

Context

Stirling North Primary School, in the Port Augusta region of South Australia, has over 350 students and an ICSEA of 964. It is a hub of the community and considered a desirable school in the region. Class sizes are currently full, with enrolment continuing to trend upward over time. This has resulted in an enrolment policy to manage school numbers.

Since 2017, Stirling North PS has redeveloped its grounds and facilities. The school has recently focused on adding technology to the classroom, including virtual reality that enables students to “travel” out of the classroom and exposes them to experiences they wouldn’t otherwise be able to enjoy. Additionally, leadership has focused on streamlining line management and adjusting professional development to the needs of staff and students.

Student agency has been increased for greater engagement, community interaction and improved student results. A focus on student agency was initially implemented across a small section of the school with positive impacts. As a result, staff investigated and implemented its application across the school with emphasis on developing students’ social and emotional and STEM learning capabilities. This has resulted in increased engagement, demonstrated by improved attendance and NAPLAN results.

Project overview

Issues Identified

Stirling North PS identified a need to increase student agency to reflect how they value their students and involve students in the learning process.

Vision

The school believes that students should be part of designing their learning to empower them as learners and improve engagement and learning outcomes.

Actions

Stirling North PS implemented strategies to increase students’ social, emotional and STEM learning capabilities and provided opportunities for students to plan tasks and assessments, linking learning to local contexts.

Outcomes

Students have engaged in learning activities outside of the classroom and in play-based learning/ projects relevant to the individual student.

Impact

These have included an increase in attendance and enrolments; a reduction in behaviour issues resulting in a drop in suspension rates. Additionally, the school’s NAPLAN Year 7 reading/ numeracy and Year 5 reading results have been the highest on record.



What happened during the project?

Over the course of the project, staff developed a culture of bringing fun into the school, promoting engagement as the initial factor of success. They leveraged the South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning (TfEL) framework, particularly Domain 2 (create safe conditions for rigorous learning), to develop the physical, social and emotional conditions for rigorous learning and ensure students have a say in their learning. The school also implemented Wilson McCaskill’s Play is the Way program for teaching social and emotional skills, supported by teacher coaching. Leadership then linked curriculum areas around termly themes, enabling teachers to look beyond the classroom to maximise engagement opportunities.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were formed around numeracy, STEM, phonological awareness and Walker Learning (play-based learning). Particular emphasis was placed on increasing STEM teaching and learning, especially critical and creative thinking and the design thinking process. A student input-led framework, with a focus on students negotiating and shaping their learning, enabled project-based learning to be created around themes that were of interest to the student.

This led to teachers sharing learning designs with students across all areas of the curriculum, including students creating their own assessment criteria. Whole-school data collection methods, including via Sentral, were used to guide literacy, numeracy and wellbeing intervention. By 2019, learning intentions, success criteria and student goals were evident in all classrooms.



Additionally, the school proactively linked with businesses including Solar Reserve, Sundrop, Port Augusta City Council and Adelaide Zoo, enabling students to make connections between their learning and the wider community. This enabled teachers to link classroom learning to solving real-world problems and to future potential work.

Staff found the opportunity to visit UK schools powerful. Key value came from visits to XP (a school in Doncaster) that uses themes to connect curriculum areas, and to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The EEF connection added credibility when Stirling North leadership spoke to key SA Department for Education personnel due to its links with the literacy and numeracy push in SA. Visiting the Education Innovation Unit introduced Stirling North PS to the Hierarchy of Audience pyramid used to create larger cross-curricular projects.

What changed for the students?

As a result of students being involved with the planning and development of learning and assessment, links with learning were made outside of the classroom, which meant that students were able to use the learning done in the classroom and, with the involvement of local businesses, put this learning to real-life situations. This led to a new culture of engagement across the school, demonstrated by a 2% increase in attendance and a 47% reduction in negative behaviour over the course of the project, and a 59% drop in the suspension rate between 2017-2018. The school also experienced a 21% increase in enrolments during this period.

Improvements in NAPLAN results were also evident. From 2016 to 2019, Year 7 reading and numeracy and Year 5 reading were the highest in the school's history.

Additionally, the results of an anonymous online staff Perspective survey showed a high level of staff engagement. This was based on whether staff said positive things about working in their school, were committed to staying, and inspired and motivated to do their best work for their school and the young people in their care. Stirling North PS scored 92%, 22% higher than the state average.

“Our teachers try to make learning engaging and fun. They do this by making sure we know exactly what the curriculum is about, what our learning intentions are and that we get a say in what the learning tasks and activities are. We also get to design our lessons and set learning goals for our subjects. We reflect on our learning goals and are self-motivated to improve.”

Year 7 student

21%

increase in new enrolments
and 2% increase in student
attendance from 2016-2019

47%

reduction in behaviour incidents
over the three years
from 2016.

59%

reduction in suspensions
in the first year of the project
(2017-2018).

Where to next?

Stirling North PS will continue to promote critical and creative thinking. Following the Hierarchy of Learning model, adapted from Ron Berger, the school plans to create tasks with students that increase motivation and engagement and allow them opportunities to 'be of service in the world'.

In this way, through authentic avenues for student voice and agency, the school hopes to empower its students as the new generation of changemakers, ready and willing to have a positive impact on society.



Key Insights

Stirling North PS learned that the following were important to success:

- **Key capabilities** – At the forefront of successful schools are personal and social capabilities, and critical and creative thinking.
- **Student agency** – When students are involved and invested in their learning there is greater engagement, less behaviour issues and stronger student outcomes.
- **Connections** – Partnerships and relationships are the key to building a successful culture in a school. Partnerships with parents and businesses build relevance in learning for students.
- **Change management** – Listening and responding to staff during the change process; and remembering the power of 'bringing people with you'.
- **Time and resources** – Leadership need to allow staff sufficient time to engage; relevant research/ readings to demonstrate evidence for change – in particular, Formative Assessment and TfEL; and the time and opportunity to celebrate success.

The importance of collaboration

Q&A with the School Principal Adam Wilson

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

Partnering with SVA has given our site a fantastic opportunity to learn from other like schools across the country. It has made it possible for students to connect with others outside of our small rural town. By extending our network, both our staff and students have been able to benefit from ongoing learning.

Personally, SVA has also given me the connections and confidence to continue my focus on what I feel education should be. It has provided me with opportunities to hear from leaders and visit schools – not only in Australia but internationally. It has also given me the confidence to stand up for holistic education and the belief in our local partnership, which is starting to gain traction.

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

The most helpful collaborative work that has been achieved through The Connection has been the link with the STEM learning paper from the University of Canberra. In addition, the link with Merrylands East Public School and their ability to engage students in project-based learning.

Contribution of another school to your journey



Other schools in The Connection that have contributed to the journey at Stirling North PS include Merrylands East PS, Wirreanda Secondary School and Rooty Hill High School. Merrylands East PS modelled individualised learning, high-level engagement, effective use of technology and teachers working effectively in partnerships.

Wirreanda Secondary School demonstrated excellent strategic leadership – Stirling North PS has utilised their pedagogy timeline idea and created one to capture their own journey. Lastly, a visit to Rooty Hill High School was the springboard to making the general capabilities alive and real in a school environment.