

Executive summary

Highlights from the 2016 school reviews



This report summarises the practices and improvement in Queensland state schools based on the findings from the 2016 school reviews. It is evident that Queensland state schools are making significant progress across all domains of the *National School Improvement Tool* in order to improve outcomes for all students.

Similar to the 2015 findings, the three levers — planning, capability and data — were found to play a significant role in school improvement in 2016. Schools worked to implement evidence-based, strategic approaches to planning and monitoring of school improvement, they built staff enthusiasm and commitment to implemented changes, and they invested in enhancing staff capabilities, particularly in regard to using data to inform teaching practice.

The 2016 reviews identified a number of strengths across schools, as well as areas of continuing focus for schools, regional offices and central office to further enhance schools' capacity to learn and improve.

Strengths

A strong focus on student achievement was explicitly articulated in all review schools and embedded in the culture of high expectations, which was promoted along with an inclusive education philosophy. The learning and wellbeing needs of a diverse student population were a high priority in all review schools, and a great number of partnerships were developed to enhance learning and address the needs of all students.

Based on the analysis of the 366 school review reports of 2016 and the 76 review schools of 2015 that successfully completed a 12-month post-review support process, the following strengths of Queensland state schools have been identified.

School leadership and vision

Improving schools are led by leadership teams who are effective change agents — they work together and use evidence of learning to develop their school improvement agendas, as well as to build a positive culture and commitment from all stakeholders (students, parents and staff). Many review schools unpacked their improvement agendas to include explicitly defined targets and timelines for the improvement of student outcomes, as well as performance measures to help monitor progress.

To support improvement, professional development was provided and collaborative opportunities for professional learning were created in many review schools. Many partnerships were also developed and maintained by schools with their local communities and external organisations.

In addition, the majority of schools that completed the 12-month post-review support process in 2016 managed to effectively establish a clear direction for improvement and build a shared understanding of school improvement priorities and strategies. This was achieved by applying a more strategic approach to improvement (often questioning the status quo), collaborative analysis and discussion of data and evidence, and the revision of key leadership roles and responsibilities in order to align them with the improvement agenda.

Professional knowledge and collaboration

In most review schools, teaching staff were seen as highly capable, professional, hardworking, collegial and committed to achieving improved learning outcomes for students. Leaders placed a high priority on attracting, retaining and developing quality teachers and, when necessary, dealt with staffing challenges. The continual development of staff was pivotal to improving student learning outcomes — schools were investing in professional learning for teachers, teacher aides and specialist staff, encouraging coaching and mentoring, creating opportunities for collaborative planning and networked learning relationships with other schools, as well as using professional teams and committees to support improvement priorities. Instructional leadership, and peer observation and feedback practices, were evident.

Professional learning and collaboration were occurring in schools across content and skill areas. In particular, there was a growing focus on building the capability of teaching staff to implement evidence-based pedagogies linked to the school's improvement agenda, as well as their knowledge of the Australian Curriculum. Data literacy of school staff was an area of strategic importance for many review schools.

Investments in increasing staff capabilities were particularly important in schools that completed the 12-month post-review support process. Professional learning activities in these schools were often conducted to ensure consistent implementation of practices in priority areas related to identified student learning needs and related challenges of practice. Professional learning was strongly supported by regions and effectively addressed priority areas in these schools. Different forms of collaboration were emerging or were already embedded in these schools, with the aim of ensuring the consistency of whole-school practices. The collaborative nature of data discussions between school leaders and staff encouraged the collective ownership of student achievement. Some schools also intensified their external collaboration, for example, through new partnerships, or through observation and networking. Leaders in these schools, assisted by regions, intensively engaged in instructional practices and promoted learning inside and outside of their school. As a result of this professional learning, improvements were reported in staff understanding, knowledge and confidence in many areas of professional practice, particularly the Australian Curriculum. Teaching staff felt supported, which was important for maintaining the momentum of change.

Collection and analysis of data

According to the evidence from the 2016 school reviews, Queensland state schools collected a large quantity and variety of student data, for the most part aligned with each school's improvement agenda. The evidence of data-informed teaching was significant, with data walls often used to track student performance and promote professional discussions.

The focus on the analysis and use of data was particularly evident in schools that completed the 12-month post-review support process. Most of these schools implemented strategies and actions aimed at improving data processes within the school, initiated collegial data conversations and increased the use of evidence to stimulate discussion of effective teaching pedagogies. These efforts were supported by regions, and positively influenced the decision making of school staff regarding the improvement of their teaching practice.



Next steps

One of the major findings of this report is that school improvement is a continuous, internally driven process of learning that involves the identification of challenges of practice, and developing ways to address them. Schools do not need to wait for movement in their performance indicators or a school review to trigger improvement activity. Instead, they should create ongoing opportunities and structures for learning, and continuously enhance their capacity to learn and improve. This report shows that schools' improvement trajectories are highly dependent on the context in which they operate. There is no one solution or way in which school improvement should be achieved; therefore, it is important for each school to continuously develop the learning capacity at the individual, team and organisational levels. This will help schools to identify the problems of practice before they are evident in student achievement data. In that sense, school improvement should be a permanent practice of all schools, including those that are performing well.

This reflection provides a starting point for the next steps in the school improvement journeys of Queensland state schools, particularly in relation to the three improvement levers: planning, capability and data. These three levers should continue to be the focus of schools, and what follows builds on the *School Improvement Unit 2015 annual report* (SIU 2016), suggesting how each lever could be further addressed by schools. Making links to the key dimensions of a learning organisation extends this interpretation.

Planning

Rather than a static, point-in-time activity, planning for improvement needs to be seen as a strategic, visionary and consultative process of direction setting. A collaboratively planned, clearly formulated and effectively communicated school improvement agenda determines the success of implemented improvement strategies.

Collaboration: Greater collaboration and involvement of teaching staff in planning and decision making is needed in Queensland state schools. Teachers should be seen as partners in improvement planning, which may enhance their commitment to and ownership of improvement strategies.

Clear priorities and specific targets: There is a need to bring more clarity and precision to the improvement planning process in schools. Identified student needs should be the imperative that helps schools to establish and maintain clarity and continuity of improvement. Improvement agendas and expectations need to be carefully operationalised to specify expectations and targets, how they will be achieved and how progress will be monitored. Specific, measurable and data-informed targets, defined as student progress against curriculum achievement standards and developed for each priority, need to be well aligned with other strategic documents.

Key leadership roles: Success in school improvement is partially determined by the alignment between the improvement agenda and key leadership roles. Schools that demonstrated such alignment had distributed their leadership functions, and invested in associate leaders who supported the internal communication of change and were often the biggest drivers of improvement.

Shared understanding: Involvement of all school stakeholders in improvement planning is essential for building a shared understanding of the school's improvement vision and priorities. Effective communication of improvement agendas should be followed by seeking staff feedback to ensure that a shared understanding has been developed. This is crucial for building the staff's ownership of change, ensuring the consistency of the implemented strategies across the school, and ensuring all individual and team efforts are moving in the same direction.

Monitoring: Along with setting targets for improvement, schools need to monitor progress towards these targets. Ongoing evaluation and monitoring, using formative as well as summative assessment data, should be embedded in improvement initiatives and performed systematically.

Capability

Continuous development of leader and staff capability is a central part of school improvement. Professional learning in improving schools goes beyond investing in the knowledge and skills of staff. It spans collaborative learning opportunities within and outside of school to make learning more effective. It also involves promoting inquiry and risk-taking to support transfer of the acquired knowledge into improvement decisions at the classroom level.

Human capital: Professional learning aimed at developing the knowledge and skills of school staff needs to be better aligned with the improvement agenda and to support staff throughout the school improvement journey. School leaders and staff are encouraged to continuously work on improving data skills, and use the department's Inquiry Cycle as part of their professional learning.

Social capital: Many opportunities for collaboration are already provided in Queensland state schools, but greater attention could be paid to learning collaboration across year levels. Improving schools develop whole-school formal structures for collaborative learning, and extend their professional networks and relationships outside of school.

Decisional capital: Schools need to ensure that existing leadership and peer instructional practices are consistent within a school and involve all teaching staff. The focus of instructional leadership practice should be on developing teachers' abilities to make judgments and decisions to improve classroom instruction, which will enhance a school's decisional capital and better address problems of practice. Through regular collegial data conversations, schools will improve teaching staff's data literacy and enhance the ability and confidence of teachers to use data and evidence in decision making.

Data

Data, and evidence more broadly, are vital to inform decision making about school improvement at multiple levels. This includes at the organisational level, where strategic plans are developed by leaders working with staff, and their implementation is monitored. Teachers also use data at the individual level to identify challenges of practice, set learning goals and monitor student progress.

Consistent and balanced collection: In improving schools, processes of data collection are consistent across a school and evident in a school data plan. The focus is shifting towards greater use of formative assessment tasks.

Collegial data analysis: Schools should develop regular, systematic processes of in-depth, teacher-led, collegial data discussions and analysis. This will promote reflection, help leaders and teachers identify problems of practice, and provide a firm basis for decisions at different school levels.

Data-informed teaching: Schools are challenged to shift from collecting data and evidence to making better use of data to inform teaching, planning, managing and decision making. Continuous professional learning in data literacy is crucial, as it influences how accurately and effectively data is interpreted and used to identify and address problems of practice. Regular data monitoring accompanied by thorough data analysis can contribute to better use of data in teaching.

School capacity to learn

Overall, the evidence from the 2016 reviews, and particularly those involved in the 12-month post-review support process, shows that schools are improving due to their organisational capacity to learn. These schools are effective in developing a shared vision and goals, encouraging collaboration and teamwork, supporting improvement with appropriate continuous professional learning and learning-focused leadership, and finally, in promoting a culture of inquiry, exploration and risk-taking. While the work of schools is focused mostly on student learning, complemented with staff learning, for effective school improvement, schools need to reflect and work on their capacity to learn as organisations.

To ensure sustainable improvement of educational outcomes for every student, there should be a clear line of sight and a commitment to learning at all levels within a school and the Queensland state school system more broadly.