

Croydon Primary School - Our Success Story 2016-2020 (Sourced June 2020)

Croydon Primary School is a vibrant community school in Melbourne, Victoria. It serves a diverse population including 66% of the students who are Burmese refugees, Hakha Chin, Falam, Karen, Zomi and Zo. Over the past 4 years, the school leaders and teachers have successfully transformed the learning and teaching at the school to meet the needs of their students and community.

The school results in 2016 according to NAPLAN were well below the state median which had been a trend for some time. The school had bought in a number of 'programs' for Reading, Writing and Spelling as a strategy to improve student achievement.

However, in 2016, reflecting on student achievement and engagement, the school executive, led by a newly appointed principal set about on an improvement journey. The teachers and leaders continually asked, *"Is what we are doing right for the students in our school?"* The staff could see that schools providing testimonials for the programs were nothing like Croydon Primary School in terms of cultural diversity and socio economic status and leaders and teachers wondered if the program approach was affecting the capacity for improvement as the programs did not cater for individual need and had a lock-step approach. The 'one-size fits all' approach was not effective.

During 2016, the school executive and teachers moved away from the programs to a more differentiated approach based on teacher knowledge and judgement of each student with a philosophy to cater for each student where they are at.

Replacing commercial programs with alternative ways of planning for effective teaching took massive efforts from the dedicated teaching team at Croydon Primary School. The leadership and teaching staff were prepared to adapt their teaching to the needs of the students. They did this through quality professional learning experiences and support from each other.

Through continuing to ask their key question; *"Is what we are doing right for the students in our school?"* the school's leadership team identified focus areas to build teacher and student capability.

Vocabulary emerged as one of these focus areas. As a staff they looked at the current research into vocabulary that cites the size of a child's vocabulary in the pre-school and initial years, is a significant predictor of academic and vocational success. Coupled with this is the research on low socio-economic children hearing 30 million words less by the age of three. Understanding this was critical to the way the staff approached Literacy at Croydon Primary School.

With the support from literacy experts, they worked to use Language experiences at the beginning of each week for the junior students with talk and vocabulary a focus of these experiences including science experiments, cooking and good literature. Using that approach, the teachers could see the students now had the vocabulary to write about their experience and learned to recognise these words in their reading.

Teachers also built their understanding of letters and the sounds they represent. They strengthened their teaching in this important literacy area ensuring all letters and sounds phonics work was in a context that allows students to make sense of the work. Their planning now showed phonics sitting with sight words and teacher selected mentor texts to teach important reading structures including, initial sounds, onset and rime, digraphs and punctuation etc.



Language experience in action

Senior students studied the construction and meaning of words through structured word enquiries. Croydon teachers say, ‘knowledge is power’ and allowing students to investigate and use their knowledge of how language works has improved both their writing and reading.

The Croydon staff have also changed their approach to Writing. This became a turning point for their students. Through their professional reading and development, teachers decided to ‘teach the writer not writing’, giving the students permission to write what they are interested in. Language experience supports students with ideas, knowledge and something to write about. Students gather ‘seeds’ to help with the writing process and use notebooks to consolidate their thinking. Students now know “Writing is thinking”, rather than a lock step program that enforced everyone writing the same thing, at the same time as had been the previous approach. Student engagement has significantly improved along with student outcomes. The writing data reflects the link towards engagement, enjoyment and quality products.

The results have been incredible at each stage of schooling. All results have improved in all areas, but more than that the students have greater confidence to write because of the information they have discussed. They enjoy learning new information they did not know and now bring context to the books they read.

As principal Julie Gilbert says, *“at Croydon Primary School our belief is that we want all of our students to be Literate and Numerate to make all of the important decisions in their life, from friendships to pursue, which car to buy (evaluating brand, mileage, features etc) and to who to vote for. As most of our students come from a refugee background with households with little or no education in a completely different country and language, Literacy is far more than “reading” the books that are provided. Literacy is understanding, knowledge and context.”*

Croydon Primary School’s results at both an in-class and NAPLAN level have improved dramatically over the last 4 years since moving away from commercial programs to now catering for the individual needs of all of their students. In 2019, the school was been recognised by ACARA:

“ACARA has identified your school as having demonstrated substantially above average gain in reading and/or numeracy achievement, as measured by NAPLAN. On behalf of ACARA, I would like to extend my congratulations to you and your school community on this achievement. Improvement in student literacy and/or numeracy of this magnitude, as measured by NAPLAN, is significant and worthy of highlighting and acknowledging.”

The following 2 tables demonstrate the magnitude of this gain.

NAPLAN results:

	2016	2019
Year 5 Reading		
% above National Minimum	63%	100%
% at Band 7 & 8	22%	59%
Year 5 Writing		
% above National Minimum	84%	100%
% at Band 7 & 8	4%	30%
Year 5 spelling		
% above National Minimum	63%	100%
% at Band 7 & 8	19%	82%



Naplan Reading Benchmark Growth Year 5 - % of students above benchmark between 2017 & 2019



Naplan Writing Benchmark Growth Year 5 - % of students above benchmark between 2017 & 2019



It is clear that the beliefs and practices of the school leaders and teachers at Croydon Primary School align with the Touchstones that underpin the Foundation for Learning and Literacy. This School Success Story is a living demonstration in particular of five of the Touchstones:

A fair and equitable society depends upon every citizen being able to read and write. Being able to read and write gives people equal access to information, employment, enjoyment and further educational opportunities.

Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and to imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.

'Making sense' is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.

Children are all different. Their experiences are different, their environments are different, their ways of thinking are different. A 'one-size-fits-all approach to literacy learning does not work.

Teachers teach children. Programs do not.

The school's website states:

"Our inclusive and differentiated curriculum ensures that all students have the opportunity to progress to their full potential. Differentiated learning is a basis for effective teaching that involves providing students with different ways to learn at a level that challenges each student individually. Differentiated instruction looks at what the student needs to learn at a level they are ready for. This is achieved through ongoing assessment. Our teachers know where each student is at and provide instruction for them to progress and excel."

"The curriculum needs to be adapted and modified to not only meet their needs but provide them with opportunity to learn, grow and excel. No lock step program can do that when everyone must conform to its parameters, only a teacher with strong relationships and knowledge of the individual can develop that program." Julie Gilbert, Principal.

Congratulations to the leadership team and staff at Croydon Primary School and thank you to principal Julie Gilbert for sharing this remarkable success.