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Revealed: The elite schools splashing $100k to lift NAPLAN results

A new program in some of Brisbane's top schools is giving them the edge in NAPLAN testing. Here's the full list of which schools are using it.

Kelly Lang | Follow
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As far as before and after transformations go, Hayden's would be hard to beat.

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When you consult a sample of that same year-old's writing in January, then another in September, you'd swear it was a different kid.

Words come together like old friends instead of mismatched strangers, humorous are concise and compelling. Everything flows with an ease many adults have yet to master.

For this Year 6 student, writing has gone from a dreaded and accompanied by feelings of failure to an enjoyable outlet for sharing his wonderous thoughts and ideas.

His classmates, too, are on a dynamic learning journey.

Jupiter State School, Milne north town of Rome and eight hours' drive from Brisbane, is proving what can be achieved when children — and their teachers — are given the right tools.

Two years ago, this P-10 school of from 280 students embraced a groundbreaking program that addresses a decades-long gap in teacher training: the ability to teach writing.

Since the 1960s, young people studying at because teachers have been let down in this critical area, according to the program's founder.

The result? Many teachers lack the basics, he says, and are therefore incapable of passing them on to their students.

Jo-Ann Jensen from The Written Tradition, Parade, Brad Hunter

Australia's writing crisis is felt across the board, including in large, cashed-up private schools.

And boys are hardest hit.

"If you ask a class of 30 students to put their hand up if they feel competent in writing, 28 hands will go up, and 25 of them will be girls," says Jo-Ann Jensen, whose Written's Tradition program is now in more than 400 schools across Australasia.

Dr Hunter, a New Zealand-based historian and former university lecturer, created the program after being dismayed at the poor level of writing among his tertiary students.

When word spread about the effectiveness of the 2007 book, Write Time Essay, schools asked him to do a version specifically for them.

Today, Written's Tradition has evolved into an extensive package of online and physical resources for students and teachers, covering all writing styles, from poetry to reports.

Its pricing students lectures feedback via artificial intelligence assessment. Dr Hunter says it engages them in their individual improvement journey.

It also enables differentiated learning — where teachers can identify and respond to the needs of students at varying academic levels.

The toolbox comes with a range of daily tasks and exercises in the 2021 Written Awards for best user experience, alongside Google and Sale 19th Avenue.

"Students who struggled to grab pass a C grade are now producing As and Bs," Dr Hunter says.

"Schools are lifting their performance and teachers are being up saying, 'Why wasn't I ever taught this at university?'"

Jo-Ann Jensen from The Written Tradition, Parade, Brad Hunter

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In one of Queensland's biggest private schools, Brisbane's St Joseph's Nudgee College, the results have been dramatic.

After trialling part of the package in 2019, the Catholic school of nearly 1700 boys has signed up for the whole shebang, at a cost of about $100,000, and is running it through years 5 to 9.

Principal Peter Finlayson says there is "an increasing challenge to engage boys in literacy and learn how they think naturally go about".

"With this program, boys are feedback very quickly, which encourages them to keep going, and with that engagement there is a sense of enjoyment mixed in thinking. We've heard and I'm not getting anywhere," Mr Finlayson says.

"It's also a positive step for teachers, with rolling professional development.

"We've been looking for an improvement over time, not a cage but or quick fix."

Nudgee's literacy program leader Brenda Barlow, a teacher at the Rosendal school for more than eight years, says many students are seen producing "really high-level writing pieces".

In Senior ranking has shown vast improvements, with students able to go from a mark of 80 per cent to 90 per cent within an hour's revision.

Becker says his boys who've been using the program and are now in Year 9, sticking with Essery and claim that "Service second nature, and they no longer need the hand holding".

Brenda Barlow from Nudgee College, Parade, Brad Hunter

In this digital age, some might question the relevance of writing, with emojis replacing objective and thumb punching out characters on phones.

Technology could be seen to have diminished the need for serious excellence, with brevity and speed defining 21st century communications.

But no, according to Dr Hunter, who says sophisticated writing is as imperative as it ever was.

"Australia has the most writing intensive curriculum in the world," he says.

"A Year 12 humanities student will write about 25,000 words and a business student 10,000-20,000. Those who struggle with writing are facing an uphill battle with their grades."

Skilled writers are also better placed for success after school.

"A we're serious about having a true knowledge economy and growing the wealth of communities and families, writing is part of that pathway, you can't ignore it," Dr Hunter says.

"Writing and thinking are powerfully connected. The universe is the mission by which you surface the thought. This paragraph is the means by which the thought is fully realised.

"If you don't have those two skills in life, you will at there frustrated, wondering 'How can I get out the things inside that I want to say?'"

Dr Hunter is at pains not to lambast teachers for the current writing crisis.

"Here we have a community of gifted, committed professionals who are subject experts, yet we have not equipped their staff enough when it comes to writing."

Jupiter State School principal Lisa Quinn

In Written's Tradition, Dr Hunter has ripped into instruction methods dating to the late 1960s — the age of pragmatism, which focused on style, fluency and legible, and "and post World War II when spelling, grammar and structure were key. Or was it was in the 1960s that things went awry.

"This was the rebelling generation, when our cover the rules of grammar and composition, and it became about exploring your creativity and a writer," he says.

"The mantra in Education Questionnaire at that time was 'language is caught, not taught,' so we now have three generations of young teachers who have never taught the rules of writing, and I think this a huge challenge."

Among the key components of Written's Tradition are "coaches" who conduct in-school workshops for teachers, then in the classroom and offsite (via zoom), explaining how to ensure students make sight of a new, the example, is a Year 4 interpretation.

Jo-Ann Jensen from The Written Tradition, Parade, Brad Hunter

Driving the program's uptake in Australia is improved educator Julie Quinn.

During her 14 years as dean of studies at Brisbane's St Joseph's College Gregory Terrace, Mrs Quinn was frustrated by the school's NAPLAN results, which underpinned its academic benchmarks such as NAPLAN, the Queensland Core Skills test and its related OP scores (year 10/12). It reached at Terrace for 20 years, she resigned at the end of 2018.

No one in education circles was surprised when Quinn, who also previously taught in the state system, was quickly snapped up by her next employer.

As Australian director of Written's Tradition, she visits schools and introduces them to what the calls "a game changer".

"Schools have had really amazing uplifts, with some NAPLAN results for writing improving by 40 per cent from previous testing," she says.

Wide studies showing a direct link between Year 9 NAPLAN results and Year 12 leaving scores, she says it is critical to fill the potentially poor NAPLAN outcomes.

Quinn was introduced to the earlier incarnation of Written's Tradition, Write Time Essay, in 2007 when it was being trialled by Brisbane Grammar School, where she was observing the writing continuum taking place across the Terrace.

Jo-Ann Jensen from The Written Tradition, Parade, Brad Hunter

Terrace embraced the program the following year, as did Ashmore Treacy College in Indooroopilly. From two schools, there are now 41 participating in Queensland.

Quinn says while very large schools have invested about $100,000 in teacher development, the average school spends a $30,000, with entry level assess in online tools from $1500.

"This works on to around $60 per student, so when you consider all the money we spend on education, this is a great change," she says.

It certainly has been at Jupiter State School.

Quinn will assess Jasper last visit (basis in 2019 — and the ends on the face of that young boy who never believed he could be a competent writer.

"I asked Hayden 'How is it that I'm reading a beauty and a September that are so different?' And he said, 'Well, I turn all those thoughts in my head, and I move them the order in put them down.'"

Quinn says Jupiter State School was "very invested", with parents raising the $20,000 program spend themselves.

"There is a group of people who wanted to make a difference in their children's lives, and for a little school a long way from other big things, that's really inspirational."

See the full list of schools here:

Albany Creek State High School

Ashfield Treacy College, Indooroopilly

Aviation State High School, Clayfield

Barrett Adolescent Centre, Toowoomba

Brisbane Boys' College, Toowong

Bellbird Park State College

Brigidine College, Indooroopilly

Cannonvale State School

Centenary State High School

Corinda State High School

Coraglen State High School

Dakabin State High School

Deception Bay State High School

Earnshaw State High School

East Brisbane State School

Forest Lake State High School

Glenala State High School, Darnick

Helensvale State School

Holland Park State High School

Ignatius Park College, Cardwell

Jupiter State School

JANUARY 2019

Sonke can dish it will see that I had a month I don't have a month then we're a that behind. Well, I'm at Year 9 now. Well, I'm up to Year 7. I'm up to 8. I'm all over to your house will have resolved a made in to a home will I need I'm go to my house. I'm going to be there, we go then, we'll go on you know, further have a good time with our son. We are going to having.

SEPTEMBER 2019

In the ice towards, under machine gun fire, the soldiers fought. The light horsemen galloped to help the wounded. The light horse charge, once, they helped the wounded and poured for the dead. Suddenly, the firing ceiling had a bad thought. Or thought that this battle was like a bad, terrifying and heart-breaking.

Jupiter State School principal Lisa Quinn

Jesus College, Wynnum West

Keebra Park State High School

Lourdes Hill College, Hawthorne

Mt Ommaney State School

Mabel Park State School

Mansfield State High School

Mary MacKillop Catholic College, Highfields

Marymount College, Burleigh Waters

Mitchelton State High School

Mt Alvernia College, Kedron

Mudgeeraba State School

Nambour Christian College

Narangba State School

Noosa State High School

Our Lady of Southern Cross College, Dalby

Pacific Pines State High School

Padua College, Kedron

Palm Beach Currumbin State High School

Pimpimpam State High School

Rochedale State High School

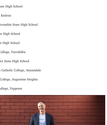
San Sananna College, Yeerongpilly

Sandgate District State High School

Southern Cross Catholic College, Annandale

St Augustine's College, Augustine Heights

St Brendan's College, Yeppoon


Jo-Ann Jensen from The Written Tradition, Parade, Brad Hunter

St Edmund's College, Ipswich

St Francis de Sales School, Clifton

St James College, Fortitude Valley

St John Fisher College, Brookes Ridge

St Joseph's College Nudgee, Banksiah

St Joseph's College Gregory Terrace, Spring Hill

St Mary's College, Toowoomba

St Monica's Catholic Primary School, Oxley

St Peter Claver College, Ipswich

St Stephen's Catholic Primary School, Pimvanch

St Thomas Moore College, Sunnybank

The Gap State High School

Toogoolawah State High School

Trinity Anglican School, White Rock

Tullawong State High School

Villanova College, Coorparoo

Yeppoon State High School

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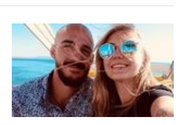

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