



Sustaining Success:

A case study of effective practices
in Fairfield high value-add schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Executive summary

Background

This research builds on two earlier CESE publications: *High Value-Add schools: Key drivers of school improvement* and *Six effective practices in high growth schools*. These reports identified broad descriptions of *which* practices make a difference; they did not, however, identify *how* schools successfully implement these practices. This paper sets out further research done to fill this gap.

This paper presents a case study analysis of how a group of seven high value-add (HVA) schools in the Fairfield Network have sustained and built on their successful educational outcomes over the period 2010-2016. Focus group data were synthesised to answer four research questions.

How do the Fairfield HVA schools implement the six effective practices?

These schools use specific **systems and processes** to support each practice, fostered by school-wide organisational structures. Staff within these schools also develop **cultures and attitudes** to promote the practices. Finally, the schools use particular **programs and activities** to bring each practice to life. The different methods that schools use to support, promote and implement each practice are detailed in the **Appendix**.

What are the interrelationships between these practices?

Cluster one: quality teaching and learning – high expectations, student engagement and effective teaching. High expectations for students underpin the culture that fosters student engagement. Together, these two foundational practices create an ideal environment for effective teaching practices to succeed. Importantly, effective teaching also leads to greater student engagement.

Cluster two: positive professional culture – school goals, collaboration and professional learning. Strategically identified and clearly articulated goals create a shared vision for staff. This vision in turn gives purpose and direction for teachers' collaborative practices. Professional learning facilitates a collaborative culture, whilst also providing the skills, knowledge and resources needed to reach goals.

Over time, each school adjusts their weighting or emphasis on each of these practices, according to the individual school's journey towards change, growth and improvement. Their emphasis will also shift as student and/or teacher populations change over time.

How do these schools foster consistency of practice, both across the school and over time?

Rather than having to find ways to make each practice consistent, optimal implementation of each practice itself promotes consistency. Clear and visible high expectations of all teachers are supported by a culture of accountability / checks and balances, and a 'no blame and shame' approach when things go wrong. Teachers are engaged and genuinely care for their students. Staff induction programs build over several terms and engage new teachers with a school's culture and practices. Effective teaching is facilitated through whole school templates, scope and sequence documents, programming manuals and how-to guides. These lay the foundation for consistent programming and planning across a school. Digital platforms help staff to easily access and share information.

School goals create a consistent vision for staff. Goals are often collaboratively developed, and the executive encourages all staff to feel that they have an important role in bringing the vision to life. Trust between teachers and school leaders is critical. Collaboration helps staff to feel a sense of shared responsibility for school programs (which also enhances trust amongst staff). Engaging in collaborative programming and planning ensures greater consistency across the school. Planned, strategic and ongoing teacher professional learning helps to embed new practices, so that they quickly become 'business as usual'.

What is it about the nature of these schools that has enabled their success?

Fairfield teachers and school executive identified three distinctive features that they felt had contributed to their success:

- local area collaboration amongst Fairfield schools;
- students and parents placing a high value on education; and
- a persistence by school staff to pursue better opportunities and higher expectations for their students, regardless of any socio-economic limitations.

1. Introduction

Background

Educational researchers have long been interested in identifying the key components of quality teaching and learning (see for example Gore 2007; 2014; Hattie 2009)¹. The NSW Department of Education has developed several frameworks, policies and publications that incorporate this research and support its implementation in schools. For example, the NSW Quality Teaching Framework² and the What Works Best³ research synthesis identify key components of quality teaching and learning, such as student engagement, high expectations, explicit teaching and collaboration.

In 2015, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) in the NSW Department of Education developed the 'value-add' (VA) approach, which identified high performing schools. Value-add measures the individual school's contribution to growth in student achievement, while controlling for important contextual factors such as parental characteristics and students' prior achievement. Using this methodology, CESE identified 37 High Value-Add (HVA) NSW government schools. Between 2010 and 2014, these schools achieved improvements in NAPLAN scores that exceeded predicted growth based on the characteristics of their students⁴. VA scores were based on NAPLAN growth scores for Years 3 to 5 for primary schools and Years 7 to 9 for secondary schools.

After identifying these schools, we next sought to investigate the nature of quality teaching and learning in the schools. In the publication *High Value-Add schools: Key drivers of school improvement*⁵, CESE compared HVA schools to similar schools⁶ to determine high-level differences in teaching practices and other school-level initiatives. As a result, CESE developed a set of six effective practices that focus on how high performing schools enact quality teaching and learning. These practices were summarised in the CESE publication *Six effective practices in high growth schools*⁷, and are outlined here:

1. High expectations

Creating and reinforcing high expectations for students, both academically and behaviourally.

2. Student engagement

Classroom learning that is relevant to students' lives and uses technology and innovative programming to enhance student engagement.

3. Effective teaching

Using data to identify and respond to individual student learning needs, curriculum differentiation, and explicit teaching.

4. Whole-school goals

Staff working together and setting shared goals to achieve school-wide improvements in student performance.

5. Collaboration

Sharing resources and taking a collaborative approach to planning, programming and assessment throughout the school.

6. Professional learning

Professional learning that supports strategic school goals and is shared among staff so that learning is embedded across the school.

1 Gore, J 2007, 'Improving pedagogy: Challenges of moving teachers toward higher levels of quality teaching', in J Butcher & J Asher (eds), *Making a difference: Challenges for teachers, teaching and teacher education*, Sense, New York, pp. 15-33. Gore, J 2014, 'Towards quality and equity: The case for quality teaching rounds in Australia', Paper presented at the *Australian Council on Education Research (ACER) Research Conference*, Melbourne, Australia. Hattie, J 2009, *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, Routledge, London.

2 NSW Quality Teaching Framework, see: <http://www.theelements.education.nsw.gov.au/the-elements-manual/policy-reforms-and-focus-areas/quality-teaching-framework>.

3 What Works Best, see: <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/what-works-best-evidence-based-practices-to-help-improve-nsw-student-performance>.

4 HVA schools were selected on the basis of having VA scores in 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 that were significantly above the baseline year (2010/2011), demonstrating a sustained contribution to improved student outcomes over time.

5 This is featured in the CESE publication, *High Value-Add schools: Key drivers of school improvement*: <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/high-value-add-schools-key-drivers-of-school-improvement>.

6 Similar schools were selected based on NAPLAN performance during the baseline year (2010/2011), Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) and school size.

7 These are summarised in the CESE Learning Curve, *Six effective practices in high growth schools*: <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications-filter/six-effective-practices-in-high-growth-schools>.

Rationale

This paper presents a case study analysis of how a group of seven HVA schools in the Fairfield Network have sustained and built on their successful educational outcomes over the period 2010-2016.

While past research identified broad descriptions of *which* practices make a difference, it did not identify *how* schools successfully implement these practices. This paper sets out further research done to fill this gap. A case study⁸ was identified as an appropriate methodology to identify the strategies and tools that schools use to implement these practices.

The researchers identified that seven of the HVA schools belong to the Fairfield Network. These seven schools were initially identified as 'excelling' in the original HVA research on the basis of their growth from 2010 to 2014; further, all of these schools continued to 'excel' on the VA measure in 2015 and 2016.

This geographical clustering of successful schools provided a naturally-occurring sample of schools that shared some common demographic features. This provided an opportunity to investigate these practices in a set of similar schools, and to examine what it is about the nature of these schools that has enabled them to sustain their success on the VA measure.

Research aim and methodology

The aim of this study is to describe the ways in which the six effective practices operate within the Fairfield HVA schools. The study addresses four research questions:

1. How do the Fairfield HVA schools implement the six effective practices?
2. What are the interrelationships between these practices?
3. How do these schools foster consistency of practice, both across the school and over time?
4. What is it about the nature of these schools that has enabled their success?

In term 4, 2016, focus groups were conducted in these seven schools with groups of principals, school executive, teachers and learning support staff. These conversations generated a set of qualitative data, which was then analysed and synthesised in an attempt to explain how this group of schools has achieved sustained high performance over time.

Context: Fairfield

The city of Fairfield is a local government area in the south-west of Sydney with a population of just over 207,000⁹. It serves a highly socio-economically disadvantaged community, based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas* (SEIFA)¹⁰. More than 70 per cent of people speak a language other than English at home, with the most prevalent being Vietnamese, Arabic, Assyrian Neo-Aramaic and Cantonese. Four in every five Fairfield residents have both parents born overseas.

⁸ A case study is defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin R 2014, *Case study research: Design and methods*, 5th edn, Sage, California, p.16). Schools are, by nature, closely intertwined within their local context and conditions, and this provides a compelling rationale to use the case study methodology.

⁹ 2016 census data reported in the Fairfield City community profile at: <http://profile.id.com.au/fairfield/> and also at: http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/SED10029.

¹⁰ SEIFA is primarily used to rank areas according to socio-economic advantage and disadvantage based on ABS census data. Variables used to calculate the index include household income, education, employment, occupation, housing, and other indicators of advantage and disadvantage.

Context: Fairfield HVA schools

All HVA schools in the Fairfield Network have high proportions of students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D)¹¹ and a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI)¹² value indicating higher than average levels of disadvantage (which reflects the broader Fairfield community). Bonnyrigg High School and Prairiewood High School both became partially selective¹³ in 2010.

Table 1:

Overview of the Fairfield HVA schools (2016 data)

School	FTE Students	FOEI	Attendance	Refugees	EAL/D with ESL support	EAL/D no ESL support
Fairfield Heights Public School	937	154	94%	20%	85%	6%
Bonnyrigg High School	1387.7	132	94%	1.7%	17%	73%
Cabramatta High School	1394.8	159	93%	3.2%	66%	20%
Canley Vale High School	1415	153	95%	1.3%	89%	7%
Fairvale High School	1378	158	92%	9.7%	89%	0%
St Johns Park High School	886.5	146	92%	7.1%	78%	12%
Prairiewood High School	1183.8	124	92%	6.4%	16%	66%

¹¹ EAL/D learners are students whose first language is a language or dialect other than standard Australian English. See: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum/multicultural-education/english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect>.

¹² FOEI is a school-level index of educational disadvantage related to socio-economic background. A higher FOEI value corresponds to a higher level of disadvantage. The average FOEI value is 100. See: https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/FOEI_Technical_Paper_final_v2.pdf.

¹³ There are 26 partially selective high schools in NSW where students participate in selective English, mathematics and science classes. They are generally part of a wider cohort of students for classes in other key learning areas.

2. How do the Fairfield HVA schools implement the six effective practices?

Data analysis identified three common threads that enable the successful implementation of each practice, as represented in figure 1.

Each of the six practices have **systems and processes** to support the practice. These are the school-wide organisational structures that create the optimal environment for the practice to thrive.

Each of the six practices also requires the fostering of particular **cultures and attitudes** to promote the practice. These are the values and beliefs that make the practice a shared, widespread and sustainable part of a school's culture.

Finally, schools use particular **programs and activities** to implement each of the six practices. These are the specific actions used to bring the practice to life – what teachers and leaders are doing in the school to make the practice real.

The following section provides a description of the systems, cultures and programs that the Fairfield HVA schools reported using to implement these six practices (high expectations, student engagement, effective teaching, school goals, collaboration and professional learning).

Figure 1:

An illustration of the common threads that enable successful implementation of the six effective practices



High Expectations

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement high expectations is included in table 2, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 2:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement high expectations

High Expectations		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
High expectations are matched with high support. Comprehensive student welfare and wellbeing systems. Case management of individual students, quickly and discretely. Structured daily routines. Pleasant physical learning spaces.	Visibly expect success of all students. Celebrate success and achievement for all students. Display and promote student achievement, including with the wider community.	School values are clearly articulated and explicitly taught. Social skills taught and reinforced regularly. Behaviour management programs consistent across the school. Additional academic support programs available to anyone who needs them.

Systems and processes

These schools emphasised the importance of matching their high expectations with systems and processes to make the high expectations achievable for students. Canley Vale High School summed this up as: *'there are high expectations, but with high support'*. These schools highlighted the role that their student welfare systems played in providing this support, with an emphasis on the important connection between a student's wellbeing and their engagement with their learning:

'The basic tenet is that kids can't learn well and teachers can't teach effectively without a good wellbeing structure. They've got to be safe, they've got to be content, happy, feel that they're attended to and case managed when they have difficulties . . . from that basis we built a very successful wellbeing structure'. (Prairiewood High School)

Staff at Fairvale High School emphasised the importance of intervening early at the first signs of disengagement *'so kids don't end up getting onto that downward spiral'*. These schools described taking a *'case management' approach, where student engagement is targeted on an individual basis. At Bonnyrigg High School, each year advisor identifies groups of students within their cohort that are targeted for extra support. Each year advisor has 'their groups of kids that they target in their year groups. So, are there groups perhaps underperforming, or not learning, or misbehaving?'* Particular programs, teachers or initiatives are then dedicated to helping these students e.g. the use of Pacific Islander Community Liaison Officers (PICLOs) to work with Pacific Islander students.

These schools also have daily routines that promote high expectations. These schools favour structured routines, with an emphasis on creating orderly environments that reflect their high expectations of the students.

'There's a clear expectation when you walk around the school . . . it's quiet, it's industrious, the business is happening and anything other than that is not tolerated. In a sense the expectation is that you sit down, you have a go and you do what's presented in front of you. You do the best you can'. (Prairiewood High School)

These schools have made many improvements to their physical spaces (particularly since the introduction of the RAM funding model in 2012) to create a physical environment that reflects and promotes their high expectations.

'[We] spent a lot of resources on actually improving the physical spaces and having a clean, workable, well-maintained school environment. That makes a big difference. If they can see that money is spent on it they feel like they're worth it'. (St Johns Park High School)

'[The new] mezzanine level that he [the principal] is building in the library at the moment in support of our senior students . . . I think that lifts the profile as well, the high expectations that we are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty to give you the best environment so that you can learn in a place that you really respect and enjoy'. (Prairiewood High School)

Cultures and attitudes

These schools have a culture where they explicitly and visibly expect success of all of their students: *'there's a culture of we expect the kids to do well and I think they rise to our expectations'*. However, there was also recognition that expectations cannot be so high as to be unattainable, and that tailored individual goal setting was necessary:

'I think it's about standard setting and making goals achievable for students . . . expectations need to be realistic, and from realistic they turn into high. So a high expectation for a student who struggles is not the same as a high expectation for someone who's at the really top end, but they need to be achievable or realistic for both of those'. (Canley Vale High School)

A common theme across these schools was a culture of loudly and visibly celebrating each student's success, across all curricular and extra-curricular areas. As well as recognising the achievement of students who had come first, there was also a broader *'celebration of success or achievement of personal best'* for students across the range of different ability and achievement levels. An expectation that their work would be publicly displayed through both traditional media (e.g. the local newspaper) and social media (e.g. SkoolBag newsletter app, Facebook, Twitter) communicated the message that their hard work and achievements are valuable. Celebration of success beyond the school walls further contributes to *'creating that overarching engagement, so the kids can actually see that it's connecting with people outside the school as well'* (St Johns Park High School).

Programs and activities

These schools have focused their behaviour management approach towards setting high expectations, with explicit boundaries and consequences. In 2012, Bonnyrigg High School redesigned their approach to student behaviour, starting with a survey of students, parents and staff to find the school's core values. Staff and students worked together to collate these results, developing a values policy and a values plan. This collaborative approach was based on an underlying attitude that *'you get much better results from kids . . . and a whole lot more works if you can get them onside . . . it was about not doing stuff to kids, but doing stuff with kids'*.

This values work was refined into the acronym CHEER: Connections, Honesty, Empathy, Excellence, and Respect. This is displayed on large posters all around the school, and is embedded into school activities and the school merit system. Year seven students have regular lessons where they are explicitly taught about each of the core values and what that means for student behaviour.

There was a common theme amongst these schools of the importance of making the expectations, boundaries and values explicit and consistently reinforced:

'It's reinforced from orientation day, day one, we meet here. The second they walk through that gate. What's expected of your uniform, what's expected of your behaviour, they know what's expected of them. And we're just all on the same page and we just give the same message. When you walk through those gates, that's the expectation'. (Canley Vale High School)

'By pushing conformity, like really strict conformity in uniform, in really basic stuff. It sets a really clear tone. Then as the classroom teacher you're not pushing against any type of resistance because that's the expectation, and you can just say we're in class we do learning . . . You don't need to constantly be reminding those basic things because it's the culture'. (Fairvale High School)

Finally, these schools described how providing a wide range of additional academic supports helped to raise students' expectations of themselves. Fairvale High School's programs include a breakfast club, junior learning centre, holiday school and afternoon tutorials:

'It still doesn't feel punitive though. It feels like we're here to help, it's not like you're going to holiday school because you failed. It's like you're going to holiday school because we want you to do well. You're staying on a Monday afternoon because we want you to pass year ten, year eleven. We don't use that punitive language which I think helps in raising expectations. Rather than being in trouble, they feel like it's us empowering them'. (Fairvale High School)

Student Engagement

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement student engagement is included in table 3, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 3:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement student engagement

Student engagement		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
<p>Develop a strong understanding of students' cultures and backgrounds.</p> <p>Develop connections in the broader community to provide post-school opportunities and pathways for students.</p>	<p>The key to engagement is a sense of belonging.</p> <p>Flip disadvantage by focusing on helping others and taking a global perspective.</p> <p>Build positive relationships and rapport between teachers and students.</p>	<p>Offer a wide range of extracurricular activities and programs to cater to diverse student interests.</p> <p>School has to have 'something for everyone' – academic and/or extra-curricular – to sustain engagement.</p>

Systems and processes

A common theme amongst these schools was the importance of putting into place systems for connecting to their students' backgrounds and building a genuine understanding of the different cultural and linguistic contexts of their students. At Cabramatta High School, the school executive organised a number of overseas trips for staff to find out more about the cultural backgrounds of their students: *'we actually do get to go into classrooms and we do get to see the facilities, and it gives us that contextual understanding of where the kids are coming from. I think the kids value that we value them in that way'*. Several years ago, there was a rise in youth crimes amongst Pacific Islanders in their local area. The school's response highlights the importance of having systems for coming to understand students' backgrounds:

'We interviewed every [student of Pacific Islander background] that we had in the school, and we found out about their goals . . . we got a real lot of information about every single student, and then we put things in place to help them realise their dreams, and so we had mentoring with the police and we employed a CLO [Community Liaison Officer]. Since then, we've just gone from strength to strength . . . I think the engagement by that group of kids and that actual youth culture has really improved . . . it was a process of cultural change'. (Cabramatta High School)

These schools also emphasised the importance of building connections across the broader community to open up a wide range of post-school pathways and opportunities for their students. For example, Prairiewood High School employs a staff member to work on getting students access to scholarships:

'She [the teacher] engages them because the children get to sit and tell their story, so it's all disadvantage, out of home care, all that sort of stuff, poverty. So they get to sit down and talk to someone about their own personal life story and that in itself says, "Somebody listening to me, someone cares about me and then writes an application for me and we put it in and I get a little prize out of it. I feel special, I feel like people notice"'. (Prairiewood High School)

This personal approach keeps students engaged in their learning.

Cultures and attitudes

These schools all identified the importance of students feeling like they belonged in the school:

'The key to engagement is the sense of belonging'. (Cabramatta High School)

'An ex-student came to the school not long ago, and I remember him saying to me, "walking in this place is just like coming home again. I think that really encompasses what happens to the kids here'. (St Johns Park High School)

These schools emphasised the importance of flipping the idea of disadvantage upside down – although these students may be disadvantaged in some ways by Australian standards, when viewed from a global perspective they are relatively advantaged. These schools also emphasise the importance of doing volunteer work and helping those less fortunate – this connects high expectations with engagement.

'The students don't see themselves as being disadvantaged, so they actually spend lots of time running projects to look after other people in the community and that type of thing. It sets high expectations . . . that helps to feed into the learning in terms of what the teachers - in class the teachers set very high expectations for students'. (Cabramatta High School)

'We tend to do projects in other countries. Like we fundraised and built a school in Ethiopia. So the students are encouraged to be global citizens, and there is a huge emphasis on giving back. That feeds into that sense of belonging, being part of something bigger and that gives us increased engagement. So engagement for me, it's not just about are my kids sitting in the classroom being engaged in that particular lesson, it's actually that sense of belonging and us facilitating all sorts of programs that allow kids to feel like they're part of the school'. (Cabramatta High School)

These staff also focused on developing positive relationships with their students. There was a strong theme that warm, positive teacher-student relationships contribute to students' sense of confidence and connectedness with their learning:

'It's all about rapport and relationships . . . the teachers are here for the right reason and they really do understand their role, their wide and deep role. Rapport is such an important one in relation to student engagement and just having someone that the children can talk to. That gives them a sense of confidence'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

Programs and activities

These schools reported that student engagement was enhanced by having a wide array of special programs and extra-curricular activities – something for everyone. In more advantaged suburbs, parents typically offer this, but many of these students would not have those opportunities outside of school. Connecting to their interests helps keep them engaged in other areas of school. This was encapsulated in a general attitude that *'there's got to be something for everybody'*:

'The students who are not academically inclined have got something else where they can get success. So if you always focus on the academia, students who are not academic will be disengaged, will have a low self-esteem in front of that. But here, there are a lot of other opportunities for them to succeed'. (Cabramatta High School)

The incredible range of extracurricular opportunities available for students provided a full timetable of opportunities and activities for them to be engaged in, summarised in the sense that *'you can be here from 7am till 5pm every day and be entertained, well not entertained – educated – but you'd be doing something every minute of that time'* (Cabramatta High School). Examples of some of the activities on offer include volunteering in a local nursing home, the Duke of Edinburgh award program, fitness clubs, yoga classes, environment clubs, meditation classes and chess clubs. This was in addition to the wide range of sporting teams and creative arts programs on offer. Many of these activities link to the schools' wellbeing programs. In effect, for students who may not be inspired to come to school solely for their academic studies, these other activities keep them engaged:

'Fairvale has a big group of students that come to school to do sport . . . music is another one. Performing arts, they tend to be the same kids. Because they're engaged in that area of learning . . . to be able to be involved in those activities they need to go to other classes. That also keeps them engaged in school. A lot of them want to come to school because they're doing what they love'. (Fairvale High School)

Effective Teaching

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement effective teaching is included in table 4, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 4:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement effective teaching

Effective Teaching		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
<p>Combination of both explicit and integrated approaches to teaching literacy.</p> <p>Key staff take leadership of numeracy programming.</p> <p>Data used to identify student gaps in numeracy skills and knowledge.</p> <p>Additional teachers and School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) to tutor students to 'fill in gaps' in numeracy skills and knowledge.</p>	<p>Data-informed programming and planning, strongly led by the school executive.</p> <p>A belief that all students should be able to access the curriculum and therefore a focus on genuine curriculum differentiation.</p>	<p>Explicit lessons, including learning intentions, goals, feedback, student self-monitoring and explicit pathways to improvement (supports student engagement).</p> <p>Explicit assessments, including rubrics, feedback, student self-monitoring and explicit pathways to improvement (supports high expectations).</p>

Systems and processes

When describing their approach to effective teaching practice, there was a focus on systems and processes for teaching literacy and numeracy across the school.

These secondary schools identified a combination of both explicit and integrated approaches for teaching literacy across the school; explicit approaches lay the foundation for students being able to access more integrated approaches. For the secondary schools, a common explicit approach to literacy was to timetable specific literacy lessons each week for students in years 7-10, in addition to their English KLA lessons:

'During the 2010 to '14 period we did have explicit teaching of literacy . . . in learning support, not in English, we had explicit periods, it was two periods a week in Year 8, and we saw real growth then'. (Fairvale High School)

Common integrated approaches to literacy were through the 'Reading to Learn'¹⁴ and 'Focus on Reading'¹⁵ programs. These schools noted that the explicit and integrated approaches are complementary, but that the explicit strategies needed to be in place before the integrated ones.

Staff described three key aspects when developing systems for teaching numeracy: specific staff needed to take leadership of numeracy programming (in secondary schools, this was the mathematics faculty), substantial use of data to identify the areas that each student needs support with, and the use of additional teachers and School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) to intensively tutor students to 'fill in gaps' in their understanding. Having staff with mathematical expertise take ownership of numeracy programming meant that students received targeted support in mathematics lessons, whilst teachers received the tools, resources and support that they needed to teach the aspects of numeracy relevant to their KLA:

'So all the maths teachers for example took ownership of it and we said, "look, mathematics underpins numeracy and the kids need to be good at maths before they're going to be good at numeracy" . . . it's part of every KLA's curriculum, but they don't have ownership of it like maths teachers have ownership of it'. (Fairvale High School)

Similarly to literacy, there was a balance between explicit numeracy learning during mathematics lessons and integrated mathematics learning as appropriate in other KLAs. Again, the explicit approaches appear to underpin success with the integrated approaches.

¹⁴ Reading to Learn, see: <https://www.readingtolearn.com.au>

¹⁵ Focus on Reading, see: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum/literacy-and-numeracy/literacy/new-focus-on-reading>

Culture and attitudes

These schools took the approach that data has to inform all significant curriculum programming and planning decisions. NAPLAN data was used in conjunction with internal school assessment data to identify areas where individual students were struggling, with schools tailoring programs to meet student needs. This was made possible through professional learning to give teachers the skills to analyse the data, with executive staff then leading teachers in making programming and curricular decisions based on that analysis. There was an underlying culture of data-informed planning and an ongoing 'test and learn' cycle:

'We go through that model of identifying through data, then collaboratively looking at different approaches, and then implementation and evaluating again. We go through that cycle.'
(Cabramatta High School)

These schools also had highly skilled learning support staff, who could make curriculum differentiation genuine, rather than superficial. There was an overarching belief that all students should be able to access the curriculum at an appropriate level:

'We do owe a huge debt to our learning support staff who do an absolutely phenomenal job, whether it be modifying assessments or collaborating with staff to modify assessments to allow students to meet outcomes or even right down to assisting in the creation of resources that specifically target students who have different needs.' (St Johns Park High School)

Programs and activities

These schools made use of explicit learning intentions and teaching their students through a self-improvement cycle: setting goals, attempting tasks, getting feedback, and being explicitly shown the pathway to improvement. There is a strong emphasis on self-monitoring and on providing students with the study skills they need to turn their feedback into improved performance. This links to engagement – students need to understand what they are meant to be learning, if they have successfully mastered the skill or concept, and how to improve. Learning needs to be seen as not just a string of activities and assessments:

'We use learning intentions and success criteria. Every lesson has a learning intention, what we're trying to learn and how we're going to achieve it . . . Then you might have specific mini learning intentions for specific kids. Yours is punctuation, yours is capital letters after full stops. That's where you get to the nitty gritty . . . at the end we see have we achieved our learning intention? No? How can we change it? What can we do the next day?' (Fairfield Heights Public School)

'We give students an outline of what's coming up in that topic, so to be successful in this topic you need to be able to do this, this and this. It's done in kid-speak so that they understand what they have to do, and they can then plan themselves and then they can tick things off, and they can actually measure their own performance.' (Fairvale High School)

This strategy is mirrored with each assessment task: providing explicit rubrics or marking criteria, giving detailed feedback, and students self-monitoring their progress. This also supports consistent teacher judgement. This strategy links to high expectations – by making clear what the expectations are at all levels of achievement, it encourages the students to aim high in terms of building on their previous performance.

'From Year 7 to Year 12, we're giving them assignments which we mark ourselves and put a lot of red ink on and there's a lot of feedback going back to the students. So they're getting a picture of what good working out looks like, what good answers look like. So they're constantly getting that and they're getting feedback on what's not working so they can go away and fix it.' (Fairvale High School)

The combination of explicit learning intentions, detailed feedback, and providing pathways to improvement is supported by the earlier practices for fostering high expectations and engagement.

School Goals

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement school goals is included in table 5, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 5:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement school goals

School Goals		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
<p>Structured systems for implementing school goals: strategy, plan, implement, evaluate, embed.</p> <p>Leadership team has a clear division of responsibilities for leading management of change and progress towards goals.</p> <p>Good communication systems between executive and teaching staff.</p>	<p>A culture of evaluative thinking, where program evaluation is a routine part of school life and evidence is regularly collected and reflected upon.</p> <p>A culture of collaboration, where school goals are generated through a consultative process and seen as a team effort to implement.</p>	<p>A consistent approach to using data to drive and monitor school goals e.g. SMART, RAP.</p> <p>Professional learning is strategically linked to school goals; ongoing TPL drives school goals from vision to implementation.</p>

Systems and processes

Staff in these schools described how their school planning processes transform the school goals from idea to implementation. At St Johns Park High School, there was an emphasis on the school goals being visible at all levels of planning, from whole school, to faculty, to individual staff:

‘Once we’ve moved to the new school plan we have that overarching template that gives us the three strategic directions and then that’s reflected within our faculty goals . . . our staff reflect on them through their PDPs [Performance and Development Plans] as well. Even though we all understand the PDP is about individual growth and individual goals, we are asking them to look at the school’s directions and align it’. (St Johns Park High School)

At Bonnyrigg High School, the planning process was described as having five main stages: develop a strategy, write an action plan, implement the plan, evaluate the outcomes, and embed across the school. Underpinning this was a leadership structure that ensured each policy or goal had an executive member responsible for leading it, and a focus on turning high-level concepts into clear, actionable items through constant questioning of *‘what does it really mean? What does it look like?’*:

‘We spent a lot of time planning, a lot of time with the appropriate teams and with the executive, planning and putting things in place. And, having some really clear outcomes of where we wanted to go, in terms of improving’. (Bonnyrigg High School)

Similarly, staff at Fairfield Heights Public School spoke about the importance of having a system to translate the school plan from concept to reality through evaluation and reflection on outcomes and an ongoing focus on the future:

‘It’s all a stepping system, we have our goal, how can we best achieve that and how do we know when we’ve achieved something and where do we head next? That’s what the school plan is all about’. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

A common theme was the importance of clear and ongoing communication between school executive and all staff and an explicit chain of responsibilities for each part of the process:

‘With the school plan we had teams working on each strategic direction and then those teams meet, and they come from a range of faculties, and then that information is disseminated to all staff at staff meetings and via email. Then we discuss those at faculty meetings as needed and then various programs come out of those strategic directions and people have certain responsibilities within that’. (Prairiewood High School)

Culture and attitudes

Staff in these schools described an underlying culture of evaluative thinking as part of the ongoing process of reviewing school goals and outcomes. For example, St Johns Park High School has an intensive faculty review process where each year two faculties are 'audited' by the executive, resulting in a very detailed report outlining what changes need to be made. This is supported by the provision of the relevant professional learning, resources and guidance to make the changes. Prairiewood High School emphasised the importance of 'piloting' new programs or systems, and then evaluating their effectiveness and modifying before expanding across the school. There is a culture of 'show me the evidence' where faculties or stage teams cannot just claim to be doing something, they have to show what it is, how it is working and to what extent it is having an impact:

'We've just done some work on evaluation and talked about if we're doing it, it needs to have triangulated evaluation, so that informs our next planning cycle . . . We're taking them [the staff] through a workshop approach and they work with each other, working in small groups and then we give feedback . . . we say, "This is what's been said, can we prove it?"' (Cabramatta High School)

This evaluative culture was supported by an equally important culture of collaboration, where school goals are generated collaboratively and implemented through a teamwork approach:

'There's consultation at every point. We know that a new plan is being created and people are invited to be part of the teams then at each stage through staff meetings and several faculty meetings or strategic team meetings. There's constant collaboration and information given to everybody . . . there's ample opportunity for people to give feedback . . . there's lots of milestones along the way where people can contribute. It's very transparent'. (Prairiewood High School)

The evaluative and collaborative cultures were intertwined at Fairfield Heights Public School. Ongoing collaborative conversations and regular team meetings culminated in a yearly evaluation of teaching and learning programs:

'They [programs] are continually evaluated . . . evaluation of what's happening, is it working, is it not working and what can we change? At the end of each year we then have a look at all of our programs that we have in place and make any alterations based on the collaborative suggestions we've had along the way'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

Programs and activities

These schools have become very efficient and highly skilled in their ability to use data to both drive the identification of school goals and monitor their outcomes. A key theme was having a consistent approach to data across the school, for example through the use of SMART¹⁶ and RAP¹⁷ data analysis.

Professional learning is also managed in a strategic manner so that it is clearly linked to the school goals, rather than a series of incohesive external courses based on individual teacher interest. Professional learning is essential to develop school goals from vision to implementation:

'They have been really clearly communicated to the staff as whole-school goals and then we're making a lot of time, in terms of allowing time for teachers to engage with these areas of programming, pedagogy, the money that's been invested into professional learning'. (St Johns Park High School)

¹⁶ School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit, see: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/assessment-and-reporting/smart-data>.

¹⁷ Results Analysis Package, see: <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/hsc-results/rap.html>.

Collaboration

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement collaboration is included in table 6, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 6:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement collaboration

Collaboration		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
<p>Common 'core' teaching and learning programs across grades/KLAs, updated regularly as student needs change.</p> <p>Shared release time specifically timetabled so that teachers have dedicated time to work together within the school day.</p>	<p>Collaborative cultures develop gradually over time through collegial and supportive relationships.</p> <p>Open-door classroom culture, regular observing of each other's lessons.</p> <p>Informal, reflective conversations and ongoing sharing of ideas.</p> <p>Curriculum programming is a team activity and a collective responsibility.</p> <p>Collaborative planning by executive underpins teacher collaboration.</p>	<p>Use of technology e.g. Google docs, Sentral, shared drives, email.</p> <p>Shared physical spaces e.g. combined staffroom.</p> <p>Team teaching (two or more teachers working together with a single group of students).</p> <p>Open committee structure, so all staff are welcome to participate.</p> <p>Cross-faculty/team coordination of extracurricular activities.</p>

Systems and processes

These schools sought to break down many of the traditional barriers to making programming and planning a collaborative process. Fairfield Heights Public School had two systems that they implemented across the school to facilitate collaboration. The first was the use of 'core programs' to create consistency in programming. Core programs gave staff a common package of content, activities and teaching strategies from which to adapt for their students. This overcame the issue of each teacher having to develop their own individual program (which is itself a huge task) and fostered greater consistency between classes:

'The executive have collaborated so that we have a common structure for all of those grade programs K-6 . . . As an executive, we look at our school plan, we look at our assessment data. That informs the content of those core programs so they change . . . They contain explicit teaching strategies, so if for instance we've got a target in the school plan about improving numeracy, we'd look at what their student outcomes are in numeracy and look at the explicit strategies we need to put in that core program to make that target happen . . . The grade program is given to the teachers . . . The teacher's job is to differentiate those programs according to the needs of the students in their class. From a collaborative point of view that drives what happens in grade meetings, it drives assessment so we're all on the same platform'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

The second system was the provision of dedicated release time during the school day for collaboration, rather than expecting it to be done before/after school. Fairfield Heights Public School had strategically timetabled release time so that staff on each grade were all off class at the same time, enabling them to collaborate on programming and planning across the grade:

'Our structures in terms of our teachers' release time, for example, all grades are off together to foster that collaboration . . . that gives teachers an opportunity for collaborative practice, discussion and feedback'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

'All the teachers on the same grade can all take release time together. That's where a lot of our planning, our programming and all of that takes place. A lot of those informal conversations where we're discussing all those strategies and sharing resources and looking at student work samples'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

Culture and attitudes

These schools described their staff as having ‘a long term culture of collaboration . . . the culture is that everybody chips in together and works together’ (Cabramatta High School). Rather than an old-fashioned ‘closed classroom door culture’, staff in these schools took regular opportunities to share ideas, simply through ‘day-to-day reflective conversations, sharing even an anecdote about a resource that worked well’ (St Johns Park High School). This manifests in an attitude that curriculum programming was both a team activity and a collective responsibility. At Canley Vale High School, each unit of work and each KLA program was positioned so that ‘everyone has access to it, everyone’s adding to it, everyone’s building it . . . it’s definitely a culture in my faculty that we do that’. Staff described taking a strengths-based approach to programming large units of work, where each staff member contributed to the program through a series of ‘small collaborative groups that actually then focussed on their strengths’ so that ‘everyone had some part to play in developing and putting together our junior program’.

More deeply, there was a sense that collaboration was underpinned by two things. The first was the development over time of positive, collegial and supportive relationships amongst staff:

‘I think of it [collaboration] as the relationships between staff . . . one of the issues we have is communication because it [the school] is so huge. The relationships you have between teachers enables you to actually get a better picture of a student as they move through high school. It’s filling in the gaps where the databases and the paper work and the paper trails aren’t really giving you that picture. It’s more like the informal discussion about students and issues that have come up in the past and strategies that have worked that really allow you to shape your classes’. (Fairvale High School)

The second was a sense that collaborative planning by the executive underpinned teacher collaboration. For example, the executive team at Fairfield Heights Public School described themselves as an ‘extremely cohesive executive team’ and explained how they used ‘executive data days’ to go through student assessment data and ‘look for common threads or successes and things that are causing concern’ to feed into the collaborative planning conversations that teachers have in their grade teams. Similarly, the executive team at St Johns Park High School described their executive meetings as having ‘a lot of collaboration and group work’. Before implementing any new initiative or change, they felt that it was ‘really important at an exec level that we’re all on the same page before we deliver it out’.

Programs and activities

When considering how collaboration was implemented, staff identified that ‘communication is the key word’ (Fairvale High School). This was facilitated through smart use of technology, including shared drives online, google apps to share documents, the Sentral¹⁸ online welfare system, and regular, concise emails to keep everyone up to date. Cabramatta High School redesigned their physical space to make collaboration easier, particularly through their shared staffroom:

‘The other thing we’ve got to our advantage is we’ve got a common staffroom. It was purpose built for the amount of people that we were coming with. That’s huge for collaboration because if you want to talk about program, if you want to talk about strategy . . . it’s really easy to talk to the maths teacher and it’s really easy to talk to the science teacher and so on.’ (Cabramatta High School)

Other schools identified team teaching, an open committee structure and cross-faculty/team staff running extra-curricular activities as key activities that bought collaboration to life:

‘We have with that [equity] funding been able to get extra teachers so there’s a collaborative approach in the classroom as well . . . there’s often two teachers rather than just the one . . . so there’s that collaboration between the staff members as well as that collaboration within the classroom’. (Fairvale High School)

‘We also have, for example, an assessment reporting committee that looks at the assessment tasks and reporting, and that’s cross-faculty . . . you can just dip into it. If you’ve got something that you want to raise you can come and present that to the committee and that’s discussed. So it’s not as though they’re closed shops’. (Prairiewood High School)

‘It’s a strong theme at this school that all the extracurricular stuff, there is a big mix of staff across the school that get involved. They run a fitness club that you could be forgiven for thinking the PE faculty would run, but it’s not. There’s teachers from all different faculties that get involved’. (Prairiewood High School)

¹⁸ Sentral school management system, see: <https://www.sentral.com.au>

Professional Learning

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs that schools use to implement professional learning is included in table 7, and discussed in greater detail below.

Table 7:

A summary of the systems, cultures and programs schools use to implement professional learning

Professional Learning		
Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
TPL timetable planned yearly in advance, with flexibility to respond to emerging needs.	Open door culture of sharing resources, asking questions and seeking advice from colleagues.	Balance between whole-school TPL and small-group learning.
TPL strategically linked to PDPs and school goals.	Staff given some choice in TPL, interest drives engagement.	High quality, external expertise brought in where appropriate.
Innovative timetabling across schools e.g. Twilight evenings, Super Saturdays, across schools. Sustained focus on a single issue over a term.	A culture of staff leading each other in TPL creates a collaborative environment and facilitates ongoing learning.	Majority of TPL run in-house. This builds staff capacity and allows TPL to be highly tailored to school needs and contexts.
TPL embedded into school routines, not an 'extra'.		

Systems and processes

Staff in these schools were unanimous in their recognition of and appreciation for the large amount of money and resources that are devoted to ongoing teacher professional learning (TPL). A common theme was the importance of having a system for using individual staff PDPs [Performance and Development Plans] in conjunction with whole school goals to strategically plan for TPL across a school. For example:

'She [the Deputy] took a lot of time in looking at people's PDP goals and mapping it on an Excel spreadsheet and looking at common threads about what people wanted and why . . . now the professional learning has been charted and it's towards people's needs and it's based on data. A lot of the things that we do now are based on data, so we've really evaluated, analysed, reflected and then we've made decisions based on the data'. (Prairiewood High School)

Whilst the schools were in agreement on the benefits of having a year-long TPL timetable strategically planned and made available to all staff in advance, they also noted the importance of having the scope to respond to emerging needs throughout the year and add additional workshops or activities as necessary.

Many of these schools have flipped the conventional structure of using the last two days of the year for professional learning through a combination of 'twilight evening' and/or 'super Saturday' events. Staff can attend TPL at planned evening or weekend sessions in lieu of the final two days. Many of these schools were collaborating with each other to expand the range of TPL on offer during these sessions and to share local expertise. There was also an emphasis on the benefits of sustained professional learning over a longer period of time. Fairvale High School hosts an annual two-day TPL conference each year:

'The school also provides opportunities for collaboration through professional learning. We have an annual conference every year, which is a sleepover . . . that allows for networking amongst other staff and we're usually seated with other faculties'. (Fairvale High School)

Cabramatta High School uses their fortnightly faculty TPL sessions to have a continued focus on a single topic over the course of a school term:

'You do five sessions in that because the research shows it's not a one-off but sustained learning and time to practice that is true professional learning'. (Cabramatta High School)

These systems all serve to embed TPL into regular school routines and structures, rather than being an 'extra' demand on teachers' time.

Culture and attitudes

Staff in these schools identified three key attitudes as underpinning their approach to TPL. The first was an informal, 'open door policy' that created a culture whereby staff were always sharing with each other and learning from each other:

'You've got your informal professional development. I think we really have a bit of an open-door policy in this school, like there is this comfort and everyone's welcome to walk into another classroom to observe . . . there's always people walking in or saying, "Can I share a resource?" or "Can you help me with this?"' (Canley Vale High School)

The second was a culture of giving staff choice in their TPL, rather than mandating what they have to do. The systems described above mean that staff can be offered a wider range of TPL opportunities and 'you get to go to things that interest you, rather than, "You have to listen to this"' (Prairiewood High School). This helps staff to be engaged in their TPL.

Thirdly, TPL in these schools is underpinned by 'a culture of staff leading other staff in professional learning' (Cabramatta High School). At its simplest level, there is an expectation that if staff attend external TPL, they will share their learnings with their colleagues when they return to school, typically through team meetings. More broadly, there is an emphasis in these schools of identifying staff strengths and interests as a key source of TPL:

'[We] try to get different members of staff to showcase some of their work. If someone has a particular area of strength or expertise or is trying something new then we try to provide opportunities for them to share that'. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

'Anybody that has an interest or a passion or expertise in something, they can run some [TPL] sessions'. (Prairiewood High School)

'What we're doing with professional learning it relies on collaboration again because we're asking a lot of staff to share something that they know a lot about. Then other staff learn from them so again we're collaborating'. (Prairiewood High School)

This approach feeds into the collaborative culture in these schools and strengthens capacity building across a school:

'Having a staff member or a colleague deliver professional learning also takes away that barrier of having someone who you might be reluctant to ask questions to or who you're not certain quite understands the school cultural context . . . they're an ongoing resource because they're a point of contact in the school that you know is experienced, they're an asset that you can return to for clarification or for collaborative planning'. (St Johns Park High School)

Programs and activities

TPL activities in these schools contained a balance of whole school TPL delivered to all staff and small group learning, 'where it's a bit more intimate and you get that conversation opportunity to discuss various things' (St Johns Park High School).

Whilst these schools highlighted the benefit of accessing external expertise and having 'really high-quality people coming into the school to deliver TPL', there was a clear preference to having the majority of TPL activities designed and delivered in-house, taking advantage of the broad spectrum of staff available in these large schools. The main advantages of this were that it builds staff capacity, is needs-driven and is tailored to school context:

'We have a lot of people in our school delivering professional learning to the staff on staff development days and twilight sessions and things like that. I just find that builds the capacity within those people and also it means that they're delivering things that are actually targeted at our school and what we need . . . It's needs driven not supply driven . . . I think that it feels more and more targeted to what the school needs rather than what is maybe trendy at the time'. (St Johns Park High School)

3. What are the interrelationships between these practices?

Whilst it is clear that each practice has its own distinctive elements, the discussion so far has shown that these six practices are closely related to each other. Furthermore, it is also evident that some of the practices co-occur with each other in specific ways. During focus group discussions, Fairfield teachers and school executive were asked to describe their perception of the interrelationships between the practices. Across all seven schools, they identified two key clusters of practices, with some discussion of order effects evident within each cluster.

Cluster 1: Quality teaching and learning

Three of the practices were identified as being the drivers of quality teaching and learning: high expectations, student engagement and effective teaching. Having high expectations for students underpins the culture that fosters student engagement. Together, these two foundational practices create an ideal environment for effective teaching practices to be implemented. Teachers also recognised that effective teaching also leads to greater student engagement. Over time, high expectations, student engagement and effective teaching combine to create quality teaching and learning in the classroom.

Cluster 2: Positive professional culture

The remaining three practices were identified as being the drivers of a positive professional culture amongst school staff: school goals, collaboration and professional learning. Strategically identified and clearly articulated goals create a shared vision for school staff. This vision in turn gives purpose and direction for teachers' collaborative practices, as staff work together in pursuit of these goals. Professional learning facilitates a collaborative culture, whilst also providing the skills, knowledge and resources necessary to reach the goals. These three practices combine to generate positive professional relationships amongst teachers and school leaders, where ongoing learning is valued and the team culture is one of cohesion, trust and an openness to trying new things.

The six practices in action

Over time, each school adjusts their weighting or emphasis on each of these practices, according to the individual school's journey towards change, growth and improvement. Their emphasis will also shift as student and/or teacher populations change over time.

These interactions are represented in Figure 2. The inner circle contains the key elements of quality teaching and learning i.e. the core work of a school, manifest in productive and cohesive relationships between teachers and students. The outer circle contains the elements of a positive professional culture i.e. the broader work of a school, manifest in positive professional relationships between teachers and school leaders.

A summary of the systems, cultures and activities identified for each of the six practices is also included in the **appendix**.

Figure 2:

The interrelationship between the six practices



Note: The inner circle contains the key elements of quality teaching and learning. The outer circle contains the key elements of a positive professional culture.

4. How do these schools foster consistency of practice, both across the school and over time?

This case study also showed how the six key practices themselves foster consistency. Analysis of the data revealed that, rather than having to find ways to make each practice consistent, optimal implementation of each practice itself promoted consistency. Therefore, there was no need to explicitly emphasise consistency, as the implementation itself led to consistency across the school. Consistency over time was further supported by stability in the key membership of the executive leadership team. For each of the six practices, Fairfield teachers and school executive described how each practice was consistently implemented within their schools.

Firstly, these schools described the importance of having consistently **high expectations** of all teachers. At Fairvale High School, this was fostered through the executive ensuring that all staff know and understand the school plan and strategic directions: *'[there are] consistently high expectations . . . We know our three focus areas, we know that the executive are working towards that'*. Staff at Prairiewood High School emphasised the importance of having clear roles and responsibilities: *'there are clear expectations in what each classroom teacher, each head teacher, each faculty is responsible for'*. This extended into a culture where teacher underperformance is considered unacceptable:

'[Other teachers] won't tolerate poor performance, they won't tolerate inefficiency and the fact that those kids deserve better . . . there is a culture of we want the best teacher that we can possibly get in front of every student, every class'. (Prairiewood High School)

The emphasis on high expectations is fostered by a balance between accountability and trust. Staff at Prairiewood High School emphasised the importance of monitoring programs and practices throughout the year. They described a series of *'checks and balances'* to ensure that all staff are following policies and practices, monitored by the Head Teachers. Head Teachers, in turn, have regular meetings with the Deputy Principals, who ensure that programming is up to date and *'all of those things are being ticked off'*. This was summarised as *'taking the pulse'* of the school:

'Monitoring and accountability . . . Every six months we [the Deputy Principals] talk to the head teachers about how they're travelling and so it's that constant reflection on our practice and tweaking things and making sure that we're on track, taking the pulse of what's happening in the school'. (Prairiewood High School)

Accountability was balanced by a feeling that staff were trusted. There is an openness to trying new things, and a culture of *'no blame and shame'* when things go wrong:

'Sharing outcomes helps. Good, bad or indifferent you share whatever happens . . . But there's no blame and shame attached to that'. (Cabramatta high School)

'The message that we try and send about accountability is . . . we don't really blame people for things. We just say, "Here's an issue. Let's sort it. Let's fix it and get on with it,"'. (Prairiewood High School)

Secondly, staff in these schools described how **highly engaged** the teachers are. At the simplest level, this would manifest as the staff genuinely caring for the students and being willing to go above and beyond to give their students as many opportunities as possible:

'I think we have a really amazing group of staff who are really motivated to give the kids those opportunities. There's nothing that's too much trouble or nothing that's too much paperwork or too much of a hassle'. (St Johns Park High School)

Staff at St Johns Park High School described their school as ‘very warm’, ‘exceedingly welcoming’ and a ‘very positive atmosphere’, which had the effect of drawing new teachers into the school’s activities and processes. Staff in these schools also emphasised the role that their induction programs play in creating consistency in the school’s culture and practices. These programs went well beyond having a handbook and an introduction to basic school procedures (although this is important), but rather incorporated very structured, thorough induction programs that run over several school terms and addressed all aspects of teaching practice:

‘We have a weekly meeting with all the beginning teachers and in their first term that they’re here we look at the orientation to the school practice . . . they can come and they can ask any question. It cultivates the feeling of trust . . . Then the next term we start to look at their practice in the classroom . . . Then by term three we start to look at the evidence and specifically relate that to the teaching standards . . . It’s not about supervision, which is a different set of accountabilities. This is about professional growth as a teacher’. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

Reflecting the strong connection between high expectations and engagement, these induction programs engaged new teachers with the school’s culture and practices and also made explicit the fact that there are consistently high expectations of all teachers:

‘[The induction program] told those new staff coming in this is what it’s like here. This is the high expectations we have for your work and the work of the kids in your classes. This is how you can go about really being a quality teacher at this school, this is how we’re going to support you to be that . . . It just sets the bar I suppose from day one’. (St Johns Park High School)

Thirdly, these schools use particular tools and frameworks to facilitate **effective teaching**. There was broad agreement that whole school templates, scope and sequence documents, programming manuals and how-to guides provided the foundation for consistent administration, programming and planning across the school. Digital platforms such as Sentral¹⁹ and Google Docs were convenient tools for making access to information between staff. The recent introduction of new syllabus documents provided an opportunity to streamline teaching programs:

‘We developed a programming model based on the 5E’s [Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate], then we had a school scope and sequence about the topics of history, geography and science. Every teacher collaboratively worked with a partner to write one of these units . . . now we have a framework across history, geography and science that collaboratively links the RFF [Release from Face to Face] programs, classroom teacher programs K-6, fulfils the syllabus requirements and they have really enjoyed the experience of putting timing to a unit and seeing the other teachers on the grade teach it’. (Fairfield Heights Public School)

Teachers also commented on the role of the Professional Standards for Teachers²⁰ in creating consistency of teaching practices across a school:

‘I think what is going to bring greater consistency is the teaching standards. Now I am not a new scheme teacher, but now, we are all thinking about accreditation and what a proficient teacher looks like, what a highly accomplished teacher looks like. So that is going to bring even greater consistency’. (Canley Vale High School)

Fourthly, the leadership teams within these schools have a strong emphasis on their **school goals**. The school goals create a consistent vision for where a school is aiming. Whilst goals were often developed collaboratively, the executive team had a responsibility to make all staff feel that they have an important part to play in bringing the vision to life:

‘It’s a matter of getting the staff on board. It’s about sharing the vision . . . if you can get the staff on board with that and identifying the things they’re already good at and incorporating that into the school vision then everyone seems to feel like they’re part of it’. (St Johns Park High School)

School leaders focused on the importance of ‘getting the staff on board’ with the school goals. The need for teachers and school leaders to trust each other was a common theme:

‘I think from the top down perspective, if there’s trust and there’s faith and we can see that the top’s great, you’re likely to get on board a lot more and that culture is really important’. (Fairvale High School)

¹⁹ Sentral school management system, see: <https://www.sentral.com.au>

²⁰ NSW Education Standards Authority Professional Standards for Teachers, see: <http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/teacher-accreditation/how-accreditation-works/guide-to-accreditation/professional-standards>

The executive team at Fairvale High School talked about the importance of executive staff minimising the number of days they are away from school, as this sets an expectation of high attendance for both staff and students: *'that standard is set at the executive level, it filters down to the staff and then it filters down to the kids'*.

Moreover, a **collaborative** approach, where staff feel a sense of shared responsibility for school programs, enhances feelings of trust amongst teachers:

'A lot of it still comes back to the exec and knowing who is driving which teams. Those people then are investing trust and responsibility in others to make sure more people are involved in making these things happen . . . There's a shared responsibility'. (St Johns Park High School)

Engaging in a collaborative approach to programming and planning ensures greater consistency across the school:

'Because of all these new programs . . . across all different faculties because of that constant communication, that constant collaboration, that constant getting together. It makes a world of a difference as a school culture'. (St Johns Park High School)

Finally, targeted **professional learning** is used to embed new practices, so that they quickly become *'business as usual'*. Staff at Prairiewood High School identified the role that consistent professional learning has in developing consistency across a school:

'I think the professional learning because it's more regular now . . . it's more timely when it's spaced out throughout the year and because it happens more often you get more consistency . . . the quicker you can address something, the more consistent you can be'. (Prairiewood High School)

Strategic use of staff meetings to reiterate the importance of key concepts and programs also fosters consistency:

'When we meet in our staff meetings we often have the teams present information or data they've gathered or just reiterate something that's already been said. That maintains that consistency because staff become aware of the fact that this isn't going away. It's embedded in our school vision and in our processes'. (St Johns Park High School)

In summary, these schools do not address consistency as a discrete focus because the six practices themselves foster consistency of practice.

5. What is it about the nature of these schools that has enabled their success?

As in any case study, these exemplary practices need to be carefully contextualised; part of each school's success lies in their unique contextual features. During focus group discussion, Fairfield teachers and school executive identified three distinctive features that they felt had contributed to their success:

- local area collaboration amongst Fairfield schools;
- students and parents placing a high value on education; and
- a persistence by school staff to pursue better opportunities and higher expectations for their students.

Each of these points is further discussed below.

Local area collaboration

These schools, over many years, have developed a series of systems for collaborating with schools in their local area. The 'Fairfield 11' is an established group of eleven schools in the Fairfield area (including the secondary schools in this case study) whose principals get together once a term for professional learning and support. The secondary schools work on collaborating with their feeder primary schools to support the transition to high school and also to share resources and expertise e.g. a mathematics teacher at Cabramatta High School runs accelerated maths classes for local primary students one afternoon a week; a music teacher at St Johns Park High School runs a music program in the local primary school.

Teams of teachers have programming days with teachers from their KLA in the local area e.g. HSIE programming days at Canley Vale High School. These schools are also very open to visiting other schools to observe particular practices and programs of interests that are running successfully. They then take these practices back to their own school to change and adapt them for their students:

'Wherever there are pockets of best practice we go and we have a look and see what information we can get, and likewise we welcome people to come here'. (Prairiewood High School)

The key message here is that these schools are open to learning from each other and recognising their different strengths and weaknesses. Rather than competing with each other, there is an emphasis on learning from each other:

'The Fairfield network is quite unique in the sense that most of the principals have been at the schools for quite some time now, some of us started at the same time, and we all actually get on with each other quite well personally and professionally . . . it's quite a different feeling in that it's not competitive. So we all realise we've got different strengths'. (Fairvale High School)

The value of education

The staff in these schools commented on the significance of the cultural backgrounds of their students. Many (but certainly not all) of these students start school, in effect, primed by their families to place a high value on their education and to take school seriously:

'[The] majority of our parents have come from a [background] where education is highly valued. That has translated into the students'. (Cabramatta High School)

'We've got an advantage at this school because we've got a culture . . . that really enables us because they [the students] are here, they want to learn. It establishes a school culture where learning is important'. (Cabramatta High School)

There was also a clear sense that the parental support provided within these school, both implicit and explicit, helped these students to thrive. This could be as simple as parents ensuring their children have the rights books and equipment for school, but also extended to a broader support and trust by parents of the school:

'That parental support that is provided here, you may not find it elsewhere. I think it's a vital remedy in here. You can replace the school community with another community and I reckon you would have varied results'. (Canley Vale High School)

'There's a huge trust [from the parents] that we are going to deliver for their kids'. (Canley Vale High School)

The teachers were keen to acknowledge that the fact that these students recognise that *'education for them is a key ingredient in success and their future'* means that replication of these six practices in other contexts would not necessarily produce the same results:

'The parental expectation is very high and obviously the kids are expected to come here and learn . . . One thing that is undervalued is the culture of the community and of the kids themselves because they come with an appreciation of learning and education'. (Canley Vale High School)

This underlying culture of valuing education appears to create an optimal environment for the six practices to thrive.

Demand and insist on better opportunities and higher expectations

The staff in these schools, whilst acutely aware of the relative disadvantage in aspects of their students' lives, described a determination to ensure that their students did not have a disadvantaged education. Schools cannot overcome all aspects of disadvantage, but schools can be a critical space for better opportunities and higher expectations. The principal of Fairfield Heights Public school captured this view the best:

'We don't see our children as disadvantaged as such, because as soon as that happens a certain mindset takes place that says these poor little ones, they really have very little hope because they come from such a disadvantaged background . . . We don't accept that as a school and as a staff and that's a very, very important point here. We see ourselves as creating opportunities for children, we see that our children will learn . . . Schools cannot compensate for society, but they do their bit about building a more equitable, democratic society . . . What Garth Boomer [the Australian educationalist] also says is that we should demand and insist . . . We demand that they do their best and we demand our teachers to do their best to give them that opportunity. We're very proud of that'.

This approach pairs the 'demanding' of high expectations and better opportunities and the 'persistence' to consistently pursue this over the long term. This also echoes the earlier theme around the importance of having high expectations for these students without reference to their relative disadvantage. The key point here is the need for appropriate resources, teaching practices and educational opportunities to translate these high expectations into better long term outcomes for students. This is reflected in the high numbers of students in these schools who report in the *Tell Them From Me* survey that they intend to go on to further studies after school (including university), often as the first person in their family to do so.

6. Sustaining Success – Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated how the six effective practices are implemented in each of the Fairfield HVA schools. Each practice has systems and processes to support the practice, cultures and attitudes to promote the practice and programs and activities to implement the practice.

It is also evident that some of the practices co-occur with each other in specific ways that feed into the teaching and learning in these schools. High expectations, student engagement and effective teaching combine to create classrooms where quality teaching and learning is a sustainable, everyday practice. This is the core work of a school, manifest in productive and cohesive relationships between teachers and students.

School goals, collaboration and professional learning combine to create a positive professional culture amongst teachers and school leaders, where ongoing learning is valued and the team ethos is one of cohesion, trust and an openness to trying new ideas.

A focus on these practices creates the conditions for consistency of practice, both across a school and over time. Leadership stability also plays an important role in creating consistency.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Fairfield is a unique part of Sydney. Given the specificity of this case study to the Fairfield context, caution should be taken when generalising from these findings. This case study is not a 'recipe book' of activities to replicate, but rather is a window into how these schools are implementing these practices. The intention is that other schools can learn from these examples and consider how they may be adapted to meet the particular needs of their staff and students.

As was demonstrated in the introduction, the findings in this case study have strong parallels with other departmental publications and frameworks, in particular the NSW 'Quality Teaching Model' and the CESE report 'What Works Best'. The high degree of overlap here strengthens the findings and highlights their robustness.

It is also known from previous CESE publications that these six practices are present in other HVA schools. It may be useful to conduct similar case study work in high performing schools in other regions to bring to light similarities and differences across the state.

Appendix: How do the Fairfield HVA schools implement the six practices?

Cluster 1: Quality teaching & learning			
	Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
High expectations	<p>High expectations are matched with high support.</p> <p>Comprehensive student welfare and wellbeing systems.</p> <p>Case management of individual students, quickly and discretely.</p> <p>Structured daily routines.</p> <p>Pleasant physical learning spaces.</p>	<p>Visibly expect success of all students.</p> <p>Celebrate success and achievement for all students.</p> <p>Display and promote student achievement, including with the wider community.</p>	<p>School values are clearly articulated and explicitly taught.</p> <p>Social skills taught and reinforced regularly.</p> <p>Behaviour management programs consistent across the school.</p> <p>Additional academic support programs available to anyone who needs them.</p>
Student engagement	<p>Develop a strong understanding of students' cultures and backgrounds.</p> <p>Develop connections in the broader community to provide post-school opportunities and pathways for students.</p>	<p>The key to engagement is a sense of belonging.</p> <p>Flip disadvantage by focusing on helping others and taking a global perspective.</p> <p>Build positive relationships and rapport between teachers and students.</p>	<p>Offer a wide range of extracurricular activities and programs to cater to diverse student interests.</p> <p>School has to have 'something for everyone' – academic and/ or extra-curricular – to sustain engagement.</p>
Effective teaching	<p>Combination of both explicit and integrated approaches to teaching literacy.</p> <p>Key staff take leadership of numeracy programming.</p> <p>Data used to identify student gaps in numeracy skills and knowledge.</p> <p>Additional teachers and School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) to tutor students to 'fill in gaps' in numeracy skills and knowledge.</p>	<p>Data-informed programming and planning, strongly led by the school executive.</p> <p>A belief that all students should be able to access the curriculum and therefore a focus on genuine curriculum differentiation.</p>	<p>Explicit lessons, including learning intentions, goals, feedback, student self-monitoring and explicit pathways to improvement (supports student engagement).</p> <p>Explicit assessments, including rubrics, feedback, student self-monitoring and explicit pathways to improvement (supports high expectations).</p>

Cluster 2: Positive professional culture

	Systems & processes	Cultures & attitudes	Programs & activities
School goals	<p>Structured systems for implementing school goals: strategy, plan, implement, evaluate, embed.</p> <p>Leadership team has a clear division of responsibilities for leading management of change and progress towards goals.</p> <p>Good communication systems between executive and teaching staff.</p>	<p>A culture of evaluative thinking, where program evaluation is a routine part of school life and evidence is regularly collected and reflected upon.</p> <p>A culture of collaboration, where school goals are generated through a consultative process and seen as a team effort to implement.</p>	<p>A consistent approach to using data to drive and monitor school goals e.g. SMART, RAP.</p> <p>Professional learning is strategically linked to school goals; ongoing TPL drives school goals from vision to implementation.</p>
Collaboration	<p>Common 'core' teaching and learning programs across grades/KLAs, updated regularly as student needs change.</p> <p>Shared release time specifically timetabled so that teachers have dedicated time to work together within the school day.</p>	<p>Collaborative cultures develop gradually over time through collegial and supportive relationships.</p> <p>Open-door classroom culture, regular observing of each other's lessons.</p> <p>Informal, reflective conversations and ongoing sharing of ideas.</p> <p>Curriculum programming is a team activity and a collective responsibility.</p> <p>Collaborative planning by executive underpins teacher collaboration.</p>	<p>Use of technology e.g. Google docs, Sentral, shared drives, email.</p> <p>Shared physical spaces e.g. combined staffroom.</p> <p>Team teaching (two or more teachers working together with a single group of students).</p> <p>Open committee structure, so all staff are welcome to participate.</p> <p>Cross-faculty/team coordination of extracurricular activities.</p>
Professional learning	<p>TPL timetable planned yearly in advance, with flexibility to respond to emerging needs</p> <p>TPL strategically linked to PDPs and school goals.</p> <p>Innovative timetabling across schools e.g. Twilight evenings, Super Saturdays, across schools. Sustained focus on a single issue over a term.</p> <p>TPL embedded into school routines, not an 'extra'.</p>	<p>Open door culture of sharing resources, asking questions and seeking advice from colleagues.</p> <p>Staff given some choice in TPL, interest drives engagement.</p> <p>A culture of staff leading each other in TPL creates a collaborative environment and facilitates ongoing learning.</p>	<p>Balance between whole-school TPL and small-group learning.</p> <p>High quality, external expertise brought in where appropriate.</p> <p>Majority of TPL run in-house. This builds staff capacity and allows TPL to be highly tailored to school needs and contexts.</p>

A network diagram consisting of numerous light blue circular nodes of varying sizes connected by thin white lines, set against a dark teal background. The nodes are scattered across the page, with a higher density in the lower right quadrant.

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