

Closing the gap: Doonside Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Doonside Public School has achieved high learning growth for Aboriginal students. In particular it looks at the ways in which Doonside Public School uses high expectations, data to inform practice, and community engagement to achieve high growth for Aboriginal students.

The 'Closing the Gap' strategy is a formal commitment made by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008 to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through setting measurable targets for improvement. The Closing the Gap framework will reach its tenth year in 2018. Four of the existing seven Closing the Gap targets are due to expire in 2018. This includes the target to halve the gap for Aboriginal students in reading, writing and numeracy.

The Council of Australian Governments has agreed to work with Aboriginal leaders, organisations and communities to refresh the Closing the Gap framework. As part of the broader Closing the Gap refresh, NSW committed to undertake a 'deep-dive' analysis of what works in schools to assist in lifting the performance of Aboriginal students.

To this end, CESE has produced a series of five case studies on primary schools that have closed the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The case studies highlight strategies that the schools identify as contributors to their success.

Background

Doonside Public School is a primary school located in Western Sydney. It has approximately 282 students. Twenty-one per cent of students are Aboriginal and 55 per cent of students are from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE) (NSW Department of Education data 2017). The percentage of Aboriginal students at the school as a whole is decreasing, although the actual number of Aboriginal students remains fairly consistent. The percentage of LBOTE students is increasing (My School 2016). This is mainly due to demographic change in the region. The school has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value, with 57 per cent of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter (My School 2016).

Doonside Public School currently gains results close to similar schools across all NAPLAN domains. This is an improvement from eight years ago when the school consistently achieved significantly below similar schools and other local schools in the area. The attendance rate at Doonside Public School in 2016 was 83 per cent for Aboriginal students and 92 per cent for non-Aboriginal students (My School 2016). Doonside Public School employs one full time Kindergarten to Year 6 Aboriginal Education Officer. Doonside also has an Aboriginal designated preschool – Wingarra Preschool – located within the school grounds. The preschool's Aboriginal Education Officer works closely with the staff and families of Doonside Public School.

According to student engagement data, 92 per cent of Aboriginal students at Doonside Public School in Years 4 to 6 agreed that they felt good about their culture at school, and 92 per cent of Aboriginal students agreed that they felt their teachers had a good understanding of their culture (Tell Them From Me data 2017). Student mobility has decreased substantially from the last decade. Doonside Public School describes itself as committed to providing a foundation for learning based upon teaching practices that involve strong student wellbeing principles and explicit teaching.

Closing the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

Doonside Public School attributes its success in achieving high growth for Aboriginal students to its overall strategy to improve performance outcomes for all students. Over the last eight years, the school has seen significant changes in leadership. The focus of the school over this time has moved from behaviour issues to curriculum, with improved outcomes being attributed by the principal to insistence, persistence and consistency in school practice. The school today views itself as a 'global village', where difference is recognised but everyone is also working towards the same goals.

The practices that seem to be particularly relevant in increasing outcomes for all students, and particularly for Aboriginal students at Doonside Public School, are: high expectations, use of data to inform practice, and community engagement.

High expectations

Doonside Public School has a constant focus on high expectations for all students, irrespective of background. The principal and all staff expect that all students at Doonside Public School can be PhDs, can be teachers, can be whatever they want to be. Another way in which the school ensures high expectations for all students is by making sure that behaviour expectations are consistent and appropriate. For instance, in the past, the school had a 'chill out' room for students who were not behaving. This room has subsequently been abolished as there is now an expectation that all students are at school to be taught, to learn and to be in classrooms and that they will behave appropriately. This focus on high expectations applies not only to students, but also to teachers. All teachers at Doonside Public School are expected to have thorough written programs that cater for every student in the classroom. The assistant principals (who are not classroom-based for 2017) observe and check written programs and make sure that all teachers have up-to-date programs in place. The assistant principals also play a mentoring/coaching role to support staff, and to assist staff with any issues that they have with students.

High expectations at Doonside apply to Aboriginal students in the same way as to any other students. There is no 'special treatment' for any group of students. All students are expected to attend school, to be on time, to behave appropriately and to achieve high academic results. While consistently high expectations apply to all students, and inclusivity rather than

exclusivity is the focus of the school¹, different strategies may sometimes be used to raise expectations for different groups of students. For example, one way in which Aboriginal students' expectations are raised at Doonside Public School is by taking them to university to meet Aboriginal students who are studying subjects such as medicine. Doonside Public School also recently hosted the launch of Deadly 7s, an innovative Aboriginal rugby primary school program that aims to introduce more Aboriginal children to rugby. At the launch was the Australian Sevens Squad member and local Aboriginal woman, Mahalia Murphy, who grew up in Doonside. Doonside Public School also makes a conscious effort to ensure Aboriginal students feel positive about themselves and their identity, and consciously builds Aboriginal perspectives into lessons for all students.

Doonside Public School also offers staff professional development opportunities in the '8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning' pedagogy. The 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogy is a framework that allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives by using Aboriginal learning techniques such as learning through narrative and connecting learning to local values, needs and knowledge. Awareness of Aboriginal perspectives is not something that Doonside Public School considers an 'add on', but rather an inherent part of the 'global village' approach at Doonside, and a natural and intrinsic part of a contemporary multicultural Australian education more broadly.



¹ Students are also all permitted and encouraged to participate in any or all opportunities offered by the school, for example the school's Aboriginal dance group (the 'Rainbow dance group') is open to all students regardless of ethnicity or whether they identify as Aboriginal.

Use of data to inform practice

Doonside Public School has a strong focus on using data to inform practice. For instance, staff do a thorough breakdown of NAPLAN data every year to inform teaching practices. The school has also recently started using the Tell Them From Me surveys to provide additional data on school engagement which the school can then feed into teaching practices.

Doonside Public School focuses on individual student trajectories, and targets strategies for particular students on the basis of their learning needs, irrespective of background. The school has a data wall for all students from Kindergarten to Year 6. The data wall indicates where all students are, and where they should be (i.e. the benchmark they should be meeting). Every five weeks there is a review of Planning Literacy and Numeracy (PLAN) data² to see which students are behind, why they are behind, and strategies that have been put in place to bring these students up to the benchmark. The learning support team at Doonside Public School is available for all staff, and staff are encouraged to discuss confidentially what is and what is not working in terms of teaching practice.

In terms of Aboriginal students and using data to inform practice, the Deputy Principal – Instructional Leader focuses in particular on Kindergarten to Year 3 students with an emphasis on providing support to Aboriginal students. SMART data is used to identify strengths and weaknesses and to identify specific areas of need. Individual students who need particular support are also identified through this data analysis, with all staff being involved in this process.

The school feels that their previous participation in the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (ATSIEAP) as a ‘focus school’ was useful in building a foundation of good practice and establishing specific goals for Aboriginal students. The school had to do a lot of ‘backwards mapping’ as part of its participation in this initiative. For example, thinking about which strategies would ensure all students learnt to read, write and count.

Wellbeing

One of the features of Doonside Public School is the way the school engages with its community (including both parents and the broader community) and other government agencies, to ensure the wellbeing of students and engagement with their learning.

Parents

The school has worked hard over recent years to engage parents with the school and their children’s learning. Some of the strategies they have employed to encourage parental involvement include inviting the families into the school and explaining to them the practices, policies, and expectations of Doonside Public School. As part of this priority, the school has clarified expectations about appropriate rules and responsibilities for parents when they are at the school. According to the principal, this has raised the level of mutual respect between parents and the school. The school’s efforts to enhance parent engagement has shown some success – for example parents now come to school assemblies in contrast to past experience. According to the principal, parents have a stronger sense of belonging with the school today and are more likely to come and discuss concerns with the school than they were in the past. Parents also stated that they found the school very friendly and welcoming and felt like they were encouraged by the school to collaborate in their children’s learning.



2 Planning Literacy and Numeracy (PLAN) software is used by schools to record, analyse and monitor student progress along the literacy and numeracy continuums.

In terms of engaging parents of Aboriginal students, specific policies have been put in place by the school and the Aboriginal Education Officers. The school ensured that a permanent Kindergarten to Year 6 Aboriginal Education Officer was appointed with the commitment of long-term employment. This staff member works closely with the on-site pre-school Aboriginal Education Officer to listen to families, take on board what families want and advocate for families. Filling this position permanently, and having had the same staff now occupy the Aboriginal Education Officer positions for a number of years, has established consistency and trust between the school, parents and the broader community. This in turn contributes to the high expectations climate that has been created in the school. An example of the trust that has been established between the Aboriginal Education Officer and parents is seen through the development of the Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) for Aboriginal students. The school finds it is now much easier to get parents to engage with these plans than it was in the past.

One of the specific initiatives that the Aboriginal Education Officers have set up for parents at the school is 'chill and chat' every Wednesday morning where families can come in and just sit and listen, or sit and talk. These sessions take place in the 'Aboriginal Education Room', a classroom the school has dedicated for chill and chat, and for teachers to bring their classes for Aboriginal education lessons. While the chill and chat sessions are run by the Aboriginal Education Officer, all parents – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – are welcome to attend. The chill and chat sessions are also used at times by external agencies who want to speak with parents.

Community

The school works closely with the local community in an effort to make the school as welcoming and friendly as possible, and to show that the school is committed to working with the local community to improve outcomes for everyone. This is exemplified through the annual community expo held on the school grounds. Initially the community expo was set up by the Aboriginal Education Officers as a means to engage Aboriginal families, but the expo has continued to grow and is now a large event for all school families and friends. A number of community support agencies attend the expo to give advice and support to families. Agencies that have attended in the past include Blacktown Council, Northcott Disability Services, health services (including Aboriginal health, community health and Western Sydney Health Services), and local police (including crime prevention and youth liaison officers). The expo provides an opportunity for parents to engage with government and community programs. It also gives different agencies a chance to engage and consult with one another to see what they can offer families and to see where there might be funding gaps in the local community. By working with the local community in this way, the school can create partnerships which help to achieve the best outcomes for families and which place students in a better position to come to school and to learn.





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