



Agility

To be agile is to be nimble, is to be able to move quickly and easily.

To implement a new curriculum might seem a less-than-nimble process, a marathon-like task.

At Gilson College, leaders have used a project management process called Agile to plan the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in 2013. In doing so, it has also furthered its status as a school with a best-practice professional learning community.

‘You don’t have to look overseas to see best practice in education,’ said Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Max Caruso. ‘A visit to Gilson College will demonstrate best practice in action.’

Mr Caruso introduced the Agile process to Gilson College in late 2011. The project management process is a little like turning a marathon into a series of short runs. The process calls the micro-actions of project management ‘sprints’.

For example, an initial sprint would be a teacher, not necessarily in an official leadership role, speaking to staff in broad terms about the Australian Curriculum. Another sprint would be a newsletter item introducing parents to the idea of the new curriculum. Another sprint would be deciding who will be taking the lead with the first four subjects of the new curriculum: English, mathematics, science and history. Yet another sprint would be timetabling teacher professional learning for the new curriculum.

‘The Agile process is a vehicle that delivers projects – big or small – in a strategic manner,’ said Mr Caruso. ‘It has embedded practices that focus on peer-to-peer learning, professional learning by doing, sharing, collaborating and co-constructing.’

‘I sensed Agile would sit well with the school’s spirit of continued professional learning and building of ongoing leadership.’

‘Agile has been great for our professional learning program,’ said Sandra England, the school’s Learning and Teaching Coordinator. ‘It means that classroom teachers can take on leadership roles that may have previously been delegated to coordinators and the like. It means there is more “teacher voice” in planning.’

Gilson College is a Prep to Year 12 Seventh-Day Adventist coeducational school in Taylors Hill, with 780 students.

Challenge: To implement the Australian Curriculum in 2013.

Action: Introduce the Agile process of project management.

Results: Leadership capacity spreading through the school.

The College's involvement with the Smarter Schools National Partnerships program and the Advisors from Independent Schools Victoria has added a wider and deeper focus to our professional learning.

– Mrs Sandra England,
Learning and Teaching Coordinator



Mr Caruso explained that Agile works by creating teams and team leaders who come and go according to the needs of the various school priorities and 'sprints'. 'The teachers do not need to be in official leadership positions. What is more important is the notion of the teacher-leader, and that teachers have the opportunity to lead.'

'The Agile process allows for leadership in teachers to be recognised and distributed,' added Mr Caruso. 'It creates an environment where staff can authentically engage in collaborative learning.'

'The school had already begun to introduce what could be called a "flatter", more widespread system of leadership,' said Mrs England. 'That system has been enhanced by Agile.'

As well as the Agile process, professional learning at Gilson College is occurring through concepts such as action research in the classroom, evidence-based observation in the classroom, and cognitive coaching of teachers.

An action research project may be about the teaching of persuasive writing, or about Year 1 students using iPads. Evidence-based observation involves another teacher noting and detailing how a colleague teaches. Cognitive coaching gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on and alter their teaching practice.

All of these elements, including the Agile process, combine to form a dynamic professional learning community at Gilson College, a learning community that has moved away from the notion of professional learning being predominantly short-burst, quick-fix, one-day events.

The essence of professional learning communities revolves around providing specific time for staff to meet and focus on excellence in pedagogy – teaching practice – and with the central focus being student learning.

'The school's involvement with the *Smarter Schools National Partnerships* program and the Advisors from Independent Schools Victoria has added a wider and deeper focus to our professional learning,' said Mrs England.

'Conversations between staff about professional learning are very rich. Teachers are thinking deeply about the way they teach.'

Mr Caruso said the SSNP program at Gilson College has been significant and has 'helped to enhance and add value to an already very positive school environment'.

Mark Vodell, Gilson College Principal, praised the SSNP program for its positive effects upon teachers and students. 'The programs developed by Independent Schools Victoria and rolled out with us at Gilson College have significantly assisted us to develop the capacity of our leadership and teacher teams. They helped embed a number of systems and protocols into our school culture that assisted to raise the standard of teaching and helped us reflect on our pedagogy – developing our professional learning culture.'

'The benefits of this are evident in learning and teaching, and the results from our student data reinforce the fact that this is more than just anecdotal.'

Mr Vodell described the assistance provided by Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors Max Caruso and Lynda Cutting as 'invaluable, as were the extensive professional learning opportunities provided through National Partnerships initiatives for Gilson College leaders.'

He said that the Agile technique used in preparation for implementation of the Australian Curriculum ensured that the process was effective and 'relatively pain-free'.

'Also, teacher capacity has been built upon through the Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisors working with teams of teachers or individuals to plan and deliver enhanced learning for students.'

'The impact of the National Partnerships programs throughout our school is having a substantially positive effect on the education and achievement of our young people from the western suburbs of Melbourne.'

The Agile process has also been introduced to Ilim College of Australia Inc, to guide the school's opening of a new campus in 2013.

