

# Wii-Ma-Li (light the fire): The impact of the Connected Communities Strategy on Hillvue Public School



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## Abstract

The Connected Communities Strategy is about developing an inclusive culture in a school and providing an environment that maximises student learning with an emphasis on high expectations, engagement and achievement. Globally, there have been significant changes to the ways that children learn and teachers teach. Our school environment and the world in which our students grow and function continues to change in so many ways! We are responsive to the influences that impact on the Hillvue Public School community as we deliver a quality and engaging education now and into the future. It is up to us to light the fire of education in our students and communities, a fire that ignites a passion for learning and valuing education and the opportunities it provides. Our journey has involved the development and implementation of many initiatives that go hand-in-hand to support improved outcomes for our students and families. At Hillvue, our focus is on innovation, opportunity and success. We believe that all students can learn and all students will learn. We have significantly improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, increased both student and parent engagement and developed a strong culture of professional learning and reflective practice.

## Background

I entered on duty as the Executive Principal of Hillvue Public School in January 2013. I am very proud of our achievements over the five-year period and I continue to watch closely the school's progress and achievements. We should never consider education a luxury; it is a necessity, especially for children in poor and minority communities, so that they can someday enjoy a high quality of life. It may be their only chance at a better life (Muhammad, 2009).

This journey involved the development and implementation of many initiatives, some are briefly outlined in this reflection. Everything we have done was underpinned by respect, trust and the building of honest and open relationships. It is important for me to acknowledge the work of Hattie (2011), Dinham (2016), Mahammad (2009) and Connors (2000). Their research and reflections formed the basis for many discussions, as we read, reviewed and workshopped throughout the change process.

Hillvue Public School has an enrolment of approximately 300 students, 80 per cent of whom identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The school, located in Tamworth, is one of 15 Connected Communities schools in New South Wales. *The Connected Communities Strategy* (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011) positions schools as community hubs. It broadens the influence of the community and school leadership to play a role in the delivery of key services and in supporting children and young people from birth through school into further training, study and employment.

## The transition to becoming a Connected Communities school

A significant challenge for me as the Executive Principal was working with staff who felt as though they were victims in the Connected Communities Strategy. The announcement to move to a Connected Community was made through media channels, which is how most staff found out about the initiative. The incumbent principal was moved to an alternate position and many of the staff felt undervalued, some were angry and others were completely disillusioned about the way the strategy had been communicated. They felt as though everyone thought they were being portrayed as teachers who had failed the students at Hillvue Public School. I had to gain their trust, improve morale and rebuild a cohesive staff.

Our journey commenced by asking three simple questions: What are the best things about Hillvue Public School? What areas do we need to address? What would you change immediately?

The responses were compiled and discussed at length. All items were addressed in some form, and regular feedback was provided to staff. It was also clear that everyone was heading in a different direction and we needed to develop a clear vision for the school. What did Hillvue stand for? A set of focus areas was then developed to address the responses and support the Connected Communities key deliverables. The focus areas were a vision statement, school culture and the physical environment; professional learning; community engagement and strong partnerships; and student and staff welfare, attendance and communication.

A shared vision for high-impact learning and teaching and a cohesive organisational culture resulted in significant growth in all areas. Student success in learning was the only option. The high expectations held by our team and our sense of collective efficacy were fundamental to our ultimate goal of achieving improved outcomes for our students and families, and key to our success. The overwhelming belief in self and the power as a team to impact change through a shared belief in our ability to overcome challenges and plan a pathway for success.

My vision and focus are based on providing an environment that maximises student learning with an emphasis on high expectations, engagement and achievement. The Connected Communities Strategy is about developing an inclusive culture in the school.

Globally, there have been significant changes to the ways in which children learn and how teachers teach. Our school environment and the world in which our students grow and function continues to change in so many ways! We are responsive to the influences that impact on the Hillvue Public School community as we deliver a quality and engaging education now and into the future. It is up to us to light the fire of education in our students and communities, a fire that ignites a passion for learning and valuing education and the opportunities it provides.

Our journey has involved the development and implementation of many initiatives that go hand-in-hand to support improved outcomes for our students and families. At Hillvue our focus is on innovation, opportunity and success.

Our belief that all students can learn and all students will learn because of what we do is fundamental to our ultimate goal of achieving improved outcomes for our students and families. We close the window and look at the reflection in the glass. What are we doing? What can we change? What can we control? What can we offer? We don't open the window, look outside and blame parents, community and governments. We identify barriers and challenges and we address them. We get on with the business of doing. This culture is being instilled in our students and community.



**Figure 1** Hillvue's vision statement

## Development of a vision statement

The process of developing a vision statement took a semester and involved student, staff and community consultation. The end results are clearly displayed at the front of the school on a wall, covering an area of approximately 6 metres by 4 metres (see Figure 1). It includes these statements:

- Hillvue Public School is my second family.
- Hillvue Public School shows me our culture is important.
- Hillvue Public School encourages me to be the best person I can be.
- Hillvue Public School allows me to have choices.
- Hillvue Public School shows me university is possible.
- Hillvue Public School is a place where my teachers believe in me.

The vision statement is used as a teaching and learning tool for students and the community.

## A positive school culture

A significant amount of time was spent understanding and developing a positive school culture. A culture that is supportive of all students. A culture that is professional and safe, where everyone feels appreciated, listened to, valued and respected.

One of the most important and powerful elements of an effective and successful school is its positive culture. In a school with a well-defined and shared focus on student learning, staff and students are more likely to work towards the specific goals and visions of the school (Muhammad, 2009).

## Differentiated learning/open-plan environments

Differentiated learning/open-plan environments were created by opening up classrooms and breaking down silos to address the needs of students through open-ended activities and scaffolding strategies, while maintaining high expectations. All grades are taught together in these open-plan areas. The fostering of collaboration and group skills in students and teachers is a priority.

## Targeted professional learning

All teachers on staff are released from class for an hour each week to participate in grade professional learning led by our instructional leaders. The instructional leaders work closely with staff to reflect on practice, analyse data to inform teaching and next steps in learning, collaboratively plan, differentiate teaching, select and design interventions to support students, and team teach. This is sacred time and is never interrupted. If the instructional leaders are away, the session is led by one of the other teachers.

## Assessment data

We now have joint ownership of assessment data. Students, teachers and parents are familiar with the children's progress and targets throughout the year, not just at report intervals. Highly targeted use of data enables all those involved in teaching, planning, supporting, leading and managing to respond to issues quickly and efficiently. Regular celebrations of student achievement are held in each grade across the school.

## A focus on key transition points

In 2015, we moved a teacher from Year 2 to Year 3. We now do this with every grade each year. The transitioning teacher brings cumulative knowledge in relation to background, welfare and learning to the classroom. This has significantly reduced disruption to student learning and supports continuity of learning.

## Language matters – teaching Gamilaraay language to students K–6

You cannot teach language without teaching culture. We have staff trained in both Certificate I and Certificate II Gamilaraay language through TAFE Western. Gamilaraay language is taught in every classroom every week at Hillvue Public School. Our language teacher works with classroom teachers to embed the teaching of language across the school. Language is now part of the school culture and is present in teaching and learning, on word walls in classrooms and each classroom block is named in English and Gamilaraay.

## Stronger partnerships

Partnerships with University of Newcastle Rural Health Faculty, the University of New England and TAFE New England, and TAFE Western support aspirational programs and knowledge for students and community about future learning options and opportunities.

Our partner schools program that operates with Tamworth High School and feeder schools is now being mirrored by Peel High School. Monthly meetings are held to plan, review and discuss a variety of initiatives and strategic directions, which include:

- professional learning for high school staff (led by primary teachers)
- curriculum design and monitoring and tracking student progress
- mirroring our flexible differentiated learning environments in Stage 4.

## TAFE classes for parents

TAFE classes commenced at school to engage parents and community in lifelong learning. Parents were asked what they would like to learn and a program was developed at school in coordination with TAFE New England to support the areas identified by parents. Each session started with a wellbeing session, where parents went for a walk and did some exercise.

The focus in the classroom was literacy and numeracy. This initial introduction has led to a number of parents enrolling full time in classes at the TAFE campus. Two parents are now employed as a result of their

commitment to learning and the confidence they gained from attending classes and developing skills.

## Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program and community engagement

Pleasurable food education teaches students positive food habits through fun, hands-on learning. The Kitchen Garden Program Foundation gives students all the skills, experiences and role modelling they need to learn to love their vegetables and make healthier choices about what to cook and eat, for life. A kitchen specialist and a trained horticulturalist are employed to implement the Stephanie Alexander Program. Students grow and harvest from the vegetable garden each week and then prepare and cook meals in the kitchen. Each session is completed by sitting and sharing the meal that has been prepared. Parent sessions, grandparent's high tea and cafes run by students for parents also take place in the kitchen throughout the year.

## Wii-Ma-Li early years extended transition program

This program is based on the Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, 2009) and aims to build strong relationships between the school and the home, ensuring a positive experience as each child starts school at Hillvue. Children attend a transition session each week in Terms 2, 3 and 4. The development of school readiness programs, social skills and building strong partnerships with families to support attendance are priorities. Students' eyesight, hearing, speech and teeth are screened. Parents are provided with take-home resource packs to assist their children at home with school-readiness activities. We also hold workshops to support parents and members of the community in obtaining Working with Children Checks (WWCC) and birth certificates.

## Eat Well 2 Learn Well (breakfast club)

Eat Well 2 Learn Well continues to operate at the school each morning and is available for all students free of charge. A warm, healthy breakfast is a great way to start the school day. Between 40 and 60 students have breakfast at school each morning. Eat Well 2 Learn Well is supported by the University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health, members of the local Anglican Church and Rotary Club.

## Conclusion

We faced many challenges and we are proud of the overall impact of the change process implemented at Hillvue Public School.



As I highlighted at the beginning of this narrative, our journey has involved the development and implementation of many initiatives. All of which fit together like a jigsaw puzzle to build a culture that is underpinned by respect, trust, and honest and open professional relationships. The staff were hardworking, dedicated and caring professionals who wanted the best for the students in their care, but that was not enough.

We had to build a culture of high expectations, explicit teaching and effective feedback, use of data to inform practice, wellbeing and collaboration. Many of our students were failing and staff were working in silos. Different results were being achieved across grades and in many cases poor results were being attributed to student cohorts and not lack of differentiation and the one-size-fits-all mentality of using whole-grade text books. The shift in culture from 'this is how we do it at Hillvue' and having welfare as the priority, to placing academic rigour, professional learning and reflective practice as priorities was pivotal to our success. Believe in students, support and challenge students and they will achieve.

Welfare is important and we must have strong support mechanisms in place to support our students and families but we are teachers and our priority must be to deliver high quality, relevant and engaging teaching and learning.

In the past, Hillvue was the school that many parents investigated ways to avoid enrolling their children. Hillvue Public School is now the school of choice for local families. A school that parents, students, staff and community are proud of. A school they feel part of and in which they feel they have a voice. Parents are more willing to come into the school and actively engage in their child's learning. There is also increased pride in the school by the entire school community. A happy and collegial staff and a positive atmosphere in the playground with numerous activities to engage students has led to less stressful playground duties for

staff (a comment from a teacher: 'I don't even need to be on duty anymore, students have so much to do, it's great.'). We have seen reduced suspensions, reduced negative classroom notifications and significantly increased classroom engagement and literacy and numeracy results.

I know we often hear the saying that 'there is no "I" in team', and this was certainly the case as we transformed the culture of Hillvue Public School. It was a team effort and for me personally it was like leaving my family when I stepped out of the role as Executive Principal and into my current role as Director Educational Leadership.

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