

Students observe teachers at Dandenong North Primary School



North-East Melbourne, Victoria

"The values we get from being part of the SVA partnership (The Connection) are multitudinous. We've got connection with other high performing schools, interstate connections that we never had before that and we've got the best practice connections which allow us to tap into really cutting edge teaching and learning."

Principal Kevin Mackay OAM

At Dandenong North Primary School teaching is improved by allowing young teachers and students to observe and give feedback on classroom teaching.

Originally it was just staff learning from each other by observation and coaching. The more experienced teachers pass on their wisdom by making themselves available to be observed and by coaching their colleagues in continually becoming more effective as teachers.

Dandenong North PS became involved in The Connection to share and improve its approach to teacher development, with the goal of accelerating new teachers from "graduate" to "proficient" sooner, to ensure more students have access to a high performing teacher.

Through interstate visits enabled by The Connection, Principal Kevin Mackay was impressed with the way South Australian schools developed student agency, and he introduced the Student Observer program to Dandenong North.

So now it's not only teachers observing teachers. A small group of students have been trained as student observers. Since 2015 students have been observing teachers teaching. They record eight critical points during the course of a lesson and take photographs of the class and the teacher to support their written record.

The point of the exercise is to provide student feedback to observed teachers from the perspective of a learner.

Students take their feedback to the Coordinator who asks for clarification on any points that aren't clear. The Student Observers then prepare a PowerPoint with their captured images and notes.

Students ask the teacher if they would like the feedback and often the teacher invites them to present the PowerPoint to the whole class. In fact, they value it so much, they often include the student observations in their performance review. The principal reports that the school's student observation program, has allowed students to exercise agency in their learning, and to exercise their metacognitive abilities.

[The Student Observer program has been suspended during the Covid restrictions and lock-down.]



Dandenong North Primary School 'student observers' write up their observations of a lesson.

Student learning outcomes

Students at Dandenong North Primary School have consistently achieved NAPLAN results above those for students with similar levels of socio-educational disadvantage – the lowest level of achievement in key curriculum areas is oftentimes in line with Victoria's average achievement for all schools.

Principal Kevin Mackay says the high performance of the school is the result of many years of focus on ensuring every student is supported to develop their literacy and numeracy.

"Everyone can learn, given enough time, and small enough tasks," says Principal Mackay. "We find out what students need and keep pouring resources in to make sure they learn.

Many refugee children have missed years of education; some have never been to school at all. It has not been unusual to find that our new students have experienced only limited listening and speaking opportunities - even in a first language. Many have witnessed, or even experienced traumatic events in the places they have fled from. Significant numbers remain debilitated by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Our challenge is not only to teach a new language, but to reduce anxiety and teach children how to thrive in their new, multi-cultural society," he says.

Due to this long-term focus on improving literacy, Dandenong North was already a very high performing school when it joined The Connection in 2014. According to Grattan Institute research published in The Australian in 2013, out of more than 1000 schools in areas experiencing disadvantage (with ICSEA scores below 1000), Dandenong North PS was the top performing school with results at or above the average.

Dandenong North Primary School has overcome many challenges to become an outstanding school

The school serves 839 students from Prep to Year 6. The school has an ICSEA of 940¹, with 55% of its students coming from families in the lowest quarter of socio-educational disadvantage. Its student body is very diverse, with over 50 cultures represented, and 90% of students coming from a language background other than English. 1% of its students are First Australians.

In 2002 the school started a literacy intervention program which became the **Reading Factory**. 180 children participate every day. The school also offers an innovative, two-week Reception Program for newly arrived migrant and refugee students to help them orient in an unfamiliar environment.



Up to 10 staff, taught **English as an Additional Language (EAL)** to more than 200 students a week in 2019.

Dandenong North Primary School student learning English as an Additional Language.

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.

Achievements

International Award-winning documentaries:

The Reading Factory, A Life Changing Literacy Support Program, 2019 [watch \(35min\)](#)

Talk for Life: English as an Additional Language, 2020 [official trailer](#) [Facebook page](#)

Coping with Covid-19

The Principal found a webinar hosted by SVA for Connection schools valuable to support educators to keep their spirits up and their pedagogical growth going during this challenging time.

Kevin is most worried that the youngest children have missed out on so much foundational skill development and socialisation. Also, as many are in low income families, they have less access to devices, and those with little English can have difficulties if they have a problem with their technology. The school got more than 400 laptops and iPads to distribute to their students, but they have 800 students. They also organised online access for families that didn't have an internet connection.

They have minted a medal for the students and teachers that says: "Thank you for your commitment to education during the global pandemic of 2020. Your response to the covid19 emergency will always be appreciated and remembered."

Sources:

Read the Dandenong North Primary School Case Study in the Appendix of the report [Unleashing the power of the collective in education](#)

Interview with Principal Kevin Mackay, August 2020

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.