

St Philip's Christian College became involved in school improvement through a structured program in 2014¹. The program gave the college an opportunity to develop a process that would provide focus, structure and criteria for selecting improvement targets. This process would enable the college to work on high-impact initiatives and strategically develop excellence in a select number of areas. Through the deliberate use of evidence and data sets, the college was able to identify their priorities. By 2016, the college had developed their own school improvement process and have continued to apply it with ongoing success.

“We have this desire to strive for excellence in everything that we do. The problem with that, is if you strive for excellence in everything you can actually end up with excellence in nothing...”

DEVELOPING A ROBUST SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

The school improvement process brought cohesion, consolidation and focus to an extensive range of research-based practices and innovative programs. Prior to 2014, the introduction of too many new practices and ideas had created 'change fatigue'. College leadership wanted to understand how to select the best of these and embed them as productive practices throughout the college. They achieved this through five key aspects of their improvement process:

- Senior leadership searches the data and has a thorough knowledge of how new practices work. Convergence of school improvement initiatives through a few evidence-based lenses such as coherence and consolidation;
- Collaborative project teams with specific improvement goals and a focus on decision-making based on student data and contextual information gathered from myriad sources;
- Planned, rigorous professional learning based on current research — build teacher knowledge and capacity with a view to agency;
- An explicit plan for implementation and ongoing support of teachers in the classroom;
- An 'ongoing project' phase that is led by middle leadership and classroom teachers that ensures excellent practice is developed and embedded.

In the early stages of the school improvement journey, senior leadership found the support of an expert was critical. This outside voice was important for identifying the existing culture and the college's approach to change. Senior leadership then adopted a distributed leadership approach, which allowed for a greater number of teachers to be involved the improvement process, thus empowering and engaging staff. Change became contextualised and more measured in pace and the range of initiatives was narrowed.

School Profile

- K-12, co-educational
- Established in 1982
- 1,250 students
- Regional New South Wales

Prominent features

- Effective school leadership
- Specifying desired improvement outcomes
- Identifying drivers for improvement
- Reflecting on the improvement process

“I think its important to look at school improvement through a variety of lenses ... when we bring together a variety of perspectives we get a more clear picture of what it is that were dealing with and what it is that we want to achieve.”

WHAT WERE THE PRIORITIES?

The college had always been well known for change and growth, but in recent years there was recognition that change and initiatives had not necessarily generated the desired impact. Rather than abandoning all previous ideas, leadership chose three of the most successfully embedded or most promising initiatives with a view to implementing or reframing them through the new improvement process.

This approach led to the development of a dynamic project-based learning curriculum for the middle years and design of new learning facilities. The college also developed a *Whole of Life Framework* curriculum that encompasses the college values, student learning intentions and core aspects of student wellbeing.

“School improvement is about choice, making choices about where you’ll go next and what you’ll attend to...”

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CLASSROOM?

Data revealed a desire for diverse, non-traditional pathways for students and for further development of the cultural distinctiveness of the college. The educational purpose of the three sub-school structure has been strengthened as a supportive structure for student well-being and creating meaningful community. The college has assigned curriculum programming and development to a more traditional primary and secondary model that overlays the sub-schools. Project-based learning has also become integral to innovating the Years 2 - 10 curriculum.

WHAT CARRIES THE PROCESS FORWARD?

The St Philip’s Christian College story is one of bringing order and process to an existing culture of innovation and improvement. The college did not lack a heart for change nor did it lack interest in innovative practice. However, it did lack processes for embedding excellence and leading change that would have a defined, measurable impact on student learning and achievement. As a large school, the college demonstrates that school improvement can occur in a complex context with many stakeholders and from within an established culture.

The school improvement process provides an effective way of monitoring all improvement plans and sharpens the focus on the target outcomes for students, which is crucial in a large organisation. The process also ensures one success generates the groundwork necessary for subsequent improvement, thereby ensuring continuity and cumulative impact of each plan.

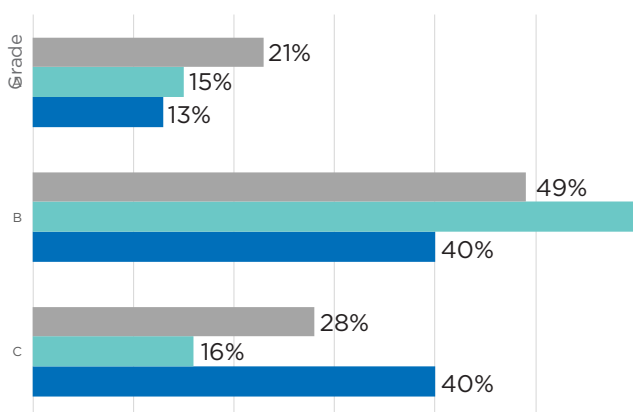
“We made the decision not to engage with change just for the sake of change, but to be very strategic and intentional...”

School improvement has become a cultural dynamic at St Philip’s. It is an ongoing journey of high capacity, deep learning and development that is underpinned by unified, capable leadership. Senior leadership recognises the challenges of bringing change and improvement into a large, complex school environment. The school improvement team has learnt to simplify plans and rely on the triangulation of data to inform strategies.

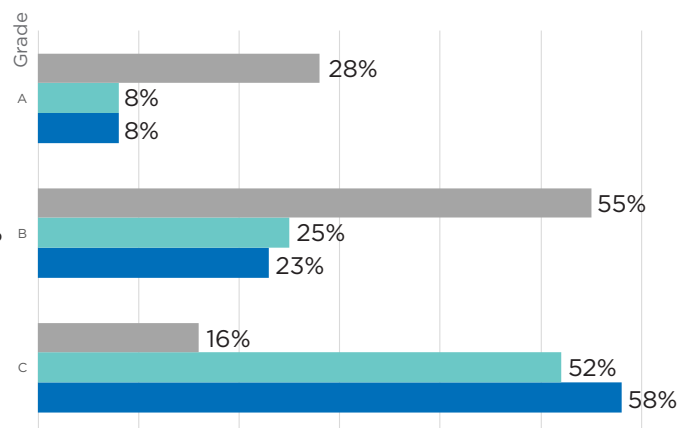
St Philip’s story is one of simplifying and sharpening focus with a keen eye for bringing positive impact to whole school. It is also a story of using their own improvement processes to enhance existing initiatives that are flourishing or are not generating specific impact as intended. The process gives these practices and approaches a structured opportunity to be evaluated for inclusion in the college’s strategic planning.

COMPARISON OF YEAR 10 GRADES FROM 2016 TO 2018

History



Geography



2018 2017 2016

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 2014-2016 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.