

Context

Casula High School is a co-educational comprehensive high school located south-west of Sydney. Currently with a student population of 870, Casula HS has an ICSEA score of 951 and 76% of students have a language background other than English. Enrolments at the school have grown by 20% in the last three years and are expected to continue growing due to growth in the area as well as positive sentiment in the community about the school.

Casula HS is committed to providing equal opportunity for all students. This is strived for through evidence-based, innovative and future-focused educational practice that promotes an inclusive focus on student growth and success beyond the classroom.

The Casula HS mantra is, 'I never lose. I either win or learn.' – Nelson Mandela.

Prior to 2016, Casula High School had been building a shared agenda around evidence-based practice, with a focus on teacher clarity and communicating learning intentions and success criteria in the classroom. This work led them to question how to further build out their evidence-based classroom practice to have the greatest impact for students.

When Casula HS joined the SVA Bright Spots Schools Connection program (The Connection) in 2016, they identified a need to implement a whole school approach to visible learning that was grounded in the use of evidence, with the aim of building a shared language of learning among students, staff and the community. This would position the whole school community as learners with a shared aspiration and responsibility for learning growth.

Project overview

Issues Identified

Staff at Casula HS were unsure how their teaching practices were having an impact. They also identified that students and staff needed to further develop a shared language around the process of learning.

Vision

The greatest impact for students will come from ensuring that all teachers are using evidence to make learning visible for executive, teachers and students.

Actions

The school provided ongoing professional learning allowing staff to evaluate instruction via impact cycles and feedback to students.

Outcomes

As a result of using evidence to make learning visible, staff and students were better able to identify gaps in student learning, leading to more targeted teaching and learning practices to add the greatest value to student learning outcomes.

Impact

Students are empowered, self-directed and reflective learners and there is a shared language of learning between students and their teachers.



What happened during the project?

Over the last three years, Casula HS implemented a multi-pronged, whole-school approach aimed at building a shared language of learning among the executive, educators, and students.

The first steps were to understand the current climate of visible learning in the school, and to understand what teachers and students thought a 'good learner' was. Drawing from student and staff surveys, student video diaries, classroom observations and walkthroughs, they found that work needed to be done to create a shared understanding of a good learner. They created a learner matrix that articulated the learning profile of an effective learner and developed a visible learning action plan for the school to outline the approach and targets to making learning visible in the classroom.

With this baseline in place, the executive team developed a comprehensive professional learning program for all staff that focused on the foundations of visible learning. This included work on feedback, classroom observations, success criteria and the use of the learner matrix that was developed.

In 2018, with staff united around the focus on visible learning, teachers began using impact cycles to better understand the impact of their teaching practice in the classroom. Each staff member owned their own impact cycle and collected and evaluated evidence to understand the progress of their students and inform future practice, supported by their impact partner who advises as a critical friend.

This visibility at the teacher level was carried into classrooms and students were consistently involved in the conversation about their own progress and what works for their learning. They were also actively involved in providing feedback to teachers using student perception surveys and classroom walkthroughs.

Over 2019, given staff buy-in to this united approach to visible learning, and buoyed by indications of achieving their initial aim of a 'shared language of learning', the focus has been on further embedding structures to ensure that a deep focus on evidence-informed articulation and design of learning across the school is sustainable. This has meant a continued focus on professional learning – especially for teachers who are new to the school – and distributing feedback processes throughout the school to continue to build a culture of visibility, collaboration, and above all, learning.



What changed for the students?

Students are benefiting from a more responsive teaching practice as staff have an increased capacity to use data and undertake action research to understand and adapt their approach. This is supported by a school executive who work with students and staff to co-design evidence-based future directions for the school.

“An unexpected outcome of using impact cycles was the ‘decluttering’ within the school – the strong focus on evidence not only helped to inform practice but also to let go of what is not working.”

Gareth Smith, Principal

The culture of the school has become one of transparency and collaboration across faculties that draw on a shared language of learning, empowering students in their learning journeys.

Students are a key part of the collaborative culture of learning within the school. They are more empowered and confident learners, with 87% of students reporting that they knew why their learning was important and 92% of students were able to articulate what they were learning, where they need to go and what they need to do to get there.

“As a SHARP learner I feel confident in having a go at answering questions in class. Also using ALARM in Skills has shown me how I learn to improve my writing.”

Faye, year 8 student

Where to next?

A visible learning culture will continue at Casula HS, with a focus on moving from implementation to sustainability, and ensuring that it becomes part of the induction process for new staff.

The success of our impact cycles has seen a reshuffle of our whole school timetable. More time has been allocated to executive positions to evaluate teaching and learning in the curriculum through classroom observations.

A whole school professional learning plan for 2020 has been created with a focus on two-week impact cycles measuring the effectiveness of using a learning matrix across all Key Learning Areas.

Key Insights

Casula HS learned that the following were important:

- **A commitment to professional learning** – Investing in dedicated and consistent time for staff professional learning and the implementation of visible learning initiatives like impact cycles.
- **Trialling impact cycles** – to gain staff buy in, a diverse leadership team trialled action research impact cycles to evaluate feasibility within the school before rolling out to all staff.
- **Setting high expectations** – It was important to develop a strong expectation of teachers as expert educators with a growth mindset for continued learning and improvement, and to support this with exposure to best practice, experts and high-quality professional learning.

The importance of collaboration

Q&A with the School Principal

Q: What has made SVA a productive partnership for your school?

Our partnership with SVA as part of The Connection has empowered the school to flourish, unite around a shared purpose, and develop a sharper focus on impact.

Collaboration at The Connection Star Hub days and Thought Leadership Gatherings (TLGs) has enabled us to think differently, receive feedback from colleagues as critical friends and share our expertise. This feedback has allowed us to reframe, redesign and refine our projects to increase their impact.

We have increased our ability to collaborate with other schools from across Australia and feel assured that we are not alone and many schools and systems have similar challenges and goals. Collaborating with schools in contexts like ours has sparked ideas for innovations that can be transferred to our own context. Seeing growth in other schools has helped us learn about growth in ours.

We have been exposed to expertise from within and outside schools, which has allowed us to bring examples of best practice back to our school and share these with staff as part of our evidence-informed improvement agenda.

The experience has reduced in school challenges that existed about creating partnerships and grown our confidence to seek these out. This has been a shift in mindset and subsequently opened the door to several different innovative and longstanding partnerships, including with Salesforce and the Sydney Opera House.

It has also built the leadership aspirations of those who are involved. We have also been convinced of the importance of documenting and sharing our story, and also evolving that story.

Q: Outside of SVA itself, what has been the most productive partnership you've developed through your SVA project? Why has it been productive?

Being in SVA led to our current project and work with Corwin around the development of visible learning practices based on the work of Professor John Hattie. Although this partnership is ongoing it was the catalyst for staff better knowing their students and where they are going. All teachers now work as experts to put evidence into action and move our students forward.

Through SVA we were also introduced to Schools Plus, who supported us to connect with Salesforce as a business partner to the school. Since 2016, we have worked with Salesforce across multiple projects to ensure students at Casula are equipped for careers in science, technology and maths. Our partnership with Salesforce is an excellent example of how schools and industry can innovate together to achieve shared aims.

Before joining the Connection, we didn't value business partnerships the way we do now. The Connection gave us the confidence to aim high and seek out what we needed in partnerships because our vision was clearer.