

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Creating a culture of excellence: Taree West Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Taree West Public School creates and sustains a culture of excellence, particularly through visionary leadership, staff collaboration and professional learning, ongoing evaluation, and focus on student wellbeing and community engagement.

Background

Taree West Public School is a primary school located on the Mid North Coast of NSW. There are 509 students enrolled at the school, 17% of whom are Aboriginal and four per cent of whom come from a language background other than English (LBOTE). Taree West Public School has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 928 which is lower than the NSW average of 1000, indicating a higher than average level of disadvantage. Fifty per cent of enrolled students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter while five per cent are in the top ICSEA quarter. The school performs close to or above similar schools in all NAPLAN domains (My School 2016). External validation in 2016 found Taree West Public School to be excelling in 12 out of the 14 elements in the School Excellence Framework (SEF) version 1.

According to the Taree West Public School Plan 2015-2017, the school strategic directions were provision of care, excellence and opportunity for all students to enhance the quality of learning; continual enhancement of quality teaching and leadership; and provision of high quality school systems and practices. There are 27 teaching and five non-teaching staff employed at Taree West Public School (My School 2016). Prior to becoming principal at Taree West Public School seven years ago, the current principal previously served as principal of another primary school for three years, and was acting principal of another school before that.



Creating a culture of excellence

The practices at Taree West Public School that contribute to its culture of excellence include visionary leadership, staff collaboration and professional learning, ongoing evaluation, and focus on student wellbeing and community engagement.

Visionary leadership

Just before coming to Taree West Public School, the principal completed a master's degree in education administration and leadership. This gave her valuable insight into current education research and the evidence base for improving teaching practice. Armed with this knowledge, she arrived at Taree West Public School with a clear vision of what a quality school environment should look like to achieve the best learning outcomes for students. The principal's first objective was to get teachers to proactively and continually self-evaluate their practice by staying informed about current research findings on effective teaching practice. A culture of self-reflection is now a core aspect of teaching at Taree West Public School; teachers continually strive to learn from research and improve upon their teaching practice.

The principal's second objective for Taree West Public School was to improve student achievements by trialling new teaching methods like project-based learning and increasing the number of teaching/learning support staff. This objective has been facilitated by funding from the Early Action for Success initiative¹ and RAM funding², all of which have allowed the principal to take some teachers off class so they can dedicate more time to providing support for the 20 classes at the school. Taree West Public School now has two instructional leaders in deputy principal positions, and four school executive who have been taken off class so they can provide more learning support for students.

Staff collaboration and professional learning

Staff collaboration

According to the principal, one of the main factors behind the culture of excellence at Taree West Public School is the sense of interdependence and collaboration among staff. Recognising that staff play a key role in implementing high quality practices at the school, the principal has introduced a system where most decisions are made collaboratively by members of staff. For instance, regular meetings are held to ensure that all staff members are kept abreast of school matters and have an opportunity to provide feedback. The executive meet twice a week for an hour or longer, depending on what is being discussed, while the stages (year groupings) meet once a week. There are also 'communication meetings' which were introduced to provide a forum where every staff member can be informed of, and participate in, school-related discussions. This openness and inclusion of staff in decision making is the school's way of fostering 'whole school ownership', so that every staff member feels like they have a stake in the school's success and is motivated to give their best.

The inclusion of teaching staff in decision making at Taree West Public School reflects the fact that teachers have the closest and most frequent interaction with students, and firsthand experience about what works best in classrooms. Hence, it was teachers who identified the need for each learning stage (Stages 1, 2 and 3) to have its own curriculum leader to work side by side with teachers in the development of curriculum content. After receiving this suggestion at one of the staff meetings, the senior executive of the school deliberated, consulted with the teachers, and subsequently took some executive off class so they could focus on providing curriculum support.



¹ Early Action for Success is the Department of Education's strategy for improving students' literacy and numeracy performance in the early years of schooling.

² Since 2014, NSW public schools have been funded through the needs-based Resource Allocation Model (RAM). This model is based on student and school needs, and is made up of three components: base school allocation; equity loadings; and targeted (individual student) funding.

In 2017, one additional curriculum leader was employed specifically to provide curriculum support to teachers. Taree West Public School allocates financial and other resources through the same consultative decision-making process. This approach ensures that school resource allocation reflects the priorities of each staff group, priorities that are first discussed during weekly stage meetings and later communicated to the school executive.

Staff collaboration at Taree West Public School also supports successful succession planning. In the daily operation of the school, the principal allocates tasks according to the strengths of staff members and encourages staff to share their expertise with other staff members. For example, a staff member who is very good at conducting data analyses would be assigned the task of analysing the student performance data that teachers regularly collect. This staff member, in turn, shows other staff members how to carry out the data analysis so that if there comes a time when he or she is unavailable or leaves the school, someone else can step up to perform the task. This succession planning ensures that the school continues to operate smoothly regardless of staff turnover.

Professional learning

At Taree West Public School, the principal fosters trust and interdependence among staff by getting teachers of the various learning stages to take their Relief from Face-to-Face (RFF) time together and do their professional learning as a group. Her rationale is that if stages spend a lot of time working together as a group, they will feel motivated to help each other learn and give their best to the students, and this feeling will translate across the entire school. As the principal explained, 'they identify as groups and then we identify as a school.' For half a day every fortnight, the stages participate in a professional learning course that takes place either in the school's learning centre, or in classrooms when there is a need for practical demonstrations.

With the school's focus on improving practice, teachers evaluate their own and others' teaching practice, then discuss ways to improve based on what is learnt at the workshops. The principal sees this peer evaluation as crucial for ensuring that staff are actually improving as a result of professional learning, rather than just attending workshops without changing their practice.

Ongoing evaluation

At Taree West Public School, there is a strong emphasis on evaluating current practices to identify areas for improvement. According to the principal, the School Excellence Framework (SEF) is useful for this evaluation process, helping the school to confirm areas where they are performing well and identify other areas that need improvement. Using the Framework, the school's executive gets together to conduct self-assessments that are shared with the entire staff body. Sharing the evaluation outcome is a way the school can celebrate the efforts of its staff and motivate staff to make improvements where necessary.

With its focus on using data analysis to improve teaching practices, Taree West Public School has seen improvements in students' academic achievements. Every five weeks, during staff meetings, student performance data is shared among the various year groups so that they can make whatever adjustments are necessary to improve student performance. This data is then shared with the whole school every ten weeks so that everyone – staff and students – can understand how the school is performing and make the necessary changes to improve that performance. Repeated data evaluations show that students who were previously performing at lower NAPLAN bands have now moved into the middle bands. While this is a positive outcome, the principal would like to see further improvements that show those students achieving in the highest NAPLAN bands.



Focus on student wellbeing and community engagement

Many of the students at Taree West Public School come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and, according to the principal, live in challenging home situations. For that reason, the principal has gone to great lengths to ensure that the school is a happy and safe environment for students. She encourages staff to always use positive methods in their interaction with students, avoiding certain behaviours like raising their voices to students. This has led to an overall improvement in behaviour at the school; incidences of fights among students and suspensions are now rare, though both used to be common occurrences.

According to the principal, there was very little community involvement with the school and in school events before her tenure. A number of apparent problems had caused discord between the school and the broader community. Upon her arrival, the principal made it a priority to repair the relationship between the school and the community so that the focus could return to the students. To this end, the school introduced Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL)³ four years ago as a way to get the entire school community working together to create 'a positive, safe and supportive school climate in which students can learn and develop.' The school also opens its doors to the local community, showing them data relating to what happens in classrooms and where the school is heading, and the community is invited to be a part of decision-making panels at the school.

Over time, this openness fostered what the principal now describes as a very supportive community, always willing to do whatever is asked of them on behalf of the school. She is especially pleased that the Aboriginal community now feel happy to come into the school and participate in activities with the students, in contrast to the one-off visits that were previously more common.

There is now ongoing consultation with the local community in relation to school matters. There are Aboriginal community meetings and P&C meetings where community members are invited to make recommendations about what they would like to see happen in the school. One recommendation made by parents was for the school to introduce language classes for students. The school executive took this recommendation seriously and deliberated about which language might be best introduced and what resources would be required to make that happen. As a result of these deliberations and the community consultation which prompted them, there is now a teacher at Taree West Public School who teaches Aboriginal language and culture four days a week. According to the principal, the key to building a strong relationship with the community is trust and fostering a sense of inclusion.



³ Positive Behaviour for Learning is a whole school approach that is implemented to improve the learning and wellbeing of all students in all school settings. It requires school staff to teach behaviour expectations, provide consistent positive feedback to students and deliver consistent corrective feedback and consequences when expectations are not followed. Every part of the school grounds is considered to be part of the total learning environment.



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