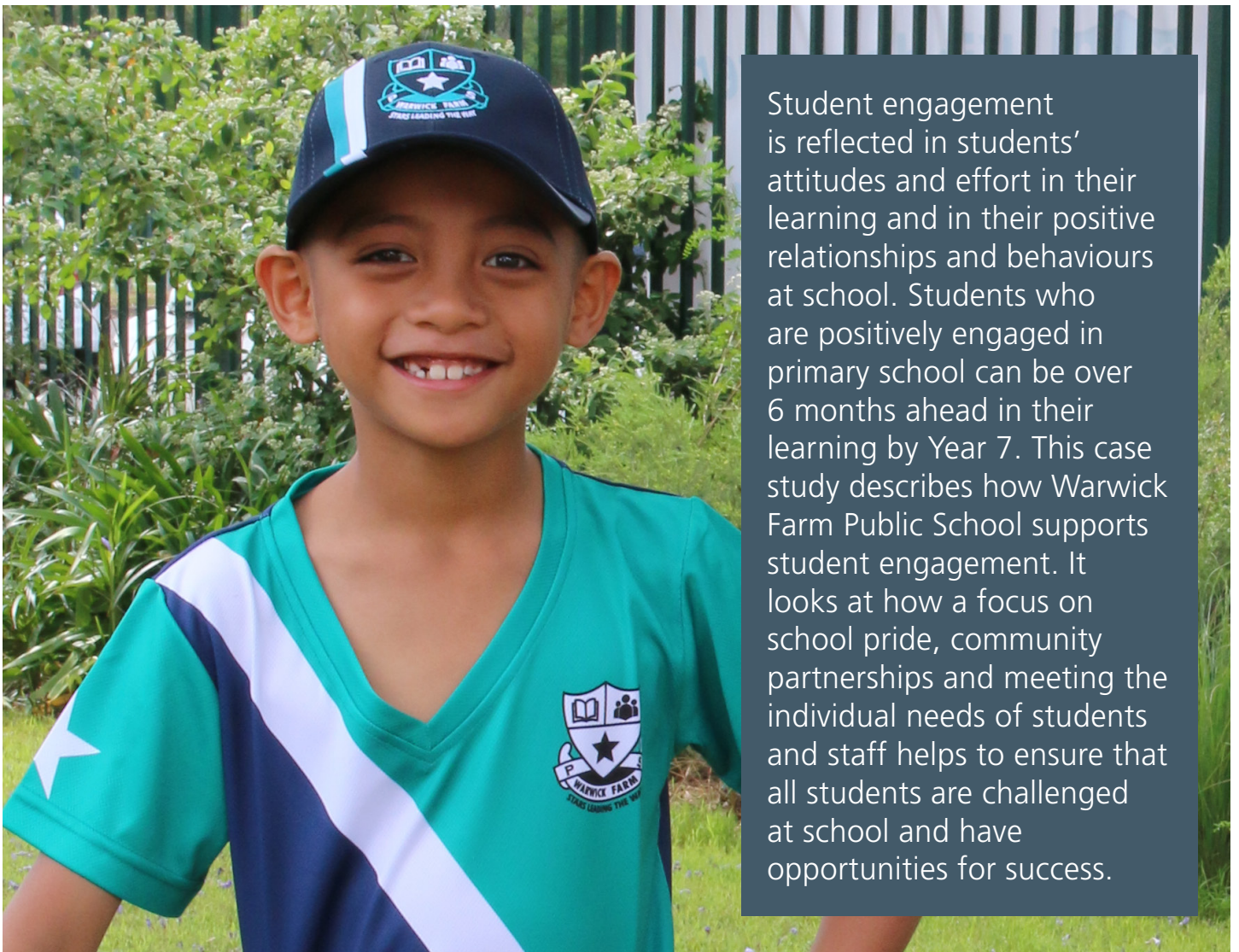


DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Supporting student engagement and effective classroom practices in primary school: Warwick Farm Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Student engagement is reflected in students' attitudes and effort in their learning and in their positive relationships and behaviours at school. Students who are positively engaged in primary school can be over 6 months ahead in their learning by Year 7. This case study describes how Warwick Farm Public School supports student engagement. It looks at how a focus on school pride, community partnerships and meeting the individual needs of students and staff helps to ensure that all students are challenged at school and have opportunities for success.

CESE would like to thank the staff, students and parents of Warwick Farm Public School for their participation in this case study. Particular thanks to Principal, Melanie Macmillan.



Introduction

Warwick Farm Public School (PS) is located in south western Sydney. The school had 227 students enrolled across K-6 in 2018. Three-quarters of its students are from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) and the school's Index of Community and Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 940 is lower than average, with approximately half of the student cohort (54%) in the bottom quarter of socio-economic status. The school has high levels of student engagement and consistently scores above expected levels for the proportion of students reporting positive homework behaviours and effort in the classroom, as reported in Tell Them From Me student survey results.

The school has had three relieving principals between 2012 and 2017, with changes to staff or staffing roles each year. The current principal joined the school in the substantive role in 2017 and the new school executive have since worked to implement new approaches to staff and student support and wellbeing, school pride and community engagement.

For both staff and students, the school has a focus on high expectations and effective leadership. For example, the school has adopted the motto 'Raising the Bar' and 'Leading the Way', and uses these phrases regularly across the school and in internal and external communications. A priority for the principal is that staff ensure that every student in the school is known and supported.



Fostering school pride through a strong and visible school identity

Warwick Farm PS is committed to ensuring that its students feel connected and engaged as part of the school community from their very first day. Having a large proportion of students from disadvantaged and refugee backgrounds means that the student population of the school is highly mobile and classroom numbers can change regularly. This can impact school activities, such as sports teams and group-based work, and can create a sense of uncertainty and instability for students. To address this, the school has invested heavily in its buildings and facilities to signal a visible and symbolic renewal of the school and create a 'physical oasis' for its students and the community. Colourful spaces, new signage and updated buildings help to attract students to the school, encouraging them to feel happy walking through the school gates, secure and ready to learn.

The school has also updated its school colours and emblem, aiding the transition to a new uniform by providing vouchers for current families to purchase the new items. The new identity and branding has helped to improve school pride, according to the principal, and shift the past perceptions of the school as being disadvantaged or outdated. The result is that its students want to attend school, engage with school life and are proud to be part of Warwick Farm PS.



Alongside the visible transformation within the buildings, the school executive strives to emulate 'visible leadership' within the community. School leaders are on-site at the school gates to welcome students and their families when they arrive and leave school. This provides opportunities for important informal conversations passing on encouragement and good news to parents and families. These purposeful welcoming strategies are in place to make students and families feel that school is a safe and supportive place to be and have helped to establish a sense of community cohesion and identity. This helps to ensure that their students are supported both at school and at home so that their students are able to engage with, and succeed in, their learning.

Connecting students and families with the community and external organisations

Warwick Farm PS has a strong commitment to providing a wide range of learning opportunities to its students and their families. The school has an excellent relationship with the local police department's youth liaison officer who provides life skills programs, such as how to build self-confidence, and other physical activities centred on building relationships and teamwork, such as ice-skating for the girls and basketball for the boys. Activities that have evolved from this partnership with the Liverpool Police Station have helped build positive relationships between community authority figures and the school's older students. Additionally, a Wests Tigers NRL Junior player joins the school three days per week as a student engagement officer, providing students with a role model to highlight the importance of balancing sport and other extracurricular interests with academic and educational outcomes.

The school understands that they can play a broad role in supporting the needs of their families. Over recent years, for example, the school has organised outreach services to parents and the wider community, including English language classes, employment workshops, and community expos demonstrating fundamental processes such as 'how to set up a bank account' and 'how to write a resume'. The aim is to help families access key services so that they are best able to support their students at home, as well as helping to establish strong, positive relationships with the school. Warwick Farm PS is also involved with programs such as OzHarvest and See Straight from Vision Australia, which provides free visual health checks and information for all students at the school. The provision of such services means that students are able to access essential healthcare services and are provided with healthy food. Facilitating access to such support means that students may be less impacted by concerns in their home life, mitigating the risk of disruptions to student engagement and learning at school.

Keeping older students engaged with non-academic opportunities

Warwick Farm PS has partnered with the local community to provide non-academic opportunities to keep their students, particularly older students, engaged at school. The principal believes that keeping their students busy is the first step in maintaining their engagement with school life.

Older students are able to apply to be 'principal/administrative officer/general assistants for a day' to provide opportunities for work experience. The school aims to have an activity at least once a week for their Year 6 students so that there is always an exciting or new event to look forward to. Some programs will run the course of the term, such as weekly library visits to meet and listen to local authors. For the last five years, the school has partnered with The Street University, Liverpool, to provide a street art program for high needs students at risk of disengaging in the classroom. The program lets students express their creativity through the design and creation of murals for the school's surrounding exterior walls. This creative outlet provides an opportunity to transform their students' interests into a visible success.

One of the challenges the school has faced is fitting these extra-curricular options in alongside curriculum demands. However, the principal is determined to provide these opportunities and believes that such initiatives will help to contribute to students' long-term success. This ethos is mirrored in the school's culture of high expectations for all their students, built on the understanding that different students will be successful at different things. The school is working to get all students to a stage of where they want to be at school, recognising that it is only then that learning can happen. In 2018, Warwick Farm PS recorded 94% attendance for their Year 6 students, which is higher than schools with a similar socioeconomic status and the state average.



Prioritising staff collaboration and wellbeing

Warwick Farm PS focuses on building a collegial workplace. Staff are encouraged to discuss classroom challenges and student issues with each other so that they can draw upon collective experiences and advice. The school uses specific academic programs, like Learning Sprints¹, where every fortnight teachers come together to determine the best action plan to improve learning outcomes for their students. This also enables transparency of classroom processes and practices, so that all staff know and understand any issues with a particular student's learning and can support that student during formal and informal interactions around the school. This facilitates a shared perception that all school staff are engaged in students' learning and that ensuring students' growth is not limited to classroom time or to a specific classroom teacher.

The school executive emulates this philosophy, actively working to support their teachers so that the teachers can look after the students. The school uses their funding to buy time back for their teachers whenever possible and uses the executive team to relieve their teachers in the classroom. The principal understands the need for a balance between high expectations and support of their staff.

Wellbeing initiatives have been implemented not only for students but for school staff as well. A personal goal for the principal is to have her teachers 'happy to be here'. Staff are encouraged to have purposeful conversations that are not work-related to help build more personal connections. Once a term, Warwick Farm PS holds a staff wellbeing week. During this week, the school executive plans something free and fun for staff each day, for example, a barbeque breakfast or the distribution of small gifts such as lanyards or diaries. No meetings are held during this week and staff are encouraged to leave school by 4 pm. The financial flow-on effect of supporting staff wellbeing in these ways is small; however, the principal believes that it will have an impact on reducing costs that may be otherwise spent on teaching replacement due to staff absenteeism. This also means more consistency in the classroom and happier teachers interacting with students in a more positive environment.



¹ Learning Sprints is a team-based approach that enables educators to collectively plan, act and evaluate their impact. It is based on using the individual and collective expertise of teachers to lift student outcomes through evidence-based practice and evaluation. For more information, visit <https://www.learningsprints.org/>

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

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