

8-2018

Successful, yet Aspiring to Improve Student Outcomes?

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Daniel (2018) "Successful, yet Aspiring to Improve Student Outcomes?," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol12/iss1/13>

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Successful, yet aspiring to improve student outcomes?

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Key words: learning communities, reflection, school improvement

Our school has always been a well-functioning school, with satisfied clientele, quality teachers and caring leadership. Recently, we have learnt that a school operating under these conditions is not necessarily a school that has a focus on continuous school improvement, nor a specific focus on further improving outcomes for students.

Background

Prior to 2013, school improvement at our school entailed a strategic plan that was formulated by school leadership. The brutal reality was, that the strategic plan usually sat on the shelf gathering dust. Unfortunately, it meant little to staff, and teaching and learning was not the main focus of the strategic plan. Of course, improvement was still taking place as some teachers would see a need in their classes and adapt their programs to meet those needs. This was good practice on the part of each individual teacher and did provide positive outcomes for their students. But collectively we weren't moving beyond these pockets of innovative practice. Furthermore, sharing of ideas and resources was ad hoc, analysis of data was limited, and professional learning was usually based on individual interests rather than the needs of the students.

With the roll-out of Adventist Schools' Australia's Quality Adventist Schools (QAS) framework in 2013, we began to spend a great deal of time collecting and analysing data through the review of various components in the framework. Initially, the QAS was used as a mechanism for driving professional conversations. As a staff group, we dived 'head first' into the component reviews and began to make many recommendations in areas requiring improvement. Staff had a voice and felt empowered that they could make a difference. They felt greater ownership of the improvement process. Many initiatives resulted from our component reviews. These included: "Every child matters" (a focus on differentiation); explicit teaching of

reading comprehension; and a greater focus on Adventist special character. In terms of the project management of our initiatives, our intentions were clear and meaningful, but our strategy execution was poor. This was because simultaneously, we were involved in NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan funding, and this initiative was dividing our focus.

As part of the Quality Adventist Schools review process, Adventist schools are required to complete a self-review document that informs the visiting team about the improvement journey of the school. In 2015, our school had their Quality Adventist School Cyclic Review. At this time, we needed to pause and reflect on our progress. The self-reflection, in preparation for the review, was invaluable and we came to a number of conclusions. We realised that we were adding too many initiatives from our component reviews to our improvement plan each year. We also came to the conclusion that trying to focus on all of these recommendations was completely unmanageable. We also realised that we were working on intensive projects, outside of the QAS (such as the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan) and best practice was to align these projects with other QAS initiatives. Furthermore, we came to the understanding that we were spending too much time on component reviews. We needed to balance our time more wisely between reviews and strategy execution.

Professional learning communities

Following our self-reflection, we aligned our initiatives and we began to focus more heavily on the few areas of greatest need to ensure initiatives could be firmly embedded. Our culture had now developed to a point where teachers no longer operated as 'silos,' but as a cohesive staff who learned together. However, staff turnover and moving from professional learning concepts to practice were major barriers to sustainability. In 2016, we began to understand the importance of establishing professional learning community (PLC) teams to assist the teachers to embed their professional learning into practice.

We now understand and value the impact PLC

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teams can have on sustainability of professional practice that enhances student outcomes. Our PLC is based on Halbert & Kaser's (2013) Spirals of Inquiry and is student focussed, inquiry driven and evidence based. We scan to find what is going on for our learners, we focus our energies on what will make a difference, we develop hunches to see what is contributing to the situation, we take part in professional learning that is connected to identified student needs, we take action and take risks, and we check to see what difference we have made. Throughout, we use protocols to guide our teams through a process of rich inquiry and norms to guide expected behaviour within teams. We live by the mantra that you cannot learn on behalf of another person but we can assist each other in our learning. Data analysis, professional reading, goal setting and reflections on learning are incorporated into every PLC team meeting. Peer observations are taking place in classes as teachers work together on whole school goals.

Our aim is for the PLC teams is to encourage staff members to be working together for the benefit of every student in the school and develop a strong sense of collective efficacy.

What we have learned about school improvement

Over the past 5 years we have learned the following about implementing a genuine school improvement program into a school:

1. Concentrate on areas of change which have high impact but low effort.

2. Start small, be fast and iterate.
3. Attack the root cause of a problem by focusing on the 'why'.
4. Understand the importance of 'dynamic implementation' where strategy is not rigid but is adapted to the changing environment.
5. Develop a shared understanding of the vision and collaboratively work on ways to achieve the vision.
6. Acknowledge the importance of relational skills when changes take place because what looks like resistance can actually be a lack of clarity or understanding.
7. Acknowledge the importance of professional reading and the value of professional guidance from critical friends.
8. Acknowledge the importance of collectively approaching school improvement with a growth mindset and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Finally, school improvement is a continuous journey and not an event to reach a destination. There are always things we can do better in our quest to offer nurture for today, learning for tomorrow and character for eternity. **TEACH**

Author information

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Figure 1: Rebecca Downes with students of her Kindergarten Science Class (2017) are all engaged components of their learning community