

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Creating a culture of excellence: Woonona High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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## Introduction

This case study describes how Woonona High School creates and sustains a culture of excellence, particularly through fostering high expectations, ongoing evaluation and parent involvement in student learning.

## Background

Woonona High School is a comprehensive secondary school located on the South Coast of NSW. There are 599 students enrolled at the school, six per cent of whom are Aboriginal and seven per cent of whom come from a language background other than English (LBOTE). Woonona High School has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 995, which is lower than the NSW average of 1,000, indicating a higher than average level of disadvantage. Thirty-one per cent of enrolled students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter while 14% 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 Woonona High School to be excelling in 12 of the 14 elements in the School Excellence Framework (SEF) version 1.

Woonona High School operates in partnership with the University of Wollongong as one of several 'hub schools', which develop models of best practice for pre-service teachers. Woonona High School strategic directions for 2015-2017 were excellence in student learning; innovative world-class teachers; and successful community partnerships. There are currently 54 staff employed at the school (45 teaching and nine non-teaching), eleven of whom joined the school in 2017. The current principal is an alumna of Woonona High School and previously taught at a nearby high school before becoming principal of Woonona High School in 2011. The principal was one of the twelve recipients of the 2017 Commonwealth Bank Teaching Awards<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth Bank Teaching Awards were launched in 2016 to recognise and reward great teachers and principals, especially those working in challenging and socially diverse communities. Each recipient is granted a \$45,000 fellowship that includes professional learning for them and project funding for their school.

## Creating a culture of excellence

The practices at Woonona High School that contribute to its culture of excellence include fostering a culture of high expectations, conducting ongoing evaluations and involving parents in students' learning.

### Fostering a culture of high expectations

At Woonona High School, the principal emphasises that staff and students have high expectations of themselves and one another, creating a culture of collective efficacy and collective responsibility, leading to continuous school improvement. High expectations among staff relates to teachers openly discussing classroom practices, learning from one another and challenging themselves to improve teaching and learning across the school. For students, high expectations involves students taking greater responsibility for their own learning, setting personal learning goals and actively seeking to improve their learning.

### High expectations for staff

At Woonona High School, staff work under the motto 'everything is everyone's responsibility and everyone's accountable'. Every executive staff member has undertaken two days' training in growth coaching<sup>2</sup> to build their capacity as leading learners and to provide them with the framework to mentor, manage, support and coach teachers' professional learning. This stems from the principal's vision of distributed leadership towards which she has been working since being appointed to the role at Woonona High School. As a new principal, she observed that staff seemed to take a passive view of leadership, leaving decisions up to the 'boss' – the principal – and waiting for top-down direction. Over time, however, leadership at the school has become distributed with each staff member given regular opportunities to lead in a variety of ways, thereby having greater ownership and contribution to the continuing success of the school. New staff are provided opportunities to develop or enhance qualities of leadership and collaboration; the principal strategically recruits teachers who demonstrate both quality teaching practice and exhibit leadership capacity.



### High expectations for students

Woonona High School challenges its students to take charge of, and excel in, their learning and provides them with various opportunities to do so. For example, the school offers enrichment classes which are specifically designed to provide students with a rich, challenging learning environment to enable them to continually improve upon their learning outcomes. Students in non-enrichment classes are also challenged as part of normal teaching practice, but the enrichment classes are an overt way by which Woonona High School fosters high expectations. To be admitted into the Year 7 enrichment class, students sit a no-cost placement test that has been developed by Woonona High School. The result of this test is considered along with the students' Year 5 NAPLAN results, their level of involvement and performance in primary school and the information contained in their applications. Prior to 2013, enrichment classes at Woonona High School were only available to Year 7 students but following positive feedback from students, the school now offers enrichment classes for students in Years 8 to 10. However, whilst students in the Year 7 enrichment class are selected largely based on their placement test and NAPLAN achievement scores, selection for the other enrichment classes are based solely on faculty invitation. There has been so much interest in the enrichment classes at Woonona High School that in 2016 the school introduced an additional Year 7 enrichment class for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA). This CAPA enrichment class is specifically targeted at students with an interest and talent in, and affinity for, the Arts discipline.

As well as challenging students to greater academic achievement, Woonona High School also makes a point of celebrating students' participation and engagement at school. The principal explained that when she first arrived, showcasing of students' successes occurred mainly during Tuesday morning assemblies, though students frequently declined to get up on stage particularly when acknowledging academic achievement; sporting achievement was more readily acknowledged. However, students' confidence and engagement has grown over the years to the extent that they have now built their own 'stage' on social media platforms such as Facebook, where the students post images of their participation in school activities. The school's fortnightly newsletter has similarly increased in length over the years, as students now regularly contribute to the content or provide images of student participation, engagement or achievement in curricula and non-curricula activities. Another platform for celebrating students' achievement and participation is the annual open night hosted by Woonona High School in March. At the event, students and staff showcase the vast array of academic, creative and performing arts, and extra curricula activities that students engage in on a daily basis at Woonona High School. In addition, parents of Year 7 students are invited to speak about their children's experiences and accomplishments during their first six weeks of high school. By celebrating students on so many platforms, Woonona High School has developed a culture which encourages students to participate and to strive for excellence.

2 Growth coaching workshops are designed to provide educators with the teaching, learning and leadership skills that they need to ultimately improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.



## Using evaluation to inform practice

In 2013, Woonona High School conducted a whole-school evaluation to gain insight into staff, student and community perceptions of the school's performance in a number of areas. The outcome of this evaluation prompted several modifications to the school's assessment practice and staff professional learning.

### Assessment practice

The 2013 evaluation involved asking teachers, students and parents their views on policies and practices, in particular: assessment task design, student engagement and feedback processes at Woonona High School. This revealed a number of areas for improvement which the school made a priority to address, in particular the need to improve assessment practices. According to the principal, parents and students felt that students were being over tested and not provided with a variety of assessment tasks, thus students did not feel engaged in their learning, and there was also inconsistency across the school in the implementation of assessment practices.

To address this, Woonona High School decided to look to alternatives to summative assessment strategies and, for the last four years, the school has been employing formative assessment and feedback strategies. The school's adoption of formative assessments is largely informed by the research of Dylan Wiliam, a British educationalist. Based on a formative assessment approach, Woonona High School students now regularly conduct peer and self-assessments moderated by teachers. The students engage in a range of formative feedback practices whilst learning, before submitting their final assessment product.

To further engage students in their learning, Woonona High School is trialling a new initiative called 'Learn to Learn'<sup>3</sup> which aims to teach students the skills to help them become effective life-long learners. These skills include developing an understanding of the neuroscience of learning, students' own learning, self-reflection, peer and self-evaluation, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and the collection of evidence pertaining to each students' personal learning goals. The initiative will first be trialled in the Year 7 class at Woonona High School before it is rolled out to other years. 'Learn to Learn' aligns with the overarching goal at Woonona High School which is to make students more independent, reflective and evaluative of their own learning, so that learning is not 'capped' in any way.

## Professional learning

Following the 2013 evaluation, Woonona High School adopted a different approach to staff professional learning, increasing collaboration across key learning areas. Now staff undertake professional learning in cross-faculty groupings called 'teacher learning communities' so that the focus of discussions is on pedagogy rather than syllabus content. According to the principal, this change was necessary because the 2013 evaluation showed inconsistencies in assessment practices that had more to do with *how* teachers were teaching rather than *what* they were teaching. Professional learning sessions at Woonona High School now begin with a presentation of research findings to build teachers' knowledge and understanding around a chosen topic or practice. This is then followed by professional dialogue of the various practices employed in classrooms at Woonona High School, using the work samples that teachers are expected to bring to every meeting of their learning communities. Work samples can be assessment tasks that teachers may have adjusted based on discussions at previous learning community meetings, or rubrics that teachers intend to use for assessment tasks. Work samples are used to share with other teachers in the learning community what has worked, what did not work, and what revisions teachers have made to their teaching practices. Through the peer evaluations and knowledge sharing that occur in teacher learning communities, Woonona High School drives its goal of improving overall consistency and consistency of execution of assessment practices across the school.

Coaching and mentoring is another important aspect of professional learning at Woonona High School that promotes sharing of knowledge and experience among staff. The principal introduced coaching and mentoring into the professional learning framework to capture the knowledge and experience of staff members in their final years of teaching. Senior staff members have been teaching for many years during which they have accumulated valuable knowledge, experience and expertise from which less experienced teachers could benefit. The principal sought to harness this expertise by pairing experienced teachers with early- or mid-career teachers at the school, while also having them supervise pre-service teachers through the University of Wollongong 'Hub Program'. Teacher learning communities at Woonona High School are now comprised of various trios of experienced teachers, the pre-service teachers they supervise, and an early- or mid-career teacher. This triangulation of professional learning ensures that knowledge and experience is shared, and fosters a culture of peer learning and peer support among teachers at the school.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Learn to Learn' initiative is funded under the Fair Education Program of education charity, 'Schools Plus'. The Fair Education Program aims to improve the learning outcomes for marginalised students in NSW by providing funding to individual schools or school clusters to deliver evidence-based projects that enhance student learning.

## Involving parents in students' learning

There is great emphasis at Woonona High School on involving parents in their children's learning so that learning continues after students leave the school grounds. This decision to involve parents was prompted by the feeling among teachers that the students' HSC results did not adequately reflect the effort teachers had put into preparing students for the examination. As a result of this, the school devised a new approach to teaching called the 'HSC strategy: Raising Achievement'. This strategy involves educating parents about the HSC, what the school is doing to prepare the students, and how parents can communicate with their children using 'HSC language'. The principal believes that if the school is to raise the standard of HSC achievements by students, then parents must be supported to have a greater understanding of the expectations placed upon students and how parents can actively and practically play a more prominent role in the process.

Woonona High School now organises term workshops with parents where parents are provided with explicit information on the academic plan for their child in the coming term; the school refers to this as their 'feeding forward' strategy. Parents have been given mini HSC-related tasks to complete with assistance from the students to gain an understanding of the metalanguage or demands of a task. In addition, during 'parent teacher nights', parents are provided with information packs outlining the academic plan for their child which may include tasks that they are to complete in the lead up to HSC trials, so that parents can monitor their children's learning progress. By taking these steps to educate parents about what the HSC entails, the school enables parents to be more directly involved in students' learning. Though originally intended for Year 12 students, the success of the parent-involvement aspect of the HSC strategy has now been extended to other years at Woonona High School to enhance students' learning.



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

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