AL-FAISAL COLLEGE (AUBURN)

Al-Faisal College started their school improvement journey in 2010[1]. They were already an established K-12 school but when they analysed their students' standardised testing data, the college identified student levels of achievement and growth had been plateauing for a number of years. After further analysis, the senior leadership team identified the area of reading as a high priority for improvement across the college.

"We wanted to have set targets, we wanted to have critical measures in place…"

DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The senior leadership team knew they had to establish a process and a culture that would equip and empower all staff to achieve the target goals. This was achieved through a number of steps, repeated for every new phase of improvement, and which evolved into the college's school improvement process.

The process involved:

- Using data to identify priority areas for improvement;
- Researching current best practice with evidence of impact in the priority areas;
- Formulation of critical targets and goals with specific measures of impact;
- Articulation of a K-12 vision for the next five years in student growth and achievement in these priority areas;
- Establishing a "guiding coalition" of teachers and parents to develop appropriate strategies;
- Providing a structured program of quality professional learning;
- Providing time for staff to engage with data and collaboratively develop new programs;
- Evaluation of programs through data analysis and measures of impact.

"for us it was really important to target our staff, we really wanted to make sure that they were upskilled, we wanted to empower them…"

In the initial stages of their journey, senior leadership led the improvement process. However, the goal had always been to empower staff to lead improvement from within the classroom, and by 2017 this was occurring. Staff had become confident in three key areas: analysing myriad sources of student data (both academic and wellbeing); collaboratively building programs that addressed student learning needs; and modelling a culture of high expectations and growth. The leadership team continued to provide the professional learning and resources required to achieve this highly effective, distributed leadership approach. The college also ensured new staff received all the support and training they needed through a structured induction and mentoring program.

School Profile

- K-12, co-educational
- Established in 1998
- 2,200 students
- Metropolitan Sydney (NSW)

Prominent features

- Collecting and analysing baseline data
- Specifying desired outcome improvements
- Measuring and monitoring improvements

Data showing growth and change

Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)

Growth in High Achiever level of attainment: Percentage of students recording ATAR above 90 rose from 18% in 2014 to 44% in 2018.

School-based survey

Key findings from surveys that reflect changes to attitudes, perceptions, professional learning, content knowledge and pedagogy include:

- 96% of primary school teachers believed providing greater professional development opportunities have helped to improve learning outcomes for students in literacy across all KLAs.
- 90% of staff now support the school's model for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics across K-3
- 95% of secondary staff believe that literacy is taught effectively across the secondary curriculum compared to 20% in 2011
- 93% of K-12 staff stated that they have modified their teaching practices to integrate literacy strategies as a result of participating in professional learning

Student Retention:

87% of the 2016 Year 10 cohort who started at Al-Faisal College, completed Year 12 in 2018. This is the highest retention rate for the past five years, up from 60% during 2014-2016.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CLASSROOM, AS A RESULT OF THE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS?

Al-Faisal College had identified reading as their first improvement priority. Literacy programs were introduced, based on explicit instruction and 3-Tier approaches to assisting students at their point of need. This pedagogy was adapted to other areas of the curriculum and subsequent target areas, such as numeracy and languages. Learning routines and metalanguage was systematically introduced across the college. Staff also shared with students an understanding of data analysis, which slowly built a culture of self-evaluation and growth.

In 2016, the college identified a new priority area. Data was pointing towards the need for a stronger student learning culture based on the college values and principles of positive behaviour. The focus was underpinned by a belief that academic achievement, which is one of the college's core values, can be more effectively delivered in a classroom that prioritises positive behaviours for learning. The ROARS (respect, ownership, achievement, responsibility and safety) program was developed for implementation across the college over the space of eighteen months. Initial development was carried out by a steering committee of representatives from across K-12, including leadership, parents and teachers. The inclusivity of the improvement process at Al-Faisal was further highlighted by the production of instructional videos by the student body. These videos defined the positive behaviours and showed what they look like in the classroom. The ROARS program was implemented in stages through a structured curriculum designed by teacher teams. It took two years to fully implement the program into the existing curriculum.

SUSTAINING FACTORS

The improvement plans for the coming years will continue to build on the focus areas of literacy, numeracy and positive behaviour for learning. Building on the effective pedagogy of their English literacy programs, Al-Faisal is also in the later stages of developing a synthetic phonics approach to the teaching of the Arabic language. The college will continue to emphasise the importance of staff ownership of the improvement process and the importance of using data to inform priorities.

The school improvement journey at Al-Faisal College has been sustained over many years by a number of factors. First and foremost is the participation and empowerment of staff across the college. This has been achieved by investing in ongoing professional learning and development. The leadership team has ensured staff have the necessary capacity, knowledge, expertise and ownership of the improvement process. Staff are allowed sufficient time to adopt and embed new knowledge and practices in their own classrooms. The journey has also been sustained through the skilful, unified leadership of the college executive and the inclusive, coherent, contextually based process that has evolved over time. The final factor in sustaining improvement over so many years has been the relentless commitment to understanding the learning needs of all students through rigorous analysis of academic and wellbeing data. Ultimately, it is an embedded culture of improvement and a vision of growth in all students that continues to sustain the journey at Al-Faisal College.

"Our teachers said they can see the improvement and see the confidence in the students."

STUDENT GROWTH IN EXTERNAL STANDARDISED TESTING (NAPLAN)

Number of Year 3 students working at proficient level (top 2 bands)

	2017	2013
Numeracy	67%	48%
Grammar	81%	57%
Spelling	92%	57%
Writing	92%	63%
Reading	75%	36%
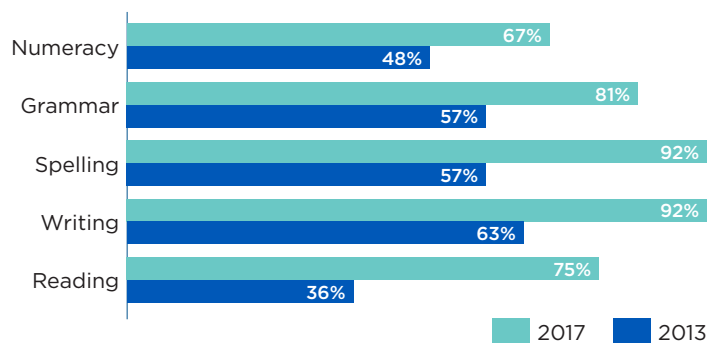
Thinking further

What aspects of this school's story resonate with you?

What actions might this story prompt for you?

There are five case studies in this school improvement series. What themes or practices emerge that might be relevant in your school context?

1. From 2010-2013 the school participated in a Commonwealth Government funded program which enabled access to AISNSW consultancy support and funds for teacher release to engage with school improvement initiatives.