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School improvement practice across Queensland state schools
In 2012, Geoff Masters (Chief Executive Officer, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)) was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to provide advice about the implementation of the Australian Government’s Rewards for School Improvement initiative. In addition to questioning the basis and effectiveness of incentive-based approaches to school improvement, Masters (2012, p. viii) built the case for the “use of “practice-based” measures of school improvement to complement the “outcome-based” measures”. He used evidence from the results of the 1257 teaching and learning audits undertaken in Queensland state schools in 2010 to explore the feasibility of developing both sets of measures. The approach that he recommends seeks not to drive improvements through just the use of rewards and sanctions, but rather to ‘support and promote improvements in school practices more directly than is possible by holding schools accountable for outcomes alone’ (Masters 2012, p. ix). This non-business model emphasises the importance of capacity building and organisational culture. It focuses on how to improve both the day-to-day work of Queensland state schools and their educational performance.

As part of developing this practice-based approach, Masters (2012) examined the school improvement frameworks used by the states and territories at that time and distilled them down into the following five common areas of focus:

- leadership
- learning
- teaching
- learning environments
- partnerships.

Building on the Queensland Teaching and Learning Audit Tool, this work informed the development of the Notional School Improvement Tool (NSIT) that was promoted by the Gillard Government during the Gonski funding negotiations. It also currently provides the basis for Queensland’s approach to school reviews. The above five factors were used as major analytic categories in the coding framework (see appendix D), and this chapter explores them in terms of the findings from the 2015 school reviews.

Leadership, in this context, is seen as the act of bringing together the components necessary to achieve school improvement and enhanced student performance. The components of school leadership which arose from an in-depth analysis of the school review reports are:

- leading learning through instructional leadership
- the improvement agenda
- purposeful collection and application of data to student learning
- use of school funding
- school culture.

For the purposes of this chapter, learning encompasses all aspects of the student experience of knowledge acquisition. It includes:

- high expectations
- individual student learning
- student empowerment.

Teaching is the other half of the learning–teaching cycle that defines schools. Explicit and systematic, teaching is the defining work of teachers. Aspects of the school review data considered under this section include:

- pedagogy
- curriculum
- support for teaching.

Learning environments are a combination of social and physical qualities that create the lived school experience of students. For the purposes of this report, the social aspect, school culture, is considered as an element of leadership. For the school reviews the physical aspect of learning environments include:

- learning facilities
- learning resources
- extracurricular activities
- reasonable adjustments.

Partnerships are the important relationships that schools develop and maintain to support their work. The school reviews provided evidence of the importance of the following types of partnerships for school improvement:

- collaborative teaching and learning
- collaboration with parents
- school and community partnerships.

The following sections of this chapter present evidence of these areas of focus for school improvement, as drawn from the school review reports. They are illustrated by working examples. More detailed case studies are also provided.
3.1 Leadership

The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning. (Leithwood 2011, p. 10)

There is increasing evidence and acknowledgement of the importance of leadership in schools. The presence of effective leadership is positively related to student learning and integral to school improvement (Seashore Louis, Dretzke & Wahlstrom 2010; Wallace Foundation 2013). Effective educational leaders:

- create conducive learning cultures centred on high expectations
- clarify what teachers should teach and what students are to learn
- establish strong professional learning communities
- lead collective efforts in teaching improvement.

While teachers have an impact on the students within their classrooms, school leaders potentially can affect all students within their schools (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin 2013). However, the role of a school leader is largely dependent on others. Almost everything a school leader does is with or through other people. Therefore their success is largely dependent on how they work together with others (Hallinger 2011) to create a personalised form of productive interdependency.

As this section will show, leaders in Queensland state schools are encouraged to be the instructional leaders of their schools by leading by example. The focus of the NSIF, and subsequently the Queensland state school reviews, is on schools rather than on the performance of any individual principal. Consequently, school leadership is considered largely as it is enacted through the implementation of the improvement agenda and aligned with other strategic activities, such as use of evidence and school funding. Leadership qualities are also very closely related to the observed school culture.
3.1.1 Leading learning through instructional leadership

Schools should be first and foremost about ‘teachers teaching and learners learning’ (Hoy & Hoy 2003, p. 1). The 2015 school reviews detailed the role and approach of school leaders in leading the processes of teaching and learning within their schools, while also engaging with their school community. DeMathews (2014, p. 193) defines instructional leadership as:

... the leadership functions associated with teaching and learning, more specifically the duties and responsibilities principals need to perform each day to support teachers and learners towards educational excellence. In order to accomplish this, principals must create a safe, supportive and collaborative work environment.

According to Mestry, Moonsammy-Koopasamy and Schmidt (2013), strong leadership, effective instructional practices and the capacity to improve learning are only possible if school leaders emphasise the building of effective learning communities within schools, and create education networks outside of schools. Fullan (2014) agrees that school leaders need to embrace the key roles of being the lead learners within their schools, and leaders within their school systems. Within the 2015 review reports, school leaders demonstrated effective instructional leadership both within their schools and across their school systems.

Leading learning within the school

The school reviews regularly found that effective or emerging practices in curriculum and pedagogy aligned with the presence of involved and supportive leaders. Effective school leaders spent dedicated time in classrooms and had direct classroom contact with students on a regular basis. As a result, teachers within these schools confirmed the school leaders’ strong and visible leadership. However, in other schools, school leaders were seen as supportive of, but not generally involved in, the day-to-day practice and learning of teachers.

School leaders demonstrated instructional leadership through active involvement in ongoing professional learning. They modelled, to staff, the importance of continuous professional learning of teaching practice.

For example, an urban primary school principal in North Queensland region demonstrated sponsorship of continuous professional learning for schools leaders through engaging an executive coach to support learning for its leadership team. In a second-wave effect, the team then spent time with teachers modelling various pedagogical processes.

School leaders, with the support of recent and relevant professional learning, were able to share their informed practice with, and build on the capabilities of, their teaching staff as a whole. One school leader in a remote school in Central Queensland region returned to teaching in the classroom in order to demonstrate effective teaching practice to all teachers. In a very large, urban secondary school in the same region, all school leaders, including the principal, spent time working with teachers, providing feedback on their teaching and, where appropriate, modelling effective teaching strategies themselves. These school leaders each taught a timetabled class and welcomed teachers into their classroom to observe and share their practice.

Fullan (2014) advocates for this type of leadership engagement, one that focuses on building capacity in all staff, including the school leaders themselves. To be an effective learning leader, Fullan (2014) argues, school leaders need to maintain their own deep learning.
Leading learning within the system

Although research (for example, Fullan 2014) advocates the need for effective school leaders to promote relationships and learning between other schools within their communities, the 2015 school reviews showed that this was not yet a consistent practice across all schools.

Across the reviews, it was evident that some school leaders routinely engaged with current research, educational experts and other schools that had achieved significant success. When shared, this engagement facilitated the capacity building of school staff and the improvement of student outcomes. School leaders and staff in smaller schools were more likely to be actively networking with other local small school leaders in cluster arrangements to support staff professional learning, collegial support and student interaction. This was not regularly found in the 2015 school reviews, which is consistent with Fullan’s (2014) observation that most school communities do not actively develop and support purposeful peer learning across schools. As with all school and community partnerships (see 3.5 below), systems leadership across schools remains an area of development for many school leaders.

... the lives of too many principals, especially new principals, are characterised by ‘churn and burn’.

(Wallace Foundation 2013, p. 13)

Within the school reviews, it was noted that some schools had significant numbers of acting staff filling school leadership roles. High turnover of school leaders, especially principals, was found in some schools. School leadership turnover can have a negative impact on school improvement:

Schools experiencing exceptionally rapid principal turnover ... often reported to suffer from lack of shared purpose, cynicism among staff about principal commitment, and an inability to maintain a school improvement focus long enough to actually accomplish any meaningful change. (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom 2004, pp. 165–6)

For review schools affected by high school-leadership turnover, the instability in leadership was seen to contribute to a disconnect between schools and their communities. It also created considerable anxiety among staff. Significant and recent changes to staff in leadership positions were also a factor in a lack of consistency and continuity in teaching practice within classrooms. This instability was apparent in a school review in a rural primary school in Central Queensland region:

The school has experienced major instability in leadership with five principals in the last two years. There was also evidence of a large number of ‘contract’ teachers employed for short periods during this period. This situation has exacerbated the instability and disrupted the teaching and learning program.
The systems approach of Freestone State School's leadership team is making a positive impact within its school gates and beyond.

Held in high regard by the local community, the school’s leadership team is developing its professional learning and improving student outcomes by working closely with school leaders from other local small schools.

Freestone State School is thriving, with a clear focus on literacy and numeracy. The leadership team actively seeks the support of external experts, researchers and resources to improve student outcomes. This includes the development and maintenance of local learning networks, and formal in-school arrangements to access regional pedagogical coaches for modelling and feedback.

Continuous professional improvement occurs at all levels in the school, and is supported by a dedicated budget. Staff capacity and expertise, particularly in the area of language skills development, has been strategically developed over time. Teachers express a personal commitment to improving their practice, and reflective and professional conversations are a frequent occurrence within the school.

School initiatives

- The school’s leadership extends to other schools within the region.
- A flourishing professional learning culture includes external and regional resources.
- Staff share expertise in continuous improvement in practice.

In another example, in a very large, urban secondary school in Metropolitan region, the review team noted that, within the school workforce plan, the vast majority of key leadership positions were filled on a temporary basis. Despite the staff in these positions making highly valued contributions to the improvement agenda of the school, the lack of certainty affected the school’s forward planning and morale. During the review, concerns were expressed regarding the ability of the leadership team to respond to the unique needs of the community, with levels of insecurity surrounding key leadership roles. At the time of the review, the school was realigning leadership roles and responsibilities to the school improvement agenda.

Clearly defined staff roles and responsibilities are often associated with effective schools. In addition, the principal and leadership team have a shared understanding of the function of each staff member’s position, what each role is accountable for, and how they each fit together to help achieve the school’s improvement agenda. These roles and responsibilities are communicated within and throughout the school community. In schools with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, school staff understand who they work with, and they know who to go to in regard to the performance of their duties. For example, if teachers need to improve their pedagogical practice in relation to numeracy, they know to seek the expertise of the numeracy coach. In schools with clear roles and responsibilities, professional learning and recruitment can occur in a considered manner, rather than as a reaction to staffing pressures.

It was regularly suggested in review reports that schools needed to provide greater clarity around the roles and responsibilities of their expanded leadership teams, their teachers and other staff, including a vision of how they work together in leading learning in the school. This improvement included formally documenting the functions and responsibilities of different roles, and specifying how each contributed to the overall improvement agenda.

In secondary schools, unlike primary schools, there appeared to be a common understanding held by members of the school community about the responsibilities of various roles, as secondary schools tend to have a richer and more established history of more expansive school leadership teams. These structures of secondary schools may potentially provide a model for primary schools.

A rural primary school in Central Queensland region demonstrated that a clearly defined leadership structure had been developed, enabling the school to identify specific role descriptions and responsibilities. This structure had formalised many existing leadership roles, including those of the principal and deputy principal, head of behaviour and learning support, head of curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment, and head of special education services. The school informed the review team that there was a collaborative process undertaken in 2014 to match personal areas of expertise and current school improvement priorities, to help underpin the leadership of the school improvement agenda. As this structure was relatively new in 2015, school leaders recognised that further communication was necessary across the school community to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities until they became embedded within school practices.
3.1.2 The improvement agenda

... to have an impact a system’s aspirations must be clear, sharp and understandable to everyone ... aspirations set the foundation for delivery because they set the bar for what the system will be asked to achieve. (Barber 2011, p. 3)

School leaders are central to improving student learning, with the links between effective school leadership and student outcomes being well established within the literature (for example, Wahlstrom et al. 2010) and as shown by the school reviews. However, successful schools are not born solely of school leaders’ individual activities, but through their involvement with, and ability to inspire, others (Smith 2015).

The vision for the success of all students is provided by a clear and consistent school improvement agenda. To be effective, the school improvement agenda should be sharp and narrow, containing a few, clear core items that require improvement, and then a clear plan for how it will all occur. According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 2), to have an effective explicit improvement agenda:

- The school leadership team and/or governing body have established and are driving a strong improvement agenda for the school, grounded in evidence from research and practice and expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes. Explicit and clear school-wide targets for improvement have been set and communicated to parents and families, teachers and students, with accompanying timelines.

Effective school leadership requires clarifying what change is being led and then clearly communicating the intentions for change, while also actively building connections, coherence and alignment across all parts of the school. This alignment is best achieved by identifying a few clear priorities for improvement and ensuring that these priorities are embraced, embedded and reinforced (Fullan 2010).

A clear vision of what a school aims to achieve establishes its overall purpose. This purpose is then reflected in the clarity of purpose within the classroom, providing challenging yet realistic performance standards for teachers, which can then translate into performance standards for students (Bennis, Cherniss & Goleman 2003, p. 41).

Fullan (2009) emphasises the need for schools (and school systems) to focus on a small number of ambitious goals, and to ensure those goals drive everybody’s work. It was evident in some 2015 review schools that they can try to do too much, which often resulted in very little actually being achieved to improve student outcomes. Successful implementation requires prioritising fewer programs, and discontinuing those with minimal impact on student learning outcomes. The process of focus and elimination is vital.

However, it is not sufficient to simply prioritise a small number of improvement priorities. Consideration must also be given to the time invested to achieve real long-term, sustainable improvement for students. According to Fullan (2000), it takes approximately three years to achieve sustained change in student performance within a primary school. Within a secondary school, depending on size, it takes some six years to achieve sustained change in student performance (Fullan 2000). A key function for school leaders is to provide clear, consistent and regular communication of what needs to change in order to achieve school improvement, and how this is best achieved. In the urgency to make change, core messages can be easily lost. Message clarity and constancy of purpose can ultimately be the difference between success and failure in school improvement (Harris 2012).

Schools must also take into account their important role in addressing community concerns and issues. It is the role of school leaders to support teachers to address key priorities but, at the same time, to maintain a focus on the overall direction of the school. The skill of an effective school leader is in addressing these agendas, while also ensuring that balance is maintained and that competing agenda items do not distract from the primary focus.

There was still work to be done for some schools reviewed in 2015. Reviews revealed that, although the vast majority of schools had an agenda in place that detailed priorities for improvement, many agendas were too broad (some with as many as 13 items), or priorities were not defined to the extent that they could be clearly understood, owned, actioned and achieved by all school staff. Therefore, refinement of their improvement agendas remains an area of development for many Queensland state schools.
Implementing the improvement agenda

Education is a complex system which is difficult to reform by command and oversight from a distance. By considering even the simple, first-order changes, the number of components and their interrelationships can seem overwhelming: curriculum and instruction, school organisation, student services, community involvement, teacher in-service training, assessment, and reporting and evaluation. Deeper, second-order changes in school cultures, teacher–student relationships, and values and expectations of the system may be even more daunting to effect (Fullan & Miles 1992).

The crucially important role of school leaders is to build the particular local narrative in relation to the school’s improvement agenda, and to provide a school culture that is conducive to improvement. Particular school structures (including roles and responsibilities, processes and plans) and a conducive school culture (that is, knowledge, habits and beliefs) provide a basis for school improvement. Structure considers what to do and who is responsible within a school, whereas culture is about how to be (Hargreaves & Shirley 2012, p. 87). While effective improvement agendas will outline what needs to be achieved, only an effective leadership team can create the knowledge, beliefs and habits necessary within the school community to support and drive improvement.

Teacher involvement was a key feature contributing to the development and implementation of an explicit improvement agenda. The alignment of improvement priorities to practice utilised a range of consultative mechanisms, such as local consultative committees, and teachers were able to demonstrate how improvement priorities had a direct impact on their classroom work. Teachers could clearly articulate the changes to their behaviour or practice that had occurred as a result of the school’s specific focus. There was a clear line of sight, from the school leadership team through to the teaching staff, students and the school community, so that everyone knew and understood the focus of the school for improvement.

At a very small, rural primary school in the same region, the principal was driving an explicit local school improvement agenda, with clearly articulated improvement targets and timelines for student achievement. The school’s local agenda reflected systemic and regional priorities in literacy. The school improvement agenda had clearly focused and sharpened the attention of staff, parents and students on the core learning priorities of the school.

At an urban primary school in North Queensland region, for example, a narrow and sharp focus on improvement with reading and attendance were listed as the main school priorities. Staff articulated, and were united in, their commitment to this improvement agenda.

There was widespread evidence of effective or emerging practice in planning within the review reports. In schools with a sharp and narrow improvement agenda, it was clearly derived from the schools’ performance data and was documented across their strategic plan. While the strategic plan covers the full range of school activity within a four-year cycle, the improvement agenda consisted of a small number of high-level priorities with associated strategies, actions and targets. The improvement agenda in schools usually focused on improving student learning outcomes, with a specific target, and within a particular area (for example, reading) and timeframe. Within an explicit improvement agenda there were generally no more than two to three key improvement priorities which were pursued for an extended period of time, usually three to four years (and linked to the strategic planning cycle), with major resource allocation.

The energetic and expert leadership team, with the support of teachers and parents, is pursuing two clear priorities for learning:

- that every student will get at least a C standard in English and mathematics
- that at least half of the students will be in the upper two bands of the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Years 3 and 5.

These priorities have been the focus of the school for the past three years. They drive all decisions, including programs, budgets, resources, attendance and learning engagement, pedagogical frameworks and community partnerships.

The school’s priorities are made clear to students from their very first day. Data are collected so that teachers know where students are at the start of their learning journey. All data are gathered and mapped, and the use of a data wall means that every teacher understands how every student is achieving against benchmarks.

Differentiated learning happens through a targeted intervention program for students needing learning support, while high-achieving students are challenged and extended in their learning. Great Results Guarantee funding means that a support teacher is attached to every year level cohort, and an innovative homework matrix caters for individual learning styles.

Teachers are enthusiastic, optimistic and committed to every student achieving positive outcomes. A master teacher supports teachers through coaching and modelling of teaching practices. The leadership team also offers comprehensive coaching, targeting professional development to where it is most needed.
As an example, at an outdoor environmental education centre (OEEC) reviewed in 2015, the principal was driving a sharp and narrow improvement agenda. In referring to the OEEC’s priorities, all staff expressed a shared belief in the centre’s vision, a common understanding of the improvement agenda and a sense of optimism over the centre’s current strategic direction. There was clear evidence of alignment between the priorities documented in the OEEC’s strategic plan, annual implementation plan, pedagogical framework, curriculum plan, professional learning plan and school budget. While the improvement agenda was embraced by all staff and clearly articulated during the review, clear targets to measure performance were yet to be developed. However, there were still a range of OEEC plans and processes aligned to the improvement agenda which provided staff with clear direction about what to teach and how to teach.

At a combined school in North Coast region, the leadership team had developed a clear agenda for improvement in collaboration with staff. The agenda was outlined succinctly in the school’s explicit improvement strategy that identified three key areas for improvement. A number of support documents intended to guide the implementation of the school improvement agenda were being developed at the time of the review. These included a review of the responsible behaviour plan for students.

### 3.1.3 Purposeful collection and application of data to student learning

**Continuous, regular assessment informs how to best meet the needs of each student and is the key to effective instruction.** (Black & William 1998)

Data play a significant role in school improvement and how schools plan for and measure improvement in student learning outcomes. The increased availability of technology, financial support from policy makers and accountability for student learning outcomes also facilitate the role of data in schools (Marsh & Farrell 2015; Matters 2006). Data have become the conduit for ensuring accountability in schools, as government-mandated reform has focused on student results with demands for evidence (Fullan 2000). Effective school leaders also view data as a means to pinpoint problems and to understand their nature and causes (Wallace Foundation 2013).

Around one-fifth of all 369 school reviews in 2015 included improvement recommendations to refine data collection and analysis, or build teacher data literacy. However, there was widespread evidence of effective or emerging practice around the utilisation of data in schools, and these practices are now described and contrasted with the established literature about the effective use of data in schools. The beneficial practices identified in the 2015 reviews included:

- collecting data for and of learning
- collecting less data and doing more with it
- setting benchmarks and targets
- setting goals for individual students.

### Collecting data

Collecting the appropriate data is an imperative for schools. Highly effective schools placed a high priority on the collection, analysis and discussion of data that could be used to establish, direct and monitor the progress against their improvement agenda. Schools committed to using data for continuous school improvement “[e]mbace whom they have as students and learning how to meet their needs … ensure that all achieve” (author’s emphasis) (Bernhardt 2013, p. 4).

Schools use a range of data relating to academic performance, attendance, behavioural outcomes and student wellbeing to make evidence-based decisions around their education priorities and responsibilities. According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 4), analysis of data should:

> … consider overall school performance as well as the performances of students from identified priority groups; evidence of improvement/regression over time; performances in comparison with similar schools; and, in the case of data from standardised tests, measures of growth across the years of school.

Effective schools collect data for a range of purposes. Ultimately all data collected are designed to inform effective teaching and learning within the classroom. Summative data, as traditionally collected in order to complete report cards, are now regarded as valuable data to inform starting points for learning, and to monitor the progress of student achievement towards predetermined learning goals.

However, student achievement data, classroom observation data or student formative assessment results alone are not sufficient to inform any need for changes to classroom practices. The complementary use of multiple data sources allows for informed and well-grounded decision making for improvement (Thessin 2016). The challenge for schools is to determine which data are important and which tools fit best, considering their intent and the school context.

Across Queensland, state schools are collecting a range of student performance data, utilising many data collection tools. However, there is evidence across the 2015 reviews that schools sometimes find it difficult to identify the most useful data to inform their decision making. A decade ago, Hattie (2005, p. 11) noted ‘schools are awash with data’. More recently, Thessin (2016, p. 69) asserted that schools are even ‘drowning in the data’. Shirley and Hargreaves (2006) suggested teachers can be driven to distraction by accumulating data.

Schools which use data effectively collect only the data they need, using appropriate tools correctly. They are then able to use what they have to adjust their teaching and learning practices, and so improve student outcomes. Within the 2015 school reviews, it was evident that some schools used multiple data collection tools that were essentially providing teachers with the same information. For example, when analysing reading, classroom teachers, especially in the primary setting, may be asked to administer the following assessment to students in their class:

- PM benchmarking
- past NAPLAN papers
- Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R), sometimes up to four times per year
- Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation of Comprehension (PROBE)
- Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies (CARS)
- Strategies to Achieve Reading Success (STARS).
This is an overuse of data collection tools in the same learning area and, in some cases, these tools have not been used in the manner for which they were intended. Inappropriate utilisation of data collection tools may also result in inaccurate or invalid information gathering, all at the expense of valuable teaching and learning time. Effective practice requires the ability to differentiate between sets of data collection tools and to select the tool that will best inform teaching and learning and maximise student outcomes.

**Applying data**

Once data have been collected, they are analysed or interpreted in order to inform improvement practice in schools. Schools which have developed highly effective practices in relation to the analysis and use of data (domain two of the NSIT) have positioned their data collection schedule and tools to ensure that they are informed, but not driven, by data. Effective schools efficiently collect less data and use fewer data collection tools, but they do more with their data.

Most importantly, schools that use data effectively allocate time to teachers to ensure that they are able to analyse datasets and explore the implications for their teaching. School leaders are reported across the school reviews as working alongside teachers in:

- the collection of data
- the implementation of quality assurance processes
- supporting teachers to use data to inform their instruction in the classroom (that is, for whole classes, groups of students and individual students).

It was also noted that teachers were provided with the opportunity to:

- work together to share in the collection of student achievement data
- consider the implications for their own instruction
- explore issues concerning teaching practice more broadly.

These collaborative data activities are acknowledged by Leithwood et al. (2004), who stated that effective practice in data requires school leaders to drive a culture of collaborative, data-informed decision making that includes collective ownership of student success, responsibility and action.

Staff in schools that have embraced collaborative practices regarding data understand that the achievement of each student is owned by all. If a student experienced difficulty in achieving their goals, then the question asked was not what the teacher was going to do, but what the school was going to do. Shirley and Hargreaves (2006) suggested that teachers do not simply look at goals, interpret spreadsheets, deliver quick interventions or examine the data walls showing student progress. Instead, they are committed to thinking deeply about teaching and learning, connecting data to their practice, working out how their students can learn differently, and taking collective responsibility for not only the students in their class, but also all students in the school.

Review schools that were using data well were setting clear benchmarks and targets for groups of students and for individual students. This practice provided for individualised educational experiences that directly addressed the specific student’s learning needs. The benchmarks and targets set for students were understood by teachers, who were able to articulate how the benchmarks were derived, how they were developed and the implications for their own classroom practice. Benchmarks and targets were used to positively reinforce and support student learning.

In many schools reviewed in 2015, the use of individual goal setting was regularly observed in classrooms. In schools that had well-developed practice in utilising data, the use of student goals had a significant purpose and impact.

The use of student goals was a powerful tool to link the collection and analysis of student assessment data with activity and the ownership of their learning by the student (Sharratt & Fullan 2012). Furthermore, schools that utilised student goal setting effectively tended to be associated with a consistency of practice across the school. Each class and every student had developed a set of learning goals which were linked to improving student learning and performance. In these schools, students were able to articulate their learning goal/s. Most importantly, they were also able to speak to the learning behaviours that they needed to develop or enhance in order to achieve the goal.

**Data capability**

Schools collect, analyse and share vast quantities of data to inform accountability and forward planning. The system has a responsibility to assist teachers and leaders to build their capabilities to enable effective, evidence-based practice, specifically informed by data, and especially given the complexity of these data (Chick & Pierce 2013).
As teachers work to incorporate the use of evidence into their practice, new challenges emerge owing to the intricacies of data that they are expected to process. This has implications for the ongoing professional learning of teachers. The 2013 Staff in Australia’s Schools survey reported that approximately one-quarter of primary school teacher respondents identified the need for further professional learning around using data, with early career teachers more likely to report a need for professional learning in the area of data utilisation (McKenzie et al. 2014).

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011) describe what teachers are expected to know and be able to achieve at different stages in their careers. Standard 5.4, *Interpret student data*, details four different levels of proficiency for teachers in the interpretation of student assessment data. They range from an ability to evaluate student learning and modify teaching practice at the lowest level, to working with colleagues to use data from internal and external student assessments for evaluation of learning and teaching, identifying interventions and modifying teaching practice at the highly accomplished level.

Effective or emerging professional learning in relation to data that was evident in the 2015 review schools included teacher release time in order to meet with the principal or other school leaders to discuss data and individual student achievement, and to determine the next steps in student learning. Leaders and teachers were engaging with data using processes such as data walls, data conversations and data cycles. They were also able to articulate the philosophy or theory behind the use of these processes, with a specific focus on the performance of every student being everyone’s responsibility. In review schools working effectively with data, student performance improvement was widely disseminated and clearly articulated by all, from the leadership team, through year-level coordinators and teachers, to those within Department of Education and Training (DET) regional and central offices. Evidence of the dedication of teachers’ time to professional learning and conversations around data were, for many 2015 school reviews, still a work in progress.

At a very small, rural primary school in Darling Downs South West region, there was evidence of the school’s commitment to the effective use of data to inform school and classroom practices. However, school leaders recognised that further professional learning and consolidation were needed to build staff skills in analysing and interpreting data.

When data are utilised purposefully through consistent collection and collaborative systematic analysis, teachers can improve their teaching practice and, in turn, improve student learning outcomes. To achieve this improvement, school leaders must lead the process with teachers. Leadership is a key factor for success in the effective implementation of initiatives relating to data use in schools (Goodnow & Wayman 2009).

To be effective leaders in data use, research indicates that school leaders must develop their own capacity as experts in interpreting data and transforming data into knowledge (Black & William 1998; Earl & Fullan 2003). Leading by example and modelling expected professional practices are important aspects of transformational leadership (Leithwood & Janzi 2006). The 2015 school reviews provided evidence of school leaders developing their own capacity so that they could, in turn, build teacher capacity through shared practice.

For example, at a very large, urban primary school in Metropolitan region, school leaders and teachers had been provided with professional learning to improve their data literacy skills, and a data culture was developing throughout the school. All the teachers had a data folder and attended data meetings with a member of the leadership team twice a term.

### 3.1.4 Use of school funding

Schools receive funding from government, fees and charges, Parents and Citizens’ Association (P&C) contributions and other sources. Total school funding and the level of funding per student vary from one school to another. Local factors that affect funding include location, makeup of the student body and the types of programs offered.

Across Australia, differences in teaching salaries and school grants, staffing ratios and the system overheads attributed to schools all contribute to the differences in funding between schools. Funding figures for each school in Queensland are available on the MySchool website.

Schools, through the allocation of staff and resources, identify and respond to the learning needs of their students. The improvement priorities of the school and how its funding is distributed should be directly related. According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 8), such targeted use of school resources occurs when:

> ... the school applies its resources (staff time, expertise, funds, facilities, materials) in a targeted manner to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of all students. It has school-wide policies, practices and programs in place to assist in identifying and addressing student needs. Flexible structures and processes enable the school to respond appropriately to the needs of individual learners.

In most instances, the 2015 school reviews showed that schools clearly linked their budget allocations with their improvement agenda. Budgets provided for the planned resourcing of staff, and professional learning activities and programs. Schools with effective budgets and funding models also had formal processes in place for the allocation of resources to key improvement areas. Schools had different staff involved in the preparation and monitoring of financial operations. This was sometimes a collaborative responsibility involving some or all staff, or just school leaders and their administration officers.

**Great Results Guarantee**

In the 2015 school reviews, the Great Results Guarantee (GRG) grant was frequently noted as an additional source of funds allocated to schools to support their student learning priorities. The GRG is a four-year (2014–17) initiative to improve learning outcomes for Queensland students. From 2016, it has been renamed Investing for Success. Every Queensland state school that received GRG funding agreed to guarantee that each of their students would either achieve the National Minimum Standard for literacy and numeracy, or have an evidence-based plan in place to address their specific learning needs (DET 2014b). Principals and their school communities set out their approach to using these funds in their GRG agreement.

The 2015 school reviews demonstrated a number of targeted ways in which schools were allocating GRG funding. It was used to support a variety of identified priority areas within schools, most commonly literacy and numeracy. GRG funds were also used to provide programs for gifted students, students with learning difficulties and Indigenous students, and to support students with diverse learning needs.

In addition to these priority areas, GRG resourcing was used to provide oral language and literacy support programs, teacher aide classroom support, teacher professional learning and additional teacher support in early years. In many instances, schools utilised their...
A positive tone and strong commitment to student welfare and learning are reaping benefits for students, parents and staff at Vale View State School.

The school is characterised by respectful and caring relationships that are reflected in the ways in which staff members, students and parents interact. The school has adopted a deliberate and considered approach to catering to the needs of all of its students. Specialised programs that meet individual learning needs are prioritised within the school's budget. There is a high level of commitment from each staff member to doing what it takes to support students and their families. School leaders encourage teachers to tailor their teaching to student requirements. All teachers and teacher aides articulate a common belief that it is their responsibility to identify and address the needs of every student in their classes.

Parents are enthusiastic and specific in their praise for the school, its staff and its provision for their children. Parents see themselves as integral to any decision about interventions to address student learning needs.

Students indicate that they receive the support they need and that they are confident in asking for assistance. Students express a very high level of satisfaction with the school, the staff and their learning opportunities.

3.1.5 School culture

Structure is about what we do. Culture is about how to be. (Hargreaves & Shirley 2012, p. 87)

School leaders play a vital role in establishing and maintaining the values and ethos of their school and in setting directions for development (Masters 2009). To develop and maintain a productive learning culture, school leaders need to be committed to continuous improvement. Such commitment is of paramount importance and needs to be evident in all aspects of school life (Masters 2009). In some of the review schools, the commitment to continuous learning was not yet evident, while many other schools displayed strong learning cultures.

According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 6), a culture that promotes learning is one where:

... the school is driven by a deep belief that every student is capable of successful learning. A high priority is given to building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents. There is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among teachers and school leaders, and parents are treated as partners in the promotion of student learning and wellbeing. The school works to maintain a learning environment that is safe, respectful, tolerant, inclusive and that promotes intellectual rigour.

The overarching culture of the school determined how those within it interacted, communicated and felt within their learning environment. It was the culture of the school that affected student and staff wellbeing, their sense of belonging, and whether or not interactions between the school and its community were constructive.
Student and staff wellbeing

There is a strong and growing body of literature (for example, Hattie 2013; Roorda et al. 2011) that confirms the value of positive teacher–student relationships for improving learning, behaviour and wellbeing. A Wellbeing Australia survey (2011) of factors affecting school wellbeing found that 99 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that a focus on student wellbeing enhanced an effective learning environment. Some 96 per cent also agreed or strongly agreed that a focus on teacher wellbeing promoted student wellbeing.

In an international literature review carried out for the Australian Government (Noble et al. 2008, p. 30), student wellbeing was seen as:

... strongly linked to learning. A student's level of wellbeing at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social-emotional behaviours. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences.

In Queensland state schools, the Learning and Wellbeing Framework uses a whole-school approach to connect the elements of:

- learning environment
- curriculum and pedagogy
- policy and partnerships.

The framework is used to guide schools in their creation of a positive learning culture that enhances students' engagement, achievement, and mental health and wellbeing. It also identifies ways for school communities to further support students, and is an important and practical resource for state schools to improve student outcomes (DET 2015d).

The school reviews generally characterised schools and their staff as being committed to creating a culture of learning for students, and demonstrating strong care and concern for the welfare of their students. Students believed that school staff were caring and showed concern for them. Schools commonly placed a high priority on student wellbeing and had processes in place to provide both academic and social support to students.

Schools often engaged or utilised specialist staff to address student wellbeing. Staff, such as guidance officers, youth health nurses, chaplains, workforce officers, development officers and teachers of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), were all noted as being involved in student welfare and engagement. Some schools had student welfare committees in place to coordinate these support services.

At one rural secondary school in Darling Downs South West region, student wellbeing was a school improvement priority. Student welfare support was provided through the weekly personal development program, the student welfare organisation team and targeted programs. The principal and school leaders gave a high priority to understanding and addressing the learning and wellbeing needs of all their students. The school applied its resources in a targeted manner to meet student wellbeing needs. Students experiencing welfare issues were regularly identified and promptly supported by the school. Year-level coordinators and the head of department of student services provided the first line of support.

At another urban primary school in Metropolitan region, student support and wellbeing was a significant aspect of the school, and a range of staff provided opportunities for students to experience and engage in different activities. A breakfast club, garden club, chess club, choir and boxing, as well as a high and low ropes course, were offered to Years 5 and 6 students. The school ran several wellbeing programs to ensure the provision of a supportive school environment. The school chaplain, groundsperson, classroom teachers and teacher aides were key staff who coordinated the programs, which were highly valued and well attended by students. The school chaplain also supported students by providing cooking and social skills programs, and a social club.

Within the literature, teacher wellbeing is often described in negative terms. Stress can lead to teacher burnout and the challenges of retaining teachers are often highlighted. In Australia, up to one-fifth of teachers leave the profession in their first year and almost half leave in the first five years (Roffey 2012). Teacher wellbeing is critical for whole-school wellbeing as it facilitates a stable environment for students by reducing the volume of teacher withdrawals. In Queensland, teacher wellbeing is measured and reported through the School Opinion Survey (SOS), which is an annual suite of surveys (parent/caregiver, student, staff and principal) to gauge opinions on important issues in Queensland state schools. The staff and principal surveys also provide an opportunity for school staff to express their opinions on how the school fares as a workplace.

At an OEEC, for example, a distinctive and cohesive team ethos was clearly evident. Staff morale was very high. All staff articulated and enacted a strong sense of pride, ownership, accountability and alignment. SOS data indicated that 100 per cent of staff agreed with statements in the staff school survey. High levels of trust were apparent, interactions were focused on student and staff wellbeing, and refined processes were in place to cater for individual and collective needs. Centre staff were individually and collectively valued by the principal as authentic contributors to the overall success of the OEEC. Staff contributions were acknowledged on the centre's 'wall of acknowledgement'.

At a rural primary school in Darling Downs South West region, teachers described a strong collegial culture where there was openness to constructive professional critique, and both formal and informal partnerships existed to support professional learning. School leaders and staff reported that workplace morale fluctuated in response to curricular and other organisational changes that impacted on work–life balance. School leaders understood that care was needed to balance high expectations for staff with the provision of appropriate professional and personal support.

In addition to the school leadership churn, high turnover of teaching staff was noted in some review schools, with one urban primary school in South East region experiencing more than 60 changes of teaching staff over the previous three years. However, there was a core group of dedicated teaching staff who remained and assisted the leadership team to induct new teachers.

In recent years, schools, particularly primary schools, have seen an increase in the number of middle management leadership positions. This trend may be explained by the additional funding available through initiatives such as Great Teachers = Great Results and GRG. Schools currently have access to a greater level of school improvement funding than previously, as well as discretion as to how this funding may be used. The school reviews revealed that many schools had invested in additional staffing, including positions such as head of behaviour and learning support, head of curriculum (HOC), head of teaching and learning, head of special education services (HOSES) and master teachers. A downside to these often temporary roles was that the movement of staff into and between these roles sometimes contributed to confusion in personnel arrangements.
Sense of belonging

Students who feel they belong in their schools are more likely to succeed academically as they feel confident and successful in their learning (Anderman 2002). For students to feel part of their school communities, it is important to optimise the learning context of schools and to create a positive emotional environment (Sari 2012).

The NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 6) states that an effective school culture should consider that ‘all students and staff have an obvious sense of belonging, all parents are welcomed and all staff, students and parents speak highly of the school’. Within the school reviews there were many examples of schools creating a sense of belonging which was sensed and appreciated by the broader school community.

At a special school in South East region, for example, the principal and executive team were clearly committed to excellence in professional practice and continual improvement across the school. As a result, staff, parents and community members spoke passionately about the professionalism, dedication and positive relationships within the school. In meetings with teachers and teacher aides, the review team noted a strong sense of pride and belonging in the school among all staff and students.

At a remote school in Central Queensland region, the leadership team had established a strong school culture. High expectations and well-established routines were in place that enhanced the positive tone of the school. Students were fully engaged in their learning. There was mutual respect among the staff, students and school community, and a strong sense of belonging. A pastoral care program was embedded across the secondary department with a strong emphasis on school-wide wellbeing. Clearly articulated processes were in place to proactively support student learning, engagement and behaviour management. Students, parents and the wider community were very complimentary about the school. Parents and community members were supportive of the school improvement agenda and of the reform work achieved in recent years by the school. The stability of school leaders had greatly enhanced the growth and development of school–community partnerships over time.

Constructive interactions

Constructive interactions, where schools communicate in positive ways with and about students, staff, parents and the wider school community, were noted in school reviews. Schools interacted in numerous ways with:

- staff, by way of collegial relationships and staff meetings
- students and families, through student reports and social media
- the broader community, through the local media.

These interactions led to the formation of mutually respectful relationships across the school community. The school reviews demonstrated many examples of positive interactions within schools and across school communities.

At a rural secondary school in Central Queensland region, for example, teachers spoke highly of students in the school. Interactions between staff, students, parents and families were noted by the review team as caring, polite and inclusive. The vast majority of students were supportive of each other. Many staff also spoke of the collegial relationships among the staff, particularly in staffroom settings.
Cavendish Road State High School enjoys a strong reputation in the community as a high-achieving school in academic, cultural and sporting areas, and students are reporting very high levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching.

The school is committed to continuous improvement and innovation, while also maintaining tradition. Characterised by strong staff–student relationships, there is a clear focus on learning. The school also displays a firm commitment to the implementation of a school-wide pedagogical framework based on the Art and Science of Teaching (ASoT).

The school has a plan to consistently implement the ASoT framework through the use of extensive professional learning, feedback and monitoring processes. Professional learning is led by strategic leadership staff who routinely model the ASoT principles.

The ASoT framework is viewed by teachers as a priority, providing instruction for a variety of student learning styles. As a result, students report very high levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching.

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High-quality student outcomes are evident in all aspects of the school’s performance. These include academic achievement in Year 7 and Year 9 NAPLAN tests, Year 12 outcomes, specialist subject academies and sporting academies.

Year 7 and Year 8 students also report high levels of satisfaction and excitement with the junior secondary curriculum, pedagogy and facilities.
3.2 Learning

Learning involves ideas building on one another. Concepts or skills that are missed early on can impede the take-up of new skills down the track. In addition to cognitive barriers, there are also motivational effects. (Goss et al. 2016, p. 22)

Learning, as presented in this section, describes the student-centred knowledge activities found within the 2015 school reviews. These included having high expectations of learners, providing for individualised and differentiated learning experiences, and empowering students in their learning. These knowledge activities encompass two of the nine domains within the NSIT:

- A culture that promotes learning
- Differentiated teaching and learning (ACER 2012).

3.2.1 High expectations

In the 2015 reviews, school leaders and teachers were seen as promoting the culture of high expectations that all students will learn successfully. Schools communicated their targets for continuous improvement and monitored their achievements against an agreed set of indicators (Masters 2009). For example, in one urban primary school in North Queensland region, parents and community members commended the high expectations of the leadership team that all students could learn successfully. This school-wide ethos provided the platform for launching and maintaining the school’s favourable reputation in the wider community.

Effective teachers make explicit what students are expected to learn and are clear about the expected standard. Individual learning goals are set for each student, focused on the student’s proficiency in particular learning areas (Masters 2009). A combined school in North Coast region demonstrated a classroom culture of high expectations by clearly identifying what students were expected to learn and be able to do. Skills and content were explicitly taught, with individualised attention and timely feedback to guide student action provided as needed.

However, not all schools demonstrated high expectations of all students during their reviews. In a small number of review schools, there was limited evidence of a coordinated effort to set both high expectations for every student’s progress and ambitious targets or stretch goals for improving classroom performances.

3.2.2 Individual student learning

Schools individualised learning for their students by providing a range of challenging learning experiences, tailoring learning to individual needs, and by implementing strategies and support systems to ensure that all students were included in the learning process. Students are challenged in their learning by being cognitively extended. This learning growth approach was not only espoused, but also often observed during the reviews. Staff encouraged students to do their best as they actively engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

To provide such challenging learning experiences, an urban primary school in North Coast region offered enrichment activities to all students. However, it was noted by the review team that some students still required significant adjustments to their learning programs (for example, with accelerated programs) in order to be fully engaged and stretched.

Across the review schools, while many students expressed their high expectations as to their own performance, their assessment was that current teaching practices were not always sufficiently challenging to maximise their learning outcomes. For example, in a rural primary school in North Queensland region, a range of initiatives and classroom strategies had been implemented and resourced to lift the achievement levels of more-able students. Despite these acknowledged attempts at tailor-made instruction, student leaders, when interviewed, claimed that they still required more challenging experiences in some learning areas.

As with all differentiated and individualised learning experiences, student data were essential to identify those students who would benefit from further extension in their learning. Many schools had programs in place to teach higher-order thinking skills, and to support and enhance the performance of those students in the upper two bands of NAPLAN achievement.

Most review schools were able to demonstrate an established system of formalised differentiation of student learning. However, in other schools, student learning differentiation was still an emerging practice. Some teachers continue to pitch learning at the level of their middle students.

Schools were mainly able to demonstrate adherence to the goal of providing differentiated learning through their curriculum offerings, assessment practices and pedagogical plans. The collection of valid, reliable and well-timed student data is essential for determining what each student is ready to learn next, and also for measuring and monitoring his or her progress over time (Goss & Hunter 2015). Student data were also used by teachers and school leaders as a measure of the effectiveness of teaching and learning outcomes.

Figure 3.1 illustrates how data collected provide the school leaders and teachers with the information they require to prepare individualised student learning experiences, such as personalised curriculum content and instructional methods. Student learning outcomes are then measured in the next phase of data collection. These data also provide evidence as to the effectiveness of teaching. In such a recursive process, decisions about future learning are made iteratively, as the student progresses or falter. Data are essential for measuring the effectiveness of the differentiation of teaching and student learning.
A well-established culture of reliable and timely student data is helping teachers at Wondall Heights State School to deliver differentiated learning to students.

Using school-wide templates, teachers are encouraged to design curriculum and teaching strategies to cater for diverse student needs as part of an explicit school improvement agenda.

The school has carefully aligned its resources to maximise the effectiveness of differentiated learning strategies. This includes investment in human and physical resources to develop teaching capability.

The school uses data systematically to track the progress of individual students, classes, year levels and the whole school. A clearly documented assessment, data and reporting framework for teachers includes a timetable for collecting and using data on student achievement and wellbeing.

Work on differentiation is ongoing throughout the school, including strategies to extend high-achieving students.

Teachers use a class dashboard, are allocated time to discuss data, and have received training to improve their literacy in data analysis and interpretation. Centralised data collection allows teachers to group students according to needs and to develop differentiation plans for the following year.

Data also drive the actions of the special needs committee, which collects and uses data to identify students’ learning needs and monitor their progress. The school actively practises flexible scheduling and allocates trained personnel to support students with special needs.

Schools also used student data to inform interventions and support for a range of priority groups, including students with disability, Indigenous students, EAL/D students and students at risk. Data also informed the allocation of the resources necessary for learning, for example, teacher aide support, the provision of speech therapy, and technological support. Student data also enabled the effectiveness of teaching delivery to be gauged.

At a remote school in North Queensland region, where the use of differentiated teaching was clearly evident, all staff in classrooms had a detailed understanding of each student’s learning and achievement levels. They demonstrated a commitment to further progressing the learning of every student and recognised that students were each at different stages in their learning. Regular assessment was undertaken and this information influenced their subsequent teaching practice. Data helped to focus explicit teaching and to inform any adjustments to curriculum delivery. School leaders articulated the expectation that staff would tailor their teaching to meet student need and readiness.

Inclusive strategies ensure that all students, including those with special needs, experience successful learning so that they can pursue their future educational and social plans (York et al. 1992). There were many examples within the 2015 review of schools being inclusive of all students in their learning.

In a very large, urban secondary school in Metropolitan region, many aspects of inclusivity practices were noted by the review team. Cultural diversity was valued and celebrated in a range of curricular and extracurricular activities. The special education program developed individual curriculum plans (ICPs) for students with verified special needs, in consultation with their parents. While there was only limited inclusion of these students into regular mainstream classes, those with disabilities did participate in mainstream practical or elective classes. Those on an ICP were grouped together for their core classes, and senior students were, in the main, undertaking courses that would lead to a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement. There was a strong focus on life skills and work experience.

However, there were isolated instances within the 2015 review schools where the learning needs of all students were not clearly met and fully catered for. For those schools, a consistent and documented plan for, and practice of, inclusive education remains an area for development.
3.2.3 Student empowerment

By providing regular feedback and encouraging students to set and collaborate in reaching their own learning goals, teachers can empower students by actively engaging them in their own learning. Learning goals and the use of feedback are regular features of research-based school pedagogical frameworks, for example, in ASoT (Marzano 2012). Within the 2015 review schools, there were many examples of students taking responsibility for their own learning and being engaged as active learners through the use of feedback and setting student learning goals.

A body of research (for example, Hattie 2013) acknowledges feedback as one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. In the 2015 school reviews, students commented on how much they valued the quality feedback they received from their teachers and how it contributed to their learning.

There was clear evidence of the commitment of teachers to provide regular and timely feedback to students, including what students should do to improve their learning. Some teachers provided students with either oral or written feedback, while others provided feedback in both formats. Written feedback tended to be associated with report and essay drafts. Students were given oral feedback as a consistent element of classroom practice, and parents were pleased with the oral and written information they received on student progress.

In a very large, urban secondary school in North Coast region, student feedback was facilitated in a number of ways. Student success was regularly celebrated through positive behaviour cards, letters, acknowledgement in the school magazine, and poster displays mounted around the school. Students in the senior school found that they were given regular feedback. In the junior school, feedback was less consistent, with students reporting that the quality and frequency of feedback sometimes depended on the teacher. Senior students were regularly informed about their progress towards their Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). This assisted them to set goals for, and take ownership of, their learning outcomes. Most students were able to articulate where they were positioned (in terms of level of achievement) and whether or not they were on track in their respective subject areas for their QCE or Overall Position.

The provision and quality of student feedback for learning did vary across the 2015 review schools. In some instances, there were no clear, school-wide expectations regarding feedback.

As with feedback, there were many examples of schools and teachers embracing the use of student goal setting to encourage students to plan and monitor their own learning. Individual student learning goals were regularly reviewed (at the start and end of each unit or term), using a consistent format such as the SMART (Specific Measurable Achievable Realistic Timely) format. By using learning goals, students were able to reflect on their achievements and set targets for future learning. There was evidence in the school reviews that teachers encouraged and assisted students to monitor their own learning, and to set goals.

In an urban primary school in Metropolitan region, students in all classrooms and year levels had SMART learning goals for reading. Students were able to articulate their targets, which were displayed, tracked and reviewed. However, the review team did note that, while goal setting was embedded across the school, it was used more effectively in some classrooms than in others.

This inconsistent use of learning goals across schools was noted in school reviews. A formalised and consistent approach to using student feedback and learning goals remains an area for continued focus and improvement for schools.

At Frenchville State School, the school leaders have established and maintain an explicit agenda for consistent improvement in literacy and numeracy.

Archer and Hughes’ Explicit Instruction: Effective and Efficient Teaching is the pedagogical approach used across the school, with graphic organisers visible and used in every classroom.

School leaders and staff members have collaboratively documented the agreed, whole-school approach for the teaching of reading, persuasive writing, spelling and mathematics. They also undertake ongoing observation and feedback to monitor the consistent delivery of these high-yield pedagogies in every classroom.

Reading has been the first area to be addressed for improvement. Staff jointly analyse reading data, and undertake research to identify an Australian expert in the field and engage them to provide whole-staff professional development. This process is replicated as the model for each new area of school focus.

School leaders and peers routinely undertake collegial visits to provide written and verbal feedback on individual teacher application of, and engagement with, the consistent agreed pedagogy. Induction of new and returning staff members includes the required professional development, modelling and collegial visits.

There is evidence of consistent improvement in literacy and numeracy. The NAPLAN 2015 results identify that the effect size, relative to the nation, is strong and positive.

The Mean Scale Score performance for Year 3 identifies five strands above Similar Queensland State Schools (SQSS) and all strands, except spelling, for SQSS for Year 5. Results for the upper two bands and National Minimum Standards across Years 3 and 5 are above Queensland and the nation.
The greatest resource in Australian schools is our teachers. They account for the vast majority of expenditure in school education and have the greatest impact on student learning, far outweighing the impact of any other education program or policy. (Jensen 2010, p. 5)

Teachers ‘share a significant responsibility in preparing young people to lead successful and productive lives’ (AITSL 2011, p. 1). According to Masters (2012, p. 27), effective teaching practice is multifaceted and includes:

... making decisions about what should be taught and ensuring curriculum sequencing and coherence; assessing and monitoring student learning and providing feedback to students and parents; and professional learning focused on continual improvements in teaching effectiveness.

In 2015, when these reviews were undertaken, Queensland schools were continuing to plan, teach, assess and report on the P–10 Australian Curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History, and Geography. Teachers continued to use the Queensland Essential Learnings and Standards to plan, teach, assess and report on learning areas where the Australian Curriculum was not yet available. Until the Australian Curriculum is available for senior years, Queensland schools will continue to use the current Queensland syllabuses. Teachers also enacted their teaching through the use of a pedagogical framework that reflected these expectations and principals’ leadership.

Elements from the school reviews concerning pedagogy and curriculum, and how teaching is supported, are explored below. They encompass four of the nine domains within the NSIT:

- An expert teaching team
- Systematic curriculum delivery
- Differentiated teaching and learning
- Effective pedagogical practices.
### 3.3.1 Pedagogy

A school pedagogical framework promotes consistency of practice, embeds collaborative inquiry processes and supports critical evaluation of the impact of research-validated pedagogies within the context of the school. (DET Pedagogical Framework 2015)

Effective pedagogy is aligned with the curriculum, taking into account the demands of the learning area/subject. The State Schools Strategy (DET 2015c) requires every school to implement a pedagogical framework that is collaboratively developed with the school community to ensure ‘high-quality, evidence-based teaching practices focused on success for every student’. This expectation acknowledges the impact of quality teaching and the evidence that research-validated pedagogy, when implemented with consistency across a school setting and supported by instructional leadership, can improve student performance and develop successful learners (DET 2014a).

According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 16), to ensure the effectiveness of pedagogical practices:

> The school principal and other school leaders recognise that highly-effective teaching is the key to improving student learning throughout the school. They take a strong leadership role, encouraging the use of research-based teaching practices in all classrooms to ensure that every student is engaged, challenged and learning successfully. All teachers understand and use effective teaching methods — including explicit instruction — to maximise student learning.

Most of the schools reviewed in 2015 had formulated a pedagogical framework. The most common pedagogical frameworks implemented by reviewed schools included:

- ASoT
- Dimensions of Teaching and Learning
- Explicit Instruction
- Gradual Release of Responsibility

Schools were at varying points along the continuum of pedagogical implementation and alignment. Some schools were still in the early formative stages, with significant work still required to build ownership, understanding and commitment to embedding the pedagogical framework across the school to provide a key driver of teaching.

The successful implementation of pedagogical frameworks was often inspired by leadership teams who shared a vision and culture of high expectations of student learning. Schools further supported their pedagogy through the allocation of resources and the provision of continuous professional learning activities for staff. To be successful, implementation required school-wide commitment to the adopted pedagogical vision.

The review teams were readily able to see evidence of pedagogy in action in classrooms through the artefacts and resources that supported the use of a particular framework. The successful use of pedagogical frameworks was also confirmed through review discussions with students and teachers. Documented plans were observed and, at their best, these both directed and were aligned with classroom practice. Plans were sometimes collaboratively developed by school leaders and staff. Pedagogical professional learning activities were included within whole-school professional learning plans and supported by school budgets.

At the school level, fully embedded and aligned pedagogy was most often evident when there was a clear line of sight all the way from the improvement agenda, to resourcing, to the building of teacher capacity, and to student learning in classrooms. For teachers, good practice meant consistency between the guiding pedagogical framework in place, planning (in both curriculum and pedagogy), classroom delivery and student learning.

At a rural primary school in Central Queensland region, for example, explicit instruction was being consistently implemented across the school. The school leadership team had drawn on student data, current research, staff expertise and best practice to establish clear expectations concerning the use of evidence-based explicit teaching strategies throughout the school. These expectations were outlined in the school’s policies and procedures and were actively promoted through ongoing professional learning and staff meetings. All teachers were proficient in explicit instruction and applied this method consistently as a sound approach to classroom practice.

Although most review schools had pedagogical frameworks in place, some were not able to demonstrate consistency across the school. Other schools were only in the early stages of implementing their frameworks.

For example, at a very small, rural primary school in Darling Downs South West region there was a whole-school pedagogical framework (enshrining the regional priority of explicit instruction) that was documented to inform school-wide teaching and learning strategies, and artefacts were displayed in classrooms. The principal recognised that a cohesive pedagogical framework was needed to underpin effective teaching. However, only some teachers had adopted the framework. Teachers could describe the framework, but showed varying degrees of understanding. Students in some classes could clearly articulate the elements of the explicit teaching framework, while others could not.

Although some schools had inconsistent pedagogical practices, they were still able to demonstrate quality teaching and learning within their classrooms. Other schools were making progress in embedding and aligning their pedagogies, despite their efforts being hampered by significant and regular staff turnover. Even facing such challenges, teachers across almost all review schools were optimistic and committed to the implementation of the pedagogical frameworks and welcomed the associated professional learning that would improve their classroom teaching.
Yarraman State School teachers are improving teaching and learning at the school through the effective use of data and teacher collaboration.

The school uses a range of data sources to analyse students’ academic progress, and assigns support where it is needed. Pre- and post-testing in mathematics already occurs, and similar testing in English is soon to follow.

Meanwhile, data and pedagogical coaches — accessed by teachers through regular teacher release time — are developing teachers’ capacity to analyse data and improve teaching practice.

Class and individual student dashboards guide teachers’ practice. Specific resources and an inclusion teacher are helping the school to differentiate learning experiences to meet individual students’ learning needs.

Meetings at the school’s Curriculum Café every three weeks are a chance for teachers to share their progress and showcase their achievements towards the school’s priority of improving learning. The meetings are part of a developing culture of collaboration across the school, which includes leaders working in classrooms.

Mentors support beginning teachers, and all teachers maintain and reflect on their performance development plans throughout the year.

Encouraging learning is not only the domain of teachers. The commitment to learning for all extends to parents, students and their families, and the school community, who all work together to foster student learning.

**School initiatives**

- Data drives the school’s programs and teaching practices.
- Specialist resources include mentors, data coaches, pedagogical coaches and support teachers.
- A collaborative culture is emerging, including the Curriculum Café to showcase teachers’ work.
- The school community is committed to improving student learning.

### 3.3.2 Curriculum

The P–12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework specifies the requirements for each Queensland state school in delivering the curriculum from Prep to Year 12. Teachers are required to implement the Australian Curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum (F) (Prep) to Year 10 specifies what students will learn and teachers will teach. In each learning area/subject, the content descriptions specify what all young people should be taught, and the achievement standards set out the depth of understanding and sophistication of skill expected at the end of each year level or band of years.

Schools are to use the whole-school curriculum, assessment and reporting plan to provide an overview across all years and learning areas, including:

- the assessment (standardised, diagnostic, formative and summative)
- the amount and timing of assessment
- processes for achieving consistency of teacher judgment.

Schools use year-level curriculum and assessment plans to ensure:

- there is an alignment between what is taught and what is assessed
- all aspects of the achievement standards are assessed over the year (although not all content descriptions are assessed)
- a range and balance of assessment types (multiple choice questions, investigation, practical report, short answer questions, exam/test, assignment/project, essay, multimedia presentation, case studies, learning contract, reflective journal) and a variety of modes (writing, reading, speaking, listening) are used
- the amount and timing of the assessment is manageable for teachers and students.

While the Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all Australian students should be taught (in terms of content and achievement standard, regardless of where they go to school or their background), it does not specify how the content should be taught (that is, what pedagogical approach should be adopted and practised). Schools develop and implement rigorous, relevant and engaging learning experiences, aligned with the curriculum and relevant to the school context, to address the individual learning needs of their students.

Most 2015 review schools were implementing the Australian Curriculum. A number of schools were moving away from only using the Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) suite of materials, which DET provided to support the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. C2C materials provide an example of how schools can plan for teaching, learning and assessment using the Australian Curriculum. They can be adopted or adapted to suit local contexts and student learning needs.
Curriculum planning, implementation and monitoring

Schools are required to develop an explicit, coherent, sequenced plan for curriculum and assessment delivery that is consistent across all years of instruction. The reviews revealed a number of processes that schools used in planning and implementing their curriculum. They highlighted how schools used varied approaches to define and make clear what (and when) teachers should teach and students should learn.

In 2015, review schools were at different stages of moving from the Australian Curriculum, as interpreted by C2C, to directly adopting the Australian Curriculum. As well as being at different stages in this transition, schools were providing teachers with varying amounts of support. Through activities such as collaborative planning, teacher planning days and the development of school planning documents, teachers were being supported to use the Australian Curriculum as the primary focus for curriculum delivery in schools. However, this process was still only in its preliminary stages in some review schools.

Review schools had developed (or were currently reviewing) whole-school curriculum and assessment plans. These were intended to form the basis of discussion and collaboration among staff. Plans were to align with the curriculum, and provide direction and sequence for structured learning. Schools were able to show evidence of alignment between curriculum, assessment and reporting, while also meeting curriculum requirements and expectations. Classroom teachers and specialist teaching staff were often noted as working together to ensure all curriculum requirements were met.

During school reviews, teachers shared their own planning documents for classroom delivery with review teams. These were working documents, which also included any differentiation planning. Learning experiences were devised to ensure that they were accessible to and engaging for students. Some schools had school-wide templates for planning, while others did not. Monitoring of planning was noted in some schools, where all or some school faculties checked the impact of their unit and lesson plans on a regular basis, making appropriate changes to improve the next round. However, this was not standard practice across all the review schools.

Secondary schools demonstrated curriculum, assessment and reporting plans that provided subject choice schemas for Years 7 to 12, as well as unit overviews, assessment tasks and timing for Years 7 to 10. Course information for senior years was published in subject information booklets, and featured in whole-school curriculum plans.

Unfortunately, not all review schools were able to demonstrate effective practice in curriculum planning and implementation. A lack of clarity in regard to the ‘what’ and ‘when’ teachers should teach and students should learn was sometimes found. On occasion, there were no whole-school curriculum plans to guide curriculum delivery and classroom teaching and learning. Even if these were evident, the vertical and horizontal alignment of units was not always clear to teachers. Sometimes, there was no obvious whole-school practice that ensured the alignment of the overall delivery plan, term and unit plans, classroom teaching and the regular assessment of student progress. Systematic approaches to monitoring how effectively the curriculum was being implemented across schools were not always evident. The ways in which school leaders and teachers regularly evaluated curriculum implementation were, at times, unclear. Though these deficiencies were only isolated instances, systematic curriculum delivery remains an area for further development in these schools.

Curriculum addresses priority areas and is locally relevant

Schools demonstrated many instances of individualising their curriculum to focus their attention and energy on priority areas, while also making the curriculum locally relevant for their students. Both these aspects are embedded within domain six of the NSIT, systematic curriculum delivery.

School leaders in review schools were noted as focusing staff and community attention on the priority curriculum areas identified within their improvement agendas. In many schools the focus was on literacy and numeracy, to ensure that students were proficient in these basics. Similarly, schools prioritised spelling and reading through dedicated programs across all classes. Such focuses included the provision of block time, teacher aide support for small groups, and professional learning and resources dedicated to supporting these areas. Staff indicated general support for the curriculum focus in the improvement agendas. Review and evaluation of these focuses, as well as student achievement data collected over time to assess the impact of these strategies and to inform ongoing curriculum practice in these areas, were undertaken somewhat inconsistently in review schools.

In addition to focusing on priority learning areas, schools tailored their curriculum to the specific needs of their student cohort by developing a context-specific approach to curriculum. Ensuring that their curriculum was locally relevant was a priority, and was enacted through the use of unique local learning environments, and through community partnerships, including charity organisations, national parks, cultural centres and cultural groups. Schools actively sought to identify and provide opportunities for a more locally responsive curriculum wherever possible.

Many examples of locally relevant curriculums were found within the review schools. For example, one rural secondary school had a dairy farm with a milking herd which was a significant and “signature” feature of the secondary curriculum. Another school incorporated Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, including a project led by a local Elder and the manual arts department, which resulted in the production of Indigenous artefacts. The outcomes of this program proved very positive, with students mentioning an increased awareness of Indigenous cultures throughout the whole school. These sensitivities were also promoted by additional activities such as cultural days.
Assessment

Assessment involves the collection of information and evidence of students’ achievements in a purposeful and often systematic manner. (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith 2014, p. 30)

Assessment seeks to determine student achievement, that is, the extent to which the student has demonstrated the knowledge, skills and attitudes required as a result of teaching and learning (Tyler 2013).

The 2015 review schools used assessment for a variety of purposes. Schools were able to articulate the reasons for assessment and could demonstrate how the assessment data served to inform student learning. Schools used assessment prior to school entry, assessing young children in terms of their readiness for learning. These data were then used to inform teaching and learning programs for the early years. Regular assessment of student learning was undertaken to monitor and inform learning. However, at times, there was only limited evidence that this information influenced teaching practice.

Review schools readily shared their whole-school assessment framework documents and showed how they used a range of assessment tools and year-level benchmarks to monitor student progress and measure student achievement, particularly in relation to the priority areas of literacy and numeracy. School assessment plans outlined the ‘what and when’ of assessment. Assessment was also differentiated and scaffolded for targeted students. C2C assessment was noted as being commonly utilised by schools and teachers to determine student achievement.

In best practice, assessment processes are aligned with the curriculum and are consistently applied. There was also evidence in some schools that teachers were using a range of formative, summative and diagnostic assessment in their teaching, and that this was applied across the school.

There was considerable evidence of front-ended assessment, with useful feedback being provided to students. ‘A’ level exemplars and task criteria sheets were routinely used. Where this occurred, students were able to express to review teams their understanding of an ‘A’ standard of achievement, the purpose of exemplars and criteria sheets, and their knowledge of their school’s assessment practices, including, for example, standards criteria and guides to making judgments.

Teachers were found to use diagnostic and summative assessment systematically. The use of formative assessment to provide evidence for short-term data analysis and the timely modification of teaching programs was also noted, but infrequently.

Schools had systematic and formalised processes in place for the effective moderation of student assessment. Teachers carried out collaborative assessment moderation within year-level teams or within their school clusters. These moderation processes resulted in a consistent delivery of curriculum and assessment across individual year levels and schools. The importance of these cluster arrangements is recognised and further explored at 3.5 below.

3.3.3. Support for teaching

Teacher professional learning must be grounded in evidence-based research and practice, and be designed to build teacher expertise in both content knowledge and their knowledge of effective ways to teach. Quality professional learning is tailored to the specific context of the school and the teacher. (Masters 2009, p. viii)

Teaching staff were supported in review schools through a variety of approaches to professional development, including continual, collaborative professional development that included the provision of feedback and collaborative processes. Some review schools were capitalising on the potential of teacher induction to quickly engage and embed new and beginning teachers into their way of operating, thus ensuring their smooth transition. Teacher aides were also an important support to teaching, particularly when they were provided with professional development opportunities in curriculum and pedagogy, and involvement in professional planning.

Professional development/learning in teaching

When schools are strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within academic departments or grade levels, across them, or among teachers schoolwide, the benefits can include better instruction and more success in solving problems of practice. (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009, p. 11)

Teacher professional learning was regularly noted within the school reviews. These practices were implemented for the purpose of building teaching capacity across both curriculum (content) and pedagogy (process). Rather than attending an occasional workshop away from school, professional development of teaching capacity is best realised as an ongoing process which includes:

- curriculum content and planning
- feedback on teacher performance via student achievement and teacher observation data
- professional learning collaboration.

Hunzicker (2010; 2011) characterised the most effective professional learning processes for teachers as supportive, job-embedded, instructionally focused, collaborative and ongoing. Teacher professional development evident within the review schools was regularly characterised, in whole or in part, in such terms. Review schools expected all teachers to be highly committed to the continuous improvement of their own teaching, and, thus, to be focused on the development of the knowledge and skills required to improve student learning. Regular professional learning was provided for teachers through a range of activities, such as weekly collaborative team meetings.
A focus on people and not programs is creating an optimistic and collaborative professional learning culture among teachers at Samford State School.

A strong and close-knit community is the hallmark of the school. There is a strong commitment by teachers to go the extra mile for students.

Collegial relationships are empowered and encouraged through strong and collaborative teams. While a school-wide culture of trust has been established over time, the school follows an explicit improvement agenda to drive and strengthen its expert teaching team and to embrace and share effective pedagogical practices.

Teachers are encouraged to own their professional learning. The school recognises professional learning is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, and provides opportunities for teachers to choose areas of interest that are relevant and purposeful to their classroom and students.

Shared professional learning and engagement are timetabled at the school. For example, a practice of holding year-level team meetings immediately after whole-school pedagogical framework meetings is helping teachers to discuss and implement change.

Feedback and reflection are also part of regular teaching practice at Samford. Encouraged by the collaborative and open learning culture, teachers are keen to try new practices and then reflect on and monitor how these changes make a difference to their students’ learning.

School initiatives

- A strong collaborative culture has evolved over time.
- Teachers actively engage in their professional learning and select relevant learning areas.
- Time is dedicated to year-level professional group meetings to embed change.

Helleve (2010) specified that professional learning must extend beyond that provided by schools and include teachers’ own proactive engagement in professional learning activities. While professional learning opportunities were largely provided to teachers on site, some review schools also encouraged teachers to seek external professional development. Teachers in some schools were seen to be pursuing their own learning opportunities through mentoring. Mentoring was especially popular with beginning teachers.

Teacher professional learning was often documented within a school’s professional learning plan. Individual teaching staff had performance plans in place that detailed how their teaching will be improved. These documents need to be informed by the school’s improvement agenda. For example, one combined school in Far North Queensland region was providing targeted professional learning to build on its improvement agenda of numeracy capability, and to develop greater rigour in teaching and assessment.

Professional learning that was specifically targeted at building staff skills in curriculum content and planning was variously enacted in review schools. In proactive schools, school leaders were seen as providing professional learning opportunities to build staff skills in curriculum. These professional learning activities ensured that staff were familiar with, and worked within, the schools’ shared curriculum expectations.

At an urban primary school in Metropolitan region, regular year-level meetings were referred to by some school staff as providing opportunities to better understand curriculum and assessment. A rural secondary school in North Queensland region took a whole-school professional learning approach, using an expert consultant to build teacher capacity in curriculum design and literacy (a school priority). Across other review schools, school leaders were seen as providing the necessary professional learning opportunities in building skills in curriculum planning through staff workshops covering, for example, data literacy, goal setting, coaching and assessment.

Leadership teams in review schools were developing strategies to build consistency in teachers’ curriculum knowledge. For example, an urban primary school in South East region trialled a new process which released teachers in year-level teams to plan with the HOCs. The teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with this strategy. Other specialist staff, such as SWD and EAL/D teachers and support teachers, were also involved in these professional learning sessions.

Although professional learning was provided to build staff skills in curriculum planning and development across most review schools, some staff reported a desire for greater time with their HOC to further support their planning and implementation of the curriculum. Other teachers expressed a need for more professional learning in relation to their specific curriculum area. Teachers also wanted more opportunities to build their knowledge of the Australian Curriculum, and to learn how to best apply it to the teaching and learning context of their school.

To support their development as effective educators, formative feedback was provided to teachers (Marzano 2012). This requires a climate of learning and continual improvement. Feedback supports teachers by identifying the next steps in a teacher’s learning journey (Brookhart & Moss 2015). In an effort to support their continuous improvement of practice, teachers in review schools were regularly open to, and actively seeking and implementing, feedback on their teaching. In some schools, collaborative teaching, observation, debriefing and feedback were strongly evident as daily practice.
School leaders in review schools consistently stated that they had high expectations of their teachers, and that they expected them to be committed to the improvement of their own teaching. School leaders and specialist teaching staff engaged in cycles of focused observation (using walk-throughs) and the provision of feedback and coaching to aid teaching improvement. These processes were moderated across teams and were accompanied by collaboratively developed and published standards of practice.

Specialist staff involved in the provision and support of teacher development in schools included master teachers, HOCs and dedicated literacy teachers who supported the implementation of school-wide pedagogies through planning, modelling, observing and providing feedback to teachers. School leaders were also providing teachers with ongoing and detailed feedback on their classroom practices.

The focus of classroom observations was often established in advance and, in most cases, related to school priorities. Feedback was either provided through informal discussion or in writing. Data from observations were used to inform whole-school professional learning programs. Clear, documented feedback protocols and conventions were established in many schools. However, in some schools these processes were still being formalised at the time of their review.

For the most part, teachers in review schools indicated that they valued the opportunity to gain feedback and to reflect on their practice. They spoke positively of the feedback they received about their teaching practice. Beginning teachers especially valued the high level of professional support they received through school-based coaching and feedback, which provided daily contact with other teachers and included modelling, co-teaching and professional dialogue.

While the reviews demonstrated that teachers were open to constructive feedback, in some schools there were little or no formalised or systematic coaching and feedback processes evident. As a result, classroom observation and feedback remains an emerging practice in some Queensland state schools.

Learning collaboration actively engages teachers and other staff to increase their knowledge in pedagogy and curriculum content through critical reflection with others who share the same experience in trying to enhance student learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). Collaborative approaches to professional learning can promote school change that extends beyond individual classrooms. When all teachers in a school learn together, all students in the school benefit (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009, p. 5). Professional collaborative activities include conversations about pedagogy among teachers, which can occur in an open atmosphere where teachers regularly visit each other’s classrooms to observe and critique instruction (Leithwood et al. 2004).

Professional collaboration around curriculum

Many schools were identified as regularly using collaborative curriculum practices. Collaboration and discussions around what was being delivered within classrooms promoted clarity and consistency in learning experiences and expectations across schools. School leaders established opportunities for teaching teams to regularly discuss curriculum planning and individual student learning needs. In addition to curriculum planning, teaching teams moderated for alignment and consistency of teacher judgment within and across year levels. These activities ensured that the curriculum was responsive to the changing needs of students.

Collaborative curriculum activities also ensured that school-wide expectations for curriculum development and delivery were clearly communicated among all teachers. In many review schools, it was expected that all teachers were involved in collaborative planning. The school reviews showed that these meetings were highly valued by teachers and could be either formal or informal in nature.

In the literature (for example, Voogt et al. 2015), collaborative curriculum practices are identified as a powerful form of professional learning. Teachers share their goals for student learning, and their practice, beliefs and knowledge, with other teachers in order to challenge and deepen their own knowledge. Collaborative curriculum practices have been found to improve teacher practice and increase student learning and behaviour outcomes (Voogt et al. 2015).

The term ‘professional learning collaboration’ is used here instead of the more widely recognised term of ‘professional learning communities’ (PLCs) to acknowledge the diverse forms of collaboration that teachers participate in throughout Queensland state schools. Across the review schools there were many examples of teacher collaboration as a professional learning activity. Research suggests that well-developed professional learning collaborations have a positive impact on both teaching practice and student outcomes (Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). DuFour (2004) recommended that teachers should continually reflect on the ways in which they are working in order to embed student learning and collaboration into the culture of schools.

School leaders can play a major role in supporting and developing the professional collaborations of teachers as they guide one another in improving instruction (Wallace Foundation 2013). Across the school reviews, school leaders were often noted as leading these processes. School leaders had often established year-level based PLCs, where teachers collaboratively used moderation, student information and performance data to discuss planning needs, curriculum programs and effective teaching strategies. These professional learning collaborations were seen as highly functional and productive by the review teams.

In many review schools, reflective, professional conversations that were focused on improving student outcomes were a regular feature of school life. Teachers articulated a preference to work in collaboration and share professional practice across their schools. They regularly shared resources and ideas about teaching in informal ways. Formalised opportunities to share practice, observe the work of colleagues and build collective capacity for continuous improvement were also evident in some review schools.
Collegial and professional collaboration across schools was promoted through pedagogical coaching. The appointment of specialist teachers as coaches contributed significantly to the ongoing professional development of teaching staff, and most were actively involved in the coaching process. Teachers were open to constructive feedback and enjoyed informal, professional discussions with colleagues through these coordinated collaborative activities.

Professional learning collaboration was not only noted within individual review schools, but also across schools through the active participation of school leaders and teaching staff within school clusters. Some teachers and school leaders reported participating in school cluster PLCs with a focus on curriculum and pedagogical areas of interest. Teachers involved in these PLCs reported that they valued the professional conversations and learning. In addition to cluster participation, teachers and school leaders engaged with other networks and professional organisations that enabled professional sharing, encouraged program enhancements and supported leadership development.

In the small number of review schools not embracing professional learning collaboration, teachers reported feeling isolated in terms of their professional learning. In the absence of any school-wide plan to provide ongoing professional learning for staff, teachers sometimes linked with colleagues in other schools to access professional learning opportunities.

Teacher induction

Induction refers to the initial support programs for new and beginning teachers and is considered a critical phase in the professional learning of a teacher. Induction programs include:

- an orientation to the profession
- personal and professional support
- opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes essential for teaching (Department of Education, Science and Training 2002).

International research indicates broad inconsistency in the provision of induction for new and beginning teachers (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). This shortcoming was reflected in the 2015 reviews, where not every school provided clear, structured and documented processes for teacher induction. However, many schools did have a documented induction process that included clearly defined stages and timelines for developing skills, and for appointing experienced teacher mentors to support the development of required skills. The use of teachers as mentors for new and beginning teachers was a common feature in the schools reviewed in 2015.

In one rural primary school in North Coast region, the induction process included a school-based program, weekly meetings with the leadership team, and being assigned an experienced teacher from the school as a ‘go-to’ person. New staff indicated that they valued this process highly. In contrast, in a rural primary school in North Queensland region with a high turnover of teaching staff, the induction process for new and beginning staff was largely ad hoc and not formally documented.

Some review schools provided only very limited induction to new and beginning teachers, such as providing a staff handbook. A small number of review schools were unable to demonstrate any embedded induction processes. The implementation of formal induction processes is an area for further development in some schools.

A balanced approach to literacy, adopted by Claremont Special School as part of its targeted improvement agenda, is helping every student achieve — and feel great about their success.

As a special school, Claremont is focused on supporting every student to exit the school as a capable adult.

Through its literacy program, students are making clear gains that are, in turn, encouraging them to feel positive about their progress and prepare them for future success.

Central to the school’s literacy program is the addition of a specialised literacy support person who coaches and mentors staff at the school. This person provides teachers with targeted datasets and helps the school to set common expectations for curriculum, assessment, reporting and focused student intervention. This role has enabled teachers to develop differentiated strategies in every classroom to help readers and writers of all skill levels.

Leadership team members also regularly work in the classrooms with teachers to share their skills and knowledge.

Thanks to the literacy program and the school’s improvement agenda, staff skills are now well matched to students’ needs. Specific mentoring and coaching opportunities are offered to teachers identified as emerging leaders. A positive professional culture encourages teacher engagement and promotes better student learning.

**School initiatives**

- The improvement agenda focuses on literacy.
- An external consultant has been a long-term coach and mentor.
- Professional learning and development opportunities encourage teachers to lead.
Teacher aides

Teacher aides directly support teachers in the classroom, and professional learning activities in schools frequently included teacher aides. The teacher and student support provided by teacher aides is integral to a school environment that is conducive to student learning. Teacher aides are increasingly working with students in schools to improve their academic outcomes, especially in key learning areas such as reading and mathematics, and to assist ‘at risk’ students in their learning (Harris, Davidson & Aprile 2015).

School reviews consistently acknowledged the fundamental role that teacher aides played within schools. Teacher aides provided the extra attention some students required in the classroom, and helped teachers to organise engaging and educational activities each day. In some review schools, teacher aides were also often central in the collection of student data to inform differentiated learning.

Teachers considered the significant role of teacher aides within their unit planning. There was evidence of high levels of collaboration between teachers and teacher aides in the conduct of learning in classrooms. Teacher aides reported being briefed in a timely manner by teachers regarding the particular needs of students with whom they worked. Teacher aides articulated a high level of satisfaction with the way teachers partnered with them and provided feedback on ways they might differentiate and support student learning.

While the majority of review schools valued the support provided by teacher aides, a body of research questions the value of teacher aide support in improving actual student learning outcomes (Blatchford et al. 2007; 2011; Farell et al. 2010). These questions were raised owing to the limited professional learning opportunities provided, a lack of understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, or to how teacher aides worked with students (Radford, Blatchford & Webster 2011). Blatchford et al. (2007; 2011) suggest that teachers may spend less time with students who have already been assisted by teacher aides. However, within the schools reviewed, teacher aides received regular training across a variety of skills, such as literacy, reading strategies, numeracy and inclusion. Teacher aide training was also, at times, reflective of school improvement priorities.

During the school reviews, teacher aides stated that they felt valued by the level of professional learning they received and that they were seen as integral members of the teaching team. Teacher aides were seen as fundamental to classroom teaching and learning and they were connected to specific school programs. Teacher aide time has increased significantly in Queensland state schools with additional funding in recent years. The professional development of teacher aides has, as a result, been prioritised across many schools, resulting in intensive investment in these para-professionals.

In isolated review schools, some teacher aides indicated that they had not attended recent professional learning events, while others indicated that continuing professional support would enable them to contribute further in additional focus areas. The professional learning and development of teacher aide staff remains an ongoing area of development for some Queensland state schools.

3.4 Learning environments

The school physical environment includes buildings, classrooms, furniture, equipment, libraries, playgrounds and so on. Satisfaction with one’s own school is a major aspect of children’s quality of life. It is important that children have a right to feel good about themselves and the institutions in which they function. (Aina 2015, p. 146)

For the purposes of this report, the learning environment includes the broad physical factors that influence the lived school experience of students (social factors are covered at 3.1.5 above, due to their strong association with leadership). Research shows that students tend to be more satisfied with their learning when the school environment is conducive to learning, and they prefer to go to schools with well-constructed and maintained classrooms and facilities of which they are proud (Omotere 2013). Features of learning environments that had a positive impact on student outcomes were often highlighted within the school review reports, with parents and other community members also articulating how the environment of the school is a source of school and community pride.

3.4.1 Learning facilities

School reviews revealed that Queensland state schools have attractive physical environments that support and encourage learning. The schools used space in a strategic manner that provided diverse and inclusive learning spaces for students. Classrooms were well equipped for learning, and regularly featured scaffolding displays to support student learning processes. Classrooms were well equipped and designed to promote flexible learning.

The provision of an attractive, stimulating physical environment provided a welcoming learning context for students and their families. School environments and facilities were very well maintained and presented. Many classrooms provided attractive physical learning environments that were clean, tidy and welcoming. P&Cs often arranged working bees to assist with landscaping. Students, in particular, valued these features of their school.
Gladstone West State School’s decision to prioritise funds to create positive learning environments is making a difference.

Gladstone West is a learning environment in which the facilities, resources, extracurricular activities and reasonable adjustments are highly conducive to the learning of its students.

The school prioritises the allocation of funds to ensure that the physical environment of the school maximises student learning.

The school grounds and buildings demonstrate the pride that the Gladstone West community has in its school.

And others are starting to take note.

Recently the school welcomed the Director-General (DG) when he visited the region.

The DG noted that it was a pleasure to tour the grounds of the school and see the high-quality facilities and modern technology being used to deliver effective education.

In some instances, school facilities were undergoing beautification, such as painting, staffroom modernisation, new signage and seating, and provision of garden beds. Other grounds improvements included the establishment of additional shade areas and student precinct enhancement. A science laboratory upgrade, hospitality kitchen refurbishment, establishment of a trade training centre, and tuckshop refurbishment are all examples of upgrades that have been recently completed in review schools. The following example, from a combined school in Darling Downs South West region is a typical statement from a review report:

The school’s environment reflects its history and growth over time. The playground area has large trees, a wide range of play equipment and ample space. Students and staff commented on the amenity of the grounds and there is obvious pride taken in its maintenance. Classroom spaces are physically attractive for students and designed to maximise student learning.

The commitment of review schools to their learning environments was evident. At a rural primary school in the same region, a school leader used time on a pupil-free day to model expectations for classroom look and feel. Overall, provision and maintenance of attractive and effective learning environments has been a common, positive feature across the review schools.

3.4.2 Learning resources

Learning resources within the review schools were largely of a high standard. However, issues with information technology, primarily due to unreliable access to the internet and bandwidth restrictions to school locations, were also evident. This is unsurprising considering the widely dispersed nature of Queensland state schools. As well as bandwidth availability and similar technical support issues, the limited number of information and communication technology (ICT) devices available in some schools has impeded the embedding of ICTs across various curriculums, especially within primary school settings.

The following statement from a school review of an urban primary school in Central Queensland region illustrates that, while ICTs have been well integrated into schools, there is still work to do:

The school has a reputation for innovation in the use of ICT in teaching and learning. There are impressive examples in the integration of ICT and music and the use of tablet applications. The use of and integration of innovative ICTs is limited across all classrooms. With a high proportion of new staff, some teachers do not feel confident in its use.

Schools utilise a range of ICT resources, including computer labs and class sets of laptops or tablets, to support teaching and learning programs across schools. Teachers were also making extensive use of interactive whiteboards to enable and enhance current classroom pedagogical practices. Interviews with students indicated that they regularly used technology to assist them in their learning.

Staff were able to demonstrate to review teams how they planned and utilised technology to enhance learning. Staff used computers and tablets to deliver differentiation to students. Although schools had adequate technology resources in all classrooms, it was noted during the reviews that, within some classrooms, some devices were past their replacement date.
3.4.3 Reasonable adjustments

For students with disability there is a legislative requirement to provide reasonable adjustments where necessary to ensure that they are able to participate in education and training on the same basis as students without disability. The school reviews found many instances of reasonable adjustment policies and processes to ensure learning equity for students with disability.

Review schools demonstrated how students with disability were accessing and participating in all aspects of school life. Students were strongly supported to facilitate high levels of learning and engagement. Students with disability, as well as students identified as having high needs, were included within classes and many schools had whole-school intervention strategies in place.

Support teams/committees, formed to assist in the appropriate implementation of student support requirements, were a common feature within schools. Support services and programs for students were determined through regular meetings of the student support teams/committees, which included personnel such as the principal, teachers, HOSES, STLaN, SWD support teacher, guidance officer, learning and engagement coaches, and school chaplain. Class teachers participated as appropriate. Students with disability have ICPs and other differentiation plans and these plans were often uploaded into OneSchool. The support teams/committees oversaw the management of student referrals and determined appropriate individualised interventions. However, formal processes for these teams/committees were not always well documented or established.

Members of the support teams/committees were viewed as highly effective in their implementation of reasonable adjustments. They consulted with parents and students to ensure student needs were met. Information about the learning needs and appropriate teaching strategies to support students with specific disabilities were disseminated to classroom teachers. Strong partnerships have been forged between classroom teachers and support teams/committees in order to assist these students. Support was also provided by teacher aides who were timetabled to assist students in classrooms.

The ongoing monitoring of the effective implementation of reasonable adjustments, and the impact these adjustments have for students with disability and diverse learning needs in classrooms, was not systematic across all schools. Monitoring and evaluation of reasonable adjustments is therefore an emerging area for some schools. (For further information regarding how students with disability are supported in their learning see 3.2 above.)

3.5 Partnerships

... a process that engages school personnel, families, and community members in a mutual and respectful collaboration and shared responsibility whereby they accomplish mutual goals and outcomes in a reciprocal relationship. (Bryan & Henry 2012, p. 409)

Productive partnerships expand the knowledge, skills and resources available in schools (DET 2015d). Partnering with stakeholders, such as parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations, can also have a positive influence on school improvement (Armstrong 2015).

Research highlights the numerous commonalities that foster effective partnerships:

- strong leadership (Rea et al. 2015)
- well-defined and robust structures and processes (Chapman et al. 2009)
- a history of collaboration (Hill et al. 2012)
- clear communication (Lindsay et al. 2007)
- a sensitivity to context (Hutchings et al. 2012).

According to the NSIT (ACER 2012, p. 18), effective school–community partnerships occur when:

The school actively seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by collaborating with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations. Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their children’s education. Partnerships are strategically established to address identified student needs and operate by providing access to experiences, support and intellectual and/or physical resources not available within the school. All partners are committed to the common purposes and goals of partnership activities. Procedures are in place to ensure effective communications and to monitor and evaluate impacts of school partnerships.

Successful partnerships are those where both partners achieve improved outcomes, with each partner experiencing some change. When partners collaborate, the results can be synergistic, with outstanding benefits for students, families and partners (Nathan 2015).

Across the review schools, examples of school–community partnerships included:

- between schools, to assist in student wellbeing, and sharing aspects of teaching and learning
- within schools, integrating parents and families
- across schools
- with the wider community, partnering with businesses and other community organisations.
3.5.1 Collaborative teaching and learning

Schools commonly partnered with other education and training institutions to enhance student learning and wellbeing. School reviews showed that schools were working together to achieve common educational goals. They were actively collaborating with local early education providers, schools, TAFEs, other vocational education and training providers, and universities to support student transitions between education providers, and to share resources, best practice, professional development opportunities, moderation and planning activities.

The school reviews demonstrated that schools were fostering partnerships with local early childhood education and care (ECEC) providers in relation to the delivery of school programs and the shared use of resources. Programs to support student transition were in place between the ECEC providers and schools. For example, there were partnerships between primary schools and local community-run kindergartens to facilitate both an early screening of students and an understanding of individual student needs on entry to school.

Partnerships with ECEC providers also promoted shared practice and professional development. These opportunities also extended to parents in the provision of workshops for smoothing transitions for students into Prep.

The school reviews also provided examples of smaller schools strategically partnering with larger schools in an effort to access opportunities and resources previously unavailable. The links with larger schools provided professional, resourcing and administrative support for smaller schools. Shared professional learning was valued by school leaders and teachers in both the larger and smaller schools, and school leaders expressed an interest in further shared professional learning across local schools. These kinds of relationships, commonly referred to as cluster arrangements between schools, were not restricted to schools of different sizes, but were found between schools which were located relatively close together. The schools may be all primary or all secondary or a mix of both.

Cluster arrangements are groups of schools that provide numerous benefits to staff, students and their communities. In the review reports, it was evident that school leaders had taken on leadership roles within their local school clusters, and this provided a range of benefits to the teaching and learning of the schools involved. Another common and regular activity of school clusters evident in the review reports were moderation activities that occurred each term, and were highly valued by teachers.

One rural primary school in Darling Downs South West region demonstrated an established link with the local secondary school, sharing human resources to support the alignment of the explicit teaching of reading and problem-based learning processes in the junior secondary school. This strategic link had strengthened teacher pedagogy and supported vertical curriculum alignment for students as they transitioned to secondary school.

Partnerships with universities were regularly noted in the reviews of secondary schools. One large urban secondary school in North Coast region received a prestigious award for its partnership with the local university. In addition, a program for pre-service and in-service teachers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics was about to commence with the secondary school. The school–university relationship was an excellent example of reciprocal and productive learning and teaching partnerships.

Two Townsville primary schools are separated by 11.5 km but they are united by a desire to improve the skills and knowledge of staff through collaboration.

Shared student-free days, leadership team meetings and joint professional learning are just some of the ways Bohlevale and Heatley State Schools are working together to model, share and develop teachers’ professional skills and capabilities.

HOCs regularly work together to develop unit templates, planners, unit plans and yearly overviews. The principals also work closely together. A focused improvement agenda, supported by a strong data-informed culture, drives the collaboration.

The collaborative environment fostered by the two schools is an opportunity for experienced teachers to share their craft and evidence-based practice with their colleagues across both schools. Teachers share tasks they have completed and show examples of students’ work.

The process creates a feedback and communication loop that has been embraced by teachers and has helped them reflect on their practice.

The schools’ efforts culminate every October in a joint learning fair to showcase best practice.

School initiatives

- There are collaborative relationships between the principals, teachers and HOCs.
- Resources are multiplied through shared planning and development days.
- Schools hold a joint learning fair every October.
A partnership between Berrinba East State School and regional staff is pairing regional resources and expertise with strong school leadership for the benefit of students.

Armed with a vision for an expert teaching team, and a clear focus on students’ academic achievement, the leadership team is working with staff in the department’s South East regional office to co-design its improvement plan and identify resources it can draw on.

One of the key focuses is to build teacher capacity and collaboration across the school by developing professional learning teams.

The region’s teaching and learning team is assisting the school to establish these groups. An external principal advisor helped to establish the professional learning team model with staff. The same principal advisor is acting as a critical friend and catalyst as the teams gain momentum.

Teachers at Berrinba East also engage in focused data discussions, share challenges and solutions, and are learning together as a collaborative community.

Students are benefiting from the strengthened teaching focus. Within six months, the school has achieved positive shifts in all student outcomes, particularly in the early years where the school received its best ever NAPLAN reading data across Years 3 and 5.

**School initiatives**

- Regional staff are supporting the leadership team to establish an improvement agenda.
- Professional learning teams were developed with regional expertise.
- Positive improvement in student results was evident within six months.

**3.5.2 Collaboration with parents**

Schools welcomed parent involvement and many demonstrated a strategic approach to encouraging collaboration between the school, parents and families. For example, a combined school in Far North Queensland region used a range of methods to integrate parents and families with staff in the school. The school had a popular coffee catch-up program for parents for the early primary years. Parents spoke very highly of this informal opportunity to interact with the school staff. Teachers were also encouraged to make regular contact with parents through email. A social media account was established to support the integration and collaboration of the school with parents and families.

School leadership teams and staff recognised the importance of acknowledging and increasing the participation of parents and families in schools. A range of proactive strategies was evident, and these were reflected in a positive school culture. One urban primary school in North Queensland region improved parent participation through the introduction of a yarning circle. The school also encouraged parent–teacher contact to discuss student progress and any other issues as needed.

**DET’s Parent and Community Engagement Framework** helps schools, parents and the community work together to maximise student learning. Research shows that parent and community engagement that is effectively focused on student learning can deliver powerful outcomes (OECD 2011). A suite of materials has been designed to support the framework, including practical strategies for schools, parents and the community to adopt or adapt to suit their local needs.
3.5.3 School–community partnerships

Review schools established strong and ongoing partnerships with government and non-government agencies, local businesses and community organisations. These relationships delivered a range of benefits, such as improving the social wellbeing of students and expanding their learning opportunities.

School–community partnerships appeared to be strategically targeted to areas of identified need for staff and students. For the most part they were identified by review teams as being successfully implemented and resourced. There was also evidence that the partnerships were adding value to the operation of the schools, and contributing to both community and student outcomes.

For example, a remote school in North Queensland region had a productive partnership with the local shire council. The council provided funding for school-based awards, the outside school hours and vacation care programs, the early years centre and the chaplaincy program. The school reciprocated by providing community access to the school grounds and facilities for sporting and community events.

In an urban primary school in South East region, partnerships with the local business community and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) provided a breakfast program every school day. At the time of the review, the YMCA was working with DET to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between themselves and each school they serviced.

Successful partnerships intentionally embraced the principles of self-governing collaboration, meaning that those schools, students, families and community partners shared decision making, ownership and responsibility for the partnership vision, goals and outcomes (Bryan & Henry 2012). Across the school reviews, some schools were found to have formalised their partnership arrangements in writing, usually through an MOU. Others were still in the process of formalising their partnership arrangements, and many remained informal. Developing and maintaining school–community partnerships remains an area of further development for many schools in Queensland.

Purposeful, mutually beneficial partnerships with local businesses and a university are helping Calen District State College prepare its students for successful futures.

Through a range of high-quality partnerships, students at the rural school are being given unique learning opportunities and a head start for future study and employment.

One example is a partnership that has been in place for the past eight years with a global diesel engine manufacturer. Students who complete the Different Strokes Mechanic Matters program in Years 10, 11 or 12 often receive multiple apprenticeship offers.

Through its partner university, senior phase students at Calen can undertake an undergraduate subject in a range of disciplines to experience university life, obtain points for their QCE and credit towards their eventual degree.

The school also offers Radio Rocks, a partnership with a local community radio station, which allows students to achieve a Certificate II in Broadcasting.

The school also has a strong relationship with its Adopt-a-Cop, who engages with students at the school’s on-site gym.

Through these partnerships, the school is reinforcing its strong rural community bonds and encouraging students to consider new horizons for their future study and careers.

School initiatives

- Partnerships provide career pathways for students and a clear direction for future study or employment.
- The school’s mechanical partnership has led to apprenticeships.
- More than half of the school’s students choose to study at the local regional university campus, thanks to its partnership.
This chapter has examined effective and emerging school improvement practices across Queensland state schools by focusing on the five key areas identified by Masters (2012). The broad areas of leadership, learning, teaching, learning environments and partnerships provided the analytic categories used within the SIU’s coding framework. These categories have therefore been utilised as a framework for the findings from the 2015 school reviews.

As this chapter has demonstrated, leadership is positively related to student learning. Schools reviewed in 2015 demonstrated a culture of high expectations for successful student learning, and their implementation of productive pedagogical frameworks was often inspired by their leadership teams.

Schools’ physical environments were conducive to diverse and inclusive student learning. Across the review schools, there were many examples of productive partnerships expanding the knowledge, skills and resources of students, teachers and other community members. Collectively, these practices contributed to school improvement.

Improvement practices in Queensland state schools are explored further in the next chapter. Chapter 4 provides a description and analysis of particular school types that diverge from the school types (such as urban primary schools) that dominate the 2015 review school data set. The chapter highlights school improvement practices in combined schools, remote schools, very small, rural primary schools, special schools and outdoor and environmental education centres.