

The school improvement journey for Lakes Grammar – An Anglican School started when they noticed their students had not been achieving as well as the staff thought they could and external testing results supported this view. Analysis of Higher School Certificate and external literacy/numeracy (NAPLAN) test results revealed their students needed to be better equipped with higher order thinking skills and standardised testing was indicating weakness in core literacy and numeracy skills. External testing was triangulated with internal performance data to confirm this analysis. At this point, the school was unsure which strategies might have the most impact in the areas of greatest need. So in 2015, the school joined an AISNSW school improvement program<sup>1</sup>, starting a highly successful engagement with improvement initiatives.

*“...visible leadership is very important when you are trying to create a culture of change...”*

#### SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IS A CULTURE NOT A PROGRAM

The senior leadership team recognised an existing culture of low expectations, which meant students were coasting. There was an inconsistency in standards, what constituted high level performance and how to achieve it. It was a slow-burn trigger for action. A funded program through AISNSW proved to be the perfect opportunity to act on this concern and to focus on change through improvement.

Over four years, senior leadership recalibrated the learning culture with careful attention to syllabus outcomes and detailed understanding of student performance and measures of growth. By rigorously analysing school data and implementing evidence-based improvement strategies, the leadership team moved the school from reliance on rigid programs to a dynamic process that placed a focus on the students as learners, using learning outcomes and analysing student progress. The emphasis on improvement led to a transformation of staff from sceptical to engaged, as they made changes to pedagogy and practice by working with specific goals that targeted student performance and individual gains in learning.

*“A really difficult part of our journey was at the start really, because we were introducing significant change, asking people to change what they do.”*

The improvement process required strong leadership and significant investment of time. The first year was dedicated to intensive research, preparing the groundwork for significant change and planning by senior executive. They tackled the difficult conversations and practical obstacles that come with the introduction of new strategies. There was complete awareness of the significant cultural shift that was occurring. School leadership developed the capacity to shift between a

#### School Profile

- K-12, co-educational
- Established in 2004
- 915 students
- Regional New South Wales

#### Prominent features

- Cultivating a culture of improvement
- Effective school leadership
- Designing and implementing an improvement strategy
- Identifying drivers of improvement

range of leadership styles throughout the improvement process. Transformational leadership was instrumental in creating a shared vision and aligning change throughout the school. Instructional leadership was essential for building professional capacity and developing stronger classroom practice, whilst adaptive leadership approaches tackled challenges and obstacles.

Over time, the leadership team were able to identify drivers of improvement at Lakes Grammar:

- Many teachers were ready and wanted to change the prevailing culture but were unsure how to take the first step
- Steady, consistent, courageous senior leadership were supported by middle leaders, thus enabling leadership through the difficult times of change and implementation
- Commitment to persevere until positive impact became evident and approaches were validated by the progress made
- A focus on changing culture by emphasising it was a whole-school challenge that required a solution that was supported by everyone
- Access to external resources and expert knowledge in the initial phases

## WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CLASSROOM?

For the junior school, reading comprehension was the starting point, alongside the robust implementation of a new English syllabus. An approach called Lesson Study Cycle provided structure and a shared process. Staff worked together in the classroom, testing and refining new approaches. Thinking routines were introduced and staff began to implement a variety of resources. The collaborative nature of this methodology broke down silos whilst building individuals' professional agency. In the senior school, the focus was on literacy, feedback and higher-order thinking skills across all subject areas. Senior college leadership worked directly with middle leaders to design specific application of new practices in the classroom. Through a system of coaching, which involved peer observations and follow-up professional conversations, teachers developed new evidence-based practices in their classrooms.

Key to keeping the momentum going once the improvement process had started was working closely with staff and developing the necessary professional culture. The first step was recognising resistance and focusing on teacher consistency in a range of areas, such as judgement around standards and student progress. By starting with data, student progress was placed at the centre of improvement planning. Professional learning focused on supplying staff with a toolbox of explicit strategies for making a difference in the areas that data revealed as points of need. The introduction of learning coaches for the staff was a critical and effective strategy.

A process of identifying gaps in students' learning developed over time. Once staff identified a gap they adopt the following approach:

- research current evidence-based pedagogy and learning theory;

- select a promising practice;
- trial it in the classroom with the students;
- evaluate its impact with support from the learning coach and head teacher before refining the successful aspects of each practice.

## WHAT DID THE SCHOOL LEARN ABOUT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT?

Since 2015, the school has created new leadership positions and additional roles that focus specifically on the quality of teaching and learning. This is a deliberate strategy for supporting the direction improvement is taking and a recognition that it is crucial to develop and enable all staff. The process of coaching is being scaled across the school, with heads of departments being trained as coaches.

Of many lessons senior leadership learnt from the experience of school improvement, two key ones were:

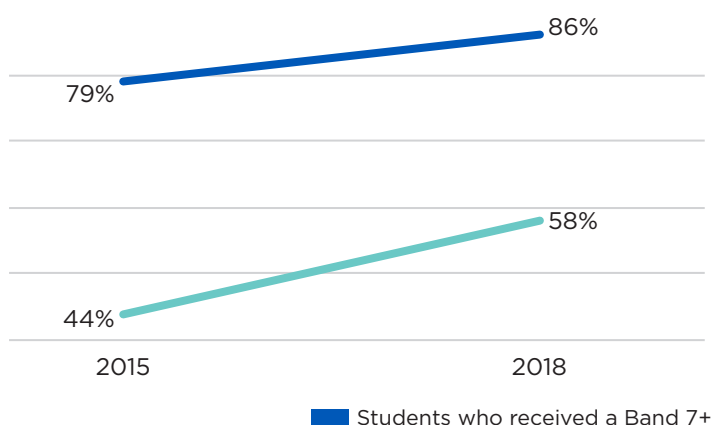
- Providing teachers with time to collaborate and learn together is essential;
- Consistency of message and persistency by school leaders over the long term is critical.

Lakes Grammar wanted to shift the achievement curve and ensure every student was experiencing growth. The intention had always been to build a culture of continuous improvement.

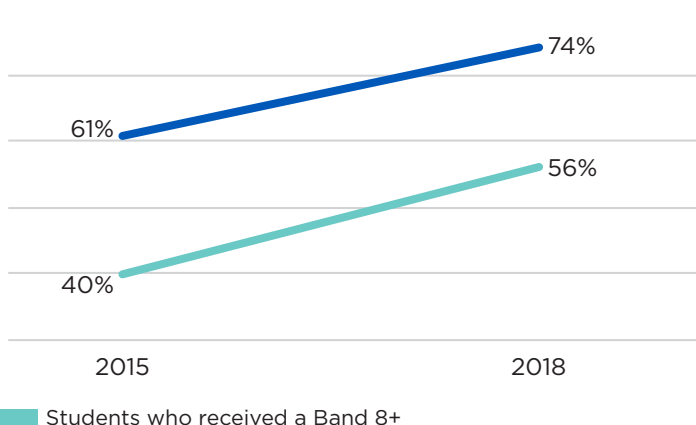
School improvement has involved shifting the focus from rigid to dynamic programs, from data as records to data as evidence, from isolated practice to collaborative professional learning that guides and informs the next step in every classroom, and most importantly, improvement has shifted the focus from undifferentiated programs to growth and progress of each student.

## STUDENT GROWTH IN EXTERNAL STANDARDISED TESTING (NAPLAN)

Reading Results Year 9



Writing Results Year 9



### 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 2015-17 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.