Bendigo South East College, formerly Flora Hill Secondary College, was formed in 2009, when Kangaroo Flat, Golden Square and Flora Hill Colleges merged to create Bendigo South East and Crusoe Colleges as part of the Bendigo Education Plan regeneration project. Bendigo South East College (Bendigo SE) caters for students from years 7 to 10 and has an enrolment of 1290 students. Students and staff from the former Golden Square College moved onto the old Flora Hill site at the beginning of 2009.

Bendigo SE principal, Ernie Fleming (previously principal of Flora Hill Secondary College), curriculum facilitator, Jenny Brown, and the rest of the school’s leaders and staff have drawn together two schools and created a strong culture of performance and development in a very short time. Driving the changes they have implemented is a strong determination to develop a P&D Culture for students and staff alike, supported by a belief that everyone at the school can learn and improve. Fundamental to their achievements is the strong sense of trust, high expectations and accountability that have been developed amongst staff and students. This is underpinned by a high level of collaborative strategic planning, organisation and structure evident in the school. Bendigo SE’s culture is inclusive of the whole school community and strong relationships are being developed with parents, who have high expectations of Bendigo SE and are supportive of the new school and its progress.

The school community began its journey towards developing a P&D Culture by establishing a collective vision of the new school. Ernie felt that involving the whole school community in decision making was pivotal to establishing a new and inclusive culture: “Everyone had to feel equally valued and we had to be careful not to make newcomers feel like they were going to have to take on Flora Hill’s ways. Just about everything was revised or changed or completely redeveloped.” Together, they agreed on the values that would shape all aspects of the new school: teamwork, respect, appreciation, leadership. As Jenny reflects, “Time wasn’t on our side, so we had to work quickly. It was a very emotional time for some Golden Square teachers and students, and we had to bring everyone on board, but it’s amazing what we’ve done, even though we had our worries at first.”
Articulating the school’s values and living out those values in all aspects of the school’s operations has facilitated the development of a P&D Culture so entrenched that Jenny feels its elements now come naturally to Bendigo SE: “Everything has consistency and compatibility - whatever we do stems from the same foundations – our values and ethos. There’s congruence because we work hard to achieve common expectations and actions. “

Assistant principal, Brendon Maloney, believes that having explicit structures and processes in place has been integral to developing a P&D Culture at Bendigo SE. “Organisation and thoroughness are emphasised heavily. We believe we can help every student to learn effectively if they are organised, on time and well prepared. The same goes for teachers. ” Every process and procedure at the school is clearly documented and based on the latest research. All policies are published for staff, students and parents and there are role statements for every group within the school community, including expectations of parents. Plans, proformas and rubrics have been collectively developed to ensure a common approach to lesson planning and professional learning. These documents ensure professional accountability and are recorded in each staff member’s annual Staff Achievement Folder, a formal document for recording personal records, professional learning, coaching, feedback, meetings, ‘great work’, contributions to the life of the school beyond the timetabled schedule and personal reflections, which form the basis of staff appraisal processes, both informal and formal.

One of the most important common understandings the Bendigo SE staff members have developed is their approach to instructional practice. They reached consensus on a ‘What makes a great teacher’ statement which articulates their vision of exemplary teaching. The statement reflects the central view of the school community: that everyone at the school is a learner and has the capacity to improve. This statement was in part informed by student consultation, reflective of the school’s student centred approach. Students have a lot of power and are trusted to lead all manner of activities. They are listened to and know that they can communicate directly with the principal. In turn, they demonstrate a pride in their school and achieve excellent results in the classroom and in co-curricular activities. The school’s strong DEECD Student Attitudes to School survey results stand as testament to the strength of the culture at Bendigo SE.

Along with the trust placed in students, come high expectations and accountability. Bendigo SE’s P&D Culture applies to everyone, not just staff. The students know the rules, values and philosophy behind them, that everyone is a learner, and everyone can improve and there’s no wriggling out of it. Probably the most important maxim for
students is: *Time counts + ready to learn + switched onto learning = great results!* This means students must come to all classes prepared with all necessary equipment for the class. Every student has a personal learning plan and an adult mentor to assist his/her learning progress, which means the curriculum is differentiated and individualised even though much of the learning occurs in groups.

Students also know that they can’t wriggle out of handing work in on time. The school’s electronic monitoring system enables the tracking of every student’s progress in an ongoing, formative way. Ernie explains: “Whole College online programs and processes supply the support needed to track student progress and objectively assess the efficiency of our efforts. Everyone, individuals and teams, has online access to curriculum and co-curricular progress. And there are no excuses – the IT system checks the log-ins”.

These processes form the basis of powerful feedback for teachers, and peer observation is integral to this. The peer observation process involves a lesson observation and evaluation plan and rubrics for personal professional learning. Teachers are now accustomed to these processes, and understand that they are part of the school’s commitment to accountability and to developing a culture of high performance and ongoing development. According to one teacher, “This is not onerous – we work and plan together all the time and are used to people watching our practice and providing ideas.” Although the school is new, people who have heard about its successes are shown through each week, attesting to its culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

All members of the school staff participate in a continuous cycle of professional learning. This cycle is shaped by each staff member’s input as they are encouraged to reflect on their learning and to share the outcomes with others. As Jenny explains, “The staff Professional Learning Cycle assists induction and guides performance and development planning. Although staff members work in teams, they create individual Professional Learning Plans. Systematically planned professional learning is ongoing and peer reviewed with professional discussion, support, time and constructive feedback organised at the school level, mainly through leading teachers.” To assist with embedding a P&D Culture, significant work has been invested in shared professional learning across Bendigo’s four new secondary schools with common professional learning days, shared project personnel and the establishment of a wide range of networks.
The school has a focus on professional learning to build leadership capacity and spends significant resources developing leaders. All leaders have a mentoring and coaching role and the College is further developing the profile of Expert Teachers believing they are an under-utilised but rich resource. The development of leadership capacity in the school, along with the embedded P&D Culture structures, will also assist with succession planning. According to the assistant principal, “Ernie’s the driver for sure, but he’s managed to push a consolidated agenda for this school. It’s all very clear and documented. It’s all in place and is being implemented, so he’s made succession possible…we’re all part of this now, so it’s sustainable –it’s glued into place.”

The school’s methods and student centred practices and leadership, supported by the P&D Culture initiative, have resulted in better student outcomes, improved attendance and more engagement in learning. Learning is focused, trans-disciplinary, negotiated and extends beyond the classroom into the workplace and the community. “We’ve got high staff morale here”, one teacher explained, “because we get results and that’s down to effort.” Ernie’s advice on leading and managing major change is to focus on the students and continuous improvement, “The key to success has been maintaining a focus on student success. A shared belief that all students are important and can be successful helps minimise people being distracted by other issues.”