

# Hilltop Road Public School

Merrylands, NSW



## Context

Hilltop Road Public School in Merrylands, western Sydney has a cohort of approximately 740 students and an ICSEA score of 979. The school nurtures individual difference and staff strive to bring out the best in every student through authentic teaching and learning programs.

Parental involvement is recognised as vital and Hilltop Road PS promotes partnerships with parents, community and industry in all aspects of school life. A strong student welfare and wellbeing program is embedded across the school and students are supported through Kids Matter, Positive Behaviour for Learning and Bounce Back.

Staff are committed to professional learning, collaborative planning and designing learning that inspires students to succeed. Combined with an emphasis on information technologies, they aim to prepare students to be effective future-focused learners and active members of the global community.

Hilltop Road PS had established a case for change around developing student agency and are adopting new pedagogies, such as project-based learning, to support this. During this process, staff have recognised that not all students were able to articulate their learning or discuss themselves as a learner. Instead they would talk about what they “did” as opposed to their “learning” and found it challenging to reflect on their strengths and needs as a learner.

Teachers noted that ineffective communication skills were impacting on students’ ability to engage in classroom discussions, negotiate with others, share their opinions and take a more active role in their learning, making it hard to develop necessary future-focused skills. The school recognised the need to form a targeted approach to address these issues.

## Project overview

### Issues Identified

Hilltop Road PS students were not reaching their full potential as they lacked a sense of agency in their learning and found it challenging to discuss their learning or identify with themselves as learners.

### Vision

That students at Hilltop Road PS have a strong voice and can articulate their needs, reflect on their learning, self-regulate and set goals based on their self-identified strengths and areas for improvement.

### Actions

The school focused on providing learning experiences which encourage and facilitate authentic, connected and co-created learning and different avenues for student expression.

### Outcomes

Improved agency in learning throughout the school community and significant improvements in student ability to discuss their learning.

### Impact

Students know themselves as learners, are able to make decisions about their learning with others and communicate more effectively with a variety of audiences.



## What happened during the project?

Prior to beginning work, staff were already aligned with the project's vision and purpose. They saw the need to improve students' ability to talk about their learning and themselves as learners and recognised that oracy was crucial to developing student agency.

From there, school leaders investigated practices to support these aims. Planning for the needs of different groups of staff, they developed targeted and whole-school professional learning with a focus on effective evidence-based practices, such as visible learning strategies, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria (LISC), accountable talk and questioning and feedback strategies. Embedding these practices enabled teachers to facilitate student-centred discussions and provide accurate feedback on tasks. Learning walks (staff observations) were used to observe practices in action and measure student engagement during lessons and their understanding of the learning taking place.



Across Hilltop Road PS, students were given more opportunities for student voice. Project-based learning allowed students to learn in an authentic context, collaboratively exploring real-world problems. The school utilised Seesaw for digital projects, with students regularly uploading samples of their learning and reflecting on their choices. Student-led conferences with parents and teachers were embraced across the school allowing students to demonstrate their responsibility for their learning and how they are active in the learning process. Meanwhile, an ambassador program was set up to provide leadership opportunities for students.

Staff also used a hip-hop radio station as a creative vehicle to engage and encourage students to play with language and develop their self-expression.

Throughout the project, staff participated in action research to evaluate and respond to students' ability to articulate their learning. This involved conducting interviews with students and developing the Triple T (Time to Talk) articulation rubric to measure progressive oracy skills, as well as professional learning in the articulation of learning.

## What changed for the students?

Students are better able to discuss the opportunities and challenges in relation to their work and discuss how they learn best. They can now articulate how to improve in learning tasks across key learning areas and know how to self-reflect and evaluate their learning. This has been evidenced, for example, through growth in their articulation of learning rubric scores and improvements in conversation/presentation scores in the student-led conferences.



Learning walk data and staff reflections have shown that teachers are better equipped to provide opportunities for students to discuss their learning and themselves as learners and that students have a better understanding of learning intention, purpose and where to next in relation to the lesson.

Students are now able to identify when they've had voice and choice in their learning. This has been demonstrated by student surveys, student-led conferences and observations from visitors.

The hip-hop radio station program has enabled students to express themselves and their learning through podcasts, beat making groups and raps about their learning. Through this initiative, students from K to 6 have shown they're able to communicate messages in a creative way.



**“It [hip-hop education] gives the opportunity for every single person to have a voice.”**

Ben, year 6 student

**80%**

of students demonstrated growth or maintained a level 3 in their learning articulation rubric scores between 2018 and 2019.

**69%**

of students rated a 4 or 5 score for overall conversation/presentation in their student-led conference in 2018, 36% higher than the previous year.

**88%**

of parents strongly agreed that they have a clear understanding of their child's effort and classroom behaviours due to the adoption of student-led conferences.

## Where to next?

Now students know themselves as learners and are able to communicate about their learning, Hilltop Road PS is looking to grow and scale the opportunities students have to let their voices be heard. Students will now be represented in the school's strategic direction groups. This ensures student voice further impacts the school's agenda.

The school also plans to create a badging system to recognise students' skills and competencies in different areas. The badges would reflect the ethos, vision and learning opportunities at Hilltop Road PS, support students' journey towards their goals and provide another avenue for students to share their learning and achievements with different audiences.

The school is also looking to maintain the discussion around why oracy is important for students and provide more opportunities for staff to share best practices in supporting students to reflect and discuss their learning.



## Key Insights

Hilltop Road PS learned that the following were important for success:

- **Opportunities for engagement** – Students need frequent opportunities to engage in conversations about their learning and themselves as a learner to know they have a voice and can make a difference in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.
- **Structured fluidity** – It's important to know when to ensure accountability and set clear expectations of outcomes/ processes and when to encourage risk taking, experimentation and different pathways to achieve a goal.
- **Networking** – Connecting and collaborating with like-minded leaders within different contexts is necessary in order to progress this work in schools. It allows leaders to know and articulate what they stand for, evaluate their strategies and practices, and encourages new ways of thinking.
- **Community support** – Informing community about the reasons for changes in practices and the overarching vision of the school helped to ensure new practices and initiatives were supported at home and at school.
- **Well-resourced learning spaces** – Creating suitable, well-resourced learning spaces, such as the Hip Hop studio, enabled the work to take place efficiently using professional, industry approved equipment. It also minimises negative fallout due to timetable changes and fluctuations in student enrolment.

## The importance of collaboration

### Q&A with the School Principal Natalie See

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

SVA has been a productive partnership for Hilltop Road PS as it has given us insights into other educational systems across states. SVA has also provided insights into various industry processes (e.g. program logic) and organisations that support leadership and team building (e.g. Deloitte Human Capital and Coach in a Box). The Thought Leadership Gatherings (TLGs) have provided uninterrupted time out of the school to connect with others, reflect on our practices, be inspired, explore new ideas and recognise different ways of thinking. We have been able to refine our thinking and collaborate with like-minded schools in other states, such as Morphett Vale (SA) and Silvertown (VIC) and with other NSW schools in The Connection.

#### 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 Connection has produced many opportunities to communicate and collaborate with other schools. The collaborative, distributed leadership of the group has also enabled new opportunities and learnings to be shared with colleagues and students within our schools. For example, The Connection initiated and hosted Teach Meets on student voice and innovative practices that were open for all staff from each school to engage in as a participant or presenter. These events were helpful as they were a way to share the work and expertise within our schools, build capacity and celebrate accomplishments with other like-minded colleagues. They also allowed other staff members outside of the SVA school teams to see how developing connections can improve practices and spark new thinking.

The Connection leaders also collaborated to facilitate the Cuberider opportunity for our students. As a result of hearing from Solange Cunin at a TLG, leaders spoke to Solange to organise an opportunity for students to design and code experiments that were tested in space with the help of NASA astronauts on the International Space Station. The students were also invited to attend a showcase night at the Museum of Applied Arts where they shared their experiments and results with others. This collaboration exemplified the opportunities that can come from connecting with others through SVA.

## Contribution of another school to your journey

Morphett Vale Primary School in South Australia has been a school that has really influenced our school's journey. When visiting the school after one of the TLGs, we were inspired by the students' ability to discuss their learning and the engagement levels in the classroom. We were influenced by many of the practices we saw, such as:

- Learning Pit posters in classrooms and how they promoted student and teacher conversations about deep learning and that it's okay for students to struggle.
- Powerful learning pathways, including mindsets, self-regulation, communication, collaboration and problem solving. These pathways also had key phrases in 'student speak' for students to readily use and apply in learning situations, encouraging conversations around learning.
- Student agency observation tool. We were impressed to see how students observed classes and evaluated where they saw students as decision makers, learning designers, evaluators, teachers, researchers and advocates for 21st century learning.
- Three-way interviews and how they facilitated these conversations.
- Leading Learners. The process for how their leading learners were chosen, how they supported lessons and how they were ambassadors for the school.

We further explored these practices and their impact on a subsequent visit, which gave us new ways to accelerate our own work. For instance, we implemented our version of The Learning Pit and established an ambassador program which focused on students being advocates for the school. Our visits also encouraged reflection and the review of our learning dispositions and mindsets and how they were being embedded across the school. They also gave us further inspiration for our student-led conference procedures that were in the early stages of development.

As a result of the Morphett Vale team sharing their expertise, we were inspired to create more opportunities for students to talk about their learning and refine our established practices to foster student agency.