

NSI Partnerships Case Study: Sevenoaks Senior College, Western Australia



Context and challenges

Sevenoaks Senior College is located in a lower socio-economic suburb of Perth. When Sevenoaks started working with NSI, 75% of the school's students were in the lowest socioeconomic quartile. The college served students from 54 different nationalities, and almost half the school's students were from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The government's recent raising of the school leaving age had meant that a number of disengaged students were required to remain at school. These students formed a marginalised group 'on the fringes' of the school.

The teaching staff, in contrast, were primarily white, middle class, and unfamiliar with the socio-economic and cultural challenges their students faced. The school principal realised that there was a need for change in order to develop a school climate in which all students would feel welcome, regardless of their background or difference. The principal contracted NSI to support the school in developing a whole-school intercultural approach.

Laying shared foundations

To launch the new school-wide focus, all staff participated in two formal professional development programmes. The [Understanding Poverty](#) programme (based on the work of Ruby K. Payne in the USA) gave teachers insights into the experiences of students affected by poverty, and the Australian [Difference Differently](#) programme addressed intercultural competence. The school then set aside a day in which teachers worked together to reflect on their values and beliefs, establish a shared understanding of the key ideas from the professional development, and consider ways to embed social and intercultural competencies into their teaching practice. Overall, the professional learning gave the staff **new insights into their students' backgrounds** and helped them empathise more with the social conditions that framed their students' lives. School leaders communicated their expectation that, going forward, key messages from these professional development programmes would become part of every teacher's interactions with students.

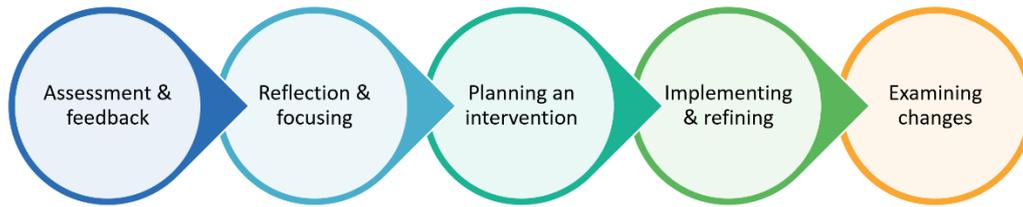
The principal also realised that to support meaningful and sustainable school-wide change, it was important to establish **a new staff culture of being a professional learning community**. NSI ran a professional development day aimed at establishing a shared understanding of the concept of a professional learning community. During this day, teachers collaborated to work through professional readings; several teachers presented workshops to their colleagues; and the staff worked together in small groups to develop "We believe ..." statements that articulated their understanding of a positive and inclusive learning environment for young adults.

The principal reflected:

*"I saw the challenge of moving the staff from [their previous] individualised way of operating to one of collective inquiry; one in which they could share personal practice with others and reduce the feeling of isolation ... This process [the professional development day] laid the foundations for building teacher capacity to work as a professional learning community ... **The processes and structures heralded a new way forward**; that staff would be engaged with moving the school forward through collaboration and participation in decision making."*

Collaborative inquiry

Having laid these foundations, Sevenoaks then embarked on using NSI's five-step collaborative inquiry process to guide school improvement and data-driven decision making.



Initial assessment of the school environment involved both staff and student perspectives to develop **a comprehensive picture of how well the school included students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds**. Staff collaboratively completed a self-assessment audit (modified from the [School's In!](#) audit) that involved reflecting on school policies, practices, curriculum, programmes, organisation, environment, and partnerships with parents and external agencies. 122 Year 11 students (who had been in the school for several years) also completed NSI's *What's Happening In This School?* (WHITS) survey, providing their perceptions of the school environment in terms of teacher support, peer connectedness, school connectedness, affirming diversity, rule clarity, and the mechanisms for reporting and seeking help.

Once the data had been gathered and analysed by NSI, the teachers nominated themselves into groups that focused on specific aspects of the data. These groups reflected on the data and then planned and implemented new strategies to improve the school environment. The professional learning community approach (introduced in the professional development day) was used to keep these groups both **safe** (with all group members having a voice and different views being respected) and **accountable** (with each group reporting back to the rest of the staff on their progress).

The principal reflected:

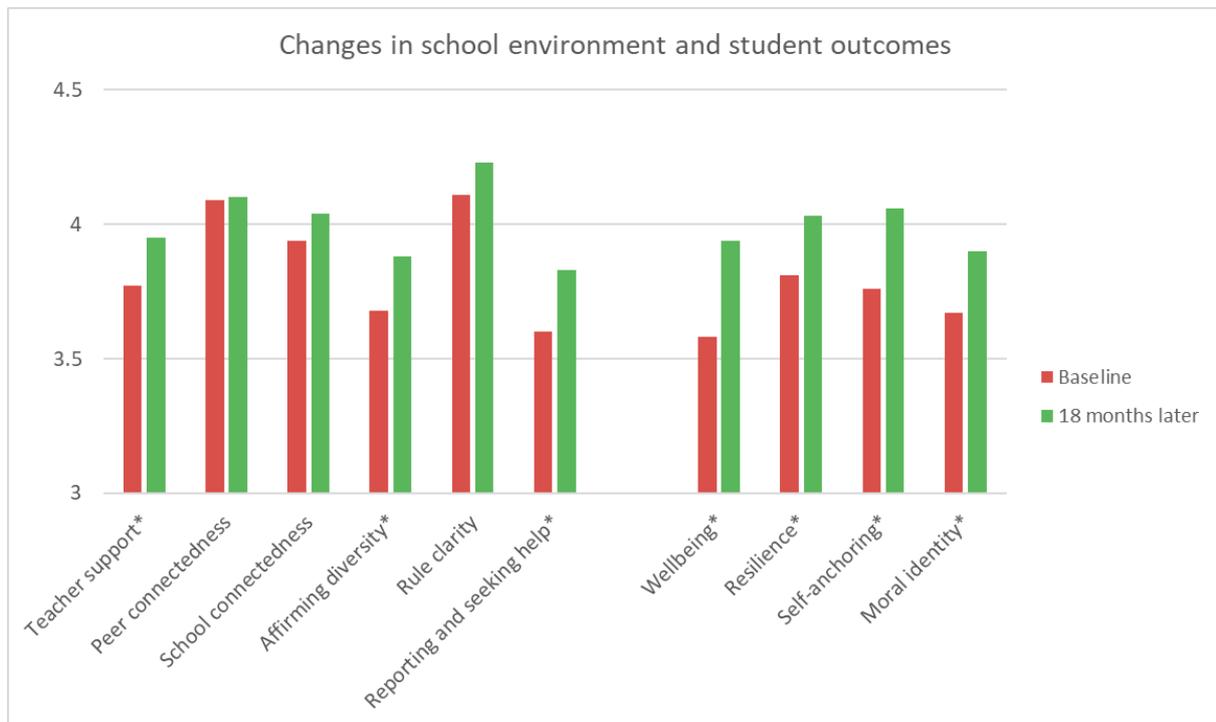
"This was one of my most complex leadership challenges ... Moving the school forward from a structure which was essentially individualized to a collaborative model of collegiate support required a delicate process over time. During this period, I noticed the sense of empowerment of teachers emerge, not only around their own spheres of influence but in actively committing to the expectations which had been presented to them. The teachers were responding to whole-of-school data, whether it was their learning area performance or whole-of-school performance or feedback from students. Ultimately, it was the students who benefited through improved academic results and an improved school climate."

Measuring progress

After 18 months of teachers working in their collaborative inquiry groups to improve aspects of the school environment, the school repeated the student survey (WHITS) to allow progress to be measured. The same students (who were now Year 12) completed the survey again, ensuring that the responses were comparable.

Improvements were observed in all six scales of the WHITS as well as in the four student outcomes that had been measured: wellbeing, resilience, self-anchoring (feeling comfortable in one's own skin) and moral identity (feeling empowered to do what one feels is right). NSI's statistical analyses confirmed that most of the changes were statistically significant (indicated by an asterisk [*] in the graph below). The three WHITS scales that did not show statistically significant improvements had

already achieved high scores in the baseline data (responses were on a 1 to 5 scale), so teachers' collaborative inquiry efforts had been more focused on the other *WHITS* scales.



Reflections

Over 18 months, Sevenoaks College had achieved measurable improvements in the inclusivity of their school environment, and this had shown roll-on effects on students' wellbeing and other psychological outcomes. Teachers had also made great progress in their understandings of their students' life experiences and their abilities to use data to drive intentional, collaborative school improvement efforts. The principal's two goals of developing a more inclusive school environment for students and developing a sense of professional learning community among staff had been met; this would stand the school in good stead for further, ongoing improvement.

In the words of one of the teachers:

*The majority of teachers at our school have been here for years and are very experienced. We believe we have kept up with the many changes in curriculum and have successfully implemented them in all learning areas. Previously, this was done largely in learning areas which had between two and five teachers. When we started to focus on whole-of-school data during staff meetings and PD days, it was not what we were used to. However, we got on pretty well and we enjoyed sharing observations and strategies in groups with teachers from different learning areas. **We found we were seeing our role as an integral part of a whole school team instead of a small part of it.** Even our perspective of the students changed [so that we saw them] in terms of their whole learning program rather than as simply students in our own classes. **It was refreshing to be involved in forging changes rather than just responding to them.***