

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Creating a culture of excellence: Sefton High School

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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## Introduction

This case study describes how Sefton High School creates and sustains a culture of excellence, particularly through educational leadership, a coherent school vision supported by robust systems, a focus on teaching and learning, and high expectations.

## Background

Sefton High School is a partially selective high school located in south-western Sydney. It has an enrolment of 1,045 students. Ninety-four per cent of students come from a language background other than English. The school's Index of Community Socio-Education Advantage (ICSEA) value is slightly higher than average. Sefton High School achieves NAPLAN results substantially above similar schools and the state in every NAPLAN domain (My School 2016). More than ninety per cent of students go on to university after completing Year 12. The School Excellence Framework external validation for Sefton High School in 2016 verified Sefton High School's practices as excelling across almost every Framework element including all the learning elements, all the teaching elements and most of the leading elements.

The school's vision statement says that Sefton High School aims to maintain 'excellence in education' for all students and 'a perspective of continual future improvement in all aspects of the school's life'. Sefton High School has high expectations of the whole school community, and provides a structured, disciplined, and dynamic and responsive teaching and learning environment which fosters excellent standards of academic achievement and student wellbeing. The principal describes Sefton High School as a 'traditional' school in that it functions in a way that emphasises the qualities and values understood and, in many cases experienced, by the parents at Sefton High School, many of whom are from a South East Asian or Middle Eastern background. These qualities and values include very high expectations in relation to academic learning (including a consistently high application to learning both at school and with homework), and explicit emphasis on regular and punctual attendance, correct uniform and equipment, respectful and responsible conduct, and adherence to school rules at all times.

Sefton's three strategic directions, as articulated in the 2015-2017 school plan<sup>1</sup>, are to: improve students' literacy and numeracy skills; improve students' engagement and success in learning; and improve teachers' professional skills in providing best quality teaching.



<sup>1</sup> These strategic directions have remained the same for 2018-20.

## Creating a culture of excellence

Sefton High School has a number of practices in place to embed and sustain a culture of excellence within the school. These practices include: educational leadership, a coherent school vision and robust systems, a focus on teaching and learning, and high expectations for all.

### Educational leadership

Strong educational leadership is a key feature of Sefton High School. The current principal has been principal at Sefton High School for the past 18 years. Prior to that she was principal for two years at another school in south-western Sydney. She describes herself as an authoritative figure in the school and is actively engaged and present in all school processes. Over her period of tenure, the principal has made substantial changes to the way the school operates, including instigating a focus on data analysis and literacy teaching (including persuasive writing across the curriculum), a focus on the quality teaching framework, and ensuring everyone in the school community, from the executive to students, understands what their roles are and are given the support to perform their roles to their best ability.

The executive (made up of the principal, deputy principals and head teachers) is the decision-making body in the school and is responsible for leading the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in the school. Two-thirds of the current executive are former teachers at the school and have been engaged with the school vision and culture over a lengthy period of time. The only separate teams or committees are for learning and support, and welfare. All staff are welcome to suggest ideas for improvement to the executive for discussion at executive meetings. The executive meetings are collaborative and constructive with a focus on decision-making. All decisions made by the executive at these meetings are published on the school's weekly bulletin. Responsibility for implementing executive decisions is delegated, in an explicit manner, by the principal to head teachers. Head teachers are responsible for translating, monitoring, explaining, and making decisions manageable for the staff in their faculty. This gives staff ownership of decisions.

The principal communicates directly with staff via the weekly bulletin and her office door is always open for those who would like to speak with her. She also believes in always being physically on the school grounds (she rarely attends meetings or functions outside of the school), to ensure that staff and students can consult on matters big and small. However, the principal generally only speaks at school assemblies at the start and end of the year and focuses on the school's expectations and achievements. All other assemblies during the year are award assemblies at which students and other staff speak. There is an emphasis on weekly faculty meetings rather than whole staff meetings (only two staff meetings are held per term). Consultation with staff is generally conducted through faculty meetings or school development days, as these provide a better opportunity for staff to talk. The principal believes that addressing the school community relatively infrequently and focussing on teaching and learning, contributes to maintaining authoritative credibility as an educational leader, and ensures as far as possible, that when she does speak, people listen.

### Coherent school vision supported by robust systems

Sefton High School has a strong school vision. All members of the school community were consulted and are therefore expected to share in the school vision. This vision centres on maintaining excellence in education for all students through demonstrating high expectations in a structured, disciplined, high quality teaching and learning environment. The phrase 'the Sefton way' is used by the school community to refer to the common policies and procedures and also relates to the recognition of the broader vision and culture of the school. According to the principal, all staff and students understand what the vision and culture involves, have a commitment to it and recognise that this is 'the Sefton way'. Maintaining the school culture is constant, daily and explicit, and every policy, procedure and action works towards informing and maintaining the cohesive and effective implementation of the vision. This vision is the basis of successful teaching and learning for the complete range of students in the school.



The principal observes that there is structure and organisation in all aspects of school life at Sefton High School and a strong expectation that these will be universally observed. Since 2001, Sefton High School has had a clear and simple school plan in place. Successive iterations of the school plan have always had the same emphasis, namely: literacy<sup>2</sup>, quality teaching and learning, and professional learning. The school produces internal role statements for all staff – the principal, deputies, head teachers, classroom teachers, year advisers – which are published on the school intranet and which articulate internal expectations. This is so everyone understands what their job is and what is expected of them, and so that all staff can see where particular responsibilities lie. Additionally, each faculty has a faculty management plan related to the school plan. All faculty management plans are published in one booklet and on the intranet so that they are available to the whole school. The school also has a staff handbook which is updated every year. This is given to all staff on day 1 and is on the school intranet. It tells all staff everything they need to know about the school. Having all policies and procedures documented and readily available provides continuity and frees up time for staff to focus on the core business of the school, namely teaching and learning.

### Focus on teaching and learning

The principal at Sefton High School emphasises that teaching and learning and its continuous improvement through professional learning is the core business of the school. All the changes the principal has put in place over the last 18 years underpin this focus. For instance, when the principal began at the school, her first initiative was to ensure that there was an attendance policy in place and that students and staff followed it. Attendance is the most basic building block of any school, as students need to be at school if they are to learn. It is also demonstrable and measurable. The school's attendance record remains one of the highest in the state. Following the introduction of this policy, the principal then turned her attention to homework policies and student application and assessment; and then to program development, professional learning and sharing of ideas.

Today at the school, there is a very strong emphasis on professional learning that is targeted to the school's strategic directions. This professional learning is informed by evidence of what works to improve educational outcomes<sup>3</sup>; external courses (e.g. 'Writing for the HSC' pilot); Quality Teaching Rounds; and research articles on educational practice. Often the principal takes the lead in professional development. For example, initially, she ran persuasive writing training for staff<sup>4</sup>. The school embeds persuasive writing across the curriculum and the principal believes that part of the school's excellent performance is due to this practice. The principal also initially led professional learning sessions on data analysis for the executive. After initial sessions, leadership of professional learning sessions was handed over to others, e.g. other executive or teachers who have attended relevant external courses. This is very successful in engaging teacher interest in fresh and effective ideas and strategies.

Prior to the introduction of SMART<sup>5</sup>, the principal at Sefton High School requested specific performance data from the department on separate results for selective and non-selective students so that improved analysis could be undertaken to inform teaching and learning.

The principal ensures that when she addresses the school, her focus is on teaching and learning. For instance, she talks to the students about 'active learning', i.e. that students have to actively engage and ask questions for learning to happen. She also ensures that she is across the learning progress of individual students where required (for example, students achieving below expectation), and that the teaching and learning taking place in the school is matching the school's overall goals. For example, once a semester, all Year 7 to 10 work books are marked by the teacher, checked by the head teacher and any 'unsatisfactory' results are passed onto the principal. Work books are assessed on: having work complete, having homework done, having notes up to date, having handouts pasted in, and presentation and organisation. The rationale behind marking work books is that these are a source of evidence of teaching and need to be used by students to revise for exams. If they are not complete, there is nothing to revise<sup>6</sup>. The principal also ensures that each teacher does an analysis of their (former) Year 12 class HSC results. The analysis is then discussed with head teachers, who then discuss the analyses and any ideas for improvement at their individual term meeting with the principal.



Sandra Coombes, Principal.

<sup>2</sup> The current school plan also includes numeracy alongside literacy, although it is historically literacy that the school has focused on given this is the area of greatest need among Sefton's student cohort.

<sup>3</sup> The principal highlighted the use of CESE's *What works best: Evidence-based practices to help improve NSW student performance* and *Six effective practices in high growth schools* papers.

<sup>4</sup> The principal was previously a head teacher English.

<sup>5</sup> SMART is the School Measurement Assessment and Reporting Toolkit. It provides NAPLAN, HSC and VALID data to principals and teachers.

<sup>6</sup> The school does not use BYOD as a strategy.

## High expectations for all

The school has a clearly articulated and explicit focus on high expectations for everyone in the school community, including staff, students and parents. It is continuously emphasised to both staff and students that they have chosen to come to Sefton High School (while many of their peers have not been able to enrol) and that as such they are expected to meet the high expectations set by the school community. There is also a very strong behaviour management framework in place at Sefton High School. At the beginning of the year the principal speaks explicitly to the students and teachers about the school's approach to behaviour management and the fact that the school is a work place and should be treated as such. For example, everyone should show respect and be respected, and bullying will not be tolerated. Any instances of bullying escalate through the teacher, to the deputy principal as does any incident involving hitting or serious verbal abuse.

For students, there are clear expectations relating to 'application to their studies' and 'conduct' based on the values of NSW Public Schools and the Department of Education Behaviour Code for Students. These expectations are supported by explicit rules, a merit award system and firm behaviour management framework. The merit award system rewards positive efforts and attitudes in all areas of school life including sport and co-curricular activities both of which are popular. To maximise learning and to keep the school safe and secure for all students, the school also has a Sefton High School (SHS) Student Code of Conduct.

This must be agreed to and signed by each student and his/her parent each year. If students do not comply with the code of conduct, the school will ring the parents to notify the parents and to discuss possible solutions. This process is designed to make the school an effective, safe and pleasant learning environment. All students are required to abide by the eleven rules in the SHS Code of Conduct which include committing to a regular program of study and meeting all course requirements, as well as the more usual school rules such as wearing the uniform correctly.

High expectations for staff at Sefton High School centre on teachers demonstrating a strong work ethic. The principal describes working at Sefton as hard work and expects all staff to have a strong work ethic. The students have certain expectations of the teachers and it is the teacher's job to meet these expectations. For instance, students expect teachers to come to class on time, and to be organised with a coherent and sequential lesson plan that goes through the syllabus in a logical and ordered manner. Students are not often happy if the teachers do not meet these expectations. In meeting with each of the executive team to develop their professional development plans (PDP), the principal explicitly discusses how their goals align with the school's goals and expectations. Staff must also include the relevant SHS strategic direction when writing each of their PDP goals. This approach inspires an explicit common purpose across the school and ensures high expectations across the whole school community.



A network diagram with various sized nodes and connecting lines, set against a teal background.

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