

Appraisal and professional learning

St Paul's School, Queensland

Case study and materials connected to the video of effective existing performance and development practice

St Paul's is a co-educational Prep to Year 12 Anglican school which, in July 2012, is opening an Early Learning Centre including Kindergarten (Preschool) programs on its campus in the outer northern Brisbane suburb of Bald Hills. The school comprises four sub-schools — a Junior School from Pre-Prep to Year 6, a Middle School for Years 7 to 9; a Senior School for students in Years 10 – 12; and an International School providing High School Preparation and English Language.

It's all about the teaching

With the arrival of a new principal who has a passion for teaching, a strategic plan was developed which had the quality of teaching and learning as priority number one. This in turn was articulated in terms of a statement which specifies what good teaching looks like at St Paul's, linked to position descriptions the school developed, which was signed off by the staff as a whole. This statement forms the basis of appraisal in the school, and facilitates professional conversations amongst staff.

Supportive structures in the school

The school then developed an approach to enable the appraisal of teachers against both the statement on teaching and the position description for each teacher's role, as outlined below. This followed a survey of staff to determine exactly what they sought in terms of recognition of their work, which surfaced the fact they wanted more involvement in decision-making, access to professional development and more feedback. The appraisal process is designed to meet these needs with a particular focus on feedback as a positive experience for all involved, rather than a threat.

In the first instance, the school's Director of Teaching and Learning conducted all teacher appraisals over a two-year period, both to pilot the process and ensure a consistent approach. This proved especially important in terms of providing an overall sense of professional learning needs, to inform the Director's understanding of what was required for staff.

Subsequent to this first two-year round, the school has restructured its middle management structure to more clearly reflect the teaching and learning priority it set. A targeted external review found that the primary focus of Heads of Department in the school tended to be transactional work instead of working to improve teaching and learning in their teams. Given this, a new model was created whereby Learning Managers were appointed to do this transactional work, and Heads of Learning to lead the implementation of strategies for improving teaching and learning in the school.

There are six Heads of Learning who each have a whole-school role focused on an element of 21st century pedagogy — i.e., communication, creativity, innovation, discovery, future thinking, and human endeavour — and who have assumed responsibility for appraising teachers in the second round. Each head is allocated a cross-section of staff to appraise and is being coached by the Director of Teaching and Learning on how to fulfil this task.

After the first round of appraisals, the school surveyed staff about the experience and modified its approach in response. One particular problem that emerged was that, although peer feedback was sought as part of the process, it was not anonymous, with the result it tended to be somewhat bland and excessively positive with no sense of challenge at all. Another aspect that needed to be reinforced, was that the process has nothing to do with performance concerns which are handled separately, and this helped enshrine the positive nature of appraisal in the school.



About

For the last six years St Paul's school has amplified its focus on teaching and learning. The school initially developed a statement that outlines what effective teaching looks like at St Paul's and this underpins performance and development in the school. The school restructured their staffing to introduce Heads of Learning to implement strategies for improving teaching and learning. The performance and development process involves teachers self-reflecting, informal and formal classroom observations, feedback from peers and students, and goal setting. The school seeks to support teachers in achieving their professional goals by running their own professional learning in a dedicated onsite centre.

Questions for discussion

1. What does effective teaching look like in your school context and how does this relate to the National professional Standards for teachers?
2. The performance and development process at St Paul's incorporates survey feedback from a range of peers and also from students. What would a peer and/or student survey need to address to ensure that the results were professionally beneficial?
3. How do you ensure that professional learning has an impact on classroom teaching and on colleagues?

School Context

St Paul's School

Bald Hills, QLD

School type: Non-government

Stage of schooling: Combined

School location: Metropolitan

The process in use

The appraisal process begins with a professional discussion between the teacher and their appraiser informed by the teacher's own reflections against the set of 18 questions provided.

Each appraiser is linked to their teachers for two years to form the sort of relationship that enables the ongoing professional conversations that form the heart of the approach. Informal classroom visits are undertaken where the appraiser 'pops in' to observe, help, demonstrate or do whatever is appropriate and agreed. This is supplemented by a formal classroom observation, which is arguably less threatening when regular informal observation already occurs.

To ensure a broader range of feedback is received, each teacher receives structured feedback from both peers and a sample of students in the following way. A range of peers comprising two teachers from their learning area, their Head of House, one middle manager, one person nominated by the appraiser and, on an optional basis, one or more other leaders or members of the teaching or non-teaching staff, complete the survey in Attachment 3. A report is prepared on the outcomes of this anonymous survey which is shared in the appraisal conversation that occurs between the appraiser and the teacher at the end of the process, along with all the other input that is outlined. Two classes of students are identified in conversation between the teacher and their appraiser, one of which provides feedback on classroom teaching, and the other of which completes a survey related to the teacher's tutoring role.

A professional development plan

The outcome of the appraisal meeting that brings together this range of feedback and observation is the identification of both a development and an interest goal to include in the teacher's professional development plan. An important focus in this context has been to broaden the range of professional development opportunities considered for the plan, with advice that explains the different collaborative professional learning opportunities from which teachers can select. These include shared reading, attending conferences/workshops, writing proposals/presenting, committee service, classroom visitations, grant writing, teacher research and reflection.

To support this broadening out, the school has established its own Centre for Research, Innovation and Future Development (CRIFD) on site to provide professional learning to staff. Professional development courses that primarily relate to differentiation, mentoring and behaviour management at this stage are provided to around ten teachers at a time, usually over five or six sessions in two school weeks, using a coaching approach. Teachers apply to attend by completing a written reflection linked to their own performance and development plan and use the learning in their classrooms as it is gained. While courses initially were provided mainly in school time, more courses are starting to occur after school in response to teacher demand. All teachers have completed courses on differentiating the curriculum and the school's impending laptop program, and other courses are targeted towards identified individual and whole-school needs.

While the second round of appraisals is only at a start, anecdotal evidence suggests that staff have had their eyes opened about the need to be accountable for planning and improvement in more collegiate ways. The result is much better plans, greater openness to having others in class, and a greater focus on the use of consistent strategies that reflect the research on what works.

Implementation

The performance and development process was closely linked to the school's professional development program to develop a common teacher understanding of good practice. Teachers across the school are currently working on differentiation in the curriculum, closely aligned with the Australian Curriculum.

Care was taken to get input from staff before and after the initial implementation stage to ensure that the appraisal process was attuned to the professional needs of teachers as well as to the overall school improvement agenda.

There was a strong focus on consistency in the way performance and development was experienced by staff. In the initial 2 year implementation phase a full time Director of Teaching and Learning conducted all teacher reviews and ran the school's professional development program.

In the second phase of implementation the responsibility for the teacher feedback and review has been extended to six Heads of Learning working with the Director of Teaching and Learning.

References

¹V Zbar, R Kimber. & G Marshall 2008, How our best performing schools come out on top: An examination of eight high performing disadvantaged schools, Report commissioned by the Data and Evaluation Division, Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

²This is the equivalent of a full year of growth in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards for students.

³The E5 model comprises the elements of Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate.

⁴The Feedback on Teaching and Learning Questionnaires developed by Certain Knowledge. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria

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