Next steps
This final chapter provides practical advice based on a distillation of findings from the 2015 school reviews. Both the reviews and this report are intended to continue the conversation and to provoke discussion in schools, regions and central office. School improvement has become part of the continuous operation of Queensland state schools. While there is much to celebrate about Queensland state education, there is still more progress to be made across all domains of the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT).

Based on findings from the 369 school reviews conducted in 2015, associated research, and quantitative data collected about Queensland state schools more generally, this final chapter outlines three key levers of school improvement. When jointly applied, these levers have the potential to drive further improvement in Queensland state schools:

• a planned approach to school improvement, specifically the development and implementation of an explicit improvement agenda
• continuous capacity building, particularly for school leaders and teaching staff
• the critical use of evidence to inform decision making and practice.

The key to improvement may not be doing more work and making more changes, but doing the right work and making the right changes (Frontier & Rickabaugh 2014).

Figure 5.1: School improvement trinity

As Figure 5.1 indicates, these are the three levers that improving schools tend to use. Concentrating effort around the three levers will help schools to focus their school improvement efforts and, in turn, maximise student achievement. The evidence indicates that, while many schools are already accomplished in one or two of these areas, they may need to intensify their efforts in the remaining area/s in order to realise the benefits of all three levers being applied together. This is described as ‘leverage leadership’ (see Bambrick-Santoyo, Lemov & Peiser 2012).

This chapter also proposes areas of further research for the School Improvement Unit (SIU), particularly understanding how to promote principal professional learning, and how to provide practice in leading change. These initiatives will be undertaken in 2016 and will provide the SIU with a more detailed understanding of its impact and any possible need to adjust its school review processes and other offerings. The SIU also hopes to contribute to the current review of the NSIT by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

5.1 Planning: the vision for school improvement

The meta analysis undertaken by Sun and Leithwood (2015, p. 501) points to the importance of direction-setting leadership practices which ‘… aim to help one’s colleagues develop shared understandings about the organisation and its activities and goals that provide a compelling sense of purpose’.

The improvement agenda determines the direction in which a school drives its activities. It is enacted, taking account of local context, through strategic planning. Planning is integral to all aspects and stages of the school improvement journey. It is used to drive:

• the best possible academic and wellbeing outcomes for students
• professional and wellbeing outcomes for staff
• reciprocal relationships with the school’s community.

Planning consistently influences day-to-day activities of the school as it clarifies goals and targets, how they will be achieved, and how progress will be monitored. Classroom planning is informed by year-level and subject-area plans, which in turn cascade down from more strategic, school-level plans. School plans reflect the State Schools Strategy that is aligned with the broader departmental strategic plan.

An improvement strategy, which was frequently suggested by school review teams in 2015, involved the need for schools to ensure that there was a clear line of sight from the school’s improvement agenda to the classroom. In improving schools, such consistency was driven by involved and supportive school leaders who genuinely engaged all staff and who were evidence-informed. Planning was apparent in the curriculum and pedagogy enacted in classrooms, and in the outcomes of students who benefited from quality instruction, including differentiation. At the strategic level, it was also reflected in the allocation of resources through the school budget, and the professional learning of staff who enjoyed regular feedback and collaborative opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. Members of the broader school community also understood and supported the vision.

For example, if an item in the improvement agenda is to attain higher levels of student achievement in reading, a large number of improvement activities must be aligned in pursuit of that goal. Table 5.1, which is based on the planning of an actual school reviewed in 2015, sets out how that improvement agenda item might be pursued by utilising a range of aligned strategies, activities or resources across the domains of the NSIT to increase student achievement.
### Domain Practices that support the priority of reading

#### Systematic curriculum delivery
- Teachers attend to identified and agreed curriculum priority areas, in particular English (reading).
- Writing has been identified as the next priority area.
- School leaders and teachers use the Australian Curriculum.

#### Differentiated teaching and learning
- Informed by data, teaching staff plan for individual student needs.
- Informed by data, teaching staff determine if differentiation is addressing student needs and adjust teaching as needed.

#### Effective pedagogical practices
- Teachers are developing their understanding of effective pedagogy, particularly as it relates to the teaching of reading.
- The school has adopted a pedagogical framework.

#### School–community partnerships
- Parents are provided with information about how they can support the agenda.
- Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their children’s education.

### Table 5.1 Example of aligned practices in a school with a priority in reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Practices that support the priority of reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An explicit improvement agenda</td>
<td>Reading is one of two or three items on the improvement agenda, supported by goals and specific timing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and discussion of data</td>
<td>Verified data are collected regularly to track student progress and to provide feedback on the teaching of reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A culture that promotes learning</td>
<td>The principal and students have developed a mantra that supports high expectations for learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted use of school resources</td>
<td>The school deploys its resources to meet the learning needs of students, particularly in reading and other items identified in its explicit improvement agenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An expert teaching team</td>
<td>A whole-school professional learning plan aligns the improvement agenda for the school with the individual learning goals of teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the data show sustained improvement in reading, in line with its goals, the school can consider and select a new priority area, such as writing. By utilising the pre-existing activities and routines, the school can work more efficiently towards addressing the next priority of writing while still monitoring and maintaining progress in reading. Planning undertaken in isolation from evidence and capacity building is less likely to produce improvement in student outcomes.

In contrast, a school improvement agenda also taken from the 2015 school review contains six items:

- improve student outcomes in reading
- improve student outcomes in writing
- improve student outcomes in numeracy
- produce assessment-literate learners
- develop a self-reflective teaching and learning culture
- improve school community connections.
To plan for the future, to be more effective and efficient, and to improve student outcomes, schools need to focus their energies more on what matters. This should not be to the detriment of everything else, but ensure that every day they remain focused on their improvement priorities. However, a sharply focused agenda should not be misunderstood as promoting a narrowing of the curriculum or lessening of learning opportunities. Improvement will result from concentrating on teaching the curriculum, using effective assessment and moderation processes, and focusing on the progress of every student in every classroom.

School improvement involves ongoing work with long-term goals. Because of the time required for change in practice and its impact on student learning, school leaders should be wary of ‘easy’ or ‘quick’ fixes, and resist the temptation to attend to the sales pitch for the ‘latest program’. Many questionable or unsupported interventions in education make tempting offers to schools to solve their problems. A search of the internet quickly reveals thousands of websites making such promises.

School improvement involves ongoing work with long-term goals.

Meaningful planning is part of the everyday work of improving schools. More than a compliance exercise, planning drives the improvement agenda and provides important reference and rally points for school staff, students and community — a common vision of what the school is and where it is going on its school improvement journey.

School improvement involves ongoing work with long-term goals.

Plans need to be data informed and focused — concentrating on the attainment of a few carefully crafted improvement priorities, including what will be achieved, over what timeframe and how. Generally, there should be no more than two to three key improvement items or priorities on the agenda, and these are to be pursued consistently over time, up to three to four years (and linked to the strategic planning cycle). This ensures that the school is focused on what matters most, and all energy and action can be directed towards goal attainment, and not distracted by less strategic, low-yield activities.

Some schools may realise the need to realign their improvement agenda items to ensure that they are described in terms of student outcomes, rather than merely in relation to preconditions of learning, such as attendance, behaviour and school-community satisfaction. The realisation of these foundations for learning are crucial for the achievement of particular student outcomes, such as reading. They are an essential part of the overall plan to achieve improvement in reading.

School improvement is a complex issue and sometimes the ultimate solutions may be unknown at the start of the journey.

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School improvement is a complex issue and sometimes the ultimate solutions may be unknown at the start of the journey. It may be difficult to know what will work best for a particular school within a particular context and at a particular point in time. Improvement planning therefore needs to be a collaborative and continuous process. This involves monitoring progress (through the collection and use of data) against the school improvement priorities, which informs the continued readjustment to and refinement of the improvement plan. As Fullan (2012) argues, to achieve real sustained improvement, focus is the key. This is achieved by selecting a small number of core educational improvements and then consistently pursuing them until they have been realised.
5.2 Capacity: developing leaders, teachers and teacher aides

In the dynamic and demanding contexts within which schools operate, teachers and school leaders are responsible for meeting many demands. To be effective, school leaders, teachers and teacher aides need to commit to lifelong learning, continuously building their capacity across curriculum and pedagogy.

In their book, Realization: The Change Imperative, Sharratt and Fullan (2009, p. 8) define capacity building as ‘...investment in the development of the knowledge, skills and competencies of individuals and groups to focus on assessment literacy and instructional effectiveness that lead to school improvement’. For them, it is the essential prerequisite to the realisation of school improvement (Sharratt & Fullan 2009).

The continuous building of capacity in school leaders, teachers, teacher aides and other school staff is an essential driver of school improvement.

Improving schools were found to be in agreement with the call for ‘investing in people not programs’. They recognised the value of making the long-term investment in building the capacity of their staff rather than hoping that off-the-shelf, ready-made fixes for school improvement might provide the answer. This includes valuing and including all school staff, and potentially members of the broader school community, in professional learning opportunities. In line with their strategic plans and the roles and responsibilities of their leadership team, improving schools know that what is needed to realise their school improvement goals is to build these skills in-house rather than relying on or buying in expertise for the short term.

Under the Principals’ Leadership Agenda 2015, the department is committed to providing professional learning opportunities to ensure a sufficient supply of suitably skilled school leaders. For example, the Take the Lead leadership and development program is part of the department’s strategy to develop the skills and capabilities of teachers, associate leaders and aspiring leaders. It also promotes the empowerment of teachers through shared leadership roles in rural or remote locations in Queensland. Program participants receive professional learning opportunities to develop their skills and capabilities. The SIU also builds the capacity of principals through its extensive program of reviewer training and school reviews.

The continuous building of capacity in school leaders, teachers, teacher aides and other school staff is an essential driver of school improvement. Research (for example, Hattie 2013) shows that an inspiring and informed teacher is the most important school-related factor that can influence student achievement. However, while teachers have a significant direct impact on student achievement, other school staff should also be familiar with the professional learning tied to improvement efforts to ensure alignment with and continuity of the school’s improvement agenda.

In improving schools, capacity building needs to be clearly aligned with school improvement priorities, and is ongoing and collaborative in nature. A culture of professional learning ensures that teachers can continue to renew and refresh their skills, including best practice as to how students learn, how emerging technology in the classroom is best used and mastery of new curriculum content.

Improving schools were found to use a range of approaches in order to build capacity continuously in their staff. Such targeting occurred in tandem with the purposeful collection and analysis of data. That is, evidence about student learning, teacher learning or leader learning was used to determine and tailor learning activities to the specific needs of the individual and the school.

As already emphasised, there are no quick fixes in education, and improving any school performance requires time. One-off or sporadic professional learning activities are unlikely to be effective or long-lasting. The best professional learning needs to be ongoing and collaborative with a focus on student learning. In improving schools, the learning culture encourages continual feedback on teacher performance, often characterised by observation and walk-throughs, and analysis of student data. As well as providing feedback on teacher practice, leaders in improving schools were found to model best teaching practices and invited others to observe and provide them with feedback.

It is also essential that professional learning is adequately resourced and planned for within a school’s timetable. Time is one of the most valuable but overlooked resources. By prioritising capacity building of its staff, the school sends the strong message to the entire school community that it is committed to lifelong learning and school improvement.

A promising form of capacity building through continual professional learning in improving schools involves the use of professional learning communities. Within professional learning collaborations, school leaders and teachers are able to engage in joint inquiry to decide on the work that will most benefit their students. Professional learning collaboration also promotes the empowerment of teachers through shared or distributed leadership practices. It gives teachers a voice in determining how best to deliver the requirements of the Australian Curriculum, how to adopt and adapt Curriculum into the Classroom as a resource, how it is best sequenced, which instructional strategies they will use, and how and when they can assess student learning. Teachers have a better chance of becoming more effective when they work with other teachers in the same specialty to improve student learning (DuFour & Mattos 2013). Teachers can teach other teachers, and professional learning collaboration ensures that effective teaching is enacted within classrooms and is aligned with the wider improvement agenda.
As well as within schools, professional learning communities are occurring across schools through cluster arrangements that reflect location, subject speciality or feeder rationale. Such professional learning communities contribute to system learning by extending the sharing of evidence and enabling moderation activities that strengthen professional standards across schools.

Another essential capacity-building practice that contributes to school improvement is the development and use of induction programs for new and beginning teaching staff. At a time when teacher and school leader turnover is a key concern, the provision of comprehensive induction programs are especially necessary within schools so that school leaders, teachers, teacher aides and other staff can more effectively carry out their work from their very first day. Although somewhat rare, well-prepared and comprehensive induction programs can provide school staff with the necessary information to understand their responsibilities, and to meet the expectations of the school. Induction programs help introduce new staff to the culture of the school and can assist in the building of professional networks.

Evidence literacy is a vital driver of the evaluation of programs, strategies, pedagogies and overall teaching effectiveness in schools.

To improve schools, capacity building in evidence literacy is a priority. Staff at all levels need to become critical users of evidence, understanding how to find, use and create evidence for themselves, including its application to the planning process. Evidence literacy is a vital driver of the evaluation of programs, strategies, pedagogies and overall teaching effectiveness in schools.

5.3 Data: evidence-informed decision making and practice

Improving schools place a high priority on the collection, analysis and discussion of evidence to establish, lead and monitor their progress against the improvement agenda. While the term ‘data’ is often used as ‘shorthand’ for evidence, data are only part of the evidence story. It is imperative that school leaders and teaching staff understand the nature of evidence: what it is, when it is required, what it says, and if it is trustworthy and reliable. One-fifth of school review reports in 2015 recommended that schools further refine their data collection and analysis or build teacher data literacy. Knowing how to judge the evidence of effective school performance and improvement, what to do with those findings, when to act, and in what order of priority is crucially important. This ability to diagnose and decide what to do next contributes to quality leadership that builds sustainable school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012; Sharratt & Fullan 2009).

Improving schools place a high priority on the collection, analysis and discussion of evidence to establish, lead and monitor their progress against the improvement agenda.

Leaders direct the purposeful collection of information to inform their decision making around all aspects of improving schools’ teaching and learning, including practice and interventions, and working in collaboration with teaching staff. This is quite different from using data to drive practice in an uncritical and uncontextualised way. Professional conversations are about students and what they can do, and on what the teachers, school leaders and community are going to do about what the data are telling them. If these conversations are focused on students and are informed by the data, these conversations have the potential to make a significant developmental impact. Such an approach is consistent with the Queensland Teachers’ Union and Department of Education and Training (DET) Joint Statement on the Purpose and Use of Data in Queensland Schools (2016).

Data are used to understand the nature of issues experienced by schools. Specifically, they:

- inform the development of the improvement agenda
- address the agenda items (for example, what aspects of the curriculum are students having difficulty with)
- monitor progress of priorities against the agenda, informing adjustments as necessary.

There are many potential data sources in schools which can be used to inform school improvement. At the classroom level, the summative and formative evaluation of individual students provides teachers with information about their teaching and individuals’ learning, and the class learning in terms of both curriculum and pedagogy. Research shows that student learning is positively influenced by the provision of regular and timely feedback on the quality of their work (Hattie 2013), and also by the active involvement of students in their own learning progress, for example, through setting goals and monitoring their development. Once aggregated, these student learning data can be considered by subject area or year level, providing insight into student understanding and teacher delivery of curriculum and pedagogy at these levels. Thus moderation can be informed. Also, at the classroom level, data can be collected about teacher practice using, for example, direct observation or the taping of lessons for subsequent discussion and reflection.
In order to advance high-quality instructional delivery, improving schools tended to ask three questions:

- What is the best source of evidence to inform teaching practice?
- What is the best data collection tool available to collect this information?
- How can the data be used to inform practice once collected?

Considering the volume of data readily available within schools, when school leaders and teachers do not understand how to use data effectively, they may experience a form of data paralysis, where they collect large amounts of data without a clear idea about its implications for the key priorities of the school (Thessin 2016). In their investigation of the use of data for the teaching of numeracy, Tozer and Holmes (2005, p. 36) show how data “… tell a story for all; the child, the teacher, the school, the parents and the nation’. However, in order for the story to inform student achievement, that data must be well analysed and understood.

Schools leaders and teaching staff, in improving schools, were found to:

- transform data into information that can be shared, understood and lead to improvements in student learning
- build the evidence literacy of school leaders, teaching staff, students and their parents/carers through professional learning and conversations around student data
- allocate school time to analysis of data and the exploration of its implications for school improvement
- understand that only valid and reliable data provide an adequate basis for their decision making.

5.4 Areas for further research

School improvement is an ongoing and unfolding journey, and DET is committed to improving the performance of Queensland state schools. This work is occurring every day, in classrooms all across the state. This work is supported by regional directors and assistant regional directors who supervise state school principals. It is also supported by other regional staff who provide direct support, as well as services, such as professional learning opportunities, and by the State Schools Division, which provides strategic direction, support and services to schools. The SIU also supports individual schools through its review processes and outcomes. It also assists school leaders with training and provides other professional learning opportunities.

The SIU will continue to provide and analyse school review reports in order to better inform the system as to apparent trends in school improvement. This sharing of evidence-based advice occurs through the training of:

- school leaders and other DET staff
- internal and external stakeholder groups
- intra- and interdepartmental working groups.

Evidence-based advice also occurs through the provision of interim updates to schools, and through the SIU website that provides fact sheets and short video presentations. It is expected that another report, similar to this one, will share the analysis of the school reviews from 2016. The 2016 report will be able to draw on the combined 2015 and 2016 datasets for the purposes of comparison. This will be augmented by an analysis of the SIU’s structured support provided to schools following a priority support review.

The SIU has extensive experience applying the NSIT across a large number and variety of schools and centres, as well as training school leaders in its applications. The SIU plans to provide feedback to ACER about the utility of NSIT.

In addition, potential research opportunities identified during 2015 are being investigated. The key research (reflective) area that the SIU will pursue is the impact of the SIU itself, through its reviews, reviewer training and engagement on school leader practice. As previously noted, the SIU has contributed to principal capacity within the Queensland state school system in 2015, with 594 principals being trained as either internal or peer principal reviewers. Of that group, 183 principals then acted as reviewers in at least one school review.

It is expected that the professional practice of school leaders will be positively impacted by their attending training as internal or peer reviewers, engaging as reviewers in a school review or having their school reviewed by the SIU. However, these developments have yet to be subjected to systematic review and empirical research. Questions that may guide this research include:

- How is the SIU changing principal practice in schools?
- What combination of interactions with the SIU appears to be most productive?
- Is having a review/being trained as a reviewer/reviewing schools different for principals at different stages of their career?

Evidence around these questions will help inform the practice of the SIU and will be of value to DET and the educational research community more broadly. As the SIU further refines its practices, and principals face other changes within the system, it would be valuable to undertake this research each year, using a mixed methods and developmental approach.
While there were many examples of emerging and effective practice taking place in many Queensland state schools, improvement should be happening across all schools in Queensland — making every Queensland state school a great school, with yet another great state school down the road.

Queensland state schools will continue to work towards the alignment of their practices and efforts with their explicit improvement agendas, which will, in turn, result in improvements in student achievement. The SIU will also continue to work with Queensland state schools to improve practice across the state. This primary work needs to be highlighted and informed by original SIU research that, with its broad stroke and fine-grained analyses, can help tap into the contemporary state, national and international conversations around school improvement. These interventions will help promote the progress of Queensland state schools as they continually seek to refine their practices and enhance school experiences for all.

As indicated at the beginning of this final chapter, the key to school improvement is not doing more work and making more changes, but doing the right work and making the right changes. Accordingly, the levers that need to be widely applied across Queensland state schools are:

- a planned approach to school improvement, specifically the development and implementation of an explicit improvement agenda
- continuous capacity building, particularly for school leaders and teaching staff
- the critical use of evidence to inform decision making and practice.

The potential and power of these drivers are yet to be fully realised.