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## Four-dimensional coaching support for teachers of literacy and numeracy

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## Summary

Deep cultural change is at the heart of successful and sustainable school transformation (Harris et al. 2008). Transformative practice begins at the whole-school level and involves all members of the school community planning according to their local needs and to suit their context.

Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) implemented combined and collaborative support to build the capacity of their teachers to improve and sustain student outcomes in literacy and numeracy. The four dimensions of support included school-based coaches, the principal as instructional leader, literacy and numeracy networks, and expert consultants. The interdependence model contributed to cultural change in schools to sustain literacy and numeracy gains.

They [the expert consultants] do it with us and then move away to give us freedom, but they are always available. The fact that the consultants 'walked their talk and practise what they preach' was highly valued. (Classroom teacher)

## Target student group

All students benefit from quality teaching, and as such were the target for implementing the four dimensions of coaching support. The whole-school approach targeted improved outcomes for all students. Moving students out of the lower two bands of National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was a focus for success.

## Method

Forty-five metropolitan, regional and rural CESA schools implemented the four dimensions of coaching approach in 2011 and 2012. These schools were a part of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships for Literacy and Numeracy (NPLN) and Low Socio-economic School Communities. The aim was to bring about a culture of change within the whole school that generated better student outcomes.

The approach included the following:

1. Principals as instructional 'leaders of learning', who establish a focused learning culture to achieve whole-school strategic change. They give feedback to the coaches and consultants.
2. Expert literacy and numeracy consultants to support principals and heads of school in developing pedagogical content knowledge about evidence-based initiatives, strategies and interventions that achieve accelerated and sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes.



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3. In-school coaches implement the NPLN strategic plans they developed with school leaders, to support classroom teachers in classrooms by mentoring, modelling, co-teaching, planning, coordinating case management for individual students, implementing effective assessment, and supporting teachers to analyse and use the data. The coaches provide feedback using proven models.
4. NPLN Learning Networks were established within and across schools and education sectors for identifying and sharing effective practices, developing resources and sharing assessment data and data analysis practices to 'deprivatise' classrooms and schools for a common focus on improvement.

The move from individualism to collectivism has created a climate in which there is greater trust in schools' ability to help other schools to improve. (Harris et al. 2008, p. 20)

Strategic planning occurred with all staff, to foster shared ownership, and was based on student data and whole-school objectives. Focuses for learning and transforming the school were recorded as clearly stated goals, actions, structures and resources to support the initiative.

Principals worked beside literacy and numeracy experts to facilitate identified targeted professional learning in the school. The coaches used *A Framework for Professional Development in Literacy Education* (Lyons & Pinnell 2001) and *Coaching Teachers in Effective Instructions* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria, 2010) to develop coaching approaches that would support learning about the identified focus and foster positive professional relationships to transform the learning culture of the school.

## Results

We now have data *for* learning, not data *of* learning, which is a very significant change. The 'Why is it so?' questions, the process of asking the questions, are central to our approach now.

NAPLAN data was used to analyse and monitor school, cohort and individual student strengths and challenges, and to plan for literacy and numeracy improvement.

Comparing NAPLAN data over the past three years has indicated growth trends in many of the targeted cohorts. For example, the 2011 NAPLAN data showed positive growth, with eight out of ten schools who were performing below the year 3 national literacy average in 2009 being above the year 5 national average in 2011. For year 7, eight out of ten schools achieved gains greater than the national and state gains.



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School-based data involving systematic classroom observations, anecdotal records and criterion-referenced rubrics and tests were important components of data and evidence-gathering to inform teaching and learning and the coach's focus of work with the teachers. Coaches' models of successful practice were consistently evident across the schools. This included the lesson structure and inquiry approach in numeracy, and an explicit teaching model in literacy.

Perception surveys and focus interviews with principals and coaches were conducted by internal and external evaluators. Survey questions were grouped according to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) priority reform areas for the NPLN:

1. Teaching and learning via effective evidence-based teaching of literacy and numeracy.
2. School leadership and whole-school engagement with literacy and numeracy.
3. Monitoring student and school performance in literacy and numeracy to identify where support is needed.

Important outcomes identified by principals included:

- professional discourse and discussion
- development of professional conversations
- shifts in pedagogy, especially in the upper primary grades
- engagement and enjoyment displayed by students, especially in the upper grades
- development of teacher confidence in sharing good practice - the 'deprivatisation' of their work
- significant development of student engagement with the learning process
- sustainability of the whole-school approach
- increased confidence and enjoyment of mathematics by students and teachers
- significant whole-school change in teaching and learning of numeracy
- development of coach and teacher leadership
- professional learning in the area of numeracy has led to a new interest in pedagogy
- staff have been unified where great progress has been made, with a single focus
- passion of the coach to the process
- a real focus on teacher learning
- a focus on student learning with real rigour
- noticeable positive student and staff outcomes
- using leading research, followed by action and reflection.

The principals consistently mentioned how the program methodology had teachers opening up to share their practice and to work with others in their classrooms. Their classrooms were no longer seen as private.



Principals were asked what they had learnt about themselves as a leader. All indicated that they had put into practice the role of being a learner with their staff. This had resulted in growing curriculum leadership in the school, which was a powerful part of the change process. There was wide acknowledgement that principals needed to be seen as learners extensively involved in leading learning.

When reflecting on the consultancy support, all principals agreed on the value of the team and their approach to working with staff and principals. Principals gave credit to the consultants' knowledge base and their focus on the realities of classroom practice.

The coaches were asked to identify what changes had occurred in the schools as a result of the program. The following comments were made:

- We now have enthusiastic students and collaboration between teachers and leaders at professional development sessions.
- We have a whole-school approach for teaching mathematics, which provides consistency for students.
- We now use data to inform our practice, so the practice is more directed, explicit and accountable.
- We have significantly improved teaching methodologies and 'maths talk in the staffroom'.
- It's great to see and hear students' enjoyment, enthusiasm and engagement in mathematics.
- It's wonderful seeing teachers become learners themselves.

The comments about student engagement, teacher collaboration and teachers' enthusiasm about their personal learning were seen by the group as significant achievements.

## Next steps

Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R) and PAT Mathematics developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) will be used in the 2013 strategy. Using data from a norm-referenced assessment will further support schools to use data to strategically plan for individuals, cohorts and the whole school.

When principals were asked what advice they would give to the consultancy team to improve their practice and support for schools, they said there was a need to push the program into secondary schools. However, principals were mindful that it was important not to spread the consultants too thinly by giving them additional schools to work in. The consultants' effectiveness was critical to the successful implementation of the program in the schools.



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## Lessons learned

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## Research base

The move from individualism to collectivism has created a climate in which there is greater trust in schools' ability to help other schools to improve. (Harris et al. 2008, p. 20)

An important aspect of this initiative was the creation of networks to support learning and bring about deep cultural shifts in the way sectors, schools and teachers view their practice. Developing and evolving pedagogy requires examining and trialling 'best practice' teaching and assessment, and this was achieved through networks sharing their learning and expertise.

Aspects of the research base for this initiative come from many sources relating to building the capacity of teachers to improve the quality of teaching, and therefore the outcomes for students (Hattie 2003 & 2009; Leithwood 2006). The use of pedagogical coaches to support teacher learning and their transformative power is well documented (Ontario 2007; Shower and Joyce 1996).

The strategy acted on research indicating that the role of the leader in providing clear and unequivocal instructional leadership is second only to teaching, and that school leaders need to develop and lead whole-school approaches to improvement, based on high expectations for all students and using data to monitor and inform goals (Robinson 2007; OECD 2008; MacBeth and Dempster 2009; Masters 2009).

A significant body of evidence supports whole-school approaches to school improvement (Sergiovanni 2006; Hattie 2009; Ontario 2007). Hayes et al. (2006) identify school-based activities that develop 'local solutions' to 'local concerns' as 'harnessing local agency'.



It is well documented (Fullen 2011; DuFour 2008; Hargreaves 2000; McKinsey 2007) that the initiation of a whole-school approach to reform requires more than changed school structures and processes; it is about transforming culture. Deep cultural change is at the heart of successful and sustainable school transformation (Harris et al. 2008).

## Further reading and links

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