

# Catholic school educators sharpen explicit teaching skills over school holiday break



By Sarah Lansdown  
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Brooke Wardana with students Edward Young, Ava Ballesteros, Gabriele Pearman, and Aahan Das, at St Thomas the Apostle Primary School in Kambah. Picture by James Croucher

Classrooms across Canberra were mostly empty and dark during the school holidays, but not at Kambah's St Thomas the Apostle Primary School.

More than 90 teachers gave up three days of their well-earned break to participate in a new form of professional learning provided by the Catholic Education Catalyst program.

The Canberra Goulburn Archdiocese systemic schools have been forging ahead with the program informed by the science of learning and now other education systems are taking notice.

Twenty-five teachers from Catholic and Anglican schools in Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria came to learn from experts about explicit direct instruction for literacy and numeracy.

Education consultant Brooke Wardana demonstrated classes for kindergarten to year 2 students, who also gave up some of their holidays for the cause.

She asked the students to repeat sentences together, sometimes singing them, marching to them or whispering them to a partner.

"The method of instruction that I was demonstrating asks children to be active participants in the learning," Mrs Wardana said.

"We want the children to be constantly doing something and engaging with what is being learned in order for them to think about it and to process that and to move that information eventually into their long term memory."

The teachers were then asked to practice the same lesson with the students and got immediate, constructive feedback from the experts.

St Thomas the Apostle Primary School principal Ursula Jamieson said her school had been gradually introducing these high-impact teaching strategies since the beginning of 2021.

“The classrooms are a buzzing with with action,” she said.

“Because they’re so engaged and they are feeling a sense of confidence ... they aren’t mucking around, they want to be doing the lesson.”

Mrs Jamieson said students as young as kindergarten were starting to write using engaging, complex sentences.

The school has seen an upward trend in literacy results and was now putting the focus on maths as well.

For the more experienced teachers, this method of explicit instruction was reminiscent of the early days of their career when teachers had students sitting on the floor directing their attention to a blackboard.

“That was a bit boring and rote learning learning,” Mrs Jamieson said.

“They’ll have a lesson now with 120 slides that they get that are engaging, bright and repetitive in the respect that it’s knowledge that they’re building on.”

Mrs Wardana said there was a common misconception that explicit instruction was a boring “drill and kill” teaching method.

“We want to break that stigma and show that actually, explicit instruction can be extremely engaging,” she said.

“In fact, one of the little boys at the end of today’s lesson when I asked him what he had learned said, ‘I learned that Mrs Wardana is awesome.’”

Director of Catholic Education Canberra Goulburn Ross Fox said there was a growing movement of teachers, schools and systems around the country who were interested in the science of learning and science of reading.

“We continue to share our understanding and progress with many political and educational leaders across Australia,” Mr Fox said.

“We welcome anyone who might wish to know more.”

Catalyst has also caught the attention of some political leaders. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet referenced the program in his James Martin Oration on September 30.

Mrs Jamieson said Catalyst was the most significant professional development initiative in her 38 years as an educator.

“We are a system all focused on the same thing, working with the same goal in mind,” she said.

“We’re making a difference to our kids and people are looking it. That’s how it should be, working together for the betterment of our children.”



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