

## John Paul College: The Professional Renewal Journey

Pauline Mundie  
John Paul College

Robert Marr  
John Paul College

### Abstract

John Paul College, a K-12 School in Queensland, Australia, recognises the centrality of classroom teachers to the ongoing improvement of student outcomes. The college has implemented a multi-tiered *professional renewal and assessment process*. These changes of emphasis are the result of significant research and subsequent/associated professional discussion and were supported during the EBA decision-making in 2012.

The professional renewal process at John Paul College guides teachers through a cycle of goal setting (related to any aspect of teacher practice which aims to improve student learning and achievement); ongoing discussion between the teacher and a mentor which determines actions; directed classroom observations (3 per term) and associated pre and post reflection/discussion; leading to application of changed practice toward achieving the criteria of the goals.

The principles of the professional renewal program are to:

- enhance development along accepted school-wide, team and department goals;
- encourage professional pedagogical reflections and conversations with a colleague/mentor;
- motivate improved performance and highlight the next steps in a teacher's development.

Through the introduction of *professional renewal, attestation and exemplary teacher processes*, the leadership and teachers of John Paul College have achieved an appropriate and innovative balance between self-directed, peer supported/directed and college-wide, strategic initiatives. Each member of the teaching team, from graduate to senior leaders are actively engaged in personalised programs of professional growth which is specifically aimed at improved learning and outcomes of the college's students.

### Keywords

Education, professional renewal, attestation, exemplary teacher processes

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Like many educational organisations that are recognised as leaders in their field, John Paul College works continuously to be at the forefront

of educational change. While more recently focussing on preparing students to be “real

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#### Corresponding Author:

Pauline Mundie, John Paul College, John Paul Drive, Daisy Hill, Queensland, Australia 4127.  
Email: pmundie@jpc.qld.edu.au

world ready,” the college leadership readily acknowledges that its methods of measuring teacher quality and performance have historically been cumbersome and generally ineffective. Previous teacher appraisal processes required each teacher to develop a complex portfolio in conjunction with a one-off, self-organised video of teaching practice. While these processes led to an upward movement in remuneration for teachers, they created a culture of inequity, portfolio competition, fear, and widely varying compliance which did not necessarily influence the quality of teaching offered on a daily basis, nor its impact on student learning. Such observations regarding teacher appraisal have been widely reported. Statements such as, “Appraisal is more about judgement...,” and “History tells us that the ill-considered, rudimentary methods of assessing teachers invariably fail with the usual result being a hollow, rubber-stamping, annual compliance ritual which benefits no one and does little to improve teaching and learning” abound (Dinham, 2012, p. 9). Similarly, the Hay Group (Hay Group, 2012) noted: “The 2009 OECD teaching and learning international survey revealed a worrying picture in teacher performance management, whereby systems of appraisal and feedback generally did not recognise teacher’s efforts and successes, or reward or incentivise effective teachers or teaching practices.”

In 2012, John Paul College celebrated 30 years as an independent ecumenical school catering to students from kindergarten through to year 12, in Logan, Queensland, Australia. John Paul College’s strengths are well established in providing rich holistic learning experiences and extensive co-curricular offerings to complement a previously traditional educational programme. Considered by many as the regional leader, educationally, in a predominantly low socio-economic region of South East Queensland, John Paul College has built a strong reputation as a leading educational institution, over its thirty years of existence. In recent years the college, in the context of its

motto, “Unity, Christ and Learning”, has gradually transitioned to adopt the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme and it offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme alongside the state and national curriculum in the senior school. The milestone year marked an acceleration of the quality and depth of engagement of the college as a whole and all teaching staff, in deep pedagogical change. Efforts to review and retain successful processes and practices were re-doubled. The year 2013 witnessed the launch of less frequent attestation processes, the recognition of exemplary teacher status, and an emerging professional renewal process. The professional renewal, attestation and exemplary teacher processes were adopted through negotiation in the *enterprise bargaining agreement* process during 2012.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has, in recent years, developed The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers which are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. The standards address the three domains of teaching:

- professional knowledge;
- professional practice;
- professional engagement.

The domains are further supported through the identification of appropriate expectations across four career stages from graduate to lead teacher. The standards define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching which will result in improved educational outcomes for students in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools and provide a framework that makes clear the knowledge, practice and professional engagement in each phase of teachers' careers. They present a common understanding and language for discourse between teachers, teacher educators, teacher organisations, professional associations and the public.

Early this decade, the Grattan Institute released a paper claiming that “Australia's systems of teacher appraisal and feedback are

broken, and students are suffering as a result” (Jensen, 2011, p. 3). The paper is based on Australian and international research, including extensive interviews with teachers and principals. It proposes a system of teacher appraisal and feedback that is developed and administered at the school level and is based on a measurement of teacher performance against at least four of the following:

- student performance and assessments;
- peer observation and collaboration;
- direct observation of classroom teaching and learning;
- student surveys;
- 360-degree assessment;
- self-assessment and external observation.

During 2012, school leaders convened a committee, led by the head of senior school and other leaders, with representation of primary and secondary school teachers. The purpose was to review the college-wide teacher appraisal processes, plan a way forward that met national requirements, shift the focus to improving teacher quality, and improve the consistency of teacher performance. The proposals were centred on raising student achievement and more appropriately responding to the learning needs of students in all classes across the college. The committee responded to research that focussed on the positive influence of peers in enacting change. Committee members were drawn to statements such as, “It has long been known that the most powerful influence on teachers are other teachers. The best way of exploiting this is through regular face-to-face encounters among professionals that focus on the improvement of teaching and learning” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 23).

Against this backdrop and as a result of the work of the review committee, John Paul College moved, in 2013, to implement a college-wide programme of professional renewal for all teachers. Significantly, the new processes have received significant commitment from teachers

across the whole college. The changes of emphasis are the result of research by the committee into current professional learning community practices resulting in ongoing professional discussion by members of the school leadership team. The John Paul College professional renewal process was adopted through negotiation in *the enterprise bargaining agreement process* in 2012.

The transition to professional renewal has shifted the emphasis from appraisal to mutually supported improvement of practices and subsequently, student outcomes. The sense of commitment to and the initial successes within professional renewal are reflected in statements such as, “In a self-improving school, more control and responsibility passes to the local level in a spirit of mutual aid between school leaders and their colleagues, who are morally committed to imaginative and sustainable ways of achieving more ambitious and better outcomes.” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 23).

John Paul College teaching teams now have the opportunity to direct and support genuine and sustainable change from within. While conceding the college is taking a “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach to implementation, school leaders and teaching teams believe it is important to begin the process, avoid procrastination, and modify the process in response to feedback obtained during implementation.

The college’s professional renewal policy states, “Professional Renewal is an integral component of the ongoing process designed to assist staff in personal and professional growth within the college environment.” Teachers are supported in professional renewal as the college provides “recognition, resources, support and mentoring of all teachers so that they can develop their performance and achieve their goals.”

The professional renewal process at John Paul College guides teachers through a cycle of goal setting (related to any aspect of teacher

practice which aims to improve student learning and achievement in the classroom) including ongoing discussion between the teacher and a mentor which determines actions and criteria to measure achievement in light of the goals; directed classroom observations (3 per term) and associated pre and post reflective discussion leading to application of targeted change in practice.

The principles of the professional renewal program are to:

- Enhance teacher development alongside accepted school-wide, team and department goals.
- Encourage professional pedagogical reflections and conversations with a colleague/mentor.
- Motivate improved performance and highlight the next steps in a teacher's development.

These processes and principles strongly parallel the Essential Elements of the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework

“Reflection and Goal Setting – All teachers have a set of documented and regularly reviewed goals related to both performance and development and ways of measuring progress...” “Professional Practice and Learning – All teachers are supported in working towards their goals... Evidence should come from multiple sources and should include impact on student outcomes; information of direct observation of teaching; and collaboration with colleagues” (AITSL, 2012 pp 5-6).

John Paul College also recognises the significance of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and has embedded the Standards into the attestation (proficient) and exemplary (lead) teacher processes. These two key points, proficient and exemplary, of a teacher's career encourage formal collaboration, reflection and contributions from students, colleagues and line managers.

The recent 2013 experience of two of the college's primary school team leaders, currently engaged in the Queensland Education Leadership Institute Aspiring Leaders Project, has supported the professional renewal developments within the college, and provided valuable impetus and modelling in support of members of their teaching team and fellow team leaders.

Each of the team leaders has engaged in a project which focusses on feedback and professional dialogue to improve pedagogical practice – centred on student learning.

Team Leader A established and prioritised observation, feedback and shared discussion across the year-level teaching team with a specific focus on literacy – reading and writing workshops.

Factors which supported and enhanced the project included:

- creating clear goals for observations and feedback;
- scheduling meeting time dedicated to shared discussion with student learning as the focus;
- investing time in clear and immediate feedback (same day);
- embracing ‘collective’ responsibility for student learning.

A number of factors inhibited the success of the project including:

- time pressures;
- high frequency of observation visits during term one; especially from other areas of the college and
- “push-back” or reluctance (teacher defensiveness) to be observed.

This required management including the provision of professional learning opportunities, professional reading and the building of confidence in the observation process.

Team Leader B initiated a project using an anonymous survey to collect early perceptions of professional renewal implementation. Data included aspects of: length of observations/visits; frequency of observations by managers;

occurrence of reflective conversations; and time between observations and the subsequent reflective conversations. Team Leader B also drew from Marzano's work regarding "what effective leaders do" and implemented the Marzano observational protocol snapshot within the year-level team.

This trial has narrowed observations toward specific lessons segments, for example, segments that:

- involve routine events that might be observed in every lesson, for example, *What is the teacher doing to help establish and communicate learning goals, track student progress and celebrate success?*
- address content, for example, *What is the teacher doing to help students effectively interact with new knowledge?*
- Are enacted on the spot, for example, *What is the teacher doing to communicate high expectations for all students?*

Both Team Leader projects are continuing but early indications are very positive regarding the beneficial impact on student learning of structured, focussed lesson observations with prompt and purposeful reflective discussion.

Through the introduction of Professional Renewal, Attestation and Exemplary Teacher processes, the leadership and teachers of John Paul College believe they have achieved an appropriate balance between self-directed, peer supported/directed and college-wide, strategic initiatives. Each member of the teaching team, from graduate to senior leaders are actively engaged in personalised programs of professional growth which are specifically aimed at improved learning and outcomes of the college's students.

The John Paul College journey is in its early stages, and the strengths and challenges encountered to date will lay the foundations for our practices into the future.

Teachers across the college have overwhelmingly welcomed the opportunities to

visit their colleagues' classrooms with a specific professional focus relating to their goals.

*Benefits of Professional Renewal include:*

- Each teacher identifies three goals linked to (1) the college's strategic plan; (2) teaching team priorities; (3) an individual preference.
- Increased levels of informal, planned professional dialogue across the college. Observation and reflection have featured visits between primary, senior and the college's international school.
- Facilitation of the aspiration for a "seamless holistic learning journey" for all students.
- All staff with teaching roles are actively engaged in the process.
- Increased appreciation of colleagues by peers for quality professional practice.
- Positive feedback increases motivation to further improve teacher practice.
- Positive supportive environment has developed across extended teaching teams.
- A more open and reflective teaching and learning community.
- Some previously isolated teaching practice is now more collaborative.

*Challenges include:*

- The requirement of three visits per term (12 per school year) have placed additional time pressures on all teachers, especially those with full teaching loads.
- Similarly, time pressures limit the opportunity for the important debrief component of the observation. This requires review in order to maintain the emphasis on quality interventions which will positively influence teaching practice.
- The specific nature of primary versus secondary timetables further emphasise the difficulties experienced by some members of the faculty. This inequity of

access impacts on the availability of colleagues for visits and follow up.

- The 2013 methodology permitted self-chosen internal buddies for observations and reflection. While this encouraged wide ranging interaction between teachers, there is a need to provide examples of best practice and identify lead practitioners.
- The time constraints and scope of the current model does not permit external buddy options. Some specialist areas such as learning support and performing arts. Instrumental music teachers would benefit from external observations due to the limited appropriate opportunities on campus.
- There is a need to increasingly achieve translation of new learning, as a result of visits, into sustainable changes in practice.
- The college must move to transparent school review processes to determine outcomes of pilot year.

For education at John Paul College to reach its potential and have the maximum positive impact on student learning, high-quality teachers and effective teaching are the main requirements. As the first year of professional renewal moves through the third term, teachers and mentors are engaging in culminating activities to reflect on the progress made with observations, conversations and the subsequent implementation of new classroom practices.

Teachers are embracing the opportunities provided, and valuing the experiences of focussed observations and dialogue in the classrooms of their peers. The challenge now is to build and refine this process, and harness the reflections, enthusiasm and refinements that are coming through. The focus will be on making modifications to the process which feed through to significantly improved teaching and learning in the classrooms. The springboard effect is evident as the teachers feed in their collective energies and expertise, and increasingly seek constructive feedback and engage in meaningful

dialogue about their practice. The accumulated data from within these logged reflections and mentor conversations will provide valuable insight as plans are established to improve and further develop the professional renewal process at John Paul College.

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#### About the Author(s)

**Pauline Mundie** is Deputy Head of Primary School at John Paul College.

**Robert Marr** is Director of Teaching Practice at John Paul College and Artistic Director – Marching Eagles.