

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Wentworth 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

Wentworth Public School is a small primary school on the NSW and Victorian border, located on the banks of the Darling River. Wentworth is approximately 30 kilometres from the Victorian city of Mildura. The school currently has 109 students enrolled, 43% of whom are Aboriginal and 58% of whom have disability. There are no support classes at the school. The school has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 838, with more than two-thirds (67%) of students in the bottom quarter of socioeconomic status and only 3% in the top quarter¹. Wentworth Public School manages a student population that is decreasing in size but increasing in complex needs.

At Wentworth Public School every student is provided with what they need to achieve their best outcomes. The school summarises this as “equity, not equality” and emphasises that the support required for each student is likely to differ from student to student. The nature of inclusive education at Wentworth Public School is well illustrated by the language and approach used by staff and parents when discussing the school’s students. Students are not defined by their disability or cultural differences, but rather every student at the school is seen as an individual with strengths to be nurtured and needs to be supported.

Wentworth Public School has been able to achieve this inclusive approach through taking a whole-school approach to inclusive education, embedding a common framework throughout the school, having innovative learning and support structures, and focusing on meeting the needs of all students.

“What [parents] have got here is a totally unique experience that's tailored to their child.”

Cath Eddie, Principal

“Inclusive education ... is every child getting what they need, [it] might not be the same as everyone else but getting what they in particular need to achieve to the best of their ability.”

Jodi Garraway, Learning and Support Wellbeing Teacher

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

- A whole-school approach supported by collaborative and highly effective leadership, with the school’s strategic directions driving all decisions and activities at the school.
- A framework for inclusive education to ensure a common language is used and students have an understanding of expected behaviour.
- Effective learning and support structures, including having a dedicated, full time learning and support wellbeing teacher.
- A strong focus on understanding and meeting the needs of students to ensure each student reaches their potential.



¹ This is compared to an even distribution in all Australian schools, with 25% of students in each ICSEA quarter.

A whole-school approach, strong leadership and a commitment to inclusion

Wentworth Public School has had a whole-school approach to inclusive education for many years and it is noteworthy how embedded the notion of inclusive education is in the school. Every aspect of the school, including the staff, structures, systems and culture, is geared toward inclusive education. This ranges from, for example, the principal being visible in the playground and knowing and engaging with all students, to various community members (students' grandparents to recently graduated high school students) volunteering as additional support people to help students feel known and included.

Underpinning all aspects of this whole-school approach is the highly effective and collaborative leadership from the school's principal and assistant principal. The school's leaders set the tone for staff and students, by emphasising to staff that they are part of one team, with responsibility for all students. This approach was exemplified by a decision made at the beginning of the year to remove letters (denoting the classroom teacher's surname, for example 6'M') from class names because the class is not the sole responsibility of the classroom teacher. Rather, all staff within the school are responsible for the students in every classroom.

"We also make a point that it may be [one teacher] has a year four class, but it's not her class, we're all responsible for those kids. So, we're all responsible for all the students in the school, not just our set group..."

Sandra Marziano, Assistant Principal

The school's three strategic directions – as identified in the school plan: 'I Learn', 'We Learn', 'We Learn Together' – sum up the emphasis on inclusive education at Wentworth Public School. These strategic directions are evident in the language and practice used throughout the school. 'I Learn' is evident in the way the leaders and staff prioritise students' individual needs. 'We Learn' means 'developing skilled teachers and support staff who have a passionate commitment to lifelong learning'. This is seen in the significant investment in staff professional learning at Wentworth Public School. 'We Learn Together' focuses on 'developing positive community partnerships that recognise the requirement of all stakeholders'. This can be seen clearly in the way Wentworth Public School engages the school's complex parent body.

"Professional development has always been a really big focus here. As a temporary teacher, I've been given every opportunity to upskill in any way that I sort of wanted."

Brian Gray, Teacher

The whole-school approach and culture of inclusive education are driven by the school's principal and assistant principal. Parents noted that staff are high quality, motivated and engaged with the school's strategic direction and overall vision. Staff work together seamlessly, with all staff having a role to play in the leadership of the school. Wentworth Public School has low staff turnover. Staff take a personal interest in students in their class and communicate regularly with families about their children. One parent noted, for example, if she is concerned about her child being picked on, she can speak with the class teacher and the teacher is always very willing to have an open conversation, does not get defensive and works collaboratively to come up with solutions.

"Staff very supportive and ... teamwork is pretty good. The kids are really good, most of the time, we do have challenges but we work together as a team to overcome those."

Patricia Jones, Aboriginal Education Officer

The cohesive nature of the leadership and staff team at Wentworth Public School creates a welcoming, positive, inclusive culture. This culture is noticeable when visiting the school. For example, one carer emphasised that she specifically chose to send her children to Wentworth Public School – one of whom has Autism Spectrum Disorder and one of whom has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – due to its inclusive culture. She said her children are always excited to come to school and that they even try to convince her to let them come when they are sick because they enjoy attending school so much. The carer believed the children's positive experience of school was due to the highly communicative, high quality and hardworking staff as well as the school's welcoming atmosphere.

"They just do so much here... I've pulled up in the morning. They've got music playing... The teachers are out there playing with the kids."

Parent



A common framework for embedding inclusive education

Maintaining the focus on inclusive education over the years has required continual improvement and refinement. Integral to embedding inclusive education at Wentworth Public School in more recent years has been the adoption of Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL). While PBL is primarily a behaviour management tool and does not in and of itself create inclusive practice, it has been used at Wentworth Public School to embed existing inclusive practice. PBL was introduced in 2018 after staff noticed an increase in student behavioural issues. The values and expectations of the PBL framework were developed collaboratively between staff, students, parents and the wider community. The PBL values that the school has adopted are: 'safety', 'respect' and 'persistence'. Posters outlining these values, and the behavioural expectations which relate to each value, are displayed throughout the school. The three values are consistent throughout the school, but the behavioural expectations differ depending on the situation. For example, in the technology room the 'safety' poster lists behaviours that are relevant to using technology, for instance 'I am aware of my surroundings when using equipment.' The behavioural expectations were developed by students to give them a sense of ownership and use positive language, for example 'I am an up-stander, not a by-stander.' Having explicit values and expectations means there is a common language across the school, which supports cohesiveness in the school's inclusive education strategies, particularly when supporting the students with a cognitive disability. Since the introduction of PBL at the school, the data shows that there has been an improvement in socioemotional skills among students and fewer behavioural incidents. Staff have also noticed a calmer atmosphere in the school.

The school's Aboriginal education officer (AEO) also explained that the PBL framework is deliberately inclusive of everyone. For example, the artwork used for the posters has a cultural aspect, with the artwork for 'respect' showing a canoe tree or boundary tree, 'persistence' is accompanied by artwork of ants, and the 'safety' poster has artwork to represent the river, emphasising to students the importance of being safe around the river that borders the school.



Example of a 'Safety' PBL poster

"I think everyone has a say... students, staff, parents and we're all speaking the same language."

Patricia Jones, Aboriginal Education Officer





Innovative learning and support structures to meet the needs of students

Integral to the success of inclusive education at Wentworth Public School are the innovative learning and support structures the school has in place. For example, the school has made a commitment to having a designated full time learning and support wellbeing teacher. This strategy is a critical part of maintaining a focus on inclusive education at Wentworth Public School. The role of learning and support wellbeing teacher is a variation of the traditional learning and support teacher role, with a key component of this role being assisting families to get support for their child. Accessing appropriate support can be particularly difficult in Wentworth because families are often ineligible for the many health services located over the border in Victoria since they live in NSW. There are fewer services available within the immediate NSW region. Many families also lack confidence or knowledge about how to access health services, or how to apply for funding from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The learning and support wellbeing teacher navigates these challenges with families, and connects families with services. For example, the learning and support wellbeing teacher arranged for an NDIS caseworker to attend the school so that families could meet the caseworker and begin the process of accessing services under the scheme.

“We... link parents with [an] agency, so if a parent is struggling or something, we’ll link them with counselling or this service, or their child is struggling in school sometimes we link them with a paediatrician.”

Jodi Garraway, Learning and Support Wellbeing Teacher

The learning and support wellbeing teacher also undertakes administration and coordination, for example, coordinating staff professional learning, managing data, collecting information about services and best practice, and daily class visits to check for any absences. She also upskills teachers about providing learning support for students by team teaching, observing lessons and acting as a sounding board, for example, to discuss an action plan for a particular student. Classroom teachers are also aided by school learning and support officers (SLSOs), who are trained by the learning and

“[The learning and support wellbeing teacher] picks up all the information for me. You can’t go wrong. Especially when you’re out of your depth. I’ve always got someone here, if I’m out of my depth, that can put me on the right path.”

Parent

“[The school’s] learning and support team [is] really on the ball... Really organised systems and thorough systems, and no one falls through the gap... Kids are immediately channelled to learning and support team meetings where their needs are identified really early and just acted on, and plans are made.”

Parent

support wellbeing teacher to work with students to support their learning and engagement. Each classroom has one permanent SLSO and additional SLSOs are employed for extra support when required. Classroom teachers noted that by having a designated learning and support wellbeing teacher performing these tasks, it frees up their time for teaching and learning. Before the role of learning and support wellbeing teacher was established, classroom teachers were responsible for undertaking all administration, family engagement and navigation of services to support students with additional needs in their classrooms.

The learning and support and PBL teams are also crucial to Wentworth Public School’s inclusive approach. The learning and support team, consisting of the principal, assistant principal and learning and support wellbeing teacher, focus on students that have additional needs and how to meet these needs. The PBL team, consisting of all teaching staff, the principal and assistant principal, most of the SLSOs and parent representatives, discuss data related to the expected PBL behaviours and decide what actions need to take place based on the data. Students are also involved in these structures, for example, Year 5 and 6 student leaders provide input to the regular PBL team meetings to ensure there is a student voice. Wentworth Public School’s principal emphasised the importance of being ‘relentless’ with making sure these teams meet regularly, so that the focus on learning and support and PBL remains strong.

Identifying and meeting the needs of students using data and targeted support

Using data to monitor progress and inform tailored education planning

Wentworth Public School places a large premium on understanding the needs of every student at the school to ensure each student reaches their potential. Students' needs are identified using a range of data, including school assessment data, social and emotional data and PBL data. Formative assessment and diagnostic tests provide a solid basis to guide decision making surrounding supported teaching and learning programs at an individual, small group and whole class level. Teachers work with students and their parents to develop a learning support plan for students with disability and a personalised learning plan for all students; and they use differentiation in class to ensure each student is able to access and benefit from all lessons. One carer whose child has Autism Spectrum Disorder stated that through the emphasis on effective differentiation in class, her child can learn at his own pace and is not left behind. Support staff in classrooms also ensure all students receive personalised support at the point of need.

"[My children, one of whom has ADHD and one of whom has Autism Spectrum Disorder] are included in all the activities, even though they might have issues and they're not handling things the same way, which my boys sometimes don't, but they are included with everything and they can learn at their pace but also they're not left behind with other children...going ahead of them."

Parent

An emphasis on the whole child is also important at Wentworth Public School and a critical part of their commitment towards inclusive education. This focus is emphasised in Wentworth Public School's school plan which has as its first strategic direction 'I learn' which means 'to develop self-regulated, self-responsible and persistent learners who are socially and emotionally aware'. Under this strategic direction, the school is currently focused on developing the social and emotional skills of students. This became a focus at Wentworth Public School after data showed that there were behavioural issues in the playground; and a new numeracy program for students was not getting the expected outcomes. The result was a focus at the school on social and emotional learning and wellbeing to ensure students are ready for learning. To provide this support to students, the learning and support wellbeing teacher undertook training in the Berry Street Education Model and zones of regulation², and developed a school-specific curriculum to deliver social and emotional skill lessons. These lessons teach students to identify their own and other people's emotions, and to manage their emotions. Every class across the school now has dedicated time each week with their teacher and the learning and support wellbeing teacher co-teaching these skills. The learning and support wellbeing teacher also acts as an advisor and coach to teachers who may be unsure how to support the additional needs of a particular student.



"In this school [inclusive education] means making sure that as a teacher I deliver the best outcomes for all of my kids and that across the school, making sure that all kids are getting the best that they can given their circumstances or what they bring to the table, what we can support them with, whether that's extending or supporting to get kids along."

Brian Gray, Teacher

² The Berry Street Education Model focuses on trauma-informed practice in schools. Zones of regulation is an approach in which students are taught strategies to become more aware of and skilled at managing their emotions and impulses, using four coloured 'zones'.



Meeting the needs of all students

Wentworth Public School provides students at the school with a range of opportunities to make sure their needs are being met. For example, the school has a large vegetable and fruit garden which is part of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program. The Program provides school staff with professional development and support to deliver food education to students. All students in Kindergarten to Year 6 participate in regular kitchen/garden lessons which promotes healthy eating and the development of cooking skills. It has also provided social learning opportunities, increased oral language learning and the development of social protocols. Another example of the school meeting identified student needs is the introduction of spelling and speech intervention programs. These programs have been introduced after data and teachers' observations showed that students were having difficulty in these areas. The spelling program has proved to be successful, with 80% of students involved making the growth that was expected over the period of time. Students are now also being supported by a speech pathologist, supplemented through additional school funds, to assist with speech. Deficiencies in receptive and expressive language is an issue across the school.

Meeting students' cultural needs is also particularly important at Wentworth Public School given almost 60% of the students with disability at the school are Aboriginal. The school's AEO plays a vital role in connecting the school with local Aboriginal communities. She speaks to Aboriginal families on a regular basis, and has also introduced an innovative strategy where the relevant teacher joins in these conversations on a consistent basis to promote engagement between families and the school. Staff state that this strategy assists with bridging cultural gaps between teachers and families. The AEO also supports a designated teacher to run lessons to promote understanding of local Aboriginal culture. These lessons are run every fortnight for students in Kindergarten to Year 6 and focus on a different theme each term (e.g. 'shelter'). A key feature of this program is accessing local knowledge and understanding, comparing and contrasting local culture with other cultures. This results in cultural awareness and understanding among all students.

"[Inclusive education is] equity and not equality, so it's different for every student, and that's sometimes a hard sell for our community. They think that some kids are getting more than others, but it's not a level playing field, never has been."

Cath Eddie, Principal

CESE would like to thank the Principal, Cath Eddie, as well as other members of the school's staff Sandra Marziano – Assistant Principal, Jodi Garraway – Learning and Support Wellbeing Teacher, Brian Gray – Teacher, Patricia Jones – Aboriginal Education Officer and parents from Wentworth Public School, for their valuable input into this study.



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