

Closing the gap: Batemans Bay Public School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Introduction

This case study describes how Batemans Bay Public School has achieved high learning growth for Aboriginal students. In particular, it looks at how the creation of a learning culture, parent and community participation, and celebrating Aboriginal culture have all contributed to above-average outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The 'Closing the Gap' strategy is a formal commitment made by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008 to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through setting measurable targets for improvement. The Closing the Gap framework will reach its tenth year in 2018. Four of the existing seven Closing the Gap targets are due to expire in 2018. This includes the target to halve the gap for Aboriginal students in reading, writing and numeracy.

The Council of Australian Governments has agreed to work with Aboriginal leaders, organisations and communities to refresh the Closing the Gap framework. As part of the broader Closing the Gap refresh, NSW committed to undertake a 'deep-dive' analysis of what works in schools to assist in lifting the performance of Aboriginal students.

To this end, CESE has produced a series of five case studies on primary schools that have closed the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The case studies highlight strategies that the schools identify as contributors to their success.

Background

Batemans Bay Public School is a primary school located on the South Coast of NSW. It has an enrolment of 569 students, 29 per cent of whom are Aboriginal and five per cent of whom come from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). The school's enrolment has increased over the last eight years, as has the percentage of Aboriginal students. The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is lower than average. Around 60 per cent of students are in the bottom ICSEA quarter, and this percentage has grown over the last eight years (NSW Department of Education data 2017). Student mobility is around 20 per cent.

Batemans Bay Public School employs two Aboriginal Education Officers and three Aboriginal teachers' aides. The school also has a preschool located on the school grounds which employs

an Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer. The school has low staff turnover rates. The attendance rate at Batemans Bay Public School is 90 per cent for Aboriginal students and 92 per cent for non-Aboriginal students (My School 2016). Ninety-one per cent of Aboriginal students say they feel good about their culture at school and 73 per cent of Aboriginal students feel their teachers have a good understanding of their culture (Tell Them From Me data 2017). The school's average NAPLAN results are close to, or above, similar schools across all domains (My School 2017). The school is an active member of Eurobodalla Learning Community, and also has close ties with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

Closing the performance gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students

Batemans Bay Public School attributes its success in improving outcomes for Aboriginal students partly to its focus on improving outcomes for all students, but also to the strong focus within the school on celebrating Aboriginal culture and recognising the specific cultural practices and needs of Aboriginal students and their families.

In particular, the success of Batemans Bay Public School in achieving higher than average learning growth for Aboriginal students appears to be associated with the creation of a learning culture based on explicit teaching and collaboration, professional learning and targeted teaching; parent and community participation; and recognising and celebrating Aboriginal culture.



Creating a learning culture based on explicit teaching and collaboration

Batemans Bay Public School consciously focuses on creating a learning culture built on improving the leadership capacity of all staff, professional learning, and targeted teaching for individuals and groups of students.

Leadership

Batemans Bay Public School had the same principal for 17 years¹ until 2017. According to the current relieving principal, the existing leadership culture in the school is one of transparency, trust and distributive leadership where all staff have a chance to run programs and show leadership skills. The Aboriginal Education Officers at the school state that the leadership style in the school is one of support, and that staff in the school are able to achieve these results because of the leadership from above.

The school provides specific leadership in literacy and numeracy through its three instructional leaders. Two of these instructional leaders are employed to drive the school's participation in the Early Action for Success strategy and are responsible for literacy and numeracy outcomes for students in Kindergarten to Year 2. These instructional leaders address how literacy and numeracy targets can be met through the use of diagnostic assessment, differentiated teaching and targeted interventions. They also support teachers to monitor and track Kindergarten to Year 2 student progress at five-weekly intervals against the literacy and numeracy continuums, and maintain the school's data wall. The third instructional leader began in 2017 and focuses in particular on Aboriginal students. She is responsible for engaging Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6 to improve their literacy and numeracy results. All instructional leaders share an office and work together to ensure the best outcomes for all students.

Professional learning

Another way in which a learning culture is created at Batemans Bay Public School is through building the leadership capacity of all staff through focused professional learning. Every staff member at the school is engaged in ongoing, relevant and evidenced-based learning. Teachers are provided with training and ongoing development in literacy and numeracy programs. For example, Kindergarten to Year 2 teachers are trained in Language, Learning and Literacy, and Targeting Early Numeracy programs; teachers in Years 2 to 6 are trained in the Taking off with Numeracy program; and teachers in Years 3 to 6 are trained in the Super 6 Comprehension program.

The instructional leaders, maths coordinator and curriculum leaders also provide mentoring, observations and feedback to help build the capacity of less experienced teachers in effective classroom practice. Improvement targets are identified in the school plan for reading in Kindergarten to Year 3, comprehension in Years 3 to 6 and numeracy in Kindergarten

to Year 3, and teachers are released every five weeks using the school's Resource Allocation Model (RAM) funding to analyse the progress that has been made towards meeting these targets. Teachers and support staff are also provided with professional learning in how to support students who experience trauma in their home environments.



¹ This principal, Tom Purcell, retired on the last day of Term 2, 2017. CESE interviewed the relieving principal for this case study.

Targeted teaching

A positive learning culture at Bateman's Bay is also created through the use of targeted teaching. Targeted teaching is used both as an intervention for individual students who require it, and to accelerate the progress of groups of students who are on the cusp of a higher progression.

The instructional leaders implement targeted interventions for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who require targeted support. For example, the school uses its RAM funding to employ a local Aboriginal person to implement the Norta Norta model, which provides targeted support for Aboriginal students to accelerate progress in student achievement. RAM funding is also used to employ other intervention teachers to provide targeted support for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Student participation in targeted interventions is reviewed on a term-by-term basis, allowing students to come in and out of the program as needed. Students on the cusp of a higher continuum progression are put into groups of three or four and provided with targeted teaching to move quickly on to the next progression. The school leadership identifies additional resourcing in the form of instructional leaders and intervention teachers as integral to its success in achieving improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Batemans Bay Public School also encourages collaborative goal setting by teachers and students through the 'kicking goals' initiative. All students – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – are supported to identify short-term or long-term goals through this program, to identify stepping stones towards these goals, and are rewarded when they reach their goal. This contributes to the personalised learning plans for Aboriginal students and assists with maintaining their relevance and authenticity.

Parent and community participation

Batemans Bay Public School has a focus on encouraging parent and community participation as part of its strategy to improve student learning outcomes.

Several strategies are in place to increase parent participation in the school and with their children's learning. For example, teachers aim to make contact with every parent within the first four weeks of Term 1, so that the school can touch base with the parents and set up a relationship for the rest of the year. The school also runs regular events for parents such as Mothers' and Fathers' Day morning teas, parent-teacher barbeques and sporting events, and encourages parental involvement through volunteering opportunities with the reading program, camping program, robotics program and school fete.

For Aboriginal families in particular, the Aboriginal Education Officers run 'Yarn Up' meetings. These are run when needed to share information and engage with Aboriginal families. The school also sends out a 'Koori newsletter' once

a term to Aboriginal families to engage families with their children's learning through celebrating success, and to share information and events relevant to the Aboriginal community. The newsletter celebrates all new Aboriginal Kindergarten students who start at the school by printing their photo and name, and celebrates Aboriginal students who have received awards though the term or who have achieved 100 per cent attendance. It also shares information and events relevant to the Aboriginal community such as NAIDOC week events. NAIDOC Week and Sorry Day are important events in the school, and are well attended by the local community.

The school also works closely with the local community to ensure that the needs of all students are met. For example, in terms of health and wellbeing, the school uses its RAM funding to employ a speech pathologist one day a week, and a designated teacher's aide who runs speech therapy groups. A paediatric occupational therapist visits the school one or two days a term. The school also works with the local Aboriginal medical service, Katungal, to host regular visits from the 'Dental Van' to provide dental treatment to Aboriginal children, and from health workers to screen for Otitis Media. Other forms of health and wellbeing support include a Breakfast Club to ensure that all children start the school day with a healthy meal.

The school is an active member of Eurobodalla Learning Community, which involves nine local primary and two local high schools and provides opportunities for students in Years 5 to 8 through programs such as a chess competition, academic challenge and leadership dinner. The school also has close ties with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative group, and the Aboriginal Education Officers regularly attend meetings to report on school events and student programs. The school's 'Koori Choir' often performs a 'Welcome' song around the local community in the local Aboriginal language, Dhurga, with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students participating in the choir.



Batemans Bay Public School has a strong focus on celebrating Aboriginal culture within the school, and on recognising the specific cultural practices and needs of Aboriginal students and their families. The Aboriginal Education Officers identify one of the most important lessons that other schools might learn from the success of Batemans Bay Public School as the need to make school a 'friendly' place for Aboriginal people. The school is working hard to achieve this in a variety of ways, including through building positive relationships with the families of Aboriginal students, teaching and celebrating Aboriginal culture, and recognising the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal students and their families.

The school is committed to building positive relationships with the families of Aboriginal students. The two Aboriginal Education Officers, both of whom are well-known members of the local Aboriginal community, play an important role in this. The school has dedicated a room specifically for the Aboriginal Education Officers, where Aboriginal students and families are encouraged to visit. This room has been deliberately located close to the front of the school via an accessible driveway, so that Aboriginal family members who may not feel comfortable walking through the school reception or playground can still access the room easily. This room includes Aboriginal artwork and posters, books and comfortable couches, and food and tea and coffee making facilities, to ensure it feels safe and welcoming for Aboriginal people.

Batemans Bay Public School also places a strong emphasis on celebrating Aboriginal culture in the school, and ensuring that all children learn about Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture is visible throughout the school, for example through artwork and posters, and a 'Welcome' sign in the entrance foyer. The school also has a policy of flying the Aboriginal flag at the same height as the Australian flag – a gesture to recognise the equality of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. One of


the Aboriginal Education Officers teaches the local language, Dhurga, to children from preschool to Year 2. The Aboriginal Education Officers collaborate with the local Aboriginal community to assist teachers to develop lesson content and resources which include Aboriginal perspectives. The school also invites local Aboriginal people to visit the school and speak to the children about their culture and experiences – and is conscious of paying Aboriginal guests to signal that their time and knowledge are valued.

The school is working hard to recognise the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal students. For example, the Aboriginal Education Officers indicate many Aboriginal students at the school speak Aboriginal English at home – an adapted language that uses different sentence structures and meanings and employs some traditional words – and that Standard Australian English is an additional language for them. In this context, it is particularly important to have Aboriginal teachers and support staff in the school who can communicate with children in Aboriginal English, because it allows them to support Aboriginal children to connect more effectively with their teachers, to develop a better understanding of the curriculum, and to attain fluency in Standard Australian English.

The Aboriginal Education Officers also play an important role in liaising between the Aboriginal community and the school on cultural matters. For example, they are able to notify the school about 'sorry business' when there is a death in the local community, that may result in Aboriginal students being absent from the school for a short period. They are also able to offer guidance to the school on how to respond appropriately to sorry business, such as by sending flowers to the family and refraining from calling them about their child's absence during this period.



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