

Closing the gap: Ashmont Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Ashmont Public School has achieved high learning growth for Aboriginal students. In particular, it looks at how a culture of high expectations and engaging students in learning, a focus on literacy and numeracy, using data to inform practice, and recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture in the school, have all contributed to above-average outcomes for Aboriginal students.

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

Ashmont Public School is a primary school located in Wagga Wagga, in the Riverina region of southern NSW. It has an enrolment of 242 students, 51 per cent of whom are Aboriginal and seven per cent of whom come from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) (NSW Department of Education data 2017). The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is lower than average. Over 80 per cent of students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter. The percentage of Aboriginal students at the school has increased over the last ten years, as has the percentage of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter (My School 2016). Ashmont Public School employs a full-time Aboriginal Education Officer and three Aboriginal support staff.

Ashmont Public School achieves results above or substantially above similar schools in most NAPLAN domains, including reading, writing, grammar and punctuation and numeracy (My School 2016). The top four Ashmont Public School students in Year 5 NAPLAN in 2016 were Aboriginal students. Eight of the top 10 students in reading were Aboriginal students, and the three top students in numeracy were also Aboriginal students (Department of Education data 2016). The attendance rate is 90 per cent for non-Aboriginal students and 87 per cent for Aboriginal students (My School 2016). Aboriginal students at Ashmont Public School report more positively than non-Aboriginal students across most student engagement measures, including sense of belonging (Tell Them From Me data 2017). The School Excellence Framework external validation for Ashmont Public School verified Ashmont Public School's practices as excelling or sustaining and growing across almost every Framework element including curriculum and learning, effective classroom practice, data skills and use, assessment and reporting, and student performance measures.



Closing the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

The success of Ashmont Public School in achieving higher than average learning growth for Aboriginal students appears to be associated with a culture of high expectations and engaging students in learning, a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, using data to inform practice, and recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture in the school.

High expectations and engaging students in learning

One of the defining features of Ashmont Public School's approach to improving learning outcomes is promoting a culture of high expectations for all students and staff. A critical element of this culture of high expectations is engaging students through learning. This represents a significant shift in the school's culture over time, from one of behaviour management to one in which all students are expected to be engaged in their learning. For example, the previous approach of punishing poor behaviour through detention has been abandoned, and children who behave disruptively in class instead participate in 'reflection' time during their lunch break. The focus of this reflection time is on learning rather than punishment. For instance, the reflection teacher might ask the student, 'Did you know Antarctica is the driest continent?' During the next day's lesson, the teacher will then ask, 'Who knows which is the driest continent?', allowing the child to answer the question and thus to feel engaged in the lesson.

One way in which Aboriginal students are encouraged to set high expectations is through personalised learning plans (PLPs). PLPs are developed collaboratively by the teacher, student

and parent at the beginning of the year and are addressed again with parents at a half-yearly interview. Teachers have been provided with professional learning on how to create an effective PLP using specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (SMART) goals.

The school also runs a 'Learning Journey Showcase' in Term Three each year as a means to raise both student and parent expectations. Each child selects a range of work that they want to show – for example, two pieces of maths work, two English, one history and one performance piece – and puts these in a display folder. Parents are then invited to attend the school, and are provided with questions to ask the children. Every student has at least one guest, and in recent years some students have had multiple guests. Five students have their guests in the class at one time so that the teacher has time to spend talking with each parent, and then all guests gather for morning tea with the students and teachers.

Another means of fostering high expectations at Ashmont Public School is through the focus on high-potential students. High-potential students are actively identified, and provided with one-on-one teaching to help further their achievement. Ashmont Public School students are funded by the school to participate in ICAS, a skills-based assessment program run through the University of New South Wales which recognises and rewards student achievement. This focus on high-potential students has shown success in that several Ashmont Public School students – including both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students – have successfully applied for placement in opportunity classes in local schools, and others have been accepted into the local selective high school.



Focus on literacy and numeracy

Ashmont Public School has an explicit emphasis on teaching literacy and numeracy. While other subjects are taught, including science and technology and human society and its environment, these always maintain a strong focus on literacy or numeracy in the lesson. For example, in a lesson about Vikings, students might be given a piece of text about Vikings to practice their reading comprehension, or calculate the length of a Viking boat to practice their numeracy skills. Another example of this strong focus on literacy and numeracy is that 'Book Week' has been extended from one week to run over a fortnight at Ashmont Public School.

The school day at Ashmont Public School is specifically structured around this focus on literacy and numeracy, with two-hour blocks being dedicated to learning either literacy or numeracy every day. For example, one half of the school has a literacy lesson from 9:15 until 11:15, then numeracy from 11:55 until 1:55 – and vice versa. After lunch, the remaining forty-five minutes of the school day are used for a different lesson each day of the week – such as sport, art or assembly – but these lessons also always incorporate an aspect of literacy and numeracy.

Students at Ashmont Public School are provided with targeted support in literacy and numeracy. For example, students requiring intervention in reading are supported to read the same book three times every day. The intervention teachers and support staff employed at the school are all highly skilled, and include ex-teachers and principals. The school also provides additional support for Aboriginal students, by funding a staff member to run the 'Norta Norta' program. This program provides Aboriginal students who require additional support with intensive learning assistance in literacy and numeracy. Detailed feedback on students' progress is provided to the student's teacher by the Norta Norta coordinator.

Using data to inform practice

Ashmont Public School has a very strong focus on using data to inform practice. The focus on data is driven by the Instructional Leader, who has developed strong systems and procedures that make it easy for teachers to collect and analyse data. The school uses a 'data wall' for students from Kindergarten through to Year 6, which all teachers use to track the progress of every student in both literacy and numeracy. NAPLAN data is analysed closely not only at the student level, but also at the classroom and school levels to identify curriculum areas that may require closer attention by teachers.

One specific way in which teachers track student progress is through 'tiered intervention booklets'. Each child has their own booklet identifying a specific skill that the student needs to work on – such as learning to count backwards from 30, or using five adjectives in a paragraph – which the teacher has identified through analysing the data. This booklet is designed so that anybody – the class teacher, an intervention teacher, or support staff – can pick it up, see what the child needs to work on, and register that the child has worked on their goal each day.

All teachers participate in fortnightly professional learning in which the previous fortnight's data is used to inform discussions on student progress and differentiating lessons in the coming fortnight. Lesson programming also occurs fortnightly, driven by this analysis, and differentiated according to the data. Planning Literacy and Numeracy (PLAN) data is analysed every five weeks, and any student identified as being two clusters behind on the continuum is supported in targeted ways. Where it is identified that a large number of students in a class are behind in a particular area, the teacher is supported with additional relevant professional learning.

The Instructional Leader also monitors the effective implementation of teaching and learning objectives – for example, workbooks from each class are collected regularly to check teachers' programming against students' books and verify that lesson programming is carrying through to classroom practice.

Recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture

Ashmont Public School's commitment to universally high expectations for all students is complemented by a focus on recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture in the school. An important part of this approach is having Aboriginal members of staff – the school has a full-time Aboriginal Education Officer and three Aboriginal support staff. The school has also recently introduced a second Instructional Leader whose role is specifically to increase the engagement of Aboriginal students and help raise their literacy and numeracy outcomes.

The school regularly observes significant events such as NAIDOC week and Sorry Day and incorporates the local Aboriginal language, Wiradjuri, into lessons. For example, children learn songs in the Wiradjuri language which they perform during events such as NAIDOC day. The school also runs the Bro Speak and Sista Speak wellbeing programs for Aboriginal children in Years 4 to 6. Sista Speak is run by the female Aboriginal Education Officer, while Bro Speak is run by a male Aboriginal support officer. The school is currently looking at ways to involve the parents of Aboriginal students in this program.







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