What really works in lifting kids' academic performance

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Schools that focus on getting the basics right produce pupils with higher academic performance, a new NSW study has found.

The boys are cricket-mad at Westmead Public School. Every lunchtime, they drag rubbish bins across the playground to use as makeshift wickets for their all-important matches.

Meanwhile, across the asphalt, at least 100 children play in a huge sandpit, dubbed the Beach at Westmead. There are red and yellow flags, a surfboard and a warning about sharks. It is a much-loved place for many kids who have never been near a beach.

Westmead is the second-largest primary school in NSW, with 1200 students. Many of its kindergarten children start school without speaking a word of English and at least 96 per cent of students speak another language at home.

It is also one of the state's highest achieving schools with consistently strong NAPLAN results. There is a strong focus on building vocabulary in the early years of school and experienced teachers formally mentor colleagues just starting out.

Teachers have high expectations of their students at the school but place equal emphasis on their happiness and wellbeing.

"The boys were getting in trouble for moving the bins all the time but rather than stop them playing, we came up with an idea for a cricket mural, asked them who their favourite players were and had them painted on a brick wall," the principal, Adrian Mort said.
"We have 1200 kids out in the playground at once but no bullying or behaviour problems because the kids are engaged and happy and when they are engaged in a school they will learn and do well."

The holy grail of education policy is knowing why and how schools like Westmead have such impressive student performance.

A new study from NSW’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, titled What Works Best, says a "growing bank of evidence" shows there is a clear pattern of higher academic performance in schools when the focus is on the basics.

This could be as simple as the expectation that classes start on time, to making sure students are challenged and given feedback from assessments. Even a teacher’s ability to control the behaviour of their class can significantly lift performance.

As part of its analysis, the paper looked at data from a student engagement and wellbeing survey of 80,000 NSW students from 220 public schools undertaken in 2013 and 2014.

The survey showed that the NAPLAN reading scores for year 9 students were as much as 40 points higher in classrooms where teachers had high expectations for their students and their work.

This included encouraging students to try hard, urging them to do their best work and to hand their homework in on time.

Teachers also need to ensure students are challenged, the study says, because research shows that all students, including high ability children, need to continuously learn new things or their results can slip. It is particularly important in maths, according to the study.

"There is evidence that many NSW students are not challenging themselves, or being challenged enough in class," it says.

Explicit teaching, where teachers clearly show students what to do and how to do it, also lifts academic performance, the study says.

Telling students what they will be learning, and being clear about the purpose of tasks, demonstrating or explaining new ideas and checking that students understand, as well as giving time for asking and answering questions is critical.

Data from the engagement survey showed that year 5 students who knew the purpose of what they were learning recorded, on average, 38 NAPLAN scores higher in reading than their peers who did not understand the importance of what they were being taught.

One of Westmead’s most experienced teachers, Jennie Gregory, who has been identified as a highly accomplished teacher by the NSW Board of Studies, says she has high expectations of her year 2 students and makes sure they understand what and why they are learning.

"What I always expect to see is the children working independently and my role in the classroom is to facilitate, so they will come and ask me questions but they work independently and I am constantly assessing them, not with pen and paper, but by listening and watching," she said. She also focuses on feedback.

International and NSW data shows that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement, the study says.

Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests from 2012 revealed that Australian students with teachers who discussed their finished assignments performed better than students whose teachers rarely gave feedback.

PISA data also shows that performance in maths is higher when students feel their maths teacher can manage their classroom, whether this is encouraging active student participation in lessons, establishing classroom rules or reinforcing positive behaviour.

And, overwhelmingly, wellbeing in the early school years drives academic outcomes.
"There is evidence that shows that students with higher levels of wellbeing are more likely to be higher academic achievers and complete Year 12, have better mental health and a more pro-social and responsible lifestyle," the study says.

For the NSW education minister, Adrian Piccoli, who commissioned the study, the research backs up his conviction that quality teaching in the classroom is the key to lifting performance.

"The most significant thing everybody talks about in education policy is student results but the thing is, you can build halls and libraries and buy 3D printers but what really matters is what happens between teachers and students in the classroom. That changes results," he said.