

## A Case Study -

### Ellenbrook Primary School, Perth WA

#### The School Context

The school has a student population of 579 with 34 teaching and 20 non-teaching staff. It has an ICSEA value of 998. Twenty percent of the students have a language background other than English and includes families from Indian and Middle Eastern countries. The school became an Independent Public School in 2011.

#### Distribution of students

	Bottom quarter	Middle quarters		Top quarter
<b>School Distribution</b>	27%	33%	25%	15%
<b>Australian Distribution</b>	25%	25%	25%	25%

*Myschool 2015*

The school focusses its teaching and learning programs on ensuring that all students have mastery of essential literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge. Explicit teaching programs are in place- Jolly Phonics, Jolly Grammar, Sound Waves spelling, Prime [Singapore] Mathematics, Guided Reading, the ACER Maths Mastery series (mental mathematics), and science. This is accompanied by a measurement program using ACER PAT tests (pre-test and post-test) to track value-added learning, using the effect size statistic. The school's specialist areas include: Science, ICT, PE and Performing Arts. Gifted students are catered for in a formal program and classroom extension. Students with learning problems are placed on Individual Education Programs and their progress is regularly monitored.

#### Background

Dr Neil MacNeill had been principal in several other schools in Western Australia which he describes as tough but at Ellenbrook he says, "It was almost like the Wild West! There were many troubled families. A number of children were inclined to use physical violence. We convinced all parents we would stand against bullying and we applied the rule, 'One strike and you are suspended.' We didn't bring in any particular programs; we just made sure that if a child said, 'I've been bullied' we followed it up straight away and resolved the matter." These conditions made it very difficult to deliver quality instruction.

In 2008 student results were below the national average, often substantially, in most areas of literacy and numeracy. The school embraced outcomes-based education and it was recognised as a model school for this approach. "We were very good at outcomes-based education," Neil says. "We had hundreds of school administrators coming through the school looking at what we were doing in the classrooms." But Neil and his team of senior staff acknowledged the school's NAPLAN results were poor. This can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1 NAPLAN Results 2008**

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015		
Colour Scheme <b>Red &amp; Green</b>		<input type="button" value="Submit"/>		Alternate view: <a href="#">Results in graphs</a>					
Reading		Narrative Writing		Spelling		Grammar and Punctuation		Numeracy	
<b>352</b> 337 - 367		<b>362</b> 349 - 375		<b>358</b> 344 - 372		<b>353</b> 337 - 369		<b>352</b> 339 - 365	
SIM 384 375 - 393	ALL 400	SIM 402 394 - 410	ALL 414	SIM 385 376 - 394	ALL 400	SIM 385 375 - 395	ALL 403	SIM 383 375 - 391	ALL 397
<b>448</b> 435 - 461		<b>435</b> 423 - 447		<b>457</b> 445 - 469		<b>462</b> 448 - 476		<b>446</b> 435 - 457	
SIM 470 461 - 479	ALL 484	SIM 473 465 - 481	ALL 486	SIM 471 463 - 479	ALL 484	SIM 479 470 - 488	ALL 496	SIM 460 452 - 468	ALL 476
<b>How to interpret this chart</b> <b>SIM</b> schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds <b>ALL</b> Australian schools' average <input type="checkbox"/> Student population below reporting threshold <input type="checkbox"/> Year level not tested  Selected school's average is <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> substantially above <input type="checkbox"/> above <input type="checkbox"/> close to <input type="checkbox"/> below <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> substantially below  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• average of schools serving students from statistically similar socio-educational backgrounds (SIM box)</li> <li>• average of all Australian schools (ALL box)</li> </ul>									

Neil explains, "We asked, 'What can we do better?' We realised that a constructivist approach to pedagogy wasn't delivering the goods that our kids needed. It really came down to literacy and numeracy - the fundamentals of primary education. Whole-language reading, Look, Cover, Write, Check spelling, the negotiated curriculum, which was accompanied by the denigration of rote learning and the demotion of teachers' roles to the 'guide on the side' all added up to failure in essential learning."

Previously, under an OBE approach every teacher created their own spelling programs, which weren't implemented at a whole-school level and were difficult to track. Teachers were supposed to embed phonics learning throughout the day, however some did and some didn't – and the kids suffered for it. We were short-changing the kids who most needed our help. Neil knew something had to change. So what did they do?

### Changing Practice and Changing Results

Together with two strong deputy principals Neil set about systematically changing the culture of low expectation and made strong stands against inappropriate behaviour which brought about a more conducive learning environment. Neil says, "Now its peaceful thanks to the efforts of the whole staff. Everyone knows the rules. There is quietness and orderliness about this place."

Pedagogic changes started with the early years and based on research done in Clackmannanshire, Scotland in 2005 that stressed the importance of synthetic phonics, staff adopted the *Jolly Phonics* and *Jolly Grammar* programs. Pre-primary teachers were told every child must be able to read the Oxford Word List and write several sentences by the end of the year. This was counter to the deeply held philosophy of 'learning through play' and several teachers were at first unsure about this new directive and more explicit approach. The success achieved in the early years was motivation for further changes to be implemented throughout the rest of the school. Structured phonics, grammar and mathematics lessons became the expected approach. Teachers were well resourced, and they had programs to follow. Firm leadership was needed at this point and the message was clear, "These are the changes you need to make." Teachers visited other schools where results were good. Watching expert delivery of the programs they adopted provided staff with high quality professional learning.

By 2012 they were at or above the national average across the board. Individual student progress has been rapid: Year 3 students who were way behind the national average in mathematics were achieving the national average two years later.

Neil is convinced that a collaborative approach is the way forward. He is fond of referencing the Bryce Courtenay novel 'The Power of One' – "That theory doesn't apply at this school," he says. He is unflinching in his view that if leadership is seen as the principal alone, a school is doomed to fail. "The real challenge for any school leader is to make sure you have a critical mass of people behind you who support what you're doing," he said. Neil believes these methods could only be effective if teachers are allowed to focus on their core job. "My deputies and I make sure any impediment to teaching and learning is removed from the classroom in less than five minutes, whether it be a child or a parent, and the resultant discussion takes place in the office."

The consequential turnaround in results was so swift and marked that a report from independent think-tank, The Grattan Institute, named it as one of four schools in Australia that proved rapid transformation was possible, and this made the front page of the Australian newspaper. The results speak for themselves. Ellenbrook's students in years three and five went from being poor in 2008 to outperforming the state on almost every metric of literacy by 2010. By 2012 the turnaround was complete as can be seen in Table 2. Ellenbrook students in years three and five were now 'at or above the national average.

**Table 2 NAPLAN Results 2012**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015		
Colour Scheme <span>Red &amp; Green</span> <input type="button" value="Submit"/> <span style="float: right;">Alternate view: <a href="#">Results in graphs</a></span>										
Year 3	Reading		Persuasive Writing		Spelling		Grammar and Punctuation		Numeracy	
	418 <small>402 - 434</small>		431 <small>417 - 445</small>		424 <small>409 - 439</small>		441 <small>423 - 459</small>		399 <small>385 - 413</small>	
	SIM 400 <small>391 - 409</small>	ALL 420	SIM 400 <small>391 - 408</small>	ALL 416	SIM 394 <small>385 - 402</small>	ALL 414	SIM 401 <small>391 - 411</small>	ALL 424	SIM 379 <small>371 - 387</small>	ALL 396
Year 5	467 <small>452 - 482</small>		486 <small>471 - 501</small>		499 <small>485 - 513</small>		493 <small>476 - 510</small>		482 <small>468 - 496</small>	
	SIM 475 <small>466 - 483</small>	ALL 494	SIM 458 <small>450 - 466</small>	ALL 477	SIM 475 <small>467 - 483</small>	ALL 495	SIM 469 <small>460 - 478</small>	ALL 491	SIM 470 <small>462 - 478</small>	ALL 489

**How to interpret this chart**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>SIM</b> schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds</li> <li><b>ALL</b> Australian schools' average</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Student population below reporting threshold</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Year level not tested</li> </ul>	<p>Selected school's average is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><span style="color: green;">■</span> substantially above</li> <li><span style="color: lightgreen;">■</span> above</li> <li><span style="color: lightblue;">■</span> close to</li> <li><span style="color: lightcoral;">■</span> below</li> <li><span style="color: red;">■</span> substantially below</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• average of schools serving students from statistically similar socio-educational backgrounds (SIM box)</li> <li>• average of all Australian schools (ALL box)</li> </ul>
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Using the successes achieved in literacy, Neil and his staff shifted their attention to numeracy. Research and trial lead to the introduction of the Prime (Singapore) mathematics program and the ACER Maths Mastery series (mental mathematics) program from year two onwards. The initial difficulties of new standards encountered were more than compensated for by the significant gain in numeracy scores. Neil is clear, "There is a principle of mastery underlying what we are doing here in mathematics." In upper primary classes teachers work in cross set groups. Neil does not shy away from this approach that is often criticised. "It is streaming of children into ability groups. We acknowledge Howard Gardner's work that says we all have different strengths and for some that means they are at different levels in their mathematics understanding."

### Sustaining the growth

Maintaining fidelity to the approaches that brought success has been instrumental in sustaining good results. Neil ensures staff are committed to the whole-school approaches that have been adopted and recruitment of good teachers who understand and embrace the approach are the ones who are hired. Underpinning Neil's staff management approach is a bedrock of trust. He describes his current leadership style as "driving a car with my hands off the wheel." Through formal and informal staff development / appraisal systems and processes Neil and his deputies assure themselves that teachers are on board. Neil calls this 'earned autonomy' and when this is achieved staff are trusted to deliver the quality of education for which the school has become known. Table 3 below shows students continue to be 'at and above' the national average in all areas measured.

**Table 3 NAPLAN Results 2015**

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015		
Colour Scheme <b>Red &amp; Green</b>		<input type="button" value="Submit"/>		Alternate view: <a href="#">Results in graphs</a>					
<b>Reading</b>		<b>Persuasive Writing</b>		<b>Spelling</b>		<b>Grammar and Punctuation</b>		<b>Numeracy</b>	
<b>437</b> 421 - 453		<b>436</b> 422 - 450		<b>439</b> 424 - 454		<b>455</b> 437 - 472		<b>418</b> 404 - 432	
SIM 414 405 - 423	ALL 426	SIM 410 402 - 419	ALL 416	SIM 402 393 - 410	ALL 409	SIM 420 410 - 430	ALL 433	SIM 386 378 - 395	ALL 398
<b>489</b> 474 - 504		<b>483</b> 468 - 497		<b>503</b> 489 - 518		<b>527</b> 511 - 544		<b>488</b> 474 - 502	
SIM 491 483 - 500	ALL 499	SIM 472 463 - 480	ALL 478	SIM 495 487 - 503	ALL 498	SIM 495 486 - 504	ALL 503	SIM 483 475 - 491	ALL 493

**Table 4 NAPLAN 2015, 2016 - Comparative Performance against Expected Performance, Yr 3 & 5**

	Year 3					Year 5				
	Num	Rdg	W	Sp	P&G	Num	Rdg	W	Sp	P&G
<b>2015</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>1.4</b>
<b>2016</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.5</b>

### Key Principles and Learnings

The following key principles underpin the gains made at Ellenbrook Primary school.

They offer others insights into the change and development process that brought about positive outcomes at the school.

- We must have strong beliefs that what we are doing is right.
- Research and school-based trials are critical to the successful implementation of change initiatives.
- Strong leaders across the teams are crucial to the success of any school.
- Everyone has to embrace the change.
- Having clear and high standards are central to successful outcomes.
- Effective teaching increases when teachers learn from each other.
- Development and measurement of student learning is critical.
- A positive school culture and supportive parents helps teachers perform in a trusted environment.
- There are two criteria for school-based change: improve the students' learning and, if possible, make the teachers' job easier.
- Understand that barriers exist, but know that everything is surmountable.
- Staff can never rest easy – We're constantly making sure we do better all the time.

**Acknowledgements**

Two articles were written about the school in recent years and they have been drawn on in writing this case study.  
Mitchell. David, 24 February 2014. "The Power of Many". Education Department of WA.  
Corry. Rupert. 16 February 2015. "Ahead of the Curve" Teacher Magazine. ACER.