

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

South Wagga Public School

Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



What we do is offer our kids opportunities for success. We provide a supportive, caring environment for them to thrive.

Tanya Whyte, Principal

CESE would like to thank the staff, students and parents of South Wagga Public School for their participation in this project. Special thanks to the Principal, Tanya Whyte; Angela Jenner, Rebecca Pietsch and Helen Cooper – Assistant Principals; Duncan Brodie – Classroom Teacher; Andrew Smith (President) and John Tonkin – Members of the P&C; Shaleen Ali – Parent; Lexie Fellows, Lachie Cole, Jaida Clancy and Bill Walker – Student Leaders; and Abbey Henman, Cohen Benson, Reuben Heine, Lucus Livio, Andy Owen, Mimi Russell and Sophie Stenning – Parliamentarians.


Introduction

South Wagga Public School is located close to the central business district of the rural city of Wagga Wagga in the NSW Riverina. The school caters for students from Kindergarten to Year 6 and has a current enrolment of approximately 330 students, 4% of whom identify as Aboriginal and 13% of whom are from a language background other than English (LBOTE). The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 1069, just above the Australian average of 1000, and has traditionally included a large number of students whose parents work as professionals in the local community. However, the school is currently undergoing a period of demographic change, with an increasing number of enrolments from more disadvantaged families, including some recently arrived in Australia with limited English, and others who are highly mobile. The school's results in NAPLAN are above average compared to other 'like' schools. A majority of South Wagga's staff have been teaching for 10 years or more, although the school has a small number of early-career teachers. Most classes in Years 3 to 6 are organised in stages, with one class that is cross stage.

Staff at South Wagga view wellbeing as an integral part of the school culture, and a prerequisite for student learning. A commitment by staff to know and care for all students, high expectations and a whole-school approach are the foundations upon which all other elements of the school's wellbeing program are built. The importance of wellbeing is reflected in the school's vision to provide high-quality, inclusive educational experiences and a diverse range of opportunities for improving learning.

What has worked to improve student wellbeing at South Wagga Public School:

- Using data to get to know where students are heading next.
- Buddy programs across stages to give students multiple opportunities to connect with peers in different grades, and to build skills and confidence.
- Giving students a strong voice through the student parliament.
- A whole-school focus on learning a new skill each week, such as 'open mindedness' or 'managing distractions'.
- Building staff capacity and collaboration through a distributed leadership model.
- Giving teachers opportunities to share expertise and resources across stages by working in small teams.



It's like a family here ...
and I can drop her off in the
morning and pick her up
knowing that she's safe here.
And she's well looked after.

Shaleen Ali, Parent



Everyone is considered a priority. Every child. We know every child's name. The children know it. It's not just us leading, it's everyone leading, from a Year 6 student right down. The kids are happy. The kids know when they come here, they're cared for ... if they can't find a teacher, they know that they can go to their buddy, or they can go to their reading buddy. They have so many options who they can go to.

Helen Cooper, Assistant Principal Stage 3

A strong sense of belonging

Every student is known and cared for

Staff at South Wagga are passionate about knowing and caring for their students, both academically and personally and this was evident when visiting the school. A number of staff and parents described the school as being like a family and parents talked about the care taken with their children.

Evidence of student learning and wellbeing is collected from a variety of sources, including work samples, *Tell Them From Me* (TTFM) student surveys, Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs), NAPLAN assessments and analysis of behaviour data. Literacy and numeracy continua/progressions are also used to track, monitor, measure and compare the growth of students against expected benchmarks. A knowledge of the skills, interests and needs of students beyond the classroom is also important at South Wagga, and teachers take every opportunity to get to know students from all stages – in their own classroom, the playground, at sport training and in lunchtime clubs. A detailed and accurate picture of what each student is interested in, knows and can do enables teachers to tailor their teaching to the needs of the student and a common planning cycle of five weeks assists with organisation across the school.

Building self-efficacy through a diverse range of opportunities

Another important part of the school's approach to wellbeing for learning is to ensure that students have a diverse range of opportunities to try new things, develop their skills and pursue their interests in order to build their confidence in their own ability. The school offers a large range of extra-curricular activities and students are encouraged to participate in those that they enjoy and that challenge them. Staff provide a safe and supportive environment in which this can occur. While the school is particularly successful on the sporting field and offers a large variety of sports (including rugby league, touch football, Australian rules football, soccer, netball, tennis and cricket),

South Wagga also offers many other clubs and activities, including chess, drama, coding, debating, Tournament of Minds, band, choir and dance. Whenever possible, entire year or stage groups participate in activities such as gala days and eisteddfods, ensuring that students have an opportunity to try something that they would not necessarily choose for themselves.

My daughter can't really participate in a lot of the sporting activities in the school [due to health reasons] ... but there's so much happening in the school that she doesn't have to feel left out.

Shaleen Ali, Parent

Multiple opportunities to connect

In addition to building skills and confidence, many of the activities on offer at South Wagga are cross stage and provide an opportunity for students to connect with like-minded students from different classes, year groups and stages. Connections with students in different stages are also facilitated by a number of buddy systems. Students in Kindergarten are supported by their buddies in Year 6 throughout the year, and the Kindergarten students return this favour at the end of the year by holding an 'appreciation' assembly for their buddies. A separate buddy system operates between students in Stage 3 and students from Kindergarten to Year 4, in order to support the younger students in areas of need such as letter identification, reading, fine motor skills and writing. An additional buddy system operates between classes, with each class pairing up with a class in a different stage and coming together for selected activities throughout the year as the teachers identify opportunities for collaboration.

Principal Tanya Whyte, the school executive and teachers also place a high priority on working collaboratively with parents

One of the big aspects of our school is that we're inclusive – for all students. The students are all connected to one another. Inclusive. Everyone has an opportunity to do something in their interest area, whether it be part of our drama club, or coding club, or out on the sporting field, or chess teams. We've got lots and lots of opportunities where students can connect with teachers who aren't necessarily their classroom teacher ... and also with other students and different cohorts of students.

Rebecca Pietsch, Assistant Principal

and carers. Parents and carers are involved in many aspects of school life, from contributing their expertise to groups such as the band, to providing food and support to families in need via the P&C's Care and Coordination committee. The strong connections across the school ensure that students have a variety of people in their community whom they know and trust, which facilitates a strong sense of belonging. Strong connections also allow any issues to be detected early so that appropriate support can be put in place.

We have an 'open door policy'. Teachers share their department email address to support direct communication. This allows parents to make regular contact or update teachers with information to support the wellbeing of their child. Teachers also coordinate other extra curricula opportunities to enhance learning and this also supports relationships with parents beyond their own classroom.

Tanya Whyte, Principal

Listening to student voice through the student parliament

Each year, in addition to the election of school captains and vice captains, students in Year 6 are elected as ministers in the school parliament. The captains and vice captains rotate through the roles of Secretary, Speaker, Prime Minister and Opposition Leader and each minister holds a portfolio, including health, education, safety, environment, recreation and functions. The parliament is a long-standing institution of South Wagga and an important vehicle through which students can suggest improvements or raise issues of concern

for consideration by a panel of their peers. While parliament is overseen by a staff member, and teachers assist with the implementation of decisions, it is predominantly organised and run by students.

Parliament convenes at least twice a term and consists of the Secretary, Speaker, Prime Minister and Opposition Leader, the elected ministers and a members section made up of students from Kindergarten to Stage 3 who have the right to speak and vote on proposals. In the lead-up to a parliamentary sitting, any student can submit a proposal, which is then read out by that student in parliament. Following debate and a vote, successful proposals are given to the relevant minister, who considers whether it is viable and follows up with a supporting staff member. Recent successful proposals include: large funding grants to improve the school's natural environment and environmental education; the installation of permanent playground equipment; fundraising events for causes that affect the school community, such as cancer and heart disease; new sporting competitions and teams, and sporting equipment; altering bus stops or routes to ensure greater safety for students; and various cultural events.

The parliament provides leadership opportunities for students in ministerial positions, but also provides a valuable opportunity for all students to formulate their views, speak in public, build a case, consider the merits of other students' arguments and develop resilience when a proposal is not supported.

**Student voice – that's very strong
and very unique in the school.**

Tanya Whyte, Principal

A whole school approach

A shared approach and a common language

Having a shared approach across the school community and a common language to articulate it are central to wellbeing for learning at South Wagga. These areas have been a priority since 2011, when in a review of school programs and practices, the principal noticed that although staff all followed a similar approach, everyone talked about it slightly differently.

We have one skill that the whole school focuses on for a week. This week, the whole school is focusing on 'planning and revising'. So what does planning and revising look like in the classroom? What does it look like as a teacher? What does it look like in the opportunities that we give students? What does it look like when you're on the sporting field, or as part of a choir?

Angela Jenner, Assistant Principal

All school programs and practices at South Wagga are created and modified in response to an identified need and evidence of improved student outcomes. Each change is workshopped and refined by the whole teaching staff at a professional learning session before being implemented across the school. An example of this is the school's 'teaching cycle', which was developed by staff based on the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation's 'What works best' paper¹. Another example is the whole-school focus on a particular learning skill each week, such as 'open-mindedness', or 'managing distractions'. Teachers first discuss what the skill looks like in multiple school contexts, and it is then explicitly demonstrated at the school assembly in the form of two skits – one showing what the skill looks like in the classroom and the other, in the playground. The skill is then communicated to parents via the school's weekly bulletin, with a definition accompanied by examples of the language that students can use in relation to the skill, such as 'Why not? Let's give it a go!' in the case of 'open-mindedness'. Teachers discuss the skill in their interactions with students during the week, and those students who display the skill are recognised via the school's awards system at the end-of-week assembly and in the school bulletin.

South Wagga has also incorporated a number of programs, such as Bounce Back, How2Learn and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), into its teaching and learning repertoire. These, together with other programs and practices implemented at the school, result in a teaching and learning approach that is known as 'Learning @ South Wagga'. 'Learning @ South Wagga' is tailored to the needs of the students and staff and emphasises the school's core values: respectful, responsible and connected. It also incorporates high expectations, and building personal qualities such as resilience and perseverance.

¹ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2014, *What works best: Evidence-based teaching practices to help improve NSW student performance*, literature review.



Our wellbeing approach is called 'Learning @ South Wagga', and the kids buy into it from day one. We're a team. It's not Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3. We're in it together.

Helen Cooper, Assistant Principal

Building staff capacity and wellbeing via distributed leadership and collaboration

Another key element of South Wagga's approach to wellbeing for learning is building staff capacity and wellbeing through distributed leadership and collaboration. The principal facilitates a distributed leadership approach at the school by encouraging all members of staff to share their expertise and lead staff professional learning that aligns with their strengths and interests. A teacher with expertise in numeracy or writing, for example, is encouraged to share their knowledge and skills in this area, regardless of their level of seniority. The benefits of this approach include providing leadership opportunities for classroom teachers and building stronger connections between school staff.

Encouraging staff to lead professional development is a really big thing that we do ... look at me – I run a huge number of things in the school. I'm a classroom teacher. I'm not executive, but I'm empowered. Basically everyone around the staff has something, or multiple things, that they lead ... and we respect them.

Duncan Brodie, Classroom Teacher

Teachers also work in designated teams for a period of time in order to address an identified need, and teams are often formed across stages. One example of this is the teams of three, known as 'triads', that share expertise and resources in the school's current focus area of writing. Having teachers from different stages working together provides multiple perspectives and builds relationships across the school. A flexible approach is taken to supporting staff collaboration, with teachers sometimes combining classes and team teaching, sometimes meeting during release from face-to-face (RFF) or lunch time, and sometimes receiving support from colleagues such as the principal or learning support teacher to observe colleagues teaching during class time.

A network diagram consisting of numerous light blue circular nodes of varying sizes connected by thin white lines, set against a dark teal background.

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