Laverton P – 12 College opened in 2008 when Laverton Secondary College merged with Laverton and Laverton Plains Primary Schools to ensure expanded educational provision in the district for students from Prep to Year 12. The college caters for a diverse student population which includes recently arrived refugees from Africa and Asia. Some recent arrivals come to the schools with little or no experience of English. The new amalgamated college of 600 students is divided into four Learning Communities: Prep to Year 4; Years 5 to 7; Years 8 to 9, and Years 10 to 12. Within each Learning Community, students are grouped according to literacy and numeracy ability rather than age. Jeff Bell is the principal of the college, but the leadership team also consists of a principal from each Learning Community. Laverton P-12 College achieved Performance & Development Culture (P&D Culture) accreditation in 2008.

In establishing Laverton P-12 College, the leadership team faced the enormous challenges that come with merging three different schools, and particularly with merging two primary schools and a secondary school to form a school catering for the whole spectrum of students from P-12. Jeff and his team aimed to create a school that was based on a sound educational rationale informed by the most recent research with an unwavering focus on maximising student learning. The changes they created in establishing the college were: physical, with new buildings designed for team teaching; organisational, with the arrangement of students into Learning Communities; and pedagogical, with the introduction of an inter-disciplinary approach emphasising literacy and numeracy.

From the outset, the school's leadership team was aware that such major change had the potential to create some trepidation amongst some staff members and would take time to develop. It required staff to learn to work together in new ways and even familiar activities, such as program planning and curriculum development, would differ from what they were accustomed to. The type of culture that Jeff and his team wanted to develop was one that would support staff through the change and improve their capacity to focus on the school’s vision.

Jeff believes that the P&D Culture initiative provided guidance for organising and structuring the change efforts. “P&D Culture has helped to embed and sustain the change, and has provided an avenue for communicating our beliefs and intentions”, he
explains. Using the P&D Culture initiative as a framework, Jeff and his team adopted practices that involve the whole school community and work towards the best interests of students. The leadership team has established an effective teaching team and embedded coherent practices across the college. “We needed to be consistent and united in achieving the new vision of maximising student learning and raising standards in an environment of continuous improvement”, Jeff explained.

A consensus approach to leadership has been embedded in the school. Discussion and debate is encouraged but once a decision is made through this process, it is considered a ‘done deal’ until it requires revision. As a result, Jeff believes the school community has come to see leaders differently. “There’s not a sense of hierarchy. Everyone is accountable. Everyone knows where the school is heading and what we’re aiming to do together.”

Planning is undertaken collectively and open discussion is integral to the success of this approach, with peer feedback and self reflection occurring as part of the process. As Jeff explains, “We had to formalise new expectations that centred on team planning and decision making, and to move away from a ‘one teacher – one subject – one classroom – sit down and do this textbook exercise’ type of thinking and behaviour. From most people there was agreement that this really was the way to go and we had their commitment. There will always be some staff resistance in any school, and we are no different, but eventually you get that critical mass of support. When things get better all the time, morale improves and there is greater job satisfaction.”

The development of a new culture of performance and development has also altered teacher student relationships and the perception of the school in the community. Families and community members are encouraged to visit the school and a parents and citizens group has been established to increase participation and improve communication. Previously graffiti and vandalism were rife. “The school was considered a pretty rough kind of place, but it really wasn’t – it was just a matter of setting the tone and the kids have really stepped up to the plate”. The campus grounds have been improved, and repainted classrooms with new resources have encouraged a higher level of respect from students. “Students were disorganised and apathetic – but now it’s a totally different learning culture”. Teachers are forging more trusting, respectful and less hierarchical relationships with students. For example, students are able to take resources home and are trusted to bring them back, and do so. For students with the lowest levels of internet connection in the state, this is important. “Students know that what we are on about most
is learning – theirs and ours. It’s non-negotiable, and we demonstrate this in every way we can.”

The P&DC initiative prompted the leadership team to look at their processes and to put an emphasis on professional learning, particularly mentoring and coaching. Consideration was given to what professional learning was required to support the staff through change and to advance the school goals. One of the biggest challenges facing the school was to ensure the same kinds of learning practices occurred across the school and to support teachers in learning to team teach across age groups with an interdisciplinary approach. As Jeff explains, “Obviously you make major changes and some people won’t be happy. There were some teachers who said they’d only taught VCE, so how could they be expected to work in a Learning Community at the lower year levels. Others were very subject and content focused and didn’t respond to our integrated curriculum approach. And some simply didn’t like the idea of not having their own classrooms and having an open space learning environment”.

This led to the identification of teaching a diverse range of students from a diverse range of age groups as a priority focus for professional learning. “It’s very important that not one of our students here falls through the cracks – we just won’t let it happen”, says Paul, a Learning Community principal. Sophie, another Learning Community principal agrees: “They’ve all got different learning needs, but it’s much easier to identify and respond to these in a learning community where students can learn through many teachers and from each other. We know they’re happier, and that makes learning easier.” As part of this process of professional learning, visits were conducted to other schools to see how flexible learning spaces best operated. Six members of staff were granted professional leave to explore the most effective strategies for school improvement and every teacher visited the other Learning Communities within the school.

As Jeff explains, “The school’s leaders are honest when they say that many students and teachers had difficulty in adjusting to working in open learning spaces, but now that everything is working so well, this configuration has seen a lot of converts. Teacher aides and specialist teachers work alongside the regular teachers in each Learning Community. A regional literacy coach has been appointed to work with the school, and specialist consultants have assisted each Learning Community to revise their pedagogy and curriculum. The emphasis is on teamwork and use of each adult’s strengths and interests”. Sophie believes this has led to clear changes, “Now kids go everywhere in the
school, and so do teachers. Everyone is a teacher of every child – and every teacher is a teacher of every teacher – that’s a big difference.”

The kind of cultural change that is occurring at Laverton College takes time to evolve and needs to be continually monitored and strengthened. Despite the progress Laverton P-12 College has already achieved, Jeff argues that it is only about one quarter of the way along the path it intends to travel. “There’s a long way to go yet, but we’ve started, we’ve got our plans and we’re on the road. But before we move any further down that line, we need to make sure everyone is coping with the huge cultural changes we’re making. A lot rests on trust, respect and learning. Everything we’ve done so far has a P&D Culture focus. The P&D Culture initiative has provided the foundation for change in our school and helped us to establish a culture geared towards continuous improvement.”