



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Bourke Public School, New South Wales

A needs-based community school

[The context](#) | [Strategies for improvement](#) | [Results](#)

The context

Bourke is a town of about 3000 situated in far west New South Wales on the Darling River. When you cross it going west, you're officially 'out back'. It's hot country, but not desert. There are thousands of hectares of irrigated land under cotton, orchards and vineyards.

Bourke Public School has an enrolment of about 280, half of whom are Aboriginal students. There is a high rate of transience among its students. During 2000, 100 students enrolled, 31 after leaving once, and 15 exited. It looks like a normal school, apart from the two train carriages at its rear. The carriages, refurbished and outfitted with enough high quality computers for a class, is the 'Literacy Train'.



Strategies for improvement

Paul Loxley has been Principal at Bourke PS for ten years. He tells his story of making changes.

The teachers thought I'd been sent here to turn the place upside down and rebuild it, which wasn't at all true, but that was the word that was out. That's not a conducive environment to work in, particularly in a school as isolated and remote as this one — low levels of teacher expertise, no programs, no guidelines and those sorts of things.

The first thing I did was that I tried to win the kids. I thought if I win the kids, at least someone will be saying something nice about me.

A basic teacher day is worth round \$170. So I look at everything in terms of casual teacher days, because in the past we haven't had a lot of casuals. But I used to think, like, for a casual day I could buy fifteen soccer balls, and when I first came that's what I did. I bought a heap of equipment. I just bought a mixed assortment of 200 footballs so that basically every kid could have a ball. People were thinking — what's this goose doing throwing all this equipment on the playground! — without realising that for about ten teacher days I'd just won nearly every kid and most of their parents. And I went out and helped them kick them around.

Then I had a dingo's breakfast (a good look round) to see those people that were doing a good job, were good practitioners and might be able to help in relation to literacy delivery. Initially, that's all I looked at — plus student management. But I couldn't do it myself. I had to find a core of people that wanted to go on that road with me,



Paul Loxley

because you're not going to do any change of its direction by yourself. You've got to take people with you. So I just picked people up and those people took on responsibilities. I made sure they had the support and the resources to do what they wanted to do.

After eighteen months I think people saw that I was here for the kids. People saw that what I was saying and how we were gearing up was all about outcomes for kids. In my first two years here I used to get phone calls all the time about what teachers were doing in classrooms. Something would pop up so I'd fix it. It was all reactive. But that was the only way I could go to start with. And I could understand their frustration.

So we started by putting the handbook together — the rules. Our Core Beliefs emerged out of this process. I'm not a big one on paperwork, but if people are going to understand whether they're playing tennis or football, you need a grip on the rules. And school's no different. You play by a set of rules and everybody can enjoy the game.

That was a fair bit of work and I had a number of very capable young people who came on and started to help me, and the snowball got bigger and bigger and bigger to a point where we had nearly everybody on board. Weight of numbers shifted a few reluctant people. What we did we did well. Fair dinkum stuff.

So, then we thought, what else can we do to improve what we do? And we took on student management. We took all the different aspects of student management — anything, people just tossed them in — and we put them into categories. All I did straight up was to say — righto, we're going to do this in an appropriate time frame. We're not going to rebuild it overnight. We're going to prioritise. What are the most important things to do? What are the easy things that we can fix right now? What are the medium- and longer-term things?

We set that up through the school management plan. Right from the start we worked with well laid out plans with performance indicators, appropriate time frames — all the right things. I've got a file here that has every management plan for the last nine years in it, and you can see where one thing's just rolled into the other, all based on defined need. We've been chipping away.

The other important aspects were professional development — that's always been important — and delegation of responsibility. You can't tell people that you want them to participate if you're not going to give them things to do and support to do it. So right from the start, the priorities and the responsibilities in the management plan have been linked to school-wide and personal professional development plans.

But, apart from all those things that were happening, right from the start the most important thing I did was respond to any phone call or any request from a parent immediately.

When parents come and see me I say — you talk and I'll listen. Do you mind me taking some notes? I take the notes. I learnt very early that once they're going, you shut your mouth. It might take forty-five minutes or an hour. But you just sit there and listen. Then I say to them — right, to fix things up I need to do this, this and this. I should be able to get back to you by tomorrow lunchtime. But if I haven't got back to you by tomorrow lunchtime, I want you to ring me.



Right from the start I never made a decision about any kid without consulting their parents, and I think that's a major issue, particularly with Aboriginal kids. You've got to empower people, you can't just rock up and say 'Your kid's done this. They're suspended for four days.' Then a second short suspension that goes to a long, then expulsion. You know the story. It's being written every day in the schools of Australia.

By establishing those links with parents, and more particularly Aboriginal parents, at least I had some credibility. They hear my side of the story and the kid is always there so I can say — righto, what's your side of the story? — and then we'll make a decision. Take the emotiveness out of it.

A wide range of strategies is now in place.

Results

There are many indicators of performance on which Bourke PS would score highly — attendance rates of students and staff; classroom and yard behaviour; 'time-out records', the number and type of 'critical incidents'; and levels of parent satisfaction — but those which are focused on most closely are performance in literacy and numeracy.

NSW Basic Skills Literacy, 2000

Year 3 achieved

- an average score of 48.1, which was below the state average of 50.0;
- an average score for boys of 49.5, which was just above the state average for boys (49.2);
- an average score for Aboriginal students of 46.5, which was above the state average for Aboriginal students (46.0); and
- 70% placed in the top three skill bands compared with 68% state wide.

Year 5

- achieved an average score of 54.6, which was below the state average of 56.2;
- had 65% placed in the top three skill bands compared with 76% state wide;
- results for Aboriginal students (51.1) were just below state results (51.5); and
- boys performed better than did the Year 5 girls.

Fourteen of the 23 Year 5 students sat the Year 3 test at Bourke Public School in 1998: 85% of these 'matched' students demonstrated progress in line with, or better than, statewide average progress for students of similar ability; 50% of these 'matched' students demonstrated progress in line with the best statewide progress (top 25%).

NSW Basic Skills Numeracy, 2000

Year 3

- achieved an average score of 48.1, which was below the state average of 50.0;
- achieved an average score for boys of 52.7, which was above the state average; and
- Aboriginal students achieved an average score of 46.5, which was above the state average.

Year 5

- achieved an average score of 58.8, which was just below the state average;
- boys had an average of 60.5, just above the state average;
- Aboriginal students achieved an average higher than the state average; and
- 65% of students were in the top three bands and no students were in the lowest band.

Thirteen of the 23 Year 5 students had sat the Year 3 test at Bourke Public School in 1998: 70% of these students demonstrated progress in line with, or better than, statewide average progress for students with similar ability. Students who have a very good attendance rate have demonstrated outstanding progress both in school-based assessment and Basic Skills Tests in literacy and numeracy.