

National NSW Education

‘We changed everything’: How 56 schools transformed their teaching and boosted results



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Rebecca Brady and her kindergarten class at St Bernard’s primary school in Batemans Bay. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

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“It’s playful and fun, but the teacher is in control and leading the lesson,” she explains.

For the past two years, her school, St Bernard’s primary just south of Batemans Bay, has been in the midst of a classroom revolution.

“We’ve changed our whole approach to teaching. We use a lot of repetition, fast-paced learning and intense explicit instruction; behaviour is improving, and the children are so engaged. It’s been a huge turn around. Kids don’t have time to disengage.”

Brady is one of hundreds of teachers across 56 Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT that have embraced “high-impact” explicit instruction, an approach partly embedded in old-school teaching methods. It shuns student-led and inquiry-based learning in favour of a direct, traditional instruction style.



Brady is one of hundreds of teachers who have embraced more explicit instruction in her classroom. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

Behind the teaching overhaul is Ross Fox, the head of Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, who four years ago decided stagnating academic results across his stable of schools required urgent attention. He called on Lorraine Hammond, an influential explicit teaching advocate from Edith Cowan University, who has implemented “high-impact instruction programs” at more than 50 schools in Western Australia and the Kimberley region.

“Any school that takes up a teacher-led approach to instruction will achieve outstanding results because learning to read, write and spell are not naturally occurring processes,” says Hammond.

Teachers and principals from the Canberra Goulburn archdiocese visited Western Australia to see how explicit teaching, regular assessment and phonics-based reading programs were being rolled out at a handful of schools there.

“I felt a huge moral imperative to turn things around. We had to think deeply about why what we were doing in the past wasn’t translating into improved results, particularly in reading,” Fox says.

“If you want students to know something, you tell them. We know there is a way the brain learns, a science behind it, and effective classroom instruction involves breaking down information into small chunks and then building on that, rather than letting the student lead their learning.

“This approach is one way we can try and close the equity gap in student outcomes,” he says.

The 56 schools are at the end of their second year adopting the explicit, evidence-based teaching approach, known as the Catalyst program, and internal analysis of NAPLAN results shows promising signs.

“Our primary schools are showing statistically significant improvement in NAPLAN reading between 2019 and 2022 for year 3 and year 5. And results have improved relative to NSW averages, particularly for reading” Fox says.



The children don't have time to disengage at St Bernard's. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

At St Bernard's, where a quarter of students are from a disadvantaged background, this year's NAPLAN results are even more pronounced: 94 per cent of year 5 students achieved the top four bands for reading. In 2017, this was just 69 per cent.

Almost 90 per cent of students achieved in the top four bands for year 5 numeracy, compared to 73 per cent in 2017.

“Before we changed everything we were throwing too much information at the kids at once. Children can only process new information when broken down in pieces and then building on that. It's how knowledge is moved to long-term memory,” Brady, who has been a teacher for a decade, says.

Fox believes one of the key changes has been improved co-operation across the schools, largely due to the common approach and schools and teachers are now learning from each other.

“Previously we had half of school cohorts in tutoring and intervention programs. Dramatically improving results was the only option,” he says.

All the classrooms across the system are simple: desks generally face the front of the room – rather than in huddled groups – and the teacher instructs from the front of the room.

“Quite a few of our schools have had to buy new furniture because a lot of it was designed to have pupils facing each other,” Fox says.

“Teachers need to keep control of students' attention. You don't want children looking and talking to their friends unnecessarily as part of the lesson. Desks are now lined in rows, student face the front, and they frequently use small whiteboards to answer teacher questions to demonstrate they've understood a concept.”

The changes adopted at Fox's schools are aligned with the phonics-based approach taken in NSW primary schools, which is embedded in its new kindergarten to year 2 curriculum, after internal Department of Education research found balanced literacy to be less effective.

NSW students improved in primary school reading in the latest NAPLAN results, and are ranked in the top three jurisdictions by mean scores in all domains.



Rebecca Brady and her class at St Bernard's primary school. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

“At St Bernard’s there is a sense of order and rigour in their teaching. It has transformed the academic lives of the students but changed the culture of the school too,” says Hammond.

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Hammond says while there is a deep-rooted perception that explicit instruction is antiquated, cognitive psychology is on the side of this approach. “But you would never have a system based entirely on explicit instruction. Once they have the knowledge students can take on some inquiry-based learning.”

Fox says he also drew on knowledge from director of strategy at literacy company MultiLit Jennifer Buckingham; the Australian Education Research Organisation’s head Jenny Donovan; La Trobe University school of education associate dean Pamela Snow, Victorian-based maths teacher Oliver Lovell and leading education psychologist John Sweller to refine their new approach.

“School education in Australia appears to focus on novelty and innovation,” he says. “We wanted evidence behind the changes we were bringing in.”

Buckingham has worked closely with Fox and the archdiocese teachers to try to hit their goal of all students being competent readers.

Many of the primary schools are using one of MultiLit’s programs – InitialLit, an early literacy program with a systematic phonics component – through kindergarten through to year 2.

“No other school system in NSW has taken a really comprehensive approach to explicit teaching,” says Buckingham.

“While things have improved in public primary schools with phonic screening checks in year 1, we are still seeing many students not meeting benchmarks for reading proficiency.

“Canberra Goulburn archdiocese are making sure students are being picked up, so there isn’t a year-on-year failure of students where they fall behind.”

Former head of the federal education department Lisa Paul says explicit instruction works particularly well with disadvantaged communities.

“The archdiocese schools are using an evidence-based approach to teaching reading. In the review that we did into initial teacher education, we were not convinced all university [teaching degrees] were teaching reading in an evidence-based way.

“It is one of the ways we are going to close the gap. And if it’s working, why isn’t everyone doing it?” Paul says.



Lucy Carroll is education editor of The Sydney Morning Herald. She was previously a health reporter. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).
