

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Creating a culture of excellence: Rooty Hill High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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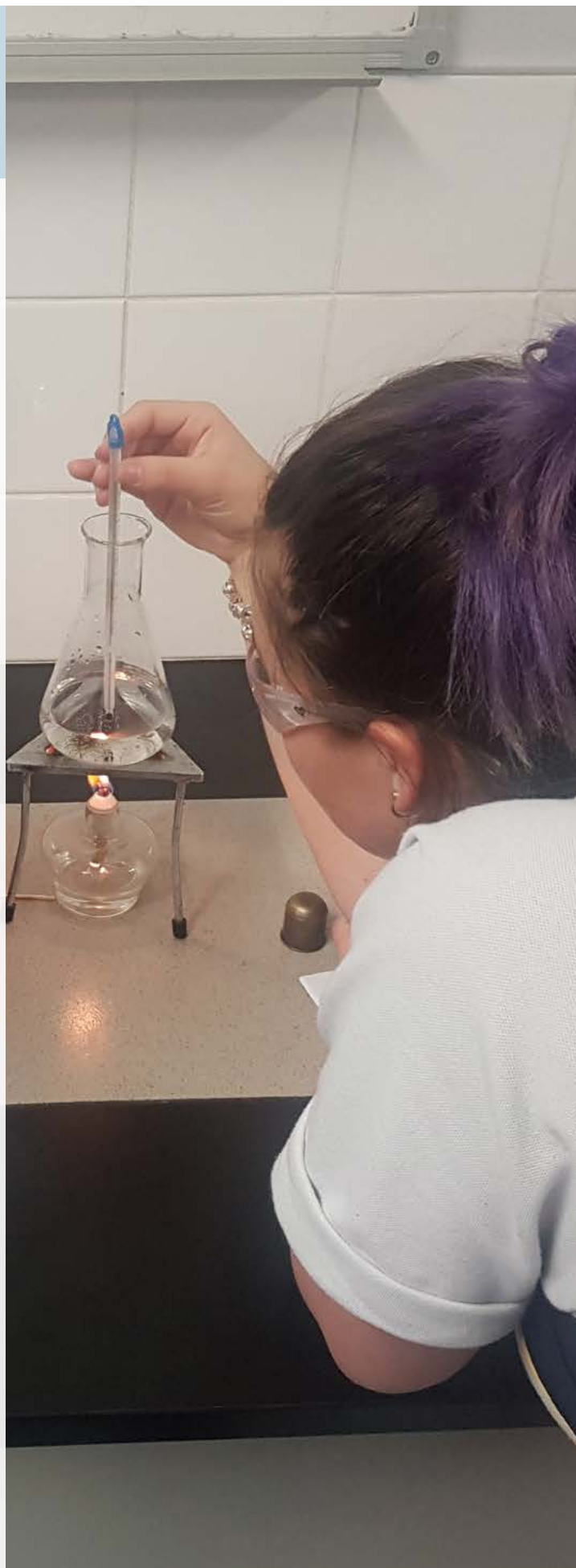
Introduction

This case study describes how Rooty Hill High School creates and sustains a culture of excellence, particularly through a collaborative approach to school planning; a commitment to innovation, creativity and difference; and a focus on professional practice.

Background

Rooty Hill High School is a comprehensive secondary school located in western Sydney. It has an enrolment of around 1,100 students. Fifty per cent of these students come from a language background other than English and six per cent of students are Aboriginal. The school has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), with 51 per cent of students in the bottom ICSEA quarter. Rooty Hill High School gains results in NAPLAN that are close to similar schools and has above average attendance rates (My School 2016). The School Excellence Framework external validation in 2016 verified Rooty Hill High School as excelling across 11 of the 14 elements. The school describes itself as a community school committed to learning, leadership and achievement. It is part of a 'Learning Neighbourhood' of four schools (Rooty Hill High School, Eastern Creek Public School, Minchinbury Public School, Rooty Hill Public School) that is dedicated to providing a quality education from Kindergarten through to Year 12.

Rooty Hill High School strategic directions for 2015-2017 were capability-driven curriculum, personalised learning, and leading for innovation. In 2016 and 2017, Rooty Hill High School was named as one of the 40 most innovative schools in Australia by *The Educator* magazine. The current principal has been principal of the school for 20 years. She is very involved in the local community as well as the broader education community. She has co-authored a book *Learning for leadership: Building a school of professional practice*; is a past president of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council; is on the boards of the Australian Council of Educational Leaders, the Smith Family and the Greater Western Sydney Giants AFL team; and became a member of the Order of Australia in 2012 for her work as an educator and principal in western Sydney.



Creating a culture of excellence

When the principal first arrived at Rooty Hill High School 20 years ago, she put in place a strategy of improvement based on high expectations, staff collaboration and meaningful community engagement. Today, Rooty Hill High School has a number of practices in place to embed and sustain a culture of excellence within the school. These include: a collaborative approach to school planning; commitment to innovation, creativity and difference; and a focus on professional practice.

Collaborative approach to school planning

In 2013, Rooty Hill High School was selected as one of three schools in NSW to trial the department's new school planning and evaluation framework. This led the school to think about how to put in place a school planning framework that was strategic rather than management focused. The school decided to use Friedman's¹ outcomes-based accountability framework to do this. This framework advocates a data-driven decision-making process to help communities and organisations go beyond talking about problems to taking action to solve them. The focus of school planning at Rooty Hill High School is centred on two major processes:

1. Collecting data based on three key questions – 'how much you've done', 'how well you have done it', and 'did you make any difference?'
2. Focusing on progress rather than just achievement, and using strategies and evaluation to show how the school can 'turn the curve'.

Important to this strategic-focused framework, has been finding alignment between the school values, the school plan, the strategic directions, school milestones, school projects, and the way this work is evaluated. According to the principal, alignment is summed up at the school by: 'what the school does, the teachers do and the students do'. For example, there are year-based programs that are built on the basis of Tell Them From Me student survey data. Students analyse Tell Them From Me data for their year group. They look at changes from the year before, and then work with the year advisor to design programs to address any emerging issues. This promotes alignment of understanding and collaboration among the school, teachers and students. In a similar example, students at Rooty Hill have an evidence portfolio, resembling the portfolio teachers' assemble for accreditation. Students upload evidence against capability benchmarks, and the school validates it. This creates both student agency and aligns process and practice between the school, teachers and students.

The use of systems to improve practice is valued at Rooty Hill High School. The principal identifies systems thinking as a key skill of the leadership teams in the school. In the context of Rooty Hill, systems thinking is about setting up systems so that the school functions in the best way it can for both its students and staff. This approach supports the induction of new staff.

As the principal describes, when new teachers come to the school, all they have to do initially is to 'follow the recipe'. New teachers do not necessarily need immediately to understand the evidence and deep understanding of practice that sits behind the school's systems in order to implement them effectively. For example, when it comes to behaviour management, all new teachers need to know is that there is a 'Raising Responsibility'² behaviour chart in every room and students identify whether they have a smiley face, meaning they have been responsible for their own positive behaviour, or a sad face, which means an adult needs to step in to assist with their behaviour. They do not need to understand 'The Choice Theory' behind why this particular system is used. According to the principal, good systems are often about having simpler representations for the user, underpinned by more complicated educational theory, software and systems thinking. The school has in place a strong administration team who have responsibility for, among other things, marketing and workplace health and safety. This team is overseen by the head teacher administration and works to deliver the school's annual operational plan. Having a strong administration team in place creates time for the principal and teachers to focus on their core job of teaching and learning.

Innovation, creativity and difference

Rooty Hill High School values innovation, creativity and difference, and according to the principal, has the capacity, like many schools, to be able to take frameworks, policies, regulations, and translate them into school strategic directions that are innovative and forward thinking. This capacity is derived both from having a strong understanding of existing systems and where they can and cannot be pushed, and a very experienced principal leading the school.

One of the key innovations in place at Rooty Hill High School is a subject-based, capability-driven curriculum. In NSW, the curriculum has traditionally been driven by strong content frameworks rather than capabilities. The school has worked with Professor Bill Lucas³ from Winchester University and three in-house consultants to reframe its subject-based programming and lesson design to 'teach through the ACARA capabilities' rather than addressing the capabilities separately from subject content. The faculty head teachers manage the implementation of the capability-driven curriculum. Students demonstrate their performance against capability benchmarks (in addition to traditional academic reports) with e-portfolios. Sitting alongside this initiative at Rooty Hill High School, is the 'Creativity Wheel'. This is a tool which has been developed by the school (based on work initially commissioned by the OECD) to explore creative learning in action. The wheel is used by the school to build creativity in each subject and to deconstruct and reconstruct learning against the key dispositions of creativity (in this case: imaginative, disciplined, collaborative, persistent, inquisitive dispositions).

¹ Mark Friedman is an American author known for his 'Outcomes-based accountability' framework which aims to turn data into action in order to improve services.

² The 'Raise Responsibility' model is based on the ideas of educator Marvin Marshall. With this model the adult is always in charge. However, instead of using punishment as a means to deal with discipline problems, the system promotes responsible behaviour. The student acknowledges inappropriate behaviour, self-evaluates, takes ownership, and develops a plan for improvement.

³ Professor Bill Lucas is the Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester and is known internationally as an expert on the subjects of learning, change, creativity and leadership.

Another innovation that Rooty Hill has implemented, with the support of extra NERA funding, has been junior and senior learning centres. These learning centres are staffed by teachers and learning support officers throughout the week and students are encouraged to drop in. Around 350 students a year use the junior learning centre, and around 400 students a year use the senior centre. The centres are designed to provide support for students with homework, assessments or other aspects of schooling that parents may not be in a position to provide because they are working or do not have the skills or confidence to assist. The school does not want parents to feel pressured to do student homework or to have conflict in the home when homework is not done.

Rooty Hill High School is also involved in a long term Learning Neighbourhood program with its partner primary schools (Eastern Creek Public School, Minchinbury Public School, Rooty Hill Public School) to help support continuity of quality education from Kindergarten to Year 12 for all students in the local community. Every student from Kindergarten through to Year 6 comes to Rooty Hill High School at least once every year for an event or an activity. These events include 'Kindy comes to high school', 'Year 6 gala days' and 'Young writers' events. The senior executive from each of the learning neighbourhood schools meet twice each term to further this collaboration.

The principal and staff at Rooty Hill High School believe that engaging with the local community is a vital part of any school, and the principal is looking to engage with aspects of 'radical localism'⁴ as her next challenge for the school. She has already laid the groundwork for this challenge. For instance, work experience for Year 10 students has recently been re-structured following an evaluation that showed the work experience program was not achieving its aims. Most students now take part in a social enterprise program instead. Over two weeks, students create up to 20 social enterprises, all of which focus on solving a problem in the local community. The point of this program is to give students a set of work and enterprise skills, as well as community understanding skills so that they can work as 'radical locals' in their own community, to build the community in which they want to live. This is seen as particularly important by the principal in an area such as western Sydney which is growing and changing rapidly, yet is still often not valued by the broader community. The school has created an alumni website to bring together its previous students, many of whom are now successful business people, academics or identities in the local area. By bringing its ex-students together, current students can learn about what it means to live in, work in and shape the local community.



4 Radical localism advocates grassroots movements which engage and shape policy locally (i.e. use a 'bottoms up' approach rather than a 'top down' approach). Radical localism is sometimes described as 'disrupting' the existing status quo.

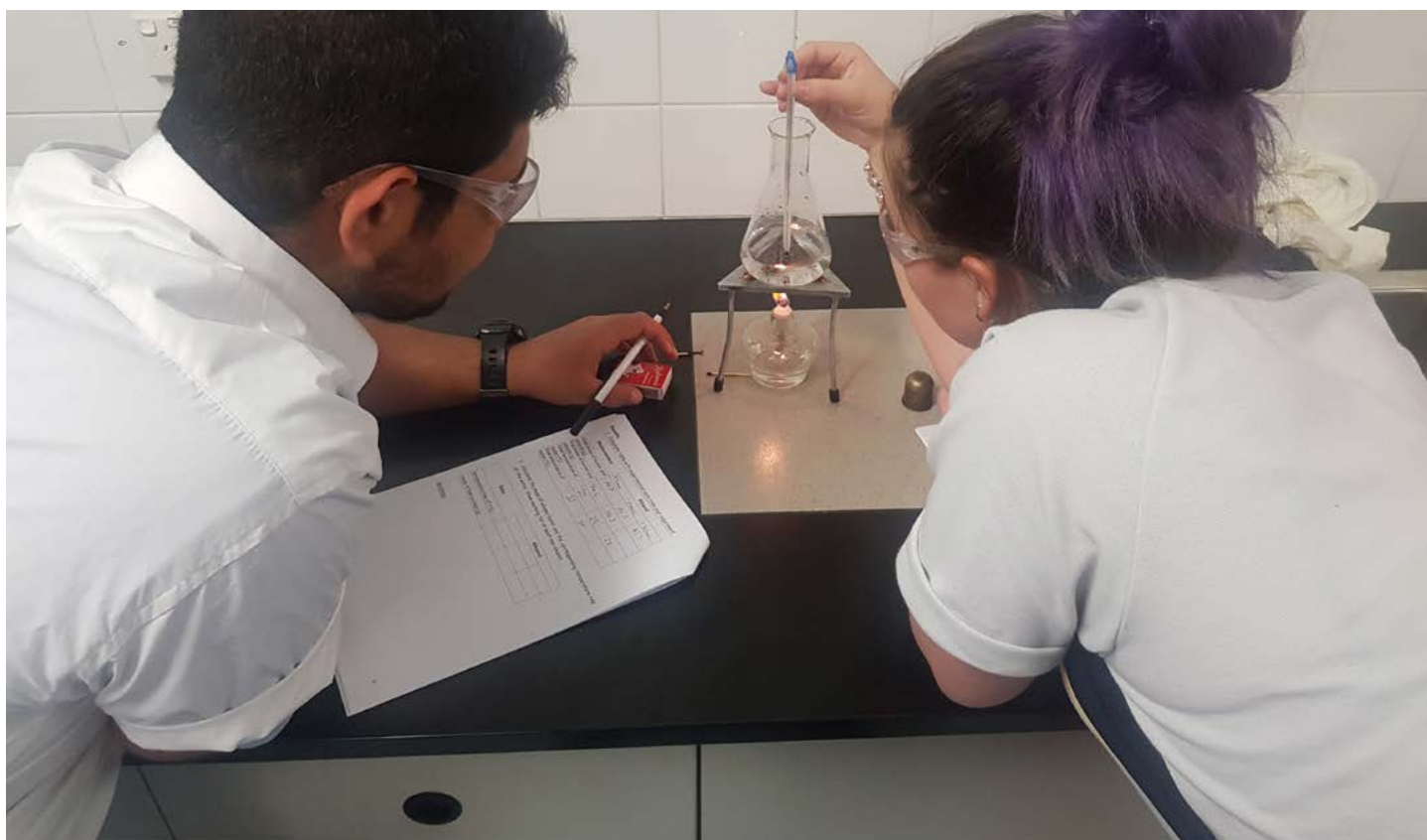
A focus on professional practice

Rooty Hill High School has been recognised over a long period of time for its quality professional practice programs. The particular focus of professional practice has been on refining the skills of teachers in delivering quality lessons; and developing skills in teacher leadership.

The principal's approach to ensuring quality professional practice rests on effective organisational design. New teachers are given the opportunity to work as part of programming teams for the subjects that they are teaching as soon as they arrive at the school. Teachers work collaboratively to design exemplary lessons and learning sequences and to develop a deep understanding of Hattie's higher order learning intentions and success criteria. There is a strong focus in the school on how the classroom is structured and how learning is structured, including lesson planning, lesson delivery and assessment. This focus on organisational design allows all teachers, from first year teachers onwards, to act and teach like 'experts'. The school has also created the concept of 'lead faculties'. Each faculty leads in the teaching of a school-wide 'platform' and explicitly teaches students how to use the scaffolds of the platform it has been assigned. For example, the PDHPE faculty now leads in paragraph writing, the science faculty leads in short answer writing, the English faculty takes the lead on comprehension and reading for comprehension, the HSIE faculty leads in summarising and the CAPA faculty leads student induction into the '8 Ways of Learning'⁵.

The lead faculty system assumes that every student has been taught every one of the instructional and relational platforms.

Leadership is perceived to be as an important component of professional practice at Rooty Hill High School. All teachers are expected to take a leadership role from their second year in the school. This could be something seemingly as simple as coordinating a day in their faculty that is of importance, such as ANZAC Day or Harmony Day; or, it could be a more complex role, such as becoming a professional practice mentor or a capability coordinator. Rooty Hill High School has a professional practice mentor in each faculty. These mentors are all 'new scheme' teachers⁶ and their job is to lead the accreditation process, support understanding of standards, and to work with the head teacher to provide faculty-based professional learning, particularly around learning design and lesson design. They also support the 20-30 practicum teachers who complete practicum or internship programs each year. The success of this approach to mentoring has been recognised by other schools and Rooty Hill's mentors are often called upon by other schools to help them design programs for their staff. The school's relationship with an external contractor and three in-house consultants also contributes to its work on professional practice. The in-house consultants are retired principals and head teachers who have expertise in teaching and learning. They work with teachers and help them learn how to teach capabilities and other aspects of learning the school is focusing on.



⁵ The 8 ways framework brings Aboriginal ways of knowing and being into the Australian classroom. It comprises eight interconnected pedagogies that see teaching and learning as fundamentally holistic, non-linear, visual, kinaesthetic, social and contextualised.

⁶ New scheme teachers were deliberately selected to be mentors as they are more familiar with the current standards than old scheme teachers, and it provides an opportunity to build capacity and expertise in newer teachers.

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

Authors: Kate Griffiths, Victoria Ikutegbe

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

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☎ 02 9561 1211

Y Yammer

✉ info@cese.nsw.gov.au

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