

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Girraween Public School

Inclusive education in NSW schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



This case study forms part of a series on inclusive education in schools. The NSW Department of Education is committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability. Inclusive education means all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices ([Disability Strategy \(2019\)](#)).

The department is committed to building the capacity of our mainstream public schools to meet the needs of their local students unless there are compelling individual reasons why a different option would better support the student. We acknowledge that this needs to be balanced against parental choice regarding the most appropriate setting for their child, and will continue to work with parents and education experts to individualise support so that every child can be engaged with learning and flourish at school ([Progress Report: Improving outcomes for students with disability 2019](#)).

Introduction

Girraween Public School is a large primary school in Sydney’s western suburbs. The school has 1,273 students, with 96% of students coming from a language background other than English. Over half of Girraween Public School’s students (63%) were born in Australia, and the students represent many different language backgrounds, the largest being Tamil. Students with disability make up approximately 10% of the student population. These students are supported both in the school’s three support classes for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and in mainstream classrooms. Students transition between support classes and mainstream classes as their needs change.

At Girraween Public School, staff work with students and families to develop strategies so that all students have equal access to education and can reach their potential. Girraween Public School has a calm atmosphere and organised nature – despite the very large number of students and the challenging physical environment as a result of student numbers putting pressure on the school’s existing infrastructure¹. Girraween Public School has been able to achieve an inclusive environment through strong, collaborative leadership, effective use of data, individualised student support, close partnerships with parents, the implementation of rigorous structures and processes paired with flexible use of resources, and investing in school staff to increase their ability to meet student needs.



What has worked to improve inclusive education at Girraween Public School:

- Strong, collaborative leadership with a visible commitment to inclusion.
- Coupling student data with conversations with students and families to identify and meet students’ aspirations and needs.
- Teachers and school learning support officers (SLSOs) working together to deliver individualised support for students with disability.
- Partnering with families as early as possible and communicating regularly to keep them engaged in their child’s learning and wellbeing.
- Clear, consistent, embedded learning and support processes that are applied throughout the school.
- Creative, flexible use of resources to make sure student needs are identified and met.
- Building the capacity of all staff, including teachers, SLSOs, and casual teachers so that they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to support all students’ learning.

“Inclusive education, I believe, is the school and... an education system where children will be observed really closely by the school, and then they get to know their children... get to know their abilities as well as where they need more help, so that they can reach their full potential and the school would support and guide the child, so they can be their best.”

Parent

¹ The school will soon begin a significant building project that will mean that the school buildings and grounds will be purpose built for the number of students at the school, and better suited to meet student needs.

"[The processes we have in place to support inclusive education are] processes that most schools – I would say all schools – would have, in regard to having good learning support teams, using flexibility of funding, utilising the expertise. I believe...it's not so much what we do but how we do it. And...making sure that the processes are rigorous. That there is documentation. And then, when we say that we are communicating with parents, we have actual processes in place to do that. It's written communication. It's meetings and it's electronic communication."

Cecilia Parada, Deputy Principal



Strong, collaborative leadership creating a shared responsibility and a common culture

The leadership team at Girraween Public School, consisting of the principal, three deputy principals and seven assistant principals, take a strongly collaborative approach to running the school. The three deputy principals, in particular, have complementary skills and responsibilities in inclusive education. For example, one deputy principal is responsible for learning and support for Kindergarten to Year 2 students, one for Year 3 to Year 6 students and one for other learning and support programs, including staff wellbeing. This shared responsibility is extended beyond the executive, with part of the school culture being that all staff are expected to be involved in the provision of learning and support. The collaborative leadership approach creates an environment where all staff are engaged in students' learning and support and can identify students who may need additional support.

"[Responsibility is] not just sitting with Learning and Support; it's sitting with everyone, for all of those students. So, I think our processes are fantastic... when you're working with children for inclusive education, everyone needs to be on board."

Kathy Needham, Deputy Principal

The school's counsellor noted that leadership of learning and support by the school's deputy principals also raises the profile of inclusive education from a parent's perspective. This leadership is formalised through the Learning and Support team, which is led by the three deputy principals, and also includes the learning and support teacher and the school counsellor. Girraween Public School parents are generally focused on academic results, and there has sometimes been hesitation among some parents to meet with the school counsellor or to investigate whether their child might have a disability. However, the strong leadership shown by Girraween Public School's executive team and the focus on supporting all students and catering for all needs, has assisted to make parents more comfortable to discuss their child's learning and support requirements with the school.

"It's really important that the parent community sees that that's a school approach, it's not just me in an isolated role talking about social emotional wellbeing of children. Particularly having the deputies run those programs, the parents still give permission, they're still aware that it's occurring, but it's a school approach, and it's to help those children build strategies that will have an impact, a positive impact on their academics."

Emily Nash, School Counsellor



Using data and consultation to identify student needs

Girraween Public School couples student data with conversations with students and their families to identify and meet students' aspirations and needs. At multiple points throughout the year, the school collects and analyses at least four types of data: school-based data, which is gathered twice each term; NAPLAN data; Best Start data; and specialist literacy data. Students with disability are given differentiated assessments which support their individual needs. In this way, students are not compared against other students but against their own expected educational growth. The school uses this data as a basis for conversations with students and their families, and to develop the student's personalised learning plan (PLP). The PLP process gives the school, the student and the family the opportunity to agree on student goals.

The student data and outcomes of the consultation with the family are also discussed at learning support meetings. The historical data from the school-based tests is compared with NAPLAN results to determine whether there is alignment, and to examine growth over time. If the data shows inconsistencies or lower than expected growth, staff consult with parents and implement strategies to support the student. Another way this data is used is to help determine allocation of learning support resources and strategies that will be used to support students. Since data is collected so regularly, teachers and support staff use the data as a form of feedback on the effectiveness of the agreed support strategies, and alter their approach when required.

"I think it is a matter of us looking at our data, drilling down through the data, and working [on] areas of improvement required in students. There's no point collecting the data, sitting on the data and doing nothing, because we [would then] have the same result [year after year]."

Jason Ward, Deputy Principal

"Formative assessment is more individualised. So, the child is not competing against other children in the class. The child is looking at their own personal goals and their progress... Children with additional needs or disability – that's what they need... [you saw a student who] was able to articulate that today... she knows her goals."

Cecilia Parada, Deputy Principal

Individualised support for students

Girraween Public School's school learning support officers (SLSOs) are effectively integrated into the classroom and provide essential and specialised support to teachers of students with disability. In consultation with the classroom teacher and the Learning and Support team, the SLSOs employ specific, evidence-based strategies and adapt these as students grow and develop. For example, one student with Autism in a mainstream class could not differentiate appropriate behaviour when she began at the school. To develop her understanding of appropriate behaviour, the SLSO wrote and illustrated 'social stories' or picture books featuring the student to teach her what to do in various challenging social situations. The books explicitly outlined the school rules and consequences for not following the rules. Over time, the student wanted to take charge of the social stories and write them herself. The characters and content of the social stories changed as the student's skills developed and needs changed. The social stories have since been phased out as the student is now a thriving Year 6 student and no longer requires this support.

Another strategy used at Girraween Public School to ensure students receive quality individualised support is the continual emphasis on students as lifelong learners, whose needs will change as they leave school and go into the workforce. Despite being a primary school, Girraween Public School has a persistent focus on HSC completion and employment outcomes for students with disability who attend the school. This means teachers consider what needs to happen for each individual student now to support their learning in the future. For example, to support the transition of a Year 6 student with Autism to high school next year, since the beginning of the year her SLSO, the school counsellor and a deputy principal have accompanied her visits to the school. Girraween Public School staff have worked with the student over many years to develop her ability to know what to say if she is feeling uncomfortable and to put in place coping strategies to avoid inappropriate behaviour. The school is now working with the student to adapt these strategies to the high school context, for example, slowly introducing the student to new situations that she will encounter that may be challenging. Parallel to this, staff from Girraween Public School are supporting staff at the high school to develop their expertise in working with students with Autism so that the intensive, individualised support this student has received can continue and the student is set up to succeed in high school.

"Yes, we're working with a kindergarten child, but that child is going to go to high school. How are they going to work in high school? What opportunities are we giving them?"

Cecilia Parada, Deputy Principal

Close partnerships with families and support services

Girraween Public School partners with families as early as possible and communicates regularly to keep them engaged in their student's learning and wellbeing. Partnerships with families often begin before the student starts at Girraween Public School, with staff liaising with local preschools about students with disability who will be moving to the school. Upon enrolment, the school uses the language of 'enrolling the whole family' and becoming 'one team' to emphasise the need for wrap around support for students. This team approach is enabled through intensive communication between the school and parents, including regular phone calls, emails and review meetings.

"We were always updated with what's happening and what [the] plans are, even which teacher is with [our daughter], the special teacher, all these things."

Parent

The school also supports families by liaising with external support services that provide assistance for students with disability. For example, the school may provide letters to doctors outlining the student's challenges when parents are from a language background other than English and therefore may not be able to articulate this themselves. School staff also liaise with students' therapists and parents so that everyone is implementing the same strategies for the student. One parent commented on the very involved nature of Girraween Public School's staff when supporting their child with disability, for example, advising on how the student could best travel home from school. The parent noted that the school was involved from the beginning of their child's experience, identifying that the student was having difficulties hearing in class. The school guided the family through every step of the process to access support services, including providing information on accessing NDIS funding, and the student is now engaged in her learning through the use of hearing aids.

"The [school] intervened as soon as they saw something that is not right. They give us the feedback. And not only that they gave us the feedback, they were really with us from the beginning up to this point ... We're so proud to be a part of [the] Girraween family."

Parent



Embedded clear learning and support processes for staff

Girraween Public School's leadership team has developed and embedded clear learning and support processes to ensure the school is providing high quality inclusive education. For example, the school's Learning and Support team has a formal, tiered process for staff to request support regarding students with additional needs. The Learning and Support team meet weekly to discuss issues raised as either 'flags' or 'referrals' and provide teachers with advice, in-class support or specialist referrals as required. Formal processes are necessary due to the large size of the school, however, flexibility is also built in if, for example, a staff member needed urgent support. These processes mean that learning support resources can be managed effectively across all students requiring support. The process also ensures no support request goes unanswered as all requests are tracked, and decisions made and actions taken are recorded. The school recognises that these processes can add additional time to a staff member's workload, so they employ an additional teacher to cover classes, so that staff have time off class to complete paperwork and plan for teaching students with additional needs.

"Teachers may get overwhelmed when they have certain children in their classrooms that have learning needs that they might not have been exposed to before, so the idea of the Learning [and] Support team is that they can come and have a chat."

Emily Nash, School Counsellor

"Learning and Support can't fix everything, but we can support the teachers and students to be the best they can be."

Kathy Needham, Deputy Principal

Employing flexible use of resources to meet student needs

Girraween Public School employs creative, flexible use of resources to make sure student needs are identified and met. For example, the school supplements the allocated number of executive teachers so that there is one assistant principal (AP) for each year level rather than for each stage. This means that one AP is only responsible for approximately 150 students and 7 teachers, rather than 400 students and 15 to 16 teachers. These smaller groups mean that the AP has time to support teachers develop their skills in working with students with disability, and also provides more opportunities for teachers to identify students who need support. The school is also flexible in its use of SLSOs, who work to a flexible timetable which is coordinated and reviewed by the learning and support teacher. Teachers and SLSOs work together as a team, in conjunction with the executive, to prioritise adaptability so that students' changing needs can be met. This flexibility is particularly important when new students enrol throughout the year. If a new student has support needs, the SLSOs' schedules can be adjusted so that the needs of this new student can be accommodated.

Another way the school uses flexible approaches to meet the challenge of providing inclusive education at a large school is through structures and timetabling. The school ensures every student is known, valued and cared for by regularly dividing the student body into small, manageable groups. For example, the school uses a house group structure to allocate students into eight groups (four houses across Kindergarten to Year 2; Year 3 to Year 6); playground time is also staggered for infants and primary students. These smaller groups give students the chance to connect with peers in a structured way, and also ensure teachers are able to identify any existing or emerging student needs that require additional support.

"It's a bit of a balance of trying to make sure that everyone feels part of a whole, but they don't get lost in the volume of the school."

Glenn Walker, Principal

Building the capacity of teachers and support staff to meet the needs of students

Girraween Public School builds the capacity of all staff, including teachers, SLSOs, and casual teachers so that they have the knowledge, skills and confidence to support all students' learning. The school provides regular, relevant professional learning to staff, for example in behaviour management and literacy intervention programs (such as MiniLit and MultiLit²). Professional learning courses are complemented by coaching and mentoring among the school's staff, with an expectation from the leadership team that staff will share their expertise with others. The school also offers professional learning to casual teachers and supports them through their accreditation process. This means that the school has a number of casual teachers skilled in inclusive education that can be called upon when required.

"[The Learning and Support team is] a limited resource...we are limited in our time and our money, so we need to build the capacity [of staff]...often teachers are doing great stuff already, and we just need to reinforce that."

Kathy Needham, Deputy Principal

In recent years, Girraween Public School has had a particular focus on building the skills of its eleven SLSOs. The SLSOs, under the guidance of the teacher, work with students individually and in small groups, and are an increasingly invaluable asset to Girraween Public School's learning and support systems. SLSOs all have performance and development plans (PDPs), which allows staff to identify their own goals and training needs. Since the PDP process for SLSOs has been introduced, SLSOs have received training on topics such as intensive literacy support, supporting students with autism, Management of Actual or Potential Aggression (MAPA), and supporting students with complex health needs. The school employs an additional teacher to provide cover for SLSOs when they attend training. This training has empowered SLSOs to bring their skills and knowledge in learning and support to the fore when working with students.

"[One lesson we've learned from inclusive education is the importance of] supporting our teachers. Supporting them with professional learning because we know, from research, it's the teacher that's going to make a huge impact and you need a skilled teacher."

Cecilia Parada, Deputy Principal



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2 MiniLit and MultiLit ('Making Up Lost Time In Literacy') are literacy interventions for students falling in the bottom 25% for reading.



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