

Celebrating Indigenous culture at Coal Point Public School



"For me, it has made sure that I'm conscious, not only in my classroom, but within my stage that I'm setting high expectations for myself and staff and this filters down to the students, using the tools that Stronger Smarter provided."
(Kate Payne)

Kate Payne and Louise Groves, Assistant Principals

After undertaking the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) together in 2017, Louise Groves and Kate Payne, Assistant Principals at Coal Point Public School in Newcastle NSW, say the ideas they gained have helped to strengthen their school culture and embed Indigenous perspectives, "We've already established a fantastic school culture. It was about strengthening what we already have and building on these practices".

Yarning Circles in the classroom

A simple addition to the classroom that has benefited everyone is the use of Yarning Circles and check-in/ check-outs. The school bought colourful yarning mats for all the classrooms. For the older students in Louise's class, the check-in might be a high-five at the door. The younger ones in Kate's class share their news in the Yarning Circle, and it teaches students to share and listen. "It has been as simple as sitting in the circle," Louise says, "It gives students a space to settle. They are all equal, and they



all get to have their turn and everyone listens. It's a real cooperative space for them."

Kate says the check-ins help to gauge how the children are each morning. "I might say to the children, tell me a colour or an animal to describe how you feel or I might link the check-in to the topic of the next lesson." She says it helps the students to understand how they are really feeling. "I found it to be really helpful for me to know where the children are emotionally, and for

them to have a better understanding of how they're feeling as well". Kate links this to the school's You Can Do It! Program. If a child gives a 'thumbs down' because they are feeling tired, it is discussed and put into perspective. "It has been really good for students to reflect on their social and emotional wellbeing in a little snippet of time."

Building respect in the classroom

Kate says the Stronger Smarter approaches have helped to build a culture of respect and high expectations in the classroom. After she attended the SSLP, she worked with her class to look at the culture they wanted as a class group. "We call our class Team P, and we have a class motto 'Together Everyone Achieves More'". As part of this, they use a compliment circle during the day. "We set the circle, and we give each other a compliment or constructive feedback. I may link this to a previous lesson or playground activities and their getting along and resilience skills.

Student Leadership

Coal Point Public School have a focus on developing leadership in all of their students. One of the ways they do this is through the Peer Support Program, where Year 5 children are the leaders and the Year 6 students are their mentors, and together they work with the younger students. Using Yarning Circles has really helped strengthen the supportive nature of the Peer Support groups. The Peer Support lessons are organised around the Stronger



Smarter framework, beginning with a lesson, a fun game, core learning and ending in a check-out. The Peer Support groups have evolved and the Yarning Circles are utilised for whole school events, including Harmony Day, Easter Hat Parade, NAIDOC Week, and Book Week. "We always had Peer Support Groups in mind, and attempted it over the years, although it has never really worked as well as it does now," Louise explains, "Because they sit in a circle and they check-in, students are settled and calm. It is a very simple approach that has made a big difference to the way students are interacting with each other."

Celebrating Indigenous culture

Coal Point PS have also used the Peer Support Program to embed local Indigenous culture into the school. The school invited the parents of their Aboriginal students to morning tea and contacted the local AECG, and together they planned their NAIDOC celebrations. "The parents helped to set up the activities for our Peer Support Groups," Louise says. They celebrated the NAIDOC theme, 'Because of Her, We Can'." "We invited the community to come along for NAIDOC Peer Support groups, and had around 100 mums, aunties and grandmas attend".

The school flies the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and delivers an Acknowledgement of Country at all assemblies. After their involvement in the SSLP, they have focussed further on celebrating Indigenous culture. Louise explains, "Stronger Smarter brought to the forefront the importance of reflecting on the effectiveness of the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives into our teaching and learning, including guest speakers, professional learning and curriculum development."

Kate described how the SSLP increased her awareness around developing high expectations across the school. "At Coal Point we have always had high expectations. However, Stronger Smarter brought it to the forefront with everything we do. I'm conscious that I'm setting high expectations for myself and staff, and this

is filtering down to the students, using the tools that Stronger Smarter provided."

Incorporating Indigenous culture into the daily activities of the school through Yarning Circles and the Peer Support



Groups has been important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. For their Indigenous students, they have seen a growth in confidence. "At the beginning of the year we had some Year 5 student leaders who were very shy, their peer support leadership and Year 6 mentors has really helped to build their confidence". Louise says of one Year 4 Aboriginal student, "When we set up the Yarning Circle he shared what a Yarning Circle was with his peers. He talked about his culture and he was able to do that



confidently in this space. When he arrived at our school, he struggled with reading. This year, he read the Acknowledgement of Country at the Easter Hat Parade and at our NAIDOC celebrations to an audience of 300 parents."

During NAIDOC week, all the Aboriginal students, even those in kindergarten, presented the Acknowledgement of Country to the school community. "They talked about why they love learning on Awabakal country, which is where the school is situated," Louise says. The students also ran a lesson within the Yarning Circles. "The leaders and mentors had grown in confidence to a point where they ran lessons involving students, community members, mums and grandmas. It was really amazing to see the students building their leadership skills."