

Blairmount Public School students learn by leading



Campbelltown, NSW

"Through The Connection I met a colleague from South Australia who introduced me to the notion of student voice and it was like a 'light bulb moment' for me, it's really opened my eyes to putting students front and centre and giving them a voice in the direction of the school."

Principal Greg Turnbull

Transforming learning by letting students lead

"Most schools focus on developing 'positive behaviour' to support learning," says Principal Greg Turnbull. "Our focus is if kids are learning well, then their behaviour will improve."

Inspired, through The Connection, by schools in South Australia and their work around student voice and leadership, in 2018 Blairmount Public School worked with other public schools in Campbelltown to identify priority areas to improve student learning. They found the highest priority was to develop a 'learner identity' through the creation of 'learner qualities'.

Students were invited to co-design a program with staff and decided to promote seven learner qualities: curious, challenged, risk-taker, problem-solver, collaborative, determined and reflective.

But the students wanted to take this much further and create exciting learning tools to roll these out to the whole school. A student focus group – called the 'Fully Charged' team, worked with a graphic designer to develop visual representations for these learner qualities – into posters, cartoons, a plush toy, life-size costumes, pencil cases, drink bottles and fridge magnets to take home.



The "Fully Charged" team then led the roll out of the learner qualities to the whole school.

[Watch Olivia](#), a member of the Fully Charged team explain more about the seven Learner Qualities and introduce WhyFi – an iPad character who uses all the Learner Qualities to become, "fully interested, fully in charge, fully ignited, fully inspired, fully involved and fully innovative."

These videos were posted on [Blairmount Public School's facebook page](#) in early August.

"We want to create engaging learning experiences - make the learning exciting, engaging, relevant and authentic. If you get all that right, you won't have a behaviour problem," says Principal Turnbull.

Learner quality language is now used consistently by staff and students in all facets of school life. 73% of teachers use the language of the learner qualities in their classrooms daily.

Now, when students are asked about being a learner, instead of talking about behaviour, they talk about the seven learner qualities and can articulate what they are learning and next steps, demonstrating a more future-focused attitude to learning.

Fully Charged team member Olivia says "When we are curious like WhyFi we ask questions, we wonder about things, we are eager to know or learn something, we want to learn and explore, we want to solve problems, we are fascinated about learning new things, we are fully interested in learning and we are fully ignited because we want to know more."

Fawaz in Year 6 sums up the student response: "I think the learner qualities help me a lot ... First, we are curious and taking risks, then we are in the pit and are problem solvers and challenged and we need to collaborate and be determined and then we are reflective on our learning at the end to improve. To be a good learner means to use all of the learner qualities".

This is just one example of how the school has embedded student voice in decision making and empowered students to teach others. They also invite students into professional development sessions in staff meetings, and students have given presentations at internal and external conferences.

To enhance student agency and engagement the school also launched Student Voice Hour. This weekly initiative included a range of activities, starting with passion projects that were focused on building student interests and experiences, such as cooking and Garage Band. Students that showed an interest in addressing school challenges and leading sustainable change engaged in student voice hour projects, including Sports Coaching, Kindergarten Orientation, Fully Charged, Innovation Team and the Media Team. Student Voice Hour empowered students to develop leadership, communication and teamwork skills, as well as learner dispositions.

Another new approach is to hold Learning Conversations with parents and carers - to engage them in discussion about their child's learning. Parents and carers have commented that they have a better understanding of their child's learning and what they needed to work on to improve. By 2019, many students planned and hosted their own Learning Conversations, with teachers taking the role of facilitator.

"Giving students the lead is revolutionary, but we have found that when the children lead, learning becomes authentic providing other students and teachers have a more relevant and exciting learning experience," says Principal Turnbull.

School characteristics and challenges

The Blairmount area in north-west Campbelltown has a rating of 924 on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage¹. Nearly half (47%) of Blairmount Public School's 520 students have a language background other than English as well as 10% who identify as being Aboriginal.

The school is future focussed and has modern facilities with up to date technology and resources, including 1:1 iPad devices K-6. These technologies foster quality teaching and learning by allowing students to work in teams, personalise their learning and think critically and creatively.

Three quarters of the students live in Claymore, where according to the 2016 Census the median household income was \$700/week (half the national average of \$1,486) and more than 90% of houses are rented (compared with a national average of 30%). The suburb has a very young population with a third of people under 14 and about 8% are First Australians (high for Sydney).

Before joining The Connection, students could not articulate their learning, which resulted in lower student engagement. There wasn't a consistent approach across the school to address this.

¹ The Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Relative disadvantage is defined as below the average ICSEA score of 1,000.

Coping with Covid-19

Before the end of the initial lockdown due to Covid-19 in March-April, Blairmount Public School reached out to other local Connection schools to collaborate on how to manage the staged re-introduction of students to their schools.

They asked SVA to facilitate weekly, then fortnightly check-ins and this widened to include other schools in the current cohort of The Connection.

Blairmount were well prepared to transition to online learning. They already had a strong focus on STEM - every student had an iPad, and the student-led learning practices have developed the capacity to be independent learners. This meant that parents didn't experience too much stress supervising their children's remote learning.

The school's approach of empowering the kids informed their approach to using tech as a resource, and this made switching to remote learning a seamless process.

The Connection is a Collaborative Leadership Development Network, created and facilitated by Social Ventures Australia, that has achieved educational improvements in 50 Australian schools, across NSW, SA and Victoria. This network has connected 2900 educators and benefited approximately 50,000 students over five years from 2014-2019.

Participating schools in areas experiencing disadvantage are connected to other primary and secondary schools in the network and learn from each other. They are supported to implement new and innovative teaching practices and approaches to improve learning outcomes for their students.

Find out more about Blairmount's involvement in The Connection [here](#)