

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Creating a culture of excellence

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

School Excellence Framework themes

The School Excellence Framework (SEF) describes 14 elements of high quality practice which underpin school excellence in the three domains of learning, teaching and leading. In 2016 five schools (Lansvale Public School, Rooty Hill High School, Sefton High School, Taree West Public School and Woonona High School) were identified as excelling in most of these elements. The practices of these schools are described in case studies of how individual schools create and maintain a culture of excellence. This summary gives an overview of the high quality practices common to these five schools, including data collection and analysis; ongoing evaluation of teaching practices; peer support and mentoring among staff; inter-school collaboration; and educational leadership.

Learning

All five schools maintain a culture of building educational aspiration and supporting students' learning with the aid of a three way partnership between teachers, students and parents. Teachers continually monitor students' academic progress using formative and summative assessment data (including NAPLAN and HSC data). Some schools like Lansvale Public School hold somewhat formalised 'data meetings' where staff discuss student performance data to aid better targeted curriculum planning. Other schools like Taree West Public School disseminate student performance data to relevant staff at five- or ten-week intervals so that the data can inform teachers' practice.

At these schools that excel, students are also encouraged to make personal learning plans and have discussions with teachers about where and what improvements are needed in their learning. For instance, Rooty Hill High School has created Junior and Senior Learning Centres specifically to provide an avenue through which students can access extra support and advice from teachers. To the same end, Taree West Public School has taken some of its teachers off class to provide students with additional learning support.

Schools that excel also strategically involve parents in students' learning to ensure that learning does not stop once students leave the school grounds. The PaTCH¹ program at Lansvale Public School is an example of one school's effort to partner with parents in enhancing students' learning. The program sees parents act as teachers' classroom helpers. Woonona High School similarly devised the 'HSC Strategy' to make it easier for parents to be involved in their children's learning. Through this strategy, the school informs parents about the HSC and how to communicate with their children using 'HSC language'. By sharing the responsibility for students' learning, the case study schools create learning environments where students feel motivated to learn and have adequate support to reach their full learning potential.

Teaching

The case study schools place a strong emphasis on staff learning and development, and promote a culture of self- and/or peer evaluations to improve teaching practice. Within each of these schools, there are professional learning (PL) systems in place that enable teachers to learn from and with each other about a range of teaching-related topics. Although schools may differ in their approach to professional learning, the goal remains the same across schools – to sustain quality teaching practice. The PL system at Taree West Public School, for instance, sees various teaching stages take their Relief from Face-to-Face (RFF) time together so that they can engage in professional learning as a stage group. Woonona High School uses a cross-faculty professional learning format to foster and strengthen interfaculty collaboration and support. For Sefton High School, improving teachers' professional skills is explicitly stated as one of the school's strategic directions and the principal strongly promotes professional learning for staff, even running some workshops herself.

¹ Parents as teachers and classroom helpers.

Further facilitating learning and development, the case study schools often form learning alliances with other schools to promote collaboration, peer learning and mentoring among teachers. For example, Rooty Hill High School belongs to a Learning Neighborhood of four schools that promotes continuity of learning from Kindergarten to Year 12. In this instance, primary school students are invited to visit and experience high school at least once a year. Teachers collaborate with other teachers within these learning alliances to exchange ideas about curriculum delivery, effective classroom practice and/or trialling of new teaching methods. Collaborations sometimes also extend to universities, as in the case of the University of Wollongong 'Hub Program' to which Woonona High School belongs. As part of the Hub Program, Woonona High School develops models of best practice for the training of pre-service teachers.

Leading

The principals at all of the case study schools are strong educational leaders who model instructional leadership both within and beyond their schools. For example, the principal of Lansvale Public School served five schools in an instructional leadership role from 2012-2015. Woonona High School's principal received the 2017 Commonwealth Bank Teaching Award for her educational leadership. The principal of Rooty Hill High School co-authored a book on school leadership and was instrumental in the school being named one of the 40 most innovative schools in Australia in 2016 and 2017.

These principals all share a common desire to build leadership capacity among their staff and often allow staff to play key roles in the making and/or enactment of school decisions. This looks different at different schools, however Sefton High School has an explicit process of delegation from principal to head teachers to the rest of the staff. The principal makes most of the decisions then hands over the responsibility for enacting those decisions to the head teachers who, in turn, assign tasks to the rest of the staff.

At Rooty Hill High School, every teacher is expected to take on a leadership role from their second year at the school, and every faculty has a professional practice mentor, typically a new scheme teacher, who leads the teacher accreditation process. Lansvale Public School builds leadership capacity by encouraging its teachers to join and learn from leadership networks outside the school.

Conclusion

This summary and the associated case studies highlight schools that were identified as excelling across SEF elements in 2016. It is clear that not all schools that excel do so by focusing on exactly the same things nor do they all demonstrate the same quality practices in the same way. Hence, there are many similarities between these case studies but also some differences. Before considering or adopting any of the practices discussed in these case studies, schools must first understand how contextual factors (such as ICSEA value or location) might affect outcomes. The School Excellence Framework continues to provide a reliable point of reference for schools to assess their practices each year. Though the Framework has been updated from version 1 to version 2, the domains and most of the elements remain consistent.



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