needs and knowledge. Staff members are also offered the opportunity to participate in the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's (AECG) 'Connecting to Country' program. This is a three-day intensive, in-the-field cultural immersion program focusing on local Aboriginal culture and history. The school is represented at the local AECG meetings held twice a term, with up to six staff members and the Aboriginal Education Officers usually attending.

Parent engagement

According to the school, parents – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – are very engaged with the school. The school makes a concerted effort to engage parents through a range

of activities. Parent interview 'speed dating' occurs at the beginning of each year when all parents are invited to come in and meet their child's teacher for 10 minutes and let teachers know what they would like for their child. The school also uses positive phone calls to parents to touch base and evaluates feedback from parents that is provided on 'sign-in' sheets when parents visit the school.

Activities that target Aboriginal parents specifically include the annual pizza night held in the school train³ for Aboriginal families as an acknowledgment and celebration of the completion of students' personalised learning plans (PLPs). According to parents, nearly all the Aboriginal students at the school attend this evening with their families. The teachers come along too, and the evening provides an opportunity for parents to have conversations with teachers about the achievements a student has made over the year. The students cook the pizzas themselves using produce from the school's kitchen garden, providing another opportunity to show some of the skills they have learnt through the year⁴. The school has one hundred per cent of PLPs completed, and state that they find it relatively easy to get parents to come into the school to participate in these. Parents are also welcome to discuss the plan outside scheduled meetings. The Aboriginal Education Officers work with the few parents who are harder to engage in PLPs, by making phone calls or visiting families in person.

Community engagement

The school works closely with the local community to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students. For example, the school engages with the Durri Aboriginal Corporation Medical Service who provide hearing and dental checks for the Aboriginal students. The school engages with Malpa, a health leadership program which trains young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in healthy eating and other ways to be healthy. Aldavilla Public School engages with Mission Australia on a Year 6 transition to high school program for Aboriginal students. The school is also increasingly engaging with the local Aboriginal pre-school and invites staff from the pre-school to visit the school's kindergarten class and to come along for the NAIDOC week celebrations. The school has a big celebration for NAIDOC week and invites the community to participate. NAIDOC week activities may include cooking damper and eating grubs and kangaroo meatballs or sausage, inviting an Aboriginal elder in to tell a Dreaming story; learning Aboriginal dances; and making use of spaces such as the yarning circle.

² One of the Aboriginal Education Officers was a former student at the school, and he was encouraged to come back to Aldavilla as a staff member by the former principal; the other Aboriginal Education Officer comes from South West Rocks.

³ The school has an old CityRail train carriage installed on its grounds, which the school has converted to a kitchen and entertaining space for cooking lessons and school gatherings.

⁴ All students in Years 3 to 6 take part in the school's kitchen garden initiative. Students either cook or garden one day a fortnight.



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