

Executive summary Highlights from the 2015 school reviews



There is much to be proud of in the findings from the Queensland state school reviews of 2015. State schools are accomplishing great things. The School Improvement Unit (SIU) has taken the opportunity in this report to showcase these emerging and effective practices and to outline our next steps as a state.

This comprehensive report highlights the many quality educational practices evident in schools. While some schools were engaging in many of these practices, others were engaged in fewer or they were emerging. This underscores one of the major findings of the report: that school improvement is a journey, and that Queensland state schools in 2015 were operating at different points along the school improvement continuum.

The school reviews confirmed that some schools were still developing strategies to enable them to implement the evidence-informed planning and capacity-building processes that are likely to result in greater levels of principal leadership, teacher effectiveness and student achievement. In contrast, other schools had firmly embedded such practices. With continued support from the system, yet more Queensland state schools will be able to continue on their developmental journey and lift the educational outcomes for every child and young person that they are responsible for.

The strong trends that emerged from our analysis of the 369 school review reports of 2015 consisted of the following six elements.

People: School reviews consistently found that the greatest assets of Queensland state schools were their people, that is, the school leaders, teachers, support staff, Parents and Citizens' Associations, parents and community members who collectively work together to provide students with a quality education system. All these stakeholders can have a positive impact, either directly in the classroom or indirectly in the community, on improving the lives of students.

As teachers have the greatest influence on student learning, they have primary responsibility for preparing students to lead successful and productive lives. Queensland state school teachers are dedicated to enhancing quality learning in their schools and are committed to the continual improvement of their own teaching practices. Teachers are also learners. They can be helped to develop through participation in a variety of ongoing professional learning activities, such as coaching, classroom observations and feedback, as well as active involvement within collaborative professional learning communities. These contributions build greater teacher capacity across both curriculum and pedagogy.

Through the reviews, principals and other school leaders were seen as actively working with teachers to improve teaching practices. As teachers work with their students to improve their learning, school leaders are working with teachers to support the learning needs of all within their schools. Quality leadership in schools is fundamental to school improvement and enhanced student achievement. The school reviews found consistent evidence that effective practices in curriculum and pedagogy were strongly associated with involved and supportive school leadership.

Strong learning cultures: Pride was a key word commonly used by Queensland state school teachers, students, parents and the community when talking about their local state school. Students who feel they belong within their schools are more likely to succeed in their learning, and schools were working hard to provide positive learning contexts. Schools were interacting and communicating productively, not only with students but also with staff, parents and their wider school communities.

SIU reviewers found numerous examples of schools positively interacting with their communities through the development and maintenance of community partnerships. These also included relationships between schools. School–community partnerships assisted in promoting student wellbeing and shared aspects of teaching and learning, while also helping parents and families to work as cooperative teams, and increasing learning and other opportunities for students and staff.

School–community engagement was particularly strong in remote schools and very small, rural primary schools. Both types of schools were found to collaborate often to accomplish mutual goals, and to expand the available resources, thus improving knowledge and skills. While these schools were often more vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters and student and staff mobility, as engaged members of their communities, these schools were resilient and well supported.

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Through the provision of school-wide and specialist support programs, schools were found to be responsive to the individual interests and academic needs of their students. These programs were as varied as the students themselves. According to parents, these provisions greatly enhanced the learning experiences and wellbeing of students. Schools also offered cultural programs to improve engagement and motivation for particular student groups, for example, the support of community Elders or religious organisations.

Community members often spoke of having confidence in their local state schools. They trusted and were proud of their schools, which often served as the hub of their community. Many review schools demonstrated a culture of high expectations for student learning. This school-wide ethos of achievement provided the foundation for schools' favourable reputation within their communities.

Schools with high expectations of students for learning similarly set high goals for student attendance and behaviour. Many schools were successfully addressing issues relating to attendance and behaviour with school-wide strategies that were embedded in the day-to-day activities of the school. Accordingly, they were able to demonstrate steady progress in these important preconditions for improved student achievement.

School leaders contributed greatly to the strength of their communities and the school system through learning-focused leadership, while actively seeking ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing. They accomplished these goals by partnering with parents, families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations.



Student academic achievement: Queensland state school students are improving their literacy and numeracy skills. In 2015, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results showed that Queensland Year 3 students excelled in reading, achieving results substantially above those of 2008 in National Minimum Standard (NMS). Queensland Year 7 students also achieved their highest result in reading (in NMS, upper two bands [U2B] and Mean Scale Score [MSS]). In numeracy, Queensland Years 5 and 9 students improved on their 2014 results (in NMS). Improvements in numeracy have also been evident in Year 3 since 2011, and following the introduction of the Prep year in Queensland.

Literacy and numeracy constitute the foundations of learning and open gateways to student success. The NAPLAN regime attests to their crucial importance, and they are often featured as key priorities within the improvement agenda of schools. To accommodate these priorities, schools are targeting their professional learning to build staff capacity in the effective teaching of these crucial skills. In 2015, Great Results Guarantee (now Investing for Success) funding was provided to improve student learning outcomes. The school reviews demonstrated the targeted ways in which schools were strategically allocating this funding.

More than 96 per cent of eligible state school students received a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) or a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA) in 2015. Many review schools demonstrated that they were actively supporting students to achieve their Year 12 targets and were providing multiple pathways for students to prepare for their lives beyond school.

The latest data show only mixed progress on meeting the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) education-related Closing the Gap targets. A revised goal has been agreed on for ensuring access to early childhood education for Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities. Targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve NMS in reading and numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 by 2018 are on track to be met in four of the eight areas. Halving the gap in NMS for reading, writing and numeracy by 2018 was achieved in Queensland (all schools) for Year 3 reading and Year 9 numeracy in 2015. In pursuit of the next target to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment, the difference between QCE/QCIA attainment rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous state school students narrowed significantly in 2015. Review schools with Indigenous students were responding to the unique cultural needs of their students by offering locally relevant curriculum, supported by strong school, community and Elder partnerships.

Student wellbeing: Review schools were greatly concerned for and supportive of the welfare of their students. Students reported that school staff cared for them. Schools were prioritising clear and well-resourced processes for supporting the academic and social wellbeing of their students. In many instances, schools had engaged specialist staff to work with students to promote wellbeing. Guidance officers, youth health nurses, chaplains, workforce officers, Indigenous Elders, development officers and teachers of English as an additional language or dialect were all involved in maintaining student welfare and engagement. Some schools had active student welfare committees, which coordinated support services and case managed individual students in need. Schools with student wellbeing as a priority were applying resources in a targeted manner to meet student needs as they were identified.

Empowering students in their learning: Queensland state school students are seen as active and engaged learners. Teachers are empowering students to take greater responsibility for their own learning by providing regular feedback and encouraging them to set and monitor attainment of their own learning goals. The school reviews revealed multiple examples of student empowerment promoted by the commitment of teachers to providing regular and timely feedback and support. Reasonable adjustments to learning goals and arrangements are provided for students who require them. These are in addition to the broad range of general student support and wellbeing mechanisms that are available.

Positive learning environments: School reviewers often spoke of the well maintained, welcoming and safe school environments they encountered, which were characterised by the purposeful use of facilities and modern technology to deliver quality education. Research shows that students tend to be more satisfied with their learning when the school environment is conducive to improved performance, and that they prefer to attend schools with well-constructed and maintained classrooms and facilities. The school reviews confirmed that Queensland state schools had attractive physical environments that supported and encouraged learning, including differentiation of student learning. Learning resources within the review schools were largely of a high standard, despite the technological challenges often associated with remote locations.

Next steps

While there is much to celebrate in Queensland state education, there will always be scope for progress across the domains of the *National School Improvement Tool*. The next steps in school improvement, presented by the SIU, recognise the promising practices that have already been implemented in our schools. These steps also highlight three key levers which, if jointly applied, have the potential to further improve many Queensland state schools.

Planning: A planned approach to school improvement, specifically the development and implementation of an explicit improvement agenda, is integral to all aspects and stages of a school's improvement journey. Planning is used to drive the best possible academic and wellbeing outcomes for students, professional and wellbeing outcomes for staff, and reciprocal relationships with the school's community. It influences the day-to-day activities of the school as it clarifies goals and targets, how they will be achieved and how progress will be monitored. Planning promotes a clear line of sight from the school's improvement agenda all the way to students in the classroom. In improving schools, planning is driven by an involved and supportive school leadership team working together with staff, and is evidence informed. Improvement agenda items are described in terms of student outcomes, like achievement in mathematics, rather than preconditions of learning, such as attendance, and are sharply focused on what matters over the long term.



Capacity: School improvement requires the continued building of staff capacity, particularly for school leaders and teaching staff. In the complex and demanding context within which schools operate, teachers and school leaders are faced with many demands: a commitment to lifelong learning, ongoing capacity building in curriculum and pedagogy, and the use of evidence for sustained and effective teaching and learning. Improving schools invest in people not programs, recognising the value in all staff and members of the broader school community. They present capacity-building activities that are clearly aligned with the school's improvement priorities, and are ongoing and collaborative in nature, within schools, between staff and across schools in cluster arrangements.

Data: The critical use of evidence to inform decision making and practice is fundamental for school improvement. 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. There are many potential sources of data in schools. Schools are tasked with finding the best source of evidence to inform teaching, the best data collection tools to collect this information, and how the data may be used to inform practice. Effective data use by schools is evident in the way school leaders and staff transform data into information that is shared, understood and applied to improve student learning. Improving schools actively develop the data literacy of staff and allocate time for data engagement with an understanding that only valid and reliable data can provide an adequate basis for decision making.

As Queensland state schools continue to effectively plan, build capacity in their staff, and use data to inform their decision making, improvement logically follows. The SIU continues to work with Queensland state schools to improve practice across the state, helping schools lift educational outcomes for all children and young people. While there are many examples of promising practice taking place in Queensland state schools, improvement should be happening across all schools in Queensland — making every Queensland state school a great school, with another great school down the road.