



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Blue Haven Public School

Evidence-based practice case study

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



CESE would like to thank the staff, students and parents of Blue Haven Public School for their participation in this case study. Particular thanks to Paul McDermott (Principal); Dale Edwards (Deputy Principal); Michael Pratt (Deputy Principal Wellbeing); Kristy West and Amy Quilty (Deputy Principals Instructional Leadership); Cara Tynan (Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership); Jeanette Frost (former Deputy Principal Instructional Leadership); Brent Dawes (teacher) and Rachel Smart (parent). Special thanks also to the teachers who generously invited us into their classrooms to observe a lesson – Sam Anderson, Megan Byrne and Laura Debnam.

Introduction

Blue Haven Public School is a government primary school located on the NSW Central Coast. The school has a current enrolment of 580 students, distributed over 24 classes from Kindergarten to Year 6 (K-6). The majority of students were born in Australia and speak English at home, with 16% identifying as Aboriginal and 7% from a language background other than English (LBOTE). Blue Haven has a full-time equivalent teaching staff of 41, with a mixture of early-career and more experienced teachers. The school serves a disadvantaged population, with an average Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) of 139. It is part of the Early Action for Success (EAfS), Bump It Up literacy and numeracy strategies, and has received targeted support in mathematics through the department's school services tailored support program. Blue Haven is well resourced, in recognition of the level of student need, with \$1,085,181 in equity funding in 2019.

Between 2016 and 2018, Blue Haven demonstrated rapid and substantial growth in student academic performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In 2016, the school performed below the state average on all NAPLAN domains and in a comparison of government schools with value-added¹ data for Years 3 to 5, Blue Haven was in the bottom 10%. In 2018, it performed above the state average in six out of 10 domains and was in the top 10% in terms of value-added. Data from these three years shows growth in relation to value-added and average NAPLAN scores over time and the school also exceeded the Premier's Priority for Bump It Up, with 23% of students in the top two bands of NAPLAN for Reading and Numeracy in 2016, compared with 37% of students in 2018². The school's growth is particularly pronounced in Year 3, but is also evident in Year 5.

The work underway at the school aligns strongly with the goals of the department's strategic plan. This case study examines those aspects of practice that the school believes have been most influential in the rapid and substantial growth in student academic performance in the past three years. More detail about resources that Blue Haven staff have found useful is included at the end of this case study.



"Everyone is on the same page. Everything that we do is supported. It's together. The vision is clear. The direction is clear. So we make it really clear to our staff as well, we don't want anyone to fail, because if anyone fails our kids are the ones that suffer."

Paul McDermott, Principal

¹ 'Value-added' (VA) is a measure of the school's contribution to student learning over and above the average school, after adjusting for differences in student and school characteristics. VA 3-5 (referred to here) measures the contribution between Year 3 and Year 5 using average Reading and Numeracy NAPLAN scores for both years.

² One of the 12 Premier's Priorities is to increase the proportion of NSW students in the top two NAPLAN bands by 8% by 2019.



Creating a new school culture

In August 2016, Paul McDermott took up the role of Principal at Blue Haven Public School. At the time of his appointment, he had 24 years' experience as an educator, including 16 as a principal. Immediately prior to his appointment to Blue Haven, Paul was Principal of Barnsley Public School, which also saw high levels of improvement in NAPLAN during his tenure³.

On arrival at Blue Haven, Paul observed that it was facing a number of challenges, including high levels of student disengagement, significant academic underperformance with a culture of low expectations, and ongoing behavioural incidents. The staff were working hard, but not seeing results for their efforts, and there was inconsistency across the school in relation to teaching practice, expectations for positive behaviour or consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Staff turnover was high and morale was low, and the school community was disengaged.

Paul's first priority was to better understand how things were operating in the school. He talked to staff, did walkthroughs to see what was happening in classrooms, used instructional rounds to collect data on aspects of teaching practice, and administered the UK Phonics Screening Check to all students (K-6) to gauge their ability to decode words. He also sought out evidence-based literature on leading, teaching and learning in schools and made contact with leaders of high-performing schools locally and interstate for advice and ideas.

The information and data collected from the school pointed to the need for an overhaul of school structures and the creation of a new school culture. From his reading of the literature and his previous experience, Paul felt that to see improvement in student academic achievement and wellbeing, the school would need strong leadership with an instructional focus; a clear vision; evidence-based practice; clear and consistent practices and structures, and a focus on staff professional learning. It would also need to develop partnerships with parents and the community to create a culture of trust, respect and high expectations.

"In the classroom, what we had was the egg carton effect. So everyone was in the same organisation, but they were all isolated. People were working hard... but because people weren't doing PD together, they weren't working together, they weren't collaborating, people were operating like silos. So there were 24 silos in operation rather than people heading in one direction together."

Paul McDermott, Principal



Strong leadership with an instructional focus, and a clear vision

A tiered leadership model

Blue Haven has a tiered leadership model, with a senior executive consisting of the principal and deputy principals and an executive that includes the assistant principals. The school is also actively nurturing an aspiring executive for those looking to lead in the future. The senior executive team is responsible for promoting a positive school culture and driving the direction of the school. The assistant principals work closely with Stage teachers, using data to analyse student progress. This ensures that students are receiving the most appropriate support academically and in relation to their wellbeing. Teachers aspiring to executive positions have the opportunity to participate in executive meetings and take on various leadership roles in the school.

³ In 2012, Barnsley's students scored below the state average in all 10 NAPLAN domains, while in 2016, they were above the state average in nine out of 10 NAPLAN domains. Paul attributes the improvement to the introduction of explicit instruction and a range of other evidence-based practices.

A cohesive senior executive

The senior executive team at Blue Haven is a cohesive group with a combined skillset created to address the areas of greatest need in the school. In addition to one deputy principal position as part of the school's entitlement, the school has an allocation of 1.8 deputy principals instructional leadership through its participation in the Early Action for Success (EAfS) strategy. Paul has created another deputy principal position for wellbeing, in response to strong evidence of widespread behavioural issues at the school. The school also chooses to allocate funds to an instructional leader at the assistant principal level, who shares some of the responsibilities of the deputy principal instructional leaders.

The senior executive team shares responsibility for setting the direction of the school and leading teaching and learning, professional development and wellbeing. Members of the team have clearly defined roles and areas of responsibility: the instructional leaders lead academic learning in the school; the deputy principal wellbeing leads behaviour management and wellbeing; while the remaining deputy principal works very closely with the principal in what Paul describes as a 'co-principal' arrangement. He shares the principal workload and is responsible for areas of school business such as liaising with external service providers and managing learning support, attendance, enrolments and data collection. The senior executive team is highly visible and accessible to staff, students and parents and has a strong instructional focus, spending a large amount of time in classrooms, coaching and supporting teachers. As leaders of professional development in the school, the team is also strongly committed to their own professional learning. Paul stresses that the leadership team has been pivotal to the school's growth and this view is supported by the school staff.

"We've got a senior executive who are so approachable, really easy to talk to, who are experts in so much of what they do and so much of what they know."

Brent Dawes, Classroom teacher

Developing a school vision that reflected the aspirations of the whole school community was an early priority for the leadership team. They aspired to be the most improved school in the state, but recognised that they could not do it on their own – they needed the community to come with them. In 2017 the school organised an event called 'Bridging Blue Haven' where they invited members of their school community, including local businesses and service providers, into the school and asked them about their hopes and aspirations for the school in the future. Attributes such as 'high performing', 'inclusive' and 'positive' were frequently mentioned and from these, Blue Haven's vision for 2018-2020 was drafted.

Once finalised, the vision was shared with the community and placed in multiple locations around the school such as the front fence, classrooms and offices. It is a constant reminder of what the school is striving for and is often referred to in conversations with parents. The school's mantra 'Every child matters every day' is also prominent on the school website and other internal and external publications, and is often referred to by staff.

School vision 2018-2020

To be a high performing school with a positive and inclusive school culture that promotes the wellbeing and success of all.



Evidence-based practice

A signature pedagogy

Implementing evidence-based practices and structures at the school has been a crucial first step in creating a new school culture and realising the school's vision. Blue Haven has what it refers to as a 'signature pedagogy' of explicit instruction – an approach that involves teachers clearly showing students what to do and how to do it, rather than asking them to discover or construct information for themselves. Explicit instruction is characterised by carefully planned and sequenced lessons; clear and detailed instructions and modelling; and frequent and systematic monitoring of student progress and feedback to students. The pedagogy is implemented from K-6 and across all key learning areas, but with a particular focus on English and maths. It underpins teaching and learning practices in both the academic and wellbeing spheres.

Synthetic phonics and ongoing formative assessment are key elements of the school's pedagogy, and practices derived from cognitive load theory are also embedded in teaching and learning programs.

Blue Haven uses a synthetic phonics approach to teaching reading and prioritises five elements essential for reading proficiency – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. A synthetic phonics approach is based on the explicit teaching of individual letters and letter combinations in a sequence that promotes blending (or synthesising). When synthetic phonics was introduced at the school, all teachers K-6 focused on phonics for the first 18 months, but as older students have become more proficient at reading, teachers of Years 3-6 have changed to a focus on morphology (for example, teaching about base words, suffixes and prefixes). Teachers continue to revise phonics with the older students to address any gaps, but the majority of phonics instruction in these Year groups is delivered via targeted intervention. Teachers of K-2, on the other hand, focus primarily on phonics, with some morphology content.

"What is the research telling us that we should be doing in reading? Because we're not here to experiment with our kids' future. We're here to do what is proven in order to get the best possible results that we can."

Paul McDermott, Principal

Blue Haven has a strong emphasis on complex vocabulary, offering multiple exposures to new vocabulary, modelling correct pronunciation and ensuring that students understand the meaning of the word in isolation and in context. The school also explicitly teaches comprehension strategies from K-6, and models to students what a good reader does when reading and how to effectively use multiple strategies when reading, to assist with developing comprehension.

Ongoing formative assessment is an important part of Blue Haven's pedagogy too, and is used to provide feedback to students at the point of error, measure student progress, differentiate teaching and plan next steps. Teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways, from informal question-and-answer activities and observation of student work, to more formal pre- and post-topic testing and benchmarking with readers. Student use of mini-whiteboards (across K-6) allows teachers to see student work as it's being created and provide immediate feedback. Regular analysis of student assessment data by individual, Year group and Stage teachers informs decisions about how to differentiate content for individual students and small groups, what content should be introduced next and when it should be introduced.

In 2018, work with the school services tailored support staff supported a focus on streamlined mathematics programming and effective differentiation for middle and higher achieving students, an approach which was carried over into writing.

Teachers at Blue Haven incorporate practices derived from cognitive load theory to ensure that students transfer previously learnt content to long-term memory, freeing up short-term memory to focus on new material. One example is the fast-paced, well-structured 'warm-ups' held at the beginning of most maths, reading and writing lessons K-6, which are designed to review and reinforce previously mastered content. Teachers use a visual prompt, such as a Powerpoint presentation or flash cards, as the guide for each warm-up. They take it in turns to prepare the materials, then share them with colleagues in their Stage, who tailor them to the needs of students in their class.

"We have invested heavily in our teachers and supported them throughout the journey. We have done it together – that's the success."

Kristy West, Deputy Principal Instructional Leadership

Adopting a signature pedagogy for the whole school represented a dramatic departure from previous practice, and teachers needed to become familiar with the new approach before they could implement it. Paul arranged for a critical mass of staff to see the pedagogy in action at his previous school, Barnsley Public School, which helped convince them of the efficacy of the approach. The fact that many students across the school did not pass the UK Phonics Screening Check mentioned previously, including 94% of Year 1 students, gave a clear indication that the previous approach wasn't working.

Paul and the leadership team stress that a whole-school approach has been key to the school's success with their pedagogy, and intensive, ongoing professional development and support for teachers have also played an important role. After many years of high turnover, the majority of staff who were at the school for the introduction of the new pedagogy in 2017 have continued at the school.

Ongoing data collection and evaluation

The introduction of the new pedagogy was, however, only the first step. Blue Haven continuously evaluates the effectiveness of its programs and practices, and adapts or replaces them as new data is received about student progress. Key to this approach is ensuring that the data collected is as fine-grained as possible so that teachers and school leaders can measure individual student progress and the impact of each program, rather than just trends across the school. The data collected is driving change at the school as teachers alter their approach to keep pace with student learning. For example, in late 2018 teachers across the school were using their seventh scope and sequence⁴ since the introduction of synthetic phonics, because students were making such rapid progress that content previously considered to be appropriate for each Year or Stage group was no longer challenging enough. Paul stresses the importance of maintaining high expectations of students and the need for teachers to adapt their teaching to cater for students' changing learning needs.

The wellbeing of students is also a priority, and wellbeing and engagement data is collected from a variety of sources, including the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) student survey offered through the NSW Department of Education. Data collected is used to gauge student perceptions of relationships and safety, as well as their sense of belonging at school.

Blue Haven is also very committed to ensuring the wellbeing of its staff, and collects staff wellbeing data in a number of ways, including via the Focus on Learning teacher survey from the Tell Them From Me suite, focus groups and weekly feedback at executive meetings. Analysis of the data collected has led to the introduction of a staff wellbeing session around half way through each term, when the usual weekly staff meeting is instead dedicated to doing something less serious and more lighthearted.

The senior executive collect data to evaluate their own practice and have used the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's (AITSL) 360° Reflection Tool to identify strengths and areas for improvement. All staff at the school were invited to provide feedback and the results were shared at executive meetings and have helped to guide the leadership team's performance and development plans.

"We've got to continue to adapt, because our kids are getting better by the minute... If we have a fixed mindset about the ability of our kids, then we're not going to push them... We've got kids who are a long way behind where they need to be, but we've also got some kids who are a long way ahead, so we need to continue to adapt our expectations of what our kids can do and design our lessons – and lesson design is probably something that is a challenge – to make sure that we're catering for those kids."

Paul McDermott, Principal



4 A document that describes the depth and breadth of subject matter content to be taught, as well as the order in which it will be taught.

Clear and consistent practices and structures

The signature pedagogy at Blue Haven is supported by clear and consistent practices and structures across the school.

Structured staff meetings

A variety of staff meetings operate throughout each term, with weekly whole-school meetings focusing primarily on developing teaching practice, and fortnightly Stage meetings focusing on issues relevant to the particular Stage at the time. These include pre- and post-topic assessment, catering for the most advanced students and those who need the most support, and consistency of teacher judgement. On alternate fortnights, teachers meet in professional learning communities that concentrate on an area of identified need in the school and consider how it can be addressed. Examples include community engagement, reading comprehension, social and emotional learning, maths and nutrition. Twice a term, in Weeks 5 and 10, teachers meet with their Stage group for half a day to analyse their student data and monitor growth, identify what's working and what isn't, and plan for the next five weeks. They also use this time to celebrate their successes.

"It's more than just the pedagogy. It's everything ... it's the leadership, it's the training, it's the whole gamut. And you can come and look at the pedagogy and go away and want to do the pedagogy, but if you don't have everything else there, woven into the fabric, it's not going to stick."

Dale Edwards, Deputy Principal

Classroom practices

A range of practices and structures operate in classrooms too, often to support formative assessment. In addition to the fast-paced, well-structured warm-ups mentioned previously, and student use of mini-whiteboards, teachers also use paddle-pop sticks labelled with students' names to randomly select students to answer questions. This ensures that all students have an equal chance of being asked a question when the teacher is checking for understanding, and that students must continue to pay attention, as their name may be called multiple times. Where a student answers a question incorrectly, the teacher always returns to check that they have the correct answer before moving on with the lesson.

Innovative school practices – literacy and numeracy

For students who need extra support with literacy and numeracy, the instructional leaders run an Earlybirds literacy and numeracy support program for half an hour before school each morning. Students who have been identified as requiring additional support in their learning are invited to attend but the program is open to everyone, and around 60 students participate each day. On arrival, students locate and scan the particular workbook that contains their barcode, and they receive a badge for every 20 visits. A continuous record is kept from year to year, and the record number of visits currently stands at 248. Activities are set up in the library when students arrive, and instructional leaders and volunteer teachers are available to guide and support.

Year 6 student 'owls' also support younger students with skills such as reading, letter formation and vocabulary development and run some groups as part of their leadership development. Earlybirds participants either choose, or are directed to a particular activity, depending on the degree of support each needs. Parents often drop in to find out how they can best support their child's learning at home.



Innovative school practices – student wellbeing

Blue Haven has implemented a range of practices and structures to support student wellbeing. Many of the students come to Earlybirds from Donny's Diner – the school's breakfast club, which operates five days a week and is run by teacher volunteers and canteen staff. Around 14 loaves of bread are consumed at the diner each morning.

The school also spends around \$150,000 per year on speech and occupational therapy and all Kindergarten students are screened on entry to school, with support provided to those who need it throughout the year. The school partners with the University of Newcastle for the delivery of occupational therapy and the team tailors a program to the needs of students, with handwriting and self-regulation of emotions a current focus.

Blue Haven's signature pedagogy of explicit instruction extends to student behaviour, and clear practices and structures have been put in place in both the playground and classroom to address early evidence of challenging student behaviour.

In response to data indicating that a high number of incidents were occurring during break times, Blue Haven has taken as many teachers as possible off roving duties during recess and lunch and put them in charge of running activities. These include touch football, soccer and handball in the playground, indoor soccer in the hall, and construction and quiet activities in the library. Teachers participate in all the activities with students in order to model positive behaviour and demonstrate how to resolve issues and this has the additional benefit of helping to build strong relationships between teachers and students. The approach has been very successful, with data indicating a drop in the number of negative behavioural incidents since it was implemented.

For students who require a bit of extra support to interact in appropriate ways with their peers in the playground, the school runs small social groups at recess and lunch. A designated teacher takes the groups around to all the structured activities and shows them how to participate in an appropriate way. When students are ready, they return to the playground as usual and a new group of students commences.

The school runs a number of more targeted interventions for students in need of more intensive teaching in this area. There are currently 12 small intervention groups of four to eight students each focusing on social-emotional learning. The program operates on a withdrawal basis, with students taken out of class during afternoon sessions to work on areas such as anger management, conflict resolution, anxiety and resilience. A variety of programs, or modified versions of programs, is used to run these sessions, some of which involve external facilitators. Current programs include: Stop, Think, Do, Worry Woos, The 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect and Resolution) and Seasons for Growth.



Blue Haven has a behaviour management plan that details a progressive series of consequences for positive and inappropriate behaviours that are based on 'behaviour circles'. More serious inappropriate behaviour results in a note and a phone call home to parents as well as time in the school's 'planning room' the following day. The planning room is run by the deputy principal wellbeing and operates at recess and lunch. Recess sessions are focussed on relaxation: breathing, meditation and learning emotional regulation strategies, and lunchtime is dedicated to a restorative justice session. The school believes that holding the session the following day is important, as it allows the staff time to investigate and talk to parents.

Any new practice or structure implemented at the school is accompanied by training for teachers and communicated to parents and carers. The school stresses that a major benefit of clearly defined practices and structures is consistency across the school, and over time. In the case of consequences for inappropriate behaviour, Paul adds that students know that a particular behaviour will attract the same consequences in Term 1 as in Term 3 and importantly, can articulate what those consequences will be. This removes any potential debate and greatly reduces the burden on teachers.

A focus on staff professional learning

Blue Haven places a major focus on, and invests heavily in staff professional learning. All teachers have received, and continue to receive, a lot of training in the school's pedagogy and approaches, particularly from the school's instructional leaders and deputy principal wellbeing. New practices are generally introduced in the weekly whole-school staff meetings and the school then follows a gradual release model, with the same process every time: demonstration by members of the leadership team followed by team teaching in the classroom, observations, then regular conversations, feedback and adjustments. At the end of five weeks at the whole-school staff meeting, teachers will discuss how the new practice is progressing and consider whether they are ready for the next step.

A deliberate decision was made to separate annual performance and development processes from staff coaching so that teachers wouldn't feel anxious about inviting observers into their classroom. Assistant principals work with teachers on their performance and development plans, while the instructional leaders and deputy principal wellbeing work with teachers as coaches and mentors. As a result, over time teachers have embraced the opportunity to discuss particular aspects of their practice and receive feedback, and members of the leadership team are in high demand for classroom observations and coaching.

Blue Haven also accesses professional development from individuals and organisations outside the school. A consultant is engaged each term to provide training on the explicit instruction model and in 2019, as in 2018, the school invited Explicit Direct Instruction expert Joe Ybarra to run a two-day professional development workshop. Other interested schools were invited to participate. Blue Haven also works with the Five from Five Project⁵, which prioritises five elements for literacy proficiency: phonemic awareness, fluency, phonics, vocabulary and comprehension. As part of the project, Blue Haven hosted a Phonics Roadshow professional learning day in October 2018.

"The model we've got in place for the kids is the same one we've got for the staff – it's a gradual release model. So we support, support, support, and then we gradually step back and the teachers take ownership of what they're doing."

Paul McDermott, Principal

⁵ The FIVE from FIVE Alliance is a group of organisations and individuals who support the objective of promoting effective, evidence-based reading instruction.

Relationships with other high-performing schools are an important part of Blue Haven's professional learning approach and the school is part of a network of high-performing schools across the country that use the same pedagogy – in NSW, Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland. Schools in the network share ideas and resources and support each other in improving their practice. Staff at Blue Haven have also visited other schools in the network to see first-hand what they are doing and identify anything that could improve their own practice.

In addition to any professional development organised by the school, staff are encouraged to engage in professional reading and to seek out other opportunities for growth. Paul stresses, however, that the school does not invest in one-off events for a single staff member. Professional development must be consistent with the school's pedagogy and priorities and usually a few staff with mentoring capability will participate together with staff who would benefit from mentoring. This provides the basis for a subsequent mentoring relationship and any professional development undertaken is followed up with coaching on return to school, especially during the implementation stage. External professional development undertaken by staff at the school includes training in Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) teaching⁶ and in 2017, a trip to Tamworth by the deputy principal wellbeing and six staff to hear behaviour management specialist Dr Bill Rogers, which helped inform their whole-school approach. Another six staff participated in the Bill Rogers training the following year.

Ongoing professional learning is also a high priority for the leadership team. The first part of each executive meeting is dedicated to sharing research that has been selected by one of the team and a summary of the research is always recorded on a template and saved on file for reference. Paul encourages the leadership team to look for opportunities for professional growth. In 2017 he completed the Professional Certificate in Instructional Leadership run by the University of Melbourne and in 2018, was awarded a Public Education Foundation Principal's Scholarship to participate in 'Leadership: An evolving vision' run by the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the United States. The same year, the whole senior executive team participated in a self-funded study tour to the United States to participate in the National Institute for Direct Instruction's (NIFDI) annual conference in Eugene, Oregon.

Succession planning is an important part of the professional learning approach at the school. Each term, two teachers aspiring to executive positions are invited to participate in executive meetings, and can continue to attend meetings after that time if they'd like to. The executive is currently trialling the use of scenarios as learning tools at meetings, and has recently discussed scenarios related to a suspension, out-of-zone enrolments and community use of school facilities. Paul and the team are also exploring other opportunities for staff to develop their leadership skills – for example, via the school's professional learning communities.



⁶ An approach where teaching is explicit, structured and systematic and involves the use of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic-tactile pathways simultaneously to enhance memory and learning of written language. At Blue Haven, MSL strategies are embedded throughout explicit instruction lessons.

Partnering with parents and the community

Blue Haven works hard to build relationships with parents, carers and partner organisations and takes any opportunity to invite community members into the school, including Father's Day, Mother's Day, Education Week and Book Week. The school also hosts open classrooms throughout the year to allow parents to see the school's pedagogy in action.

"(My kids) love it here. They want to come here. Eight o'clock in the morning, as soon as the gates open, 'Mum, we need to get to school!'"

Rachel Smart, Parent

Good communication with parents and carers is a priority, and the school makes use of multiple platforms to share information. The school newsletter, website and SkoolBag app provide information about current events and priorities, Facebook is used for reminders and to promote the school's achievements, Twitter is primarily used to communicate with other educators about professional learning, and the ClassDojo app is used to share photos, videos and messages from the classroom. The school holds information forums for parents when a significant change is occurring, such as the introduction of the school's explicit instruction pedagogy, and is currently developing short videos that share and explain content taught in class so that parents can support and reinforce the learning at home. The first video will focus on segmenting words. Paul and the leadership team also encourage teachers to phone parents with good news about their child, and Paul comments that multiple positive phone calls home about things such as great behaviour in class, or their child's mastery of a new skill, make it much easier to make a call home if there is ever a problematic incident.

Blue Haven is careful to ensure that all communication to students' families is respectful in tone. The school has reviewed all its proforma letters to parents, having observed in late 2016 that some had a demanding or aggressive tone that did not help establish a positive relationship with parents.

The leadership team at Blue Haven makes a point of being highly visible and accessible to families. Members of the team stand at the front of the school each morning and greet students as they arrive, opening car doors and giving high-fives as students enter the school. Occasionally they wear suits with crazy patterns for the greetings, to foster a sense of fun. Members of the leadership team are also present for the school's Kindergarten orientation program – Stepping Stones. They provide children with Blue Haven-branded T-shirts and give high-fives as children leave the event, which helps build connections between parents and the school leaders. Another initiative to help parents connect with the executive has been the installation of a large electronic noticeboard in the front office that contains a photo of each member of the leadership team, together with their name and position.



As a result of these efforts, Blue Haven has seen a substantial increase in the number of parents engaging with the school. In 2017, for example, 16 parents completed the voluntary Partners in Learning parent survey, and by 2018 this had increased to 103. Likewise, six parents attended the first parent information session at the school in 2016. In 2018, over 70 parents attended a session on the school's vision and direction run by the senior executive.

Building strong partnerships with local service providers and businesses is also a priority. In 2017, Blue Haven set up a stall at the local shopping centre during Education Week to promote the school in the local community. They also organised an event called 'Bridging Blue Haven', inviting members of the school community, including local businesses and service providers, into the school to assist with the creation of the school vision. In 2018, the school organised 'Bridging Blue Haven 2.0' – a community expo held at the school to strengthen the connections between staff, parents and the local community and showcase the good things the school was doing. The event was held on a weekday afternoon to 'capture' parents coming to the school to collect their children. Over 40 local organisations, including high schools, pre-schools, speech pathologists, swim clubs, The Samaritans and the Newcastle Jets Football Club participated in the event, with over 400 people attending. The school held a sausage sizzle and used the occasion to open a new playground. The expo also allowed students to introduce their parents to staff and service providers with whom they had not previously had contact, and began the process of building positive relationships between the school and the local community.

"So at no stage are we popping champagne corks saying that the journey's done for us ... We're probably at the halfway mark of the marathon. We've got a lot of work to do."

Paul McDermott, Principal

A strong school culture

Blue Haven has introduced a number of evidence-based practices and structures into the school over the past two years, but Paul stresses that no single program, practice or structure has been responsible for the school's rapid and substantial growth. Rather, their early success has been the result of all of the programs, practices and structures combined. While he believes that the school's pedagogy has had the largest impact, it is only effective because of the other elements that support it. Paul is passionate about the importance of the school culture – something he believes is often undervalued. High expectations of students, staff and the leadership team, trust and respect between all members of the school community, a hardworking and highly cohesive teaching staff with a willingness to share and grow together, and a spirit of fun are hallmarks of the Blue Haven culture and have all been integral to the school's growth.

Another hallmark of the Blue Haven culture is their willingness to share what they are doing with others. Blue Haven now supports around 40 schools with the implementation of their model by providing advice and resources, and over 300 teachers, school leaders, researchers and others have come through the school over the past two years to observe what they are doing. This has had the added benefit of communicating to members of the school community that something good is happening at their school. It is also great acknowledgement of the hard work of their teachers and staff.

While the school stresses that they are still in the early stage of their journey, with much work left to do, they are confident in their approach and looking forward to the journey ahead.

For further information about Blue Haven Public School, go to:

Website: bluehaven.nsw.edu.au

Twitter: [@BlueHaven_PS](https://twitter.com/BlueHaven_PS) (twitter.com/bluehaven_ps)

Facebook: facebook.com/BlueHavenPublicSchool



"The thing that I am proudest of ... is the school culture that we have and I don't think school culture gets talked about enough. So many people come into our school and say, 'I just love the vibe in this place' and I think it's because of the sense of fun that we promote. People know that we're incredibly serious about the direction that we're heading in and the difference that we're trying to make for the kids, but I think people like that we do have fun."

Paul McDermott, Principal

Appendix

Resources that have been useful at Blue Haven Public School

Staff at Blue Haven Public School have found the following reading materials to be useful in their school. However, school principals, in consultation with their school community, should make decisions about the programs and resources that best support teaching and learning in their school based on the needs of their students and community context.

Books and other reading

Archer, A, & Hughes, C 2011, *Explicit instruction – Effective and efficient teaching*, Guilford Publications, New York.

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