

Stirling North Primary School students tackle homelessness



Stirling North, SA

Stirling North is the largest primary school in the Port Augusta region, with 363 students spread over 14 classes from Reception to Year 7. Through their involvement with a pioneering networking and leadership program, The Connection by SVA, they introduced a suite of changes that resulted in a huge increase in student engagement, improved NAPLAN results, the students' behaviour at school improving and school suspensions dropping by 59%.

Student-led projects combine curriculum requirements with striving to have a real impact in their school and local community. A social science project to learn empathy led one Year 6/7 Class to do their bit to tackle homelessness in Port Augusta. *[read more on page 3]*.

"The Connection has been the best thing that's happened in my professional career," says Principal Adam Wilson. "It works with other schools across SA, Victoria and NSW, creating opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other. It's been an amazing experience."

"Our goal at Stirling North Primary School is to build 21st Century Skills – to ask critical questions, reflect, collaborate and problem solve. We want our students to leave Year 7 with all the skills they need to become employable," he says.

School characteristics and challenges

First Nations students make up 15% of the school's enrolments, many with English as a second language and 3% of students with a non-English speaking background are non-Indigenous.

As a satellite of Port Augusta, Stirling North is a rural town with high levels of transience, a significant Indigenous population, limited economic opportunities and diverse migrant and refugee populations.

Nearly one fifth of Port Augusta's population is First Nations and growing, but the non-Indigenous population is decreasing due to the shedding of jobs as local industries close or contract. The area is transitioning from a coal-fired power generation centre to a major renewable energy centre with the building of a 150megawatt Solar Thermal Power Plant.

Before joining The Connection in 2016 enrolments at Stirling North Primary School were declining and students weren't engaged. In 2020 enrolment is at capacity and it is a school of choice in the region.

Improved student learning outcomes

- **Stirling North had improved NAPLAN results for years 5 and 7 in Numeracy and Reading in recent years.**
- **An internal survey analysing student agency found that 93% of students could articulate their learning goals.**
- **Between 2016 and 2019, instances of negative behaviour reduced by 45%, and suspensions reduced by 59%.**

How project-based learning leads to increased student agency and engagement

To improve engagement, the school wanted to promote a “culture of fun” in the classroom, with students intrinsically motivated to learn. This aligned with the South Australian Education department's Teaching for Effective Learning (TfEL) initiative, focusing in particular on Domain Two of the framework, “Safe Classrooms for Vigorous Learning”. Their strategy had three central pillars:

1. implementing project-based learning in the classroom to foster General Capabilities,
2. developing student voice and agency across the school, and
3. working closely with local industries.

1) Project Based Learning: Adam and his teachers developed a school-wide pedagogy of project-based learning. The school selects a theme for each term, which informs the topic of the term's projects, eg 'Let's Unite'. The school regularly holds 'Expos' where students present their learning projects to parents and these are always 'packed'. Parents say they love how engaged their children are in learning.

Students learn about a topic through self-directed investigations and drive their learning by posing and seeking to answer their own questions.

The curriculum is the guide of WHAT the students will learn, the innovative approach is to ask the students HOW they want to learn it.

“We didn't know what project-based learning was meant to look like. Visiting another Connection school and seeing their work, being exposed to the Tom Lowrie paper about combining General Capabilities into the curriculum, it just made sense,” says Principal Adam Wilson.

Some current projects at the school include:

- The year 6/7 classes have chosen to help the community and they have each chosen an area (using a democratic student choice process). They are homelessness, racism and sexism. The aim is to be creative and do something that will make a change in the community
- Year 1/2 students are learning about the impact of bees and farm to plate ideas
- A group of about 30 First Nations students are recreating the school's Acknowledgement of Country and linking with local Elders to ensure they have captured the local context.

2) Student Voice and Agency: As well as building opportunities for student agency into the project-based learning curriculum, the school provides teachers with 50 minutes a week to work on co-developing learning goals with their students, which Adam estimates is now implemented in 90% of classrooms.

To develop student agency, teachers co-design learning goals with their students. Teachers track their students' knowledge and understanding of these goals through an in-house survey. The aim at Stirling North is for students to spend 70% of class time talking, and only 30% listening to the teacher.

The impetus for the school's dedication to increasing student voice and engagement is informed by Adam's visit to the London Innovation Unit as part of the school's involvement in The Connection. He was impressed by the 'motivation and engagement pyramid'.

“The lowest form of engagement for students is where teachers present to the class to fulfil a requirement. Students become more engaged when they present to the class, to their parents, to the school community,” says Adam. “But the highest form of engagement is to have a goal to be of service to the world.”

Many projects at Stirling North have a community service focus, like the Year 6 Homelessness project that includes action to support homeless people in the area.

3) Industry Partnerships: Connecting with businesses is another way to drive student engagement and learn about local industries through projects, as well as to build the school's reputation in the community. Among the school's many industry partners are several renewable energy companies.

Port Augusta is planning to be the renewable energy hub of the southern hemisphere. Introducing students to the industry allows them to apply their learning in the real world and prepare for potential future careers.

Project-based learning: using the Creativity Wheel to learn about Homelessness

Through interaction with schools in other states, facilitated by The Connection, Stirling North 'smart borrowed' a learning tool developed by NSW's Rooty Hill High School (with Professor Bill Lucas) called the Creativity Wheel.

"The aim of the Creativity Wheel is to help students understand their creativity, and that it's not just about drawing or dancing...It's really about being imaginative, inquisitive, collaborative, persistent and disciplined," explains Shae Dunbar, from Rooty Hill High School.

The Creativity Wheel helps teachers to design programs which allow students to develop Critical and Creative Thinking – one of the seven pillars of the National Curriculum. The Wheel emphasises certain dispositions (learning qualities) for students and sets out questions for teachers to design higher-order learning and to enable students to self-reflect.

As part of the Social Science/Geography curriculum all three Year 6 classes are investigating how to make a positive change in Stirling North or Port Augusta and meet a learning goal of developing the ability to empathise with someone else. Each class brainstormed the issues they wanted to work on and settled on the topics of Racism, Sexism, and Homelessness.

The class that chose to explore Homelessness researched the people involved – homeless people and the people who help them, like the Salvation Army. They asked questions – what would a homeless person feel like? What would organisations like the Salvation Army do to help them?

The father of one of the students is the local area manager for the Salvation Army and he was happy to come into the class one day and answer all their questions. The goal is not just to find out about homelessness, but how to have a positive impact and make a difference in the local area.

The students decided they could have the most impact by helping the Salvation Army provide tangible support to people who are homeless. So, they will collaborate with each other and with the Salvation Army to invite people to donate items like clothing and non-perishable food and toiletries, to make up gift packs for homeless people in the Port Augusta area.

At all points throughout the project, students were encouraged to use their voice and drive the process. From the start, students were given the option to form self-determining groups about issues of interest and decide the direction of the learning. Once the idea to invite people to help create hampers for the Salvation Army was decided, students formed interest groups



Homelessness action project - Stirling North Primary School students putting together a care hamper with donated goods and backpack for local people experiencing homelessness.

to make this happen. Some groups created Facebook videos to promote this giving opportunity, another group made promotional posters and another did research what would be the most useful items to collect. One student was inspired by the Salvation Army guest speaker about making everyone feel like “a person”, and she researched inclusive language around homelessness.

Many students initially had difficulty empathizing with people who were experiencing homelessness, as they either had no prior knowledge, or did not encounter this issue within their lives. Through the process of having a guest speaker, philosophical discussions and Visible Thinking Routines designed to explore perspectives, students were able to expand their horizons, become emotionally invested in the issue, and develop empathy for the experiences of other people. Students reported changing their perspectives – they understood they had held stereotypical notions about homeless people and that, through their research and hearing from real people, they had broadened their minds.

Dealing with the challenge of Coronavirus impacts

With the onset of Covid-19 in March only about 20-30% of students were physically attending school, with 70-80% participating online from home.

“Our teachers have been more agile than they would have been in the past,” says Principal Adam Wilson. “One outcome of giving students a voice is that you often need to change what you planned to do, so teachers have become more flexible and able to deal with changed circumstances.”

“We’ve been able to create online learning modules fairly quickly.”

Watch a [video about student voice and democracy](#) at Stirling North Primary School

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

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 Stirling North Primary School’s involvement with [The Connection](#)