

Northlakes High School:

Using *Tell Them From Me* data to identify issues and inform responses.

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Introduction

This case study looks at how Northlakes High School has been using *Tell Them From Me* data. It particularly focuses on the ways Northlakes High School has been using the *Tell Them From Me* data to identify issues and inform responses.

Background

Northlakes High School is a comprehensive government secondary school on the NSW Central Coast with an enrolment of 990 students. The school caters for the learning and welfare needs of students from diverse backgrounds, including low socioeconomic status. The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA¹) value is lower than the state average. Thirteen per cent of students identify as being Aboriginal and five per cent identify as having a non-English speaking background (My School 2015). Student mobility is high, with up to 25 per cent entering and leaving school in the academic year (NSW Department of Education 2014). In 2014, 24 per cent of students in the school accessed learning support (literacy, numeracy and special provisions); 35 per cent of Year 12 students continued their studies at university or TAFE (NSW Department of Education 2015).

In terms of student engagement and wellbeing, Northlakes High School is a Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) school and is currently utilising PBL and a new house system to generate engagement strategies and improve student wellbeing (NSW Department of Education 2015).

Using *Tell Them From Me*

Northlakes has participated in the *Tell Them From Me* surveys since 2013. The school completed the 2013 pilot student survey and subsequent student surveys in 2014, 2015 and 2016, the teacher survey in 2014 and 2015, and the parent survey in 2015. The school leadership first decided to participate in the surveys because they were interested in gaining student input into changes that the school was considering implementing. They also felt that the TTFM surveys offered more depth than other surveys that were available at the time.



Tell Them From Me is an online survey system that assists schools to capture the views of students, teachers and parents. The survey system has been devised by Canadian company, The Learning Bar, under the leadership of Professor Doug Willms. Dr Willms is an expert in education who led the development of questions on student engagement for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

The surveys have been offered to NSW government schools since 2013/2014 (student and teacher surveys) in pilot form, and to all schools since 2015 (student, teacher and parent surveys). The surveys have been adapted to suit the NSW context.

In 2015, 236,000 students from 1,157 NSW government schools completed the student survey; 14,000 teachers did the teacher survey; and 29,000 parents completed the parent survey.

¹ ICSEA is a measure of school socio-educational advantage created by ACARA.



Northlakes High School shares *Tell Them From Me* data with the school community, including the executive, teachers and students. The school has also disseminated data to particular subsets of the school community. For example, the school held a forum with the school's Aboriginal students and presented the *Tell Them From Me* data for Aboriginal students compared with whole school student data. The idea behind this was to show the Aboriginal students where they differ in engagement from the whole school. For example, Aboriginal students have lower expectations of going to university than other students at the school; but by Year 12 their sense of belonging to the school is higher than any other group of students. The leadership team used this forum both to give Aboriginal students an opportunity to talk about the survey and the results; and to show Aboriginal students that their voice was valuable and that the school was interested in listening to them. The leadership team also arranged for two of the school's newer teachers who were both Aboriginal to come and talk to the students about university, why they had gone and how it had benefitted them, to try and encourage interest in going to university among the Aboriginal students.

Similarly, the school executive held a forum with the student leadership team and took these students through the *Tell Them From Me* parent survey responses. In this way, students could see what parents were saying about the school and provide feedback on the parent responses. The executive were interested to note the students defended the school in the face of some negative comments presented by parents, but agreed with other parent comments.

Identifying issues and informing responses

Improving classroom practices

Northlakes has recently introduced a program to improve classroom practices, as part of its broader aim to improve 'how the classroom looks'. The program that has been introduced is based on an American program that prepares students from low socio-economic backgrounds to enter tertiary studies at the end of high school. Northlakes used data from *Tell Them From Me* (specifically the effective learning time, academic rigour and skills/challenge measures) to get some understanding of how students felt they were learning and performing at school. They also used this data to shift the general conversation in the school away from the quality of teaching the staff felt they were providing to the quality of learning that was actually occurring. The leadership team then interviewed students in the top streamed classes, using *Tell Them From Me* data to inform the questions, to get a further insight into the learning experiences of the best performing students. The result of this and other evidence showed the leadership team that there needed to be

more differentiated teaching in the school and as a result the new program has focused on enhancing learning for all students through a focus on differentiation.

The *Tell Them From Me* data (in combination with NAPLAN data) has shown incremental and steady improvement from 2013 to 2016 satisfying the leadership team that the program is working. Overall, the leadership team feels that *Tell Them From Me* was a catalyst for the introduction of this program, in terms of having reliable, ongoing data that allowed the leadership team to articulate what they were working towards, shaping the nature of the conversation as a school community, and monitoring the impact of the program. In 2016, Northlakes hopes to ask custom questions in the Term 3 student and teacher surveys to receive further feedback on how the program is working from the perspective of students and teachers.

New house structure

At the beginning of 2014, Northlakes High School introduced a 'house' structure in response to TTFM survey data which showed that students had a low sense of belonging at the school. The broad idea behind this initiative was to increase the connection between students and staff, and to thereby foster a sense of belonging. The house system provides a way for students to feel a sense of belonging at school by giving them the opportunity to 'attach' themselves to an entity. This is particularly important for students who are not involved in other school activities such as the student leadership team, or sporting and/or extra-curricular activities.

The school's background research showed that in order for groups to work (that is, for people to feel part of a group and not overwhelmed), groups should not be bigger than a certain size (approximately 144 people); and so the school designated eight houses. The houses have a vertical structure, rather than a horizontal one. The school deliberately chose the vertical structure to promote engagement between junior and senior students, which they felt might help increase the sense of belonging at the school. The house structure now encompasses a series of specific initiatives to boost students' sense of belonging including: 1) a 'discovery day' agenda whereby Year 5 and 6 students from partner primary schools visit Northlakes and are told which house they would belong to if they go onto high school there. On discovery day students begin 'earning points' for their future house through quizzes, games and good behaviour; 2) an annual house competition, where each of the eight houses compete for the most points. Each house has a junior and student leader, as well as staff members attached, and points are awarded for students actively contributing to their house through a variety of activities; 3) a 'reward excursion'

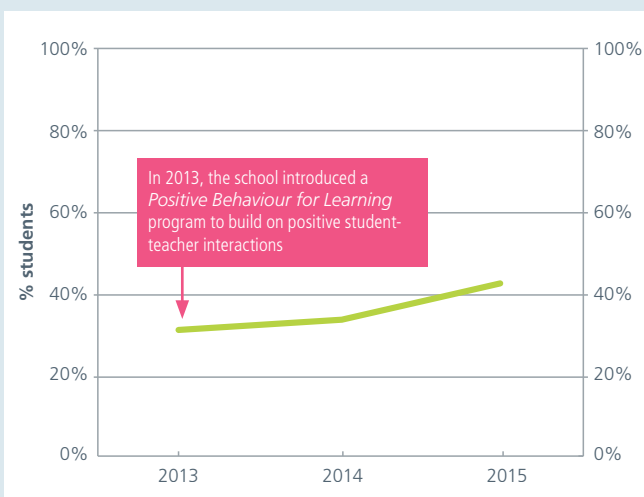


which is a way for the house to celebrate their success by getting a school paid excursion to the Easter show, movie vouchers etc. *Tell Them From Me* data has shown an increase in positive sense of belonging since the program was introduced.

Positive Behaviour for Learning

In 2013, Northlakes High School introduced a Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) program. PBL is a program supported by the Department of Education and is being implemented in many schools in NSW. Northlakes High School implemented the program to maximise academic achievement and improve behaviour in keeping with the school rules, but based on *Tell Them From Me* data also felt that it could be used to build on positive student-teacher interactions. *Tell Them From Me* data has subsequently been used to inform program priorities and student tasks within the PBL program. TTFM data shows that the number of students citing positive teacher-student relationships has increased by a statistically significant amount since 2013 when the program was introduced.

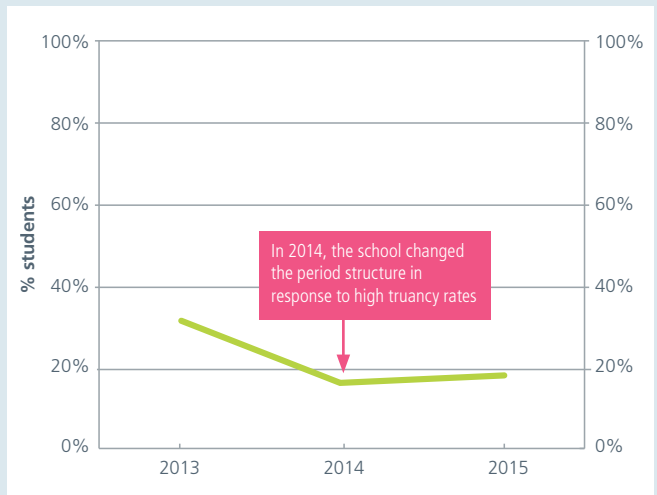
Students with positive teacher-student relations



Amended timetable structure

Northlakes High School has restructured the school period timetable based in part on attendance data from *Tell Them From Me* survey. *Tell Them From Me* data confirmed a high level of truancy at the school, with students often leaving during the change of period. The school re-introduced a four period day from the start of 2014, where each period is 75 minutes followed by a break. This replaced the former period structure of five periods per day, with only recess and lunch breaks. Senior students may arrive late if they do not have a scheduled lesson in period 1 or leave early if they do not have a class in period 4. All other students must stay at school for the whole school day. The new structure has created longer periods, and truancy at the school has dropped by a statistically significant amount according to student's self-reports in the *Tell Them From Me* data.

Students who are regularly truant



Reference list

My School 2014, *My School: Northlakes High School*, viewed 3 December 2015, <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>.

NSW Department of Education 2014, *Northlakes High School Annual School Report 2014*, annual school report, report prepared by Northlakes High School.

NSW Department of Education 2015, *School Plan 2015-2017: Northlakes High School Strategic Directions*, school plan, report prepared by Northlakes High School.

