

Closing the gap: Westport Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Westport Public School has achieved high learning growth for Aboriginal students. In particular it looks at the ways in which Westport Public School is continuously improving teaching practice, focusing on student wellbeing, and acknowledging Aboriginal culture 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

Westport Public School is a primary school located in Port Macquarie on the mid-North coast of NSW. It has around 335 students and is the smallest of the four public primary schools in Port Macquarie. Twenty-six per cent of students are Aboriginal and six per cent of students come from a language background other than English (LBOTE) (NSW Department of Education data 2017). The school has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value and the majority of students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter (My School 2016). The school currently has five Aboriginal staff at the school: a full-time Aboriginal Education Officer, as well as two Student Learning Support Officers, one office assistant and one teacher.

The percentage of both Aboriginal and LBOTE students at the school has increased from ten years ago, as has the number of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter (My School 2016). Many of the students at Westport Public School have special needs (including behavioural issues and disabilities) and the school also has many students living in out of home care. The school works closely with the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) to support these students. Westport Public School currently gains results close to similar schools across most NAPLAN domains. The school attendance rate is 91 per cent for Aboriginal students and 94 per cent for non-Aboriginal students (My School 2016).

Closing the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

Westport Public School attributes the achievement of high growth for Aboriginal students to their overall strategy to achieve high growth for all students. This strategy is based on high expectations, collegial teamwork, quality instructional systems, use of data to inform practice and explicit teaching. The school's strategic directions for 2015-2017 state that the school is focusing specifically on high quality teaching and learning programs; developing skills, knowledge and expertise for the 21st century learner; and quality wellbeing initiatives and community engagement/partnerships.

The practices that seem to be particularly relevant to improving performance outcomes for all students, and also particularly for Aboriginal students at Westport Public School, are: improving teaching practice, student wellbeing, and acknowledging Aboriginal culture.

Improving teaching practice

According to the school, improving teaching practice has been, and continues to be, an important component of improving learning outcomes and offering a comprehensive and engaging curriculum for all students. New strategies are constantly being sought to improve outcomes. For instance, in 2017, Westport Public School became an Early Action for Success school. This initiative has seen the appointment of a full-time Deputy Principal – Instructional Leadership in literacy and numeracy. Other areas that the school has focused on to improve teaching practice include the use of data to inform practice, and mentoring and collaboration.

Using data to inform practice

The school has a data wall for all students from Kindergarten to Year 6 which tracks students against the literacy and numeracy continuums. Green on the data wall indicates students who are on track, amber indicates students who are slightly behind, and red signals students who need intervention. The wall allows teachers to see which students need interventions and identify which students in their classes (using class analysis sheets from the Planning Literacy and Numeracy [PLAN] data) are within the green, amber and red bands. The primary aim for teachers is to progress the amber group into the green group quickly, while working on appropriate interventions for the red group.

Using data in this way, the school identified that writing was a major problem amongst its students. As a result, the data wall currently shows the whole school benchmarked against writing standards. There are exemplars underneath, so that teachers can bring in work samples and compare them to the exemplars, and identify where all the students in their class are and where they should be. Literacy and numeracy specific feedback generated from the PLAN software is also sent to all parents at the ends of Terms 1, 2 and 3. This provides parents with an idea of where their children are and what they can do at home to support their children with their literacy and numeracy learning.

Mentoring and collaboration

Twice a term, teachers have a rostered professional learning day in stage teams to look collaboratively at performance data for their students: student performance is analysed, incremental goals are set, planning and monitoring of student learning takes place and teachers engage in dialogue with one another about their teaching practice. Westport Public School also has mentoring programs in place that involve teacher observation. Mentoring is particularly valuable at Westport as there has been a relatively high staff turnover in the last five years due to teachers retiring. This mentoring is coded according to the Quality Teaching Framework.

The mentoring program is also important at Westport Public School as differentiation is seen as a key teaching strategy. There are always different lessons happening for different groups of students in the classroom. For example, there is a Student Support Learning Officer in every classroom for one session a day assisting with small group interventions for students who are behind and/or have behavioural issues. Westport Public School also does not, for the main, use textbooks¹ because there is such a range of learning abilities in each classroom. Mentoring and observation is one way that teachers can learn how to differentiate effectively and thus this is a particularly important component of improving teaching practices at Westport Public School.



1 Students do not have textbooks; teachers may use them occasionally for activities.

Student wellbeing

Student wellbeing is seen as a vitally important part of student learning and engagement at Westport Public School. It is this focus on wellbeing that the school is known for in the local community according to the school leadership team. One of the key features of the wellbeing strategy at the school is the 'iCan room'. The iCan room is a classroom funded by the school which has a teacher in it five days a week. The room has been in place for the last eight years and serves as a space where students can go (they can either self-refer or be sent there) when they are experiencing difficulties working in the regular classroom environment. The school describes the room as a 'circuit-breaker' for students. Students can calm down in the iCan room and then either continue their learning in the iCan classroom or go back to their classes. The iCan room is built into the school's broader Positive Behaviour for Learning strategy. Students who use the room are required to 'de-brief' with the iCan teacher before they leave so that problems can be resolved on the spot. The Aboriginal Education Officer, along with other support teachers, work closely with the iCan room, and parents of Aboriginal students attest to the usefulness of this facility. The classroom functions not only to remove behaviour issues from other classrooms, but also to provide individual support to students who need it. It also provides a 'safe' space where FACS and other agencies can come and interview students.

The school has a number of other wellbeing strategies in place including offering targeted support in the playground. In this playground initiative, students who need support are matched with a Student Support Learning Officer and placed in a group with four or five other students to do 'structured play'. The idea of structured play is to have social skills modelled and positively reinforced. For instance, students may learn how to share when playing with a ball. The outcome is that the students who need targeted support learn social skills and the playground becomes a happier place for all students. Other wellbeing strategies that the school is currently using include mindfulness in class, and Breakfast Club. All wellbeing strategies are discussed and implemented in consultation with the school counsellor who is on-site two days a week; and initiatives like the iCan room sit under the school's broader Positive Behaviour for Learning framework.

Acknowledging Aboriginal culture

Another key feature behind Westport's performance growth for Aboriginal students, according to the school's leadership team and parents of Aboriginal students, is the attention paid to acknowledging Aboriginal culture within the school. This takes a variety of forms. For instance, the school currently has five Aboriginal staff at the school (a full-time Aboriginal Education Officer, as well as two Student Learning Support Officers, one office assistant and one teacher) and the principal states that he would like to hire more Aboriginal staff in the future. All staff are also encouraged to take part in cultural

competency training such as the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's 'Connecting to Country' program. This is a three-day intensive, in-the-field cultural immersion program focusing on local Aboriginal culture and history. In 2017 five staff, including the principal, attended the training course and another five staff will attend the course next year. The school also holds events for NAIDOC Week, National Sorry Day and Reconciliation Week, has a bush tucker garden, and the grounds are decorated with Aboriginal murals and local language signage where appropriate.

The school has a separate classroom that has been set up for the Aboriginal Education Officer as a space for Aboriginal parents and students. The room is called 'The Mिंगaletta Room' which means 'meeting place' in the local Aboriginal language. The classroom is decorated, has comfortable lounges, and a kitchen area with tea and coffee supplied. It is particularly used to try and engage more parents with the school and their child's learning. For instance, the classroom has been deliberately placed near the entrance to the school. Previously it was located at the top of a two-storey block and it was found that parents were not happy to come and visit very often when it was located further inside the school. Afternoon teas for families are also held in the Mिंगaletta Room at least once a term and it is where interviews are held for developing students' personalised learning plans. This room is also currently being used as an office by the Aboriginal representative from the Port Macquarie Department of Education office.

Westport welcomes connections with the local Aboriginal community, including Department representatives and the local Birpai Aboriginal Land Council. For instance, 30 to 40 students attend the local land council-run after school care program once a week with the school arranging to have students bussed over; and the school works with the local land council to ensure any signs on the school grounds using the local language are appropriately written.







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