

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

# Creating a culture of excellence: Lansvale Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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## Introduction

This case study describes how Lansvale Public School creates and sustains a culture of excellence, particularly through ongoing professional learning, student engagement and parent engagement.

## Background

Lansvale Public School is a primary school located in south-western Sydney, NSW. There are 664 students enrolled at the school, one per cent of whom are Aboriginal and 94% of whom come from a language background other than English (LBOTE). Lansvale Public School has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 943, which is lower than the NSW average of 1,000, indicating a higher than average level of disadvantage. Fifty-four per cent of enrolled students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter while six per cent are in the top quarter. The school performs close to or above similar schools in all NAPLAN domains (My School 2016). External validation in 2016 found Lansvale Public School to be excelling in 12 of the 14 elements in the School Excellence Framework (SEF) version 1.

Lansvale Public School strategic directions for 2015-2017 were: inspire, challenge and empower students (student learning); excellence in leadership, teaching and learning (staff and leader learning); and authentic and inclusive partnerships for learning (school and community learning). There are currently 39 teaching and seven non-teaching staff employed at the school (My School 2016). Prior to being appointed principal of Lansvale Public School in 2007, the current principal served as principal of two other public schools for eight years, from 1999 to 2006. He served as principal at Lansvale Public School until 2012 when he took up an instructional leadership position, working across five schools for three years. The principal then returned to Lansvale Public School in Term 4, 2015 and has continued as principal since then.



## Creating a culture of excellence

The practices at Lansvale Public School that contribute to its culture of excellence include ongoing professional learning, student engagement and parent engagement.

### Ongoing professional learning

#### *Adaptive planning*

At Lansvale Public School, there is strong emphasis on adaptive planning, a process whereby teachers plan curriculum content with enough flexibility that improvements can be seamlessly fed back into the planning. For example, literacy and numeracy teachers operate on a fortnightly learning cycle and only plan class content two weeks in advance, so that any necessary modifications to content can be made based on teacher observation and student feedback. The purpose of this fortnightly learning cycle is to enable teachers to be more attuned to the learning needs of their students, and to encourage teachers to always tailor class content to meet the identified needs of the students. Lansvale Public School also utilises formative assessments that are framed around the fortnightly learning cycle, so that teachers can make necessary modifications to class content based on the outcomes of the assessments. The school does not favour any one type of formative assessment strategy but insists that the strategy must be authentic, meaningful to the students and aligned with the learning cycle. Teachers are therefore given the freedom to utilise whatever formative assessment strategy is best suited to their students, always reviewing and feeding outcomes back into the planning process.

### *Teacher professional learning*

The principal of Lansvale Public School believes that you cannot be a good teacher unless you are a good learner, so he is passionate about providing professional learning opportunities for teachers to learn from and with each other. There are many examples of peer learning occurring at the school, one of which is the 'data celebrations' that are held once every five weeks. At these data celebrations, teachers meet to share and compare student performance data, exchanging ideas about how to improve student achievements. The school executive meetings are another opportunity for professional learning, involving learning-focused discussions around teaching practice and impact. Executive meetings at Lansvale Public School begin with a two-minute listening or learning task to motivate staff to think deeply about pedagogy and practice. The meeting then assumes a learning focus with teachers practising 11 preselected teaching protocols, including co-construction and upwards feedback<sup>1</sup>, which aim to help teachers improve their classroom practice. Logistics and legalities are also discussed during executive meetings but the last five minutes of the meeting are always set aside to debrief on what had been achieved during the meeting and what needs more attention. By providing these open peer learning opportunities for staff, Lansvale Public School ensures that teachers are constantly learning about, evaluating and improving upon their teaching practice.



<sup>1</sup> Co-construction is about teachers working together to share ideas for improving teaching practices and student outcomes, while upwards feedback is the process through which teachers obtain students' feedback to inform the planning of class content according to the school's fortnightly learning cycle.

In addition to internal peer learning, there are also external opportunities for professional learning at Lansvale Public School. For instance, Lansvale Public School teachers often visit other schools to learn from teachers there, and the school regularly hosts open days and other professional learning experiences for educators from other schools in Australia and overseas. The school also has a strong reciprocal relationship with Western Sydney University, such as through the 'Fair Go Project', which is strategically aimed at promoting the concept of 'teachers as researchers'. By openly collaborating with other educators and researchers in this way, Lansvale Public School encourages its teachers to research, clarify and effectively articulate what they do and why, thereby strengthening teachers' professional knowledge, efficacy and leadership. There is a strong sense of pride amongst the staff and community of Lansvale Public School that stems from the professional learning relationships that the school has built over the years.

At times, Lansvale Public School may collaborate with up to five or six schools to organise professional learning workshops, so that staff can benefit from the workshops at a lesser overall cost to the school. Christine Groves<sup>2</sup>, David Hopkins<sup>3</sup>, John Marsden<sup>4</sup> and Cathy Attard<sup>5</sup> are some of the speakers that Lansvale Public School, in collaboration with other schools, has invited to run professional learning workshops. Last year, Lansvale Public School executives participated in an online Harvard-run personal growth course titled 'Immunity to change', which will be run again this year for all aspiring school leaders. The choice of this course stemmed from the principal's recognition in 2015 that the school needed to do more to enhance leadership capacity among teachers. As a result, teachers at Lansvale Public School are encouraged to be part of leadership networks outside the school so that they can be exposed to 'big ideas'. The principal also regularly attends principal conferences to gain insight into the best and most current teaching practices, always considering the merits of these practices for Lansvale Public School.

### Student engagement

Lansvale Public School prides itself on placing students at the centre of every decision made and strives to ensure that students perform at their personal best and are engaged in their learning. To maximise student engagement, Lansvale Public School selectively employs pedagogies such as project-based learning<sup>6</sup>, Self-Organised Learning Environment (SOLE)<sup>7</sup> and Storypath<sup>8</sup> to encourage applied learning across Key Learning Areas. The school also encourages students to set personal learning goals and openly discuss their strengths and challenges with teachers so that students become active rather than passive learners. Engagement in learning is recognised as a factor that contributes to better academic performance.

Lansvale Public School has a high population of LBOTE students. If students do not have a good grasp of English language, they can become disengaged from classroom learning. The principal believes that it is the school's responsibility to maintain students' primary language where possible, but also to support students' English language development. For this reason, resources have been specifically allocated for hiring specialists in English as an additional language or dialect (EALD) to provide Lansvale Public School students with targeted English language learning support.

### Parent engagement

Lansvale Public School has made a concerted effort to include parents and the broader community not just in school decision making but also in improving students' learning. The principal stated that when he first started in 2007, there was no functioning P&C and parents seemed to be disconnected from the school. The school has since taken steps to bridge the gap between the school and the broader community so that parents engage more with the school and in their children's learning. Two initiatives – PaTCH (parents as teachers and classroom helpers) and 'parent forums' – have been particularly instrumental in increasing the level of parent engagement with Lansvale Public School. As a result of these initiatives and other efforts at the school, there are now at least 50 parents who regularly attend P&C meetings at the school and who are actively involved in school discussions and activities.



2 Dr Christine Groves is a lecturer and researcher who specialises in literacy and dialogic pedagogies.

3 Professor David Hopkins is an international consultant on educational reform, with expertise in powerful learning and models of practice.

4 John Marsden is a principal whose passion for education led him to start his own schools in Victoria. He gives talks on how to write in a rigorous and authentic way.

5 Dr Catherine Attard is a researcher at Western Sydney University who specialises in numeracy and teaching practices that influence students' engagement.

6 Project-based learning is a student-directed method of teaching where learning is designed around projects.

7 SOLE refers to the adaptation of a school space in a way that facilitates enquiry-based learning and encourages students to work together in groups to answer questions, often with the aid of computers.

8 Storypath is a strategy for teaching and learning that is often used in the area of Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE). It uses a story structure to organise learning and encourages student participation as a way to facilitate learning.

## **PaTCH**

Recognising the important role that parents play in students' academic success, the principal of Lansvale Public School collaborated with a group of other educators to develop a ten-week program called 'parents as teachers and classroom helpers' (PaTCH). The objective of the program is to build parents' capacity to help their children in early numeracy and literacy by teaching parents a range of learning support skills that can be applied at home or as classroom helpers. The skills acquired through participation in the PaTCH program also give parents a good foundation for later pursuing TAFE qualification as a Student Learning Support Officer (SLSO), should they wish. However, the principal stressed that parents' acquisition of TAFE qualifications was not the main motivation behind the development of the program. Instead, given the high percentage of students from non-English speaking backgrounds at Lansvale Public School, PaTCH is used to explain how the Australian school system works to parents who might have gone to school elsewhere or not at all.

As part of the PaTCH program, teachers break down speaking, listening, reading, writing and numbers so that parents know how to engage with their children on these subjects. New concepts like 21st century learning are also discussed during PaTCH sessions so that parents understand what these concepts mean for students' learning. By addressing so many aspects of students' learning in the PaTCH program, Lansvale Public School encourages parents to be more interested and active in their children's education. Parents, in turn, feel empowered and realise that they can actively contribute to their children's learning success, rather than leaving it all up to the school.

Lansvale Public School now has at least 16 parent classroom helpers who assist in various capacities at the school, from teaching numbers to helping students with literacy. The school allows parents to decide where they are best suited to offer classroom assistance, depending on their particular skills or affinity for curriculum areas.

## **Parent forums**

Another avenue through which Lansvale Public School engages parents is holding 'parent forums' where parents are invited to meet with school staff to discuss their children's education. The parent forums at Lansvale Public School are organised around particular themes/topics such as student homework, school performance, NAPLAN and technology. At these forums, parents discuss their children's aspirations for the future and hear how the school intends to help the students realise them. These forums are not just a 'meet and greet' but rather create opportunities for parents to be better informed about the rationale behind particular teaching practices at the school. For instance, the principal explained that some parents do not understand the relevance of extracurricular activities like public speaking to students' future aspirations. These parents wonder why the school does not just focus on 'more useful' subjects like numeracy and literacy. The parent forum presents an opportunity for the school to explain clearly to parents how public speaking may influence students' future aspirations, whether for university or in later employment. Without these forums, parents may remain unconvinced about the importance of such inclusions in the school's programs, potentially causing parents to distance themselves from the school and their child's learning.



A network diagram with various sized nodes and connecting lines, set against a teal background.

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