School Improvement Unit

Interim report – Terms 1–3

2015

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Interim Report 2015 — Terms 1–3

This is the third interim report from the School Improvement Unit (SIU) examining trends in school reviews. Following the systematic analysis of **310** reports from school reviews undertaken in Terms 1 to 3, 2015, we have identified four features associated with highly effective schools:

- a sharp and narrow improvement agenda
- purposeful collection and application of data to student learning
- clear roles and responsibilities of teams and key management
- learning-focused leadership.

In earlier interim reports these features were characterised as areas for development for many schools. In this report we will examine the nature of these features and other closely associated attributes in the Queensland state school context. In addition, we have selected a range of practices which are highly effective in a particular school context and presented them as case studies [1].

These features are also reflected in State School Division's School Improvement Hierarchy, where the analysis and discussion of data, together with a culture that promotes learning, come together to promote an explicit improvement agenda. Supported by the targeted use of school resources and school–community partnerships, this provides a solid basis from which schools can attend to the systematic delivery of curriculum, using effective pedagogical practices, and the building of an expert teaching team, and then progress to differentiated teaching and learning.

The SIU was established in late 2014 to conduct reviews in Queensland state schools and centres at least once every four years. In Terms 1 to 3, 310 of the 370 school reviews for the 2015 school year (around 84 per cent) were completed. The 310 schools reviewed represent 24.6 per cent of all Queensland state schools and centres. Of the 310 schools, 211 were primary, 50 were secondary, 37 were combined (P-9/10/12), nine were special schools, two were outdoor education centres and one was a school of distance education (see Figure 1, below).
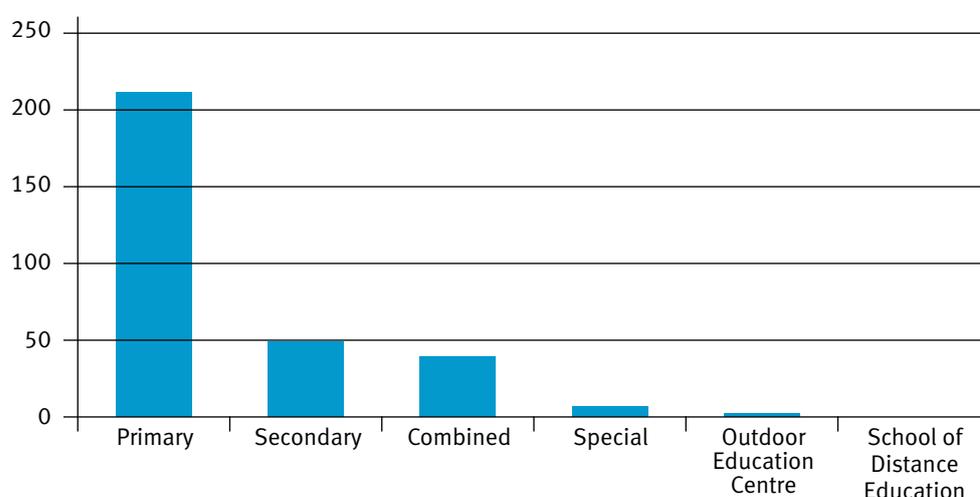

Figure 1: *Number of school reviews, Term 1 to 3 2015, by school type*

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1   These case schools have been selected because they demonstrate effective practice within a particular area or context; this does not mean that these schools cannot improve their performance or practice in other areas.

1. A sharp and narrow improvement agenda

The work of Michael 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. According to the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012, p. 2), to have an effective and 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 term of improvements in measureable 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.*

In schools with a sharp and narrow improvement agenda, that agenda is clearly derived from the school's performance data and is documented in the strategic plan. While the strategic plan covers the full range of school activity within a four-year cycle, the improvement agenda consists of a small number of high-level priorities with associated strategies and actions. The improvement agenda in these schools usually focuses on improving student learning outcomes, with a specific target, within a particular area (e.g. reading) and timeframe. Within the explicit improvement agenda there are generally no more than two to three key improvement priorities which are pursued for an extended period of time, usually three to four years (and linked to the strategic planning cycle), with targeted resource allocation.

The alignment of improvement priorities to practice uses a range of consultative mechanisms, such as the local consultative committee. In review schools with a sharp and narrow improvement agenda, teachers were able to demonstrate how

the improvement priorities had a direct impact on their work in the classroom. They were able to clearly articulate the changes to their behaviour and/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 – everyone knew and understood the school's focus.

A sharp and narrow improvement agenda informed the allocation of resources. A clear link was evident between the improvement priorities and the professional development of the staff — for teaching staff, teacher aides and other support staff. Coaching, observation, feedback and peer mentoring were also directly linked to the improvement priorities — for example, if the improvement agenda was focused on improving numeracy outcomes for students, then the resourcing of the professional learning program, aspects of individual staff members' professional development plans and the coaching programs, were all focused on developing teachers' expertise in the teaching of numeracy. The negotiated

classroom observations conducted by members of the leadership team were also concentrated on the teaching of numeracy.

The school reviews revealed that although the majority of reviewed schools, more than 98 per cent, had an agenda in place that detailed priorities for improvement, many agendas were either too broad or priorities were not defined to the extent that they could be clearly understood, actioned and achieved by all school staff.

Effective practices: Cannonvale State School and Stretton State College

At Cannonvale State School, the principal and leadership team are driving a focused improvement agenda that clearly targets improving learning outcomes for students. The members of the school leadership team bring high levels of energy, commitment and expertise to their roles and apply these strengths strategically to drive the explicit improvement agenda.

The school's improvement priorities are:

- every student will achieve at least a C standard in English and mathematics
- 50 per cent of all students will be in the Upper Two Bands (U2Bs) in NAPLAN.

Teachers are able to articulate the school's improvement agenda, with a number of teachers also noting further the areas of attendance, explicit instruction, instructional differentiation, the Australian Curriculum, and reading and writing as associated components of the agenda. Staff display a strong and optimistic commitment to school improvement strategies and a clear belief that further improvement is possible. There is evidence of a school-wide commitment to the success of every student.

Targets for improvement are documented and shared with staff and other members of the school community, with some parents interviewed able to also articulate the targets. There is a comprehensive range of whole-school plans in place, which provide staff with a clear direction in curriculum and pedagogical processes. The School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) model is the fundamental driver for improving student behaviour, learning engagement and attendance, to progress the learning and wellbeing needs of all students.

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The leadership team at Stretton State College has established and is driving a strong and detailed improvement agenda for the school, founded in evidence from research and practice. The improvement agenda is aligned with state-wide priorities and couched in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes, especially literacy, numeracy and Year 12 exit qualifications.

The improvement agenda features explicit and clear school-wide targets for improvement, which have been set and communicated, with accompanying timelines that are rigorously actioned by the teaching staff. The agenda is well communicated to parents and the wider community through school newsletters, parent–teacher meetings and on the school website.

The school's 2012–15 strategic plan provides a clear direction for school improvement. The annual implementation plans and faculty/program plans are strongly aligned and clarify the priorities. Staff express a strong and optimistic conviction that the explicit improvement agenda will result in improved outcomes.

The college vision and values are well-established, with staff, students and parents able to articulate and reflect their language and meaning. The college leadership team, teachers and parents acknowledge that the development of consistent processes and practices across Prep to Year 12 and an embedded 'brand' are an ongoing focus for the college.

2. Purposeful collection and application of data to student learning

Schools committed to using data for continuous school improvement '[e]mbrace whom they have as students and learn how to meet their needs, and ensure that all achieve' (Bernhardt, 2013, p. 4).

Highly effective schools tended to place a high priority on the collection, analysis and discussion of data in order to establish, lead and monitor the progress against their improvement agenda. They used a range of data in relation to student outcomes, academic performance, attendance, behavioural outcomes and student wellbeing, to make evidence-based decisions as part of their education priorities and responsibilities. According to the National School Improvement Tool (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.

The majority of schools reviewed in Terms 1 to 3 had a detailed data management plan that

included benchmarks and targets for student achievement, as well as timetables for the collection of data from a variety of sources. However, the highly effective practices included the regular collection of data (usually in five-week cycles), dissemination, discussion with teachers, parents and/or the community to inform practice and decision making. For example, a Term 2 school review report noted that:

The principal has analysed school performance data in a systematic way over a number of years and is aware of the trends in student achievement. This data is shared with staff.

All review schools collected data from a variety of sources; however, the degree to which they used the data to inform their practice greatly varied. In schools characterised by purposeful data collection and use, data was used to inform decision making, interventions and initiatives rather than to drive practice. This is consistent with the Queensland Teachers' Union Position Statement – *The purpose and use of data in Queensland schools*, which recognises that 'effective school leaders and teachers use a range of information when making professional decisions as a part of their educational responsibilities'.

The implementation of purposeful data collection meant that while different schools might have collected different types and amounts of data, schools were clear about its purpose and use. The primary data used in these schools related to student achievement and was consistent with the curriculum and pedagogical frameworks adopted by the school. Data was used to inform personalised learning plans and to foster higher engagement.

A precondition for the effective use of data in schools is the continued building of teacher data literacy, with schools devoting time to teacher professional development and conversations around data. Other practices also included teachers being given release time to meet with the principal and/or other senior leaders to discuss data, individual student achievement and to determine the next steps. Staff within schools effectively engaged with data using tools such as data walls, data conversations and data cycles. In addition they were able to articulate the philosophy behind the use of these tools — specifically, that the performance of every student was everyone's responsibility. Student performance improvement was widely disseminated and clearly articulated by all within the system, from the leadership team to year-level coordinators and teachers, to those within Department of Education and Training regional and central offices.

Effective practices: Wondall Heights State School and Yarraman State School

At Wondall Heights State School an effective data culture is being developed across the school as the principal and other school leaders view reliable and timely student data as essential to school improvement. There is a clearly documented assessment, data and reporting framework, and a detailed timetable for the collection and use of data on student achievement and wellbeing. Attendance and behaviour data is tracked and entered into OneSchool.

Time is allocated for teachers to discuss data on reading, writing and numeracy. Teachers have received training in aspects of data analysis and interpretation, either as a whole staff or as smaller teams. Members of the school leadership team have also received advanced data analysis training. All teachers are being introduced to the use of the class dashboard. Systematic data collections are stored centrally and provided to teachers to inform their decision making for the following year, that is to provide base-line data, to inform the grouping of students and to plan for differentiation.

Yarraman State School is also building an effective data culture as school leaders view reliable student data as an essential component of their leadership of the school. School leaders use a range of data sources to analyse academic progress and assign support.

The school has appointed a data coach to develop teacher capacity in the analysis of data to inform their pedagogical practices. Pre- and post-testing occur throughout the school in mathematics and the practice is commencing in English.

Staff at Yarraman are building their data literacy skills and most recognise the importance of data to identify starting points for improvement. Teachers are increasingly using the OneSchool dashboard tool to inform differentiated teaching practices and to understand their learners.

Processes such as teacher release time to work with data and pedagogical coaches in the school are in place to support staff to critically examine data. There is evidence that data is used to inform programs and resourcing across the school. A consistent and systematic approach to student outcomes data and a data plan are emerging to inform instruction and programs across the school.

Behaviour data is collected across the school and used to inform aspects of the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) program. Attendance data is also systematically collected and used to inform and monitor school-wide attendance targets and processes. There are consistent practices regarding monitoring, responding and rewarding attendance.
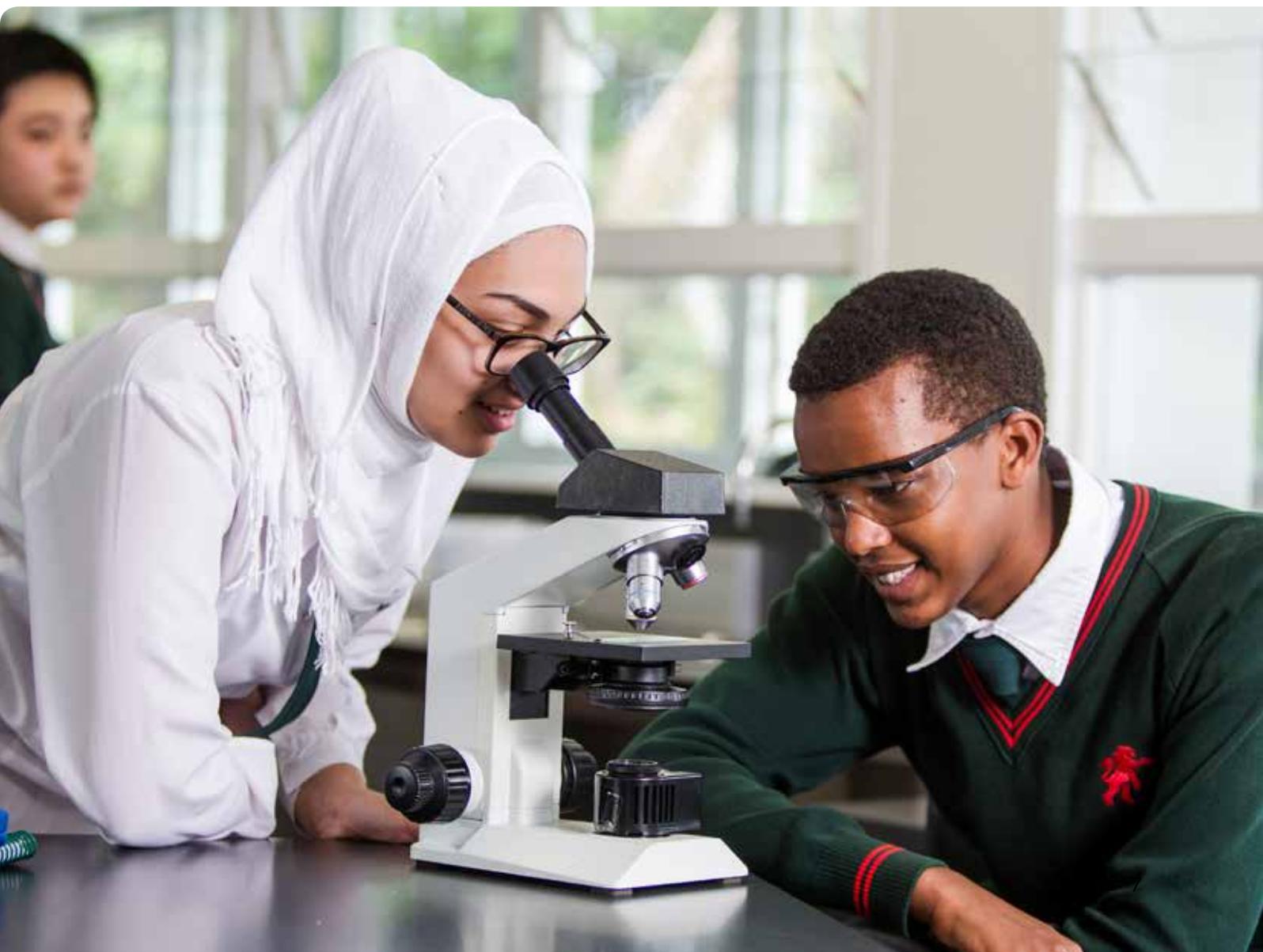
3. Clear roles and responsibilities of teams and key management

In recent years schools, particularly primary schools, have seen an increase in middle leadership positions. This trend may be explained by the additional funding available through programs such as Great Teachers = Great Results and Great Results Guarantee/Investing for Success. Schools have access to a greater level of school improvement funding than at any other time, as well as latitude in how this funding is committed. Funds may be spent on staff time, expertise, facilities or materials, to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of students. The school reviews revealed that many schools have invested in additional staffing, for example 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. These additional roles may further confuse an already complex organisational structure within the school.

Effective schools tended to be characterised by clear staff roles and responsibilities. The principal and leadership team had a shared understanding of the function of each staff position, what each role was accountable for and how they fitted together to achieve the school's improvement agenda. These roles and responsibilities were communicated to the school community. In schools with clear roles and responsibilities, school staff understood who they worked with and they knew who to go to in the performance of their duties. For example, if teachers needed to improve their pedagogical practice in relation to numeracy, they knew to seek the expertise of the numeracy coach. In schools with clear roles and responsibilities professional development and recruitment could occur in a considered manner, rather as a reaction to staffing pressures.

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

In secondary schools, unlike many in primary schools, there was regularly a common understanding held by all members of the school community about the responsibilities of various roles. Secondary schools tended to have a rich and established history of more expansive school leadership teams and potentially provide a model for primary schools.

Effective practices: Sarina State High School and Western Cape College

Sarina State High School has a clearly defined leadership structure supported by specific role descriptions. This structure has formalised 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.

A collaborative process was undertaken in 2014 to match areas of personal expertise and current school improvement priorities to the leadership of the school improvement agenda. As this structure is relatively new, school leaders recognise that further communication is needed across the school community to clarify roles and responsibilities, and to ensure that these roles and responsibilities are fully understood and embedded in school practices.

There is clear evidence that over the past three years the school leadership team has identified staff capability development as fundamental to driving the school improvement agenda, specifically in driving improvement in student learning outcomes. The staff professional learning agenda includes both essential and optional development opportunities and is aligned to the school improvement priorities of reading, writing, data literacy and the use of ICTs.

Since 2014 the implementation of a revised approach to classroom pedagogy has seen the development of the school's pedagogical framework. This model for teaching is supported by ongoing observation, feedback and coaching for all teaching staff. A culture of high expectation is being developed for classroom teaching practices and there is a strong commitment by teachers to continuous improvement, especially in their use of their pedagogical framework.

To further support classroom teaching practices and capability development, a master teacher (0.3 full-time equivalent) has been an additional resource to further strengthen the coaching and feedback processes within the school. In addition, due to some staff turnover, consideration has been given to induction programs.

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At Western Cape College the principal and other college leaders are committed to improving outcomes for all students. To achieve this, college performance data has been analysed to develop an explicit improvement agenda that contains three key priorities — high quality education, student social and emotional well-being, and community connection and relevance. To action these priorities a new organisational structure, with clear roles and responsibilities, has been developed to ensure the implementation of the improvement agenda. Because of this new organisation structure, each person in each position clearly understands their role and the roles of others in achieving the key priorities of the school.

4. Learning-focused leadership

School improvement requires effective educational leadership, after all principals are '... second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning' (Leithwood, 2010, p.10). In highly effective schools, school leaders were the lead learners within their school; this included being lead learners of all students, of teachers and other school staff, and within the school's community.

In schools with learning-focused leadership, school leaders modelled the value of ongoing professional learning and development by participating in executive-level professional development themselves. They shared what they had learnt with their staff, building their own and their staff members' capabilities.

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 79):

> *... if you want a high performing school system, a competitive economy, and a cohesive society ... we need the very best, most highly qualified teachers who have a deep and broad repertoire of knowledge and skill....*

As many review reports showed, schools have been using additional school improvement funding to invest in people rather than programs.

In the review reports where learning-focused leadership was evident, an involved and supportive leadership team led both the 'what' and the 'how' (curriculum and pedagogy). These leaders were also teaching within classrooms in order to demonstrate effective practice. For example, a Term 2 school review report noted:

> *School leaders, including the principal, spend time working with teachers, providing some feedback on teaching and, where appropriate, modelling effective teaching strategies. Both the principal and a deputy principal teach a timetabled class and welcome teachers observing their practice.*

Learning-focused leaders also contributed to the strength of the school system. The National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012, p. 18) states that schools should '... actively seek ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations'.

School system leaders focused on building external networks and partnerships in order to share and access new ideas that, in turn, improved their own schools, and promoted a high-functioning system built on collaboration. In review schools, learning-focused principals were taking on leadership roles within their local school clusters; providing a range of benefits to the teaching and learning of all schools involved within the cluster. These system-focused activities built capacity within local schools as a professional and wellbeing-oriented group, which then in turn supported their own school staff and their communities.

Effective practices: Claremont Special School and Freestone State School

Claremont Special School is an example of the effective leading of learning for students and school staff. The school leadership team is driving an explicit and narrow school improvement agenda as identified in its 2015 annual implementation plan (AIP). The principal, deputy principal and head of curriculum are united in their commitment to the improvement agenda and clearly articulate their strategies for improving student learning.

Staff members are aware of the documented priorities and there is significant evidence that the AIP is driving the work of teachers in classrooms. In particular, teachers and teacher aides can describe the importance of the pedagogical literacy model and the behaviour support program.

School leaders draw upon contemporary research and evidence, have undertaken significant professional development and use what they have learnt to identify processes and strategies for school improvement. Across the school there

is evidence of the drive for improved student outcomes and this focus is informing the work of school leaders and teachers. There is a strong and optimistic belief held by all staff that every student can learn.

Teachers describe a strong collegial culture, where there is openness to professional critique and both formal and informal partnerships exist to support professional learning. These are evident in the widespread use of videotaping, peer classroom observation and feedback. The professional learning plan details a range of targeted and planned activities that are aligned with the school's priorities. Evidence from the school review indicates that there is strong commitment to continual learning as demonstrated by high attendance rates by staff at optional professional learning sessions.

Progress towards school priorities is monitored by the leadership team through the collection of student achievement data, staff surveys and use of external coaches and critical friends. Parents are aware of the school priorities and fully support the direction of the school.

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At Freestone State School the principal demonstrates learning-focused leadership by routinely engaging with current research, experts and other schools that have achieved significant success in an effort to continually improve her own school's student outcomes. The principal does this through actively networking with the local small school principals' cluster to support staff professional development, collegial support and student interaction. By being an effective system leader, the principal contributes to and benefits from the improvement of other schools within the community.

Conclusion

Schools reviewed in 2015 are now working with their regions to address areas for improvement identified in each of their school review reports. In addition, we were able to analyse their review reports to learn from them as a system. What we have learnt is that while improvement activity continues in every school, effective practices such as the development and promotion of a sharp and narrow improvement agenda, commitment to the purposeful collection and application of data, the establishment and promotion of clear roles and responsibilities, and leadership that is learning-focused, all contribute positively to a school's improvement journey.

The findings of our final 60 school reviews for 2015 will be added to our database for analysis in December and January. The next report to be published by the SIU will be the 2015 Annual Report, available at the end of Term 1 2016. The Annual Report will provide more detailed and contextualised analysis of the 2015 school review reports. Over time, the reports will become a longitudinal study that tracks and compares trends from previous years, provides case studies of effective practice, and identifies where Queensland state schools have improved and areas for future focus.

For more information about this report, the upcoming 2015 Annual Report or to provide feedback, please email the SIU on siumb@dete.qld.gov.au

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