

# THE TIME TO READ

At Queenwood School for Girls in Sydney, the literacy committee began a long-term, complex project to increase reading for pleasure across the school. With the support of key stakeholders, they set about to provide the resources and the opportunities to draw the whole school community into the project.



**As educators we often** lament that our students are no longer reading books for enjoyment. Sadly, our students are not alone. With an ever growing curriculum and the frenetic pace of the academic school year many teachers are reading for enjoyment far less than ever before – or worse, not at all.

In 2019, with the support of a research grant from the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AIS), Queenwood began to tackle this problem for students. It was critical to the success of the project that our staff modelled strong reading behaviour and this article will focus on the strategies we used to achieve this.

## Time dedicated on the school timetable to reading

The existing teaching timetable needed to be completely overhauled to create a dedicated 20 minutes per day of sustained silent reading. It took many meetings with key stakeholders from the Executive, pastoral teams and heads of department to generate this time. This was a long, drawn-out process that presented many road blocks to overcome. However, including of all these key stakeholders ensured open, honest and thorough communications and maximum buy-in from all the key areas of the school. The clear expectation for all staff during these 20 minutes is to stop formal teaching and learning, pick up a book of their choice and read silently. Not only does this model strong reading behaviour to our K-12 students, it also gives staff permission to stop and ‘just read’. It is the understanding at Queenwood that whether the staff member is teaching at the time or off class they too will stop and read. This includes our non-teaching staff and Executive members.

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## Books as gifts

As the QLiteracy Committee began to design our ‘Just Read’ reading program, we realised putting books into the hands of our staff was critical to its long-term success. We quickly understood that daily dedicated reading time would mean that staff would move quickly through their own book collections – and needed more! The school libraries were not in a position to support the increased borrowing habits of 150 staff taking part in Just Read, in addition to all our students. To enhance motivation to read amongst our staff, the QLiteracy Committee decided that choice of reading material for staff was a powerful motivator in gaining staff commitment to the program. All staff were invited to select a book of their choice

as the Christmas holiday period commenced, as a gift from the school. This was a very special way to formally introduce Just Read to our staff.



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### Staff collection in the library

Very early in the project it became apparent that staff would be relying on our school libraries to support their daily reading practice. Our collection development policy grew to include a staff collection within the libraries that our staff now utilise heavily. Staff are encouraged to review and recommend books from this collection for their peers. These recommendations are on display in the library and are accessed consistently.

### 'Currently Reading' posters

It is not enough to simply give staff time to read – it is critical to make reading and books a visual constant around our school campuses. The Currently Reading posters are designed in-house to allow students to view and engage with what staff are currently reading (Senior School) or what they have loved to read in the past (Junior School). As we envisaged, these posters have created conversations about books between staff and students. However, an unexpected positive of the posters is the discourse it has generated between staff members themselves about these books.

### Drip-feeding for success

The Just Read project has been in the making for many years, from as far back as 2017, as part of the work of the QLiteracy Committee. Planning began around this time with the first Just Read session starting in January 2020. Information about the project was deliberately released to staff in small, manageable chunks over many months, as staff buy-in was critical to the success of our project. We monitored how staff were reacting to the reading program and we solved any issues as they arose. Changing a school's culture takes time.

### Targeted professional development

Staff valued the keynote address given by our academic mentor Dr Margaret Merga prior to Just Read starting in January 2020. Dr Merga spoke passionately of the importance of reading for student wellbeing and the improved literacy outcomes daily reading brings. She stressed the critical role our staff have in modelling reading behaviour. Dr Merga's presentation strengthened support for the reading project amongst our staff.

Although the AIS project ('Building Readers for Life: A Sustained Silent Reading Program') will conclude in December 2021 we look forward to continuing Just Read. We have observed powerful indicators of change within our school. This includes increased borrowing statistics for students and staff and incidental conversations about books. We are thrilled that some of our staff have developed a daily reading habit for the first time in their lives.

For more information of our project, please access the AIS webpage: [aisnsw.edu.au/teachers-and-staff/research-and-data-in-schools/the-evidence-institute/school-based-research-projects/queenwood-school-for-girls](https://aisnsw.edu.au/teachers-and-staff/research-and-data-in-schools/the-evidence-institute/school-based-research-projects/queenwood-school-for-girls).

### Image credits

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