Balwyn High School is located in Melbourne’s inner east, and academic excellence is its hallmark. The school’s outstanding VCE results are listed amongst the top in Victoria and over ninety-eight per cent of Balwyn High School students enter tertiary studies after Year 12. Students at Balwyn mainly come from professional middle class backgrounds with the majority of parents having tertiary qualifications. Fifty four nationalities are represented at the school and fifty-five per cent of students speak a language other than English. There’s a strong work ethic and culture of high achievement within the student body, melded with equally high expectations from teachers and parents.

Balwyn High School’s Performance and Development Culture (P&D Culture) story started with the belief of the school’s previous Principal, Bruce Armstrong, and the leadership team at the time, that despite the school’s enviable results, it had the potential to achieve even better student learning outcomes. The leadership team embraced the improvement agenda articulated in the then newly released Blueprint for Government Schools, viewing the P&D Culture strategy as a way of developing a school culture that would bring about these improved outcomes.

“Because the school has always been high achieving, it would have been so easy just to do nothing and to think ‘if it ain’t broke why fix it’”, Deborah Harman, the current Principal, points out. Some members of the school community felt just this way. The task was involve all staff in raising the bar to challenge both students and teachers to learn and teach in different ways. The Performance and Development Culture Initiative provided the framework for instructional improvement while preparing for P&D Culture accreditation focused the work undertaken by the school to implement the changes.

Essential to the purpose was a collaborative approach to developing the school’s vision, values and mission which would guide and inform the process of school improvement. This helped the school to identify what it was that teachers needed to learn and do in order to establish a Performance and Development Culture that met its vision and mission. As a result of this process, the school’s overall direction is now firmly supported
by its four pillars of learning, identified above, which are made explicit in very aspect of the life of the school, and in its documentation and branding.

Deborah recalls the early stages: “We had a clear and explicit agenda. Well established practices were put under scrutiny and new practices opened up for trial. Theory and practice were debated, discussed and analysed. Teachers adapted and shared their knowledge and talents. Teachers were supported at every step to meet new expectations. There was and is always initial push-back, but everyone can see the gains made by stretching and challenging our staff but also supporting them through the changes.”

Bernadette Clayton, the former Assistant Principal, with responsibility for P&D Culture at the school, highlighted the need for effective communication and the involvement of all stakeholders at the school. “We set up a working party to ensure the school was on course for accreditation. We wanted everyone to have ownership so all staff were involved.” With such a large staff, communication strategies had to be well planned. Expectations and the tasks to achieve a P&D Culture had to be explicit and well-documented.

Each element of the P&D Culture was investigated by small staff groupings which met regularly. There were organising briefings for facilitators; schools that had gained accreditation were visited and education literature on school improvement, teaching, learning and assessment was reviewed and discussed. Joanna Alexander, Director of Teaching and Learning, believed that it was useful “using the voices of those not associated with the principal team to advocate for the process, and address all elements of the P&D Culture Self Assessment Framework. It wasn’t seen as a top-down thing.”

Establishing a P&D Culture presupposed focusing people’s attention on instructional practice “so it raised questions and debates about what is considered to be ‘good’ teaching and what is not”, said Joanna. While this might sound confronting, especially when successful student achievement suggests that what is happening in classrooms is working effectively, it proved to be a highly productive process. “But before this, such discussions probably didn’t happen much,” says Bernadette.

These discussions became the norm in a team culture that supported collaboration, reflection and feedback on practice, planning for improvement and effective professional learning. Deborah explains how teaching has changed and how professional learning teams have supported this process: “Now the expectation is that no one plans learning
activities alone. Everyone is introduced to new ideas and thinking. Everyone is on a learning journey and we expect and accept that academic rigour is non-negotiable. Balwyn’s practices are transparent and that empowers everyone.”

Learning walks were a logical next step to placing instructional practice at the forefront of professional learning. “The learning walks have made people much more comfortable about peer observations and giving and receiving constructive feedback,” one teacher reports. “Before this happened, we were really on our own in our own classrooms. There’s much more awareness now about how we want to teach to facilitate the learning we want for students.”

The gathering and analysis of a wide range of data is integral to individual, team and whole-school planning and multiple sources of feedback on practice necessarily includes feedback from students. Balwyn encourages its students to demonstrate leadership and to express their opinions. Most importantly, students are asked to comment on what they view as effective teaching and learning practices so that the school can always improve its practices. Students’ views have also been recorded to provide constructive feedback about what facilitates and improves their learning. To this end the school runs student focus group interviews to gauge attitudes and ideas for improvement.

The DEECD’s newly released e5 Instructional Model is viewed as providing additional useful scaffolding and support for teaching and learning practices at Balwyn High School. “We feel like we’ve been ahead of the game – and the documents that are coming out – such as the e5 Instructional Model - are tremendously encouraging for what we’re doing. The e5 is now a focus for the learning walks. Our agenda is around effective practice”, a teacher says. In future the school aims to have all staff trained in the learning walks program to host external visitors.

The individual development planning process is a keystone of the school’s P&D Culture and one that has been shared with many other schools. This activity is one component of a carefully designed and comprehensive performance review process, in which the school and individual teachers have become adept at subjecting their practices to interrogation and investigation. Guided by the principle of mutual obligation, personal performance and conduct are open to discussion in the process. Expectations are high and attention is paid to detail to make sure everything is carefully documented and recorded, without reviews incurring extra work at the last minute.
Hence, Balwyn High School’s success has been built on professional learning with a performance improvement focus, and on performance review for validation of the journey teachers have taken.

Balwyn High School gained P&D Culture accreditation in 2006. It was then identified as a P&D Culture Reference School which both raised the stakes and opened the school up to scrutiny by others. “That was a stimulus and everyone became more familiar with what was involved in having a Performance and Development Culture”, Joanna adds. Besides its outstanding student results, Balwyn High School is now demonstrating new and emerging teaching and learning practices to visitors to contribute to system improvement. “There’s a different level of connection now – everywhere across the school”, Joanna states. “It’s a different place from what it was only a few years ago.”

The lessons learnt from Balwyn High’s experiences are important ones, and they encourage discussion and learning about leading and managing change. Distributed leadership and an emphasis on networks and teams highlight the need for all education employees to accept accountability and responsibility for school and system-wide improvement – “for themselves, each other and for all students”, says Joanna.

One of the main lessons, Balwyn’s leadership believes, is that while some change can occur over five or so years, they now believe that seven to ten years is required to embed profoundly new practices. They are in no doubt, there’s still a long way to go, but they’ve made a great start.

Another major lesson that can be gleaned from Balwyn’s story is how critically important leadership teamwork is, especially when it comes to succession and ongoing capacity building. Balwyn’s experience shows that the cohesiveness of a school’s formal leadership team is imperative for it to be effective.

“Prior to all this Balwyn High School was like an island with a moat around it ... It was very much ‘things are OK here, leave us alone’”. Now things have changed dramatically. With all the positive things that are happening, Balwyn High School’s ranking as a destination of choice for parents and students is hardly likely to diminish.