

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Ponds School

Inclusive education in NSW schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



This case study forms part of a series on inclusive education in schools. The NSW Department of Education is committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability. Inclusive education means all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices ([Disability Strategy \(2019\)](#)).

The department is committed to building the capacity of our mainstream public schools to meet the needs of their local students unless there are compelling individual reasons why a different option would better support the student. We acknowledge that this needs to be balanced against parental choice regarding the most appropriate setting for their child, and will continue to work with parents and education experts to individualise support so that every child can be engaged with learning and flourish at school ([Progress Report: Improving outcomes for students with disability 2019](#)).

Introduction

The Ponds School enrolls students with moderate to severe intellectual disability and is located in Sydney's north west. In addition to intellectual disabilities, many students also have physical or sensory disabilities and other health care needs. The school opened in 2012, with 24 Kindergarten students in demountable buildings. In 2019, the school had grown to 110 students in Kindergarten to Year 10 who attend school in a new, purpose-built site. Half of the school's students (51%) are from a language background other than English and almost one in ten (8%) are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The Ponds School provides inclusive education to its students through a focus on building the knowledge and skills of the school's staff, using data and evidence to support student achievement, providing access to the curriculum through adjusting for the learning needs of individual students, community connections, working closely with families, deeply embedding Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), and emphasising a culture of innovation.

What has worked to improve inclusive education at The Ponds School:

- A strong focus on building the skills of staff, particularly early career staff.
- Using data and evidence to support students to achieve their goals.
- Providing access to the curriculum through adjusting for the learning needs of individual students.
- Strong links to local community organisations, businesses and schools to provide opportunities for students to participate in educational opportunities comparable to their peers in mainstream settings.
- Close partnerships with families, exemplified by intensive, open communication.
- Embedding a common, school-wide framework to achieve positive behaviour to support learning.
- Openness to innovative approaches and collaboration to meet students' needs.





Building the capacity of staff to meet the needs of students

The Ponds School supports staff to develop the skills they need to provide an inclusive environment for all students. One way this takes place is through having an assistant principal whose designated role is to build the capacity of staff and mentor new teachers through the accreditation process. The assistant principal meets with beginning teachers weekly to work on their teaching strategies, support them with their accreditation and provide relevant professional learning. The school provides release time from face-to-face teaching for experienced staff to mentor and work with more junior teachers. This includes time spent in classrooms, observing and team teaching, support with planning and programming, support with parent meetings and time to develop shared resources. The school also funds external providers, such as a speech pathologist and an occupational therapist who focus on student behaviour and communication and upskill teachers in best practice in working with students with disability. These efforts lead to a greater emphasis in teachers targeting skills their students need, greater use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices and more confident, supported staff.

The Ponds School is also involved in sharing practice with the local school community. The Ponds School staff deliver professional learning with other schools. For example, staff share practice as part of the Special Education Principals and Leaders Association (SEPLA) and as part of an early career teacher network where beginning teachers visit other schools and learn from each other. The Ponds School started TeachMeets specifically for SSPs, after attending a TeachMeet at the Department of Education office in Parramatta, and wanting the same opportunity for teachers in special education settings.

Effective use of evidence and data to support students achieve their goals

The Ponds School uses data and continuous reporting in all aspects of a student's education. The school has developed a school-wide Data Wall, based on the Visible Learning model, with which to analyse student progress and achievement data. Teachers use data for planning, to adjust programs to suit a student's learning style, to investigate why a student might not be achieving as expected and to identify and provide appropriate adjustments and direct support. The school collects individual student data through a range of assessments adjusted to meet students' needs, for example, portfolios and observation. This data is used in conjunction with the University of Melbourne's Students with Additional Needs (SWANs) program. SWANs aims to be an integrated program of assessment, planning and teaching advice that is easy for teachers to access and use and helps them realise the learning potential of students with additional needs. Student assessment data – available at school and class level in SWANs – are used to inform teaching programs.

The school also uses data and engages students in their own learning, goal setting and outcomes by having visual 'Bump Up' walls in each classroom. These walls display a student's progress toward achieving their goal in a way that students can understand. Each student has a personalised learning plan that identifies three goals under the headings of safe and caring, life-long learner and valued member of the community. For each goal, teachers work with students to identify five steps that the student needs to work on to achieve that goal. Students are praised and rewarded each time they complete a step and a goal. Teachers reported that the visual element of the Bump Up wall enhances student focus on their goals and helps with classroom management.

"I think this can be a very challenging role to be in for teachers. Our staff show up. They're happy. They work together and that shared ownership of all our kids is... a plus... their biggest impact is seeing our kids achieve goals."

Anne Bennett, Deputy Principal

Providing access to the curriculum through adjusting for the learning needs of individual students

The Ponds School ensures inclusive curriculum practice by adapting the syllabus to the different needs of the students. Teachers modify learning programs through differentiation and scaffolding to allow each and every student to access the full curriculum, learn a range of skills, and access the key learning activities. An example of differentiation in the classroom as provided by the school, was the use of robotic equipment/resources in STEM classes. In this example, students with high support needs learn the basis of coding through understanding cause and effect by seeing that what they are operating on their iPad matches the robots' actions. Some of the higher functioning students, by contrast, use their robots to compete in races and use their mathematics skills to calculate the time taken by the first, second, and third robot to complete the race. In this way, teachers at the school are able to teach a range of skills across the curriculum. Individualised learning is a key plank of the learning approach at The Ponds School. The Ponds School supports individualised learning through using a person-centred planning approach to develop and review personalised learning plans (PLPs). By working in collaboration with families, therapists and other key stakeholders, the school formulates PLPs that are individualised, innovative and achievable and are also developed for each student. The PLPs ensure students are continually working towards achieving their own individual goals and outcomes from the syllabus.



Reaching out and inviting in the local community

One way the school implements inclusive education is through strong, purposeful links with the local community. The Ponds School welcomes National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers, however, one of the biggest challenges currently facing students and their families at The Ponds School is navigating the NDIS and getting access to services. Due to the school's strong connections with the community, and with NDIS service providers, the school is able to support students and their families by linking them to NDIS service providers. For example, the school works closely with the NDIS coordinator for the region and brings in therapists who work with students in the school environment.

The school works closely with local businesses and community members to provide students with opportunities to build their skills in engaging with the community, to introduce parents to different services that are available to support them and their child, and to raise awareness of disability within the community. One example of this is that the school engages local businesses to provide work experience opportunities for students. The school also provides students and parents with information about post-school disability service providers where appropriate. In addition, The Ponds School is known throughout the community for their annual markets and Christmas carols.

The school also engages the community by inviting students from other local schools to help with activities such as the athletics carnival, creative arts and STEM events. In addition, identified students from The Ponds School regularly attend other schools to support the development of skills such as social interaction and/or an eventual transition to mainstream schools. One of The Ponds School students will attend a local high school in 2020, for example, and so in 2019 that student was regularly attending the local high school to assist with the transition.

“We’re a very visible school in our community. We’re very much part of the surrounding areas...every time we have anything here, they ask the community to come in here and then the community spends time with our kids rather than us always having to go out.”

Parent



Working closely with families

The Ponds School principal, Leonie Donaldson, believes that in inclusive education, students should be given opportunities to build the skills to be actively, meaningfully engaged with their family. To achieve this The Ponds School works with families in a range of ways. For example, when a student is setting their personalised learning plan goals, and the school is programming adjustments, the family is consulted to establish consistency at school and home. The school supports parents to consider future options for their children, with one parent noting that the school encouraged her to think of a five-year plan for her daughter who is in Year 8, something the parent had not previously considered. The school also has a culture of open communication, with parents commenting that two-way communication takes place on a daily basis. This open culture is further enhanced by The Ponds School promoting parent engagement through volunteering opportunities and facilitating a support group for parents, as well as cooking nights where families come together and eat dinner cooked by the students.

“...Communication here is on a daily basis, so we know what’s going on from one day to the next...this school...draws our family into the school family too. So we’re part of that inclusion as well, not just my son.”

Parent

“I think getting the whole family involved...is paramount because what happens here affects what happens [at home] and what happens at home affects here too.”

Parent



Embedding Positive Behaviour for Learning

The Ponds School has been implementing Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) since the school was established in 2012. PBL is deeply embedded in every aspect of the school, including programs and routines. It is used by the school to encourage and support the behaviour of students throughout each school day, with a focus on caring, learning and being safe in every situation. The school's PBL teaching matrix guides explicit and incidental teaching of appropriate behaviours specific to each area in the school. The school community discussed and agreed on a common language to be used in all locations within the school. The common language ensures positive behaviours are explicitly taught and consistently reinforced and the school values are embedded. A focus behaviour is identified at the beginning of each month and reinforced by all staff members. Six key behaviour support strategies are depicted on posters and displayed in every classroom. These are used as a basis for supporting student behaviour. The strategies include giving choices, redirecting, reteaching, paying attention to positive behaviour and ignoring inappropriate behaviour, providing time and space to calm down and communicating. Accident/injury and minor/major incident data is collected on a weekly basis to track the impact of PBL on student behaviour over time.

"We use a lot of positive verbal praise, labelled praise... so we're always framing things in a positive light. Instead of saying, 'Don't climb on the table,' we would say, 'Feet on the floor.' Everybody in the school is using that common language."

Linda Hess, Assistant Principal

Another way the school embeds PBL with students is through clear expectations, individual goals and rewards. The school has a multi-level reward system that is used across the whole school. Staff can give students stamps, stickers and awards in categories of learning, caring and being safe. Staff are encouraged to reward students frequently. Students who have received an award are then in the running to receive a prize at the weekly assembly – as is the teacher who gave them the award. Having the teacher prize box encourages teachers to be 'fast and frequent' in giving positive feedback to students. In addition, the assembly awards are delivered by the school's student leaders, who are chosen as positive role models of the school's PBL expectations.

The structure and common approach of PBL is considered by staff to be "the thread that runs through the whole school" (Linda Hess, Assistant Principal). Since PBL is widespread in schools, the use of this approach also means that when students go to mainstream schools for visits or integration, there is often a common language with the other school. This helps students with inclusion because the language and expected behaviour is common even if the environment is different.

Using the PBL approach has complemented other strategies the school has in place to manage behaviour, for example, engineering the environment, sensory breaks and activities, flexible timetables and break out spaces in each classroom. Another important strategy in teaching students positive behaviour has been the So Safe program. The school chose the So Safe program because it is research informed, and suitable to the needs of students at The Ponds School, since it is designed for people with an intellectual disability. The program uses communication books and a common language to help students build relationships and develop positive social skills. Before implementing the program, the school gave parents the opportunity to give feedback and provide input as to whether the program should be used at the school.



Culture of innovation and collaboration

A common theme that emerged when visiting The Ponds School is the school's culture of innovation, particularly a willingness to try new strategies with students, in collaboration with parents. One example of this is that parents share information or techniques that are working at home, and the school embraces these suggestions and uses them in the classroom. One student was earning virtual coins at home to reward positive behaviour, and the school is now informing the child's parent of how many coins the student earned in the school day so that these can be added to her at-home reward system.

Teachers at The Ponds School have also introduced technology and creative arts programs that are suited to students with additional needs. This includes a dance program that uses innovative techniques so that students with severe physical disabilities can experience dance, for example, using facial expressions and eye movements to respond to music. The school also has a signing choir, which participated in the School Spectacular in 2019. Parents are engaged in these activities, for example, Aboriginal parents are involved in the school's Aboriginal dance group.

Another significant innovation the school undertook in 2019 was to offer elective subjects to the high school-aged students. To ensure students are given the same opportunities as their peers, the school developed an elective program where students participated in a different elective each term. This gave students opportunities to work with other students and staff that they had not previously worked with. The school intends to extend the program to offer more electives in 2020.

"We have to be taking on board new things that are happening in the education realm, and finding the very best way and the very best programs for our students."

Leonie Donaldson, Principal

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

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