Looma Remote Community School, Western Australia

'In terms of closing the gap we have to aim high.'

Data background | Setting up | Planning and data | High targets | NAPLAN | Attendance

Context

Looma Remote Community School is a state school 130 km south-east of Derby and south of the main Derby to Fitzroy Crossing Highway in the Kimberley.

The Looma Aboriginal community has about 400 people and sits at the base of the picturesque Grant Range. There are three main language groups (Walmajarri, Nyikina and Mangala) and the word 'Looma' is Walmajarri for 'blue tongue lizard'. That lizard is the school and community logo.

The school began as an annexe of Camballin Special Aboriginal School in 1982 and was officially opened in 1986. Since 2003, it has been classified as a Remote Community School. These days it has about 120 students including small numbers at lower secondary levels. There are 11 teachers and about the same number of Aboriginal workers.

Apart from the community languages, most of the students speak Aboriginal English and Kriol.

The data background

Principal Paul Eaglestone discusses data use at Looma:

We want rigorous testing that puts us up against the rest of Australia and of course NAPLAN is a good indicator. It tells us something about an individual's achievement in relation to others across the country.

In a small place like Looma, though, we have small numbers at each year level, and a high level of transiency. This means that comparing, say, Year 3 in 2012 with Year 3 in 2011 might not be very meaningful.

Principal, Paul Eaglestone

The general trend of our NAPLAN results is slightly upwards over time, but it's not necessarily the most useful way to look at student progress from week to week and semester to semester. We need more fine-grained data than that, so that we can monitor and demonstrate improvement along the way and to diagnose areas in which students need extra help. The main tools we use are the Kimberley Literacy Profile and First Steps, for numeracy.

Teachers need that fine grained data as well, so that they know they are making a difference. And our data at Looma show that we are closing the gap for many of our kids.

I can look at the data for any particular kid at any particular time and understand where she's up to and what is being done to help her be her best.

Setting up for success

I started four and a half years ago at Looma, which has always been a good school but I wanted it to be an academically better school. The vision was that our kids wouldn't be disadvantaged when they go away at Year 8, 9 or 10.

We know there's a gap, because kids here are coming from language backgrounds where Standard Australian English isn't spoken. But we are closing that gap for many kids.

Originally we had classes of 12 or 13 and even though attendance wasn't bad it only takes a few kids to be away at a funeral, say, and your numbers are getting quite low. And then there can be a kind of circular process where teachers aren't enthused and that gets passed on to the students who vote with their feet. I think about a class having a critical mass where there are leaders, some high achievers, some in the middle and then some who struggle more and I think you need all of them.

I knew the community because I'd worked here before so I knew that parents are supportive and that there aren't a lot of behaviour issues. I knew we had a great platform to do something special here.

So I presented a few options to the staff about possible change because I wanted to make sure that if we did change everyone felt they were a part of it. The option we chose increased class sizes by three or four but in doing that freed up one teacher to be Numeracy Coordinator, and meant that an AIEO [Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer] could be in every room. The idea of a Numeracy Coordinator was attractive because we weren't doing as well in numeracy at the time as we wanted, and teachers felt they needed more help. We managed to get a numeracy person I knew of from outside the school to fill the position.

As well, I have been able to use National Partnerships money to create a Literacy Coordinator position.

Planning and data

The thing then is not just to create these positions, but also to use them to really assist the teaching and learning process. So they work side by side in the classroom with the other teachers but they are also involved in working with them individually. All our teachers are First Steps trained and ESL trained, so they know about the good practice we're promoting here.

Every day we have morning fitness (which is a state initiative to make sure every kid has 30 minutes exercise every day). At that time, the Literacy Coordinator and the Numeracy Coordinator have one period a week with each teacher. That's also the time they work to assist with planning and make sure that all the teachers administer the tests in the same way.

In terms of data collection, where possible I convert left over FTE (teacher replacement) money to salary and employ a relief teacher to take over the class while the regular teacher does the testing with the kids. That way the kids are working with the people they trust.

You have to be able to trust the data, and although they do spend a lot of their own time, you have to give teachers time to be able to work with it. If the Year 3 teachers this year can't trust the data from last year's Year 2 teacher, then what's the point? They just have to waste the first week assessing students for themselves.

Our whole school planning is pretty simple but holistic because everyone is involved. But our plans are one-pagers, because I want people to use them! I've seen too many good-looking plans that are very dusty.

Our operational plans for Literacy and Numeracy are all one-pagers and it's non-negotiable that if the plan says we're doing numeracy at 10 o'clock every day, then that's exactly what we're doing. It gives the teacher a structure, and for me as well, when I'm running to routine I'll look in on every class every day, and I know in advance what kind of activity will be going on there.

Every one of our students has individual targets each semester, based on the Kimberley Literacy Profile and First Steps.

Here is an extract from a literacy example for three Year 3 students.

And here is an example of a numeracy profile.

High targets

What we want is student gain. I prefer high targets, even though sometimes students might do well but still not get there, because I want them to reach for the stars. Also, in terms of closing the gap we have to aim high. Experience tells us which targets are reachable but mean that the student has to excel to get there. We'll never set an unrealistic target.

I ask every four or five weeks that the teachers and the Literacy Coordinator and the Numeracy Coordinator look at the data just to see how the kids are going in terms of their targets. Teachers have a lot of autonomy, but they appreciate being supported in these things, and helped to plan what they can do to give students the specific help they need.

It's very important that you set up a situation where teachers don't feel they are being judged by whether students meet ambitious targets. It has to be a cooperative situation, rather than a big stick. Apart from anything else, if teachers feel they are being judged in that way, they're less inclined to be accurate with data.

Actually, the targets and other data are available all the time on our shared drive, so it's easy to access. So AIEOs can and do look at it, and so do I. I know the kids really well and sometimes I'll ask teachers questions like 'I notice such and such did really well, why do you think that is?' and then we can have a positive professional discussion about it. It's almost as scary not to know why someone did well, as why they didn't.

In recent years the school has become a more attractive destination for teachers. Here are Paul's comments about induction and continuity of the program.

Reporting on NAPLAN

Here is an example of NAPLAN results for three students. Notice that apart from the raw results, student progress is assessed on a 'traffic light' system.

My thinking is that if students make a 100 point gain between Year 3 and Year 5, or Year 5 and Year 7, they get a 'green', regardless of whether they're below at or above because that's closing the gap.

It works the other way as well. If a student has improved, even beyond benchmark standard, they might get a 'red' if we really think they could have done a lot better. That might seem a bit harsh, but when you explain to the parent and the student that it was judged in terms of the individual, they can see what it means. In that aspect, it's not about comparing students with each other.

Attendance and achievement

Data at Looma support the common-sense view that high levels of attendance do, in fact, correlate with achievement. Here is an example that shows attendance rates of a group of Year 1 students alongside aspects of the Kimberley Literacy Profile, and here is another example relating to a group of Year 6/7 students. In the latter example, the shaded areas show where students have successfully moved ahead of the Profile. In general, those are the students with good attendance records.

This way of showing data is good for parents because you can point out how attendance usually leads to better outcomes and it's all very clear. Students can see that as well.

If you're seeing green as a parent you should be happy because you're sending your kids to school, but it's great to be able to say to them as well 'look at that, she had good attendance and look how well she's doing…'.

We can talk about data for all our students. If I look at a particular student [Student D] and know she was in hospital the previous year, and I know that was an interruption. But then I can look at this and see she's catching up now. And her parents can see that as well.

Having said that, though, we know that even 90% attendance isn't really good enough. I tell parents that if you add it up, that means a whole year away from school over 10 years. We had our attendance reward excursion to the pool the other day and even kids with 89.75% attendance couldn't come. If they chose not to come to school on days they could have, then those are the consequences.