



THE LINK

Bridging the Research to Practice Gap



School improvement

School improvement aims to enhance school practices in order to create better student outcomes. It involves school leaders, staff and the whole school community refining a shared vision, conducting rigorous self-evaluation, creating a well-developed plan for improvement, and establishing reliable ways of measuring and monitoring change. Engaging in a robust school improvement process over a sustained period of time can yield positive results, including more effective school practices and improved student outcomes.

Introduction

School improvement is about enhancing practices and strengthening capacity to intentionally improve student outcomes. There are a range of outcomes that schools may wish to focus on during the improvement process, including academic achievement, student engagement, and enjoyment of learning, as well as student health and wellbeing. It is critical to identify areas that require improvement and to prioritise these through quality, evidence-based and data-informed processes.

There are many different approaches to school improvement, and the impact of these can be maximised when contextualised to the school's needs, and tailored to its agreed priorities (OECD, 2016). For independent schools in NSW, this means taking into account the defining characteristics, philosophy, outlook, ethos, geographical context, and social demographics of the particular school.

The school improvement process

Schools are diverse and complex ecosystems. While they share a common goal of enhancing school practices and improving student outcomes, each will have different approaches to achieve this given their identified priorities and unique circumstances. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all model that schools can adopt to improve what

they do. Simply borrowing strategies and solutions from other contexts and superimposing them without appropriate data-informed adaptation offers no guarantee of success. Evidence shows that pre-packaged or imported interventions are far less successful than those that are contextualised to fit a school's needs and culture (Harris & Jones, 2016).

A growing evidence base indicates that school improvement is a multifaceted, multilayered and multidimensional process that takes place over time, involves a number of support features, and calls for action in various domains (Waite, 2013). The school community should appropriately determine what to focus on, and how improvement will be undertaken through rigorous, evaluative, and data-informed processes. Not all features and actions need to be focused on, or implemented, at the same time.

Fostering a shared vision

A school's vision often goes beyond what might be specified in its improvement plan. Typically, schools have well established vision or mission statements. In the independent sector, a school's vision may be driven by the existing philosophy or principles upon which the school was founded.

However, school improvement involves change, and with change comes uncertainty. There are often differing ideas and views within a school community as to the necessity and purpose for change. Fostering a clearly articulated, shared vision can help unify diverse points of view and clearly outline the direction in which the school will move.

Evidence shows that school vision becomes shared more effectively when:

- people are invited to contribute to the vision
- it is communicated clearly through every possible channel
- all stakeholders are empowered to act on the vision
- obstacles to the shared vision are removed (Kotter, 2011).

A shared vision aligns what a school says and what it does, harmonises its policies and practices, engages the whole school community in an ongoing inquiry, and keeps it on course during the process of change and change management. Without a clearly crafted shared vision, an improvement effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, disconnected, incompatible projects, programs, plans, or directives which can lead the school in unintended directions (Kotter, 2011).

Effective school leadership

Effective school leadership has long been identified as central to any school improvement process. Effective leaders create and sustain conditions for excellence, as well as drive and lead their school through cultural change (Fullan, 2011; OECD, 2016). Effective leaders of successful school improvement:

- challenge the status quo
- focus on team over self
- build trust through effective communication
- set high expectations
- create a commonly owned plan for success
- have a high sense of urgency for improving student outcomes
- have a commitment to continuous improvement for self and the organisation
- build external networks and partnerships (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016).

Cultivating a culture of improvement

Evidence suggests that effective leaders alone may struggle to drive successful and sustainable improvement processes – whole school commitment, actions and efforts are also needed (CESE, 2014). Building a culture that is underpinned by a set of shared values, beliefs, commitments and understandings is significant in supporting the school improvement process. A culture of improvement cultivates:

- a shared belief among staff that continual improvement is possible
- a shared and optimistic school-wide commitment to the improvement agenda (Farrar, 2015)

- an understanding that school improvement relies on both collective learning (learning how to improve as a school community) and individual improvement efforts (Kools & Stoll, 2016).

School improvement processes can be more effectively undertaken when school communities are receptive to change and actively participate in a process of continuous learning and improvement. A growing body of literature argues the need for schools to conceptualise themselves as learning organisations – those that are capable of dealing with rapidly changing external environments and facilitating organizational change, innovation and improvement (Cole, 2012; Kools & Stoll, 2016).

Building active communities of practice and collaborative networks can support school improvement processes. It is through these professional learning communities (PLCs) that members learn from each other, create synergies that might be impossible in isolation, extend their organisational base and community support, and replenish their social and intellectual capital (OECD, 2016). In PLCs, members focus on student learning, work collaboratively and hold themselves accountable for results (DuFour & DuFour, 2013). Strong PLCs are reported to foster collective responsibility and collaborative cultures where people care for each other as individuals and commit to the shared vision of the organisation (Kools & Stolls, 2016). For successful school improvement initiatives, creating a collaborative culture within schools is “the critical element in reform... and the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement” (DuFour, 1998, p.22).

Identifying drivers for improvement

It is important that schools identify the most effective drivers for improvement in their own context. These might include:

- individual and collective capacity building
- teamwork that maximises everyone’s talents, contributions and commitment
- focusing on pedagogy and using technology to aid instruction
- strategic rather than ad hoc approaches (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016).

Evidence suggests that some improvement initiatives are unsuccessful when schools focus primarily on standards, assessments, monitoring, and interventions as these do not venture beyond accountability and compliance. Having these as the main drivers may lead to an initial quick fix, but they may slow down more genuine and sustainable improvement (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016).

Collecting and analysing baseline data – knowing where you are as a school

School improvement processes involve developing a clear understanding of where a school is at in terms of practice and student outcomes. Knowing this helps establish a

baseline for improvement, prioritise the focus, and then enable a determination of whether improvement has occurred. This may require school leaders and educators to systematically, objectively, and reliably gather and analyse data about current performance to capture a wide range of student outcomes, not only achievement. For this reason, it may be useful for baseline data to be gathered from within and by schools, and also from relevant stakeholders and independent sources – for example, an independent review of the school's current practices by external assessors (Kools & Stoll, 2016). Schools may benefit from using a variety of publicly available resources and measures to help collect baseline data.

Specifying desired outcome improvements

Once baseline data have been collected and analysed, it is then possible for school communities to prioritise areas of focus and develop improvement plans. The following questions can be helpful in guiding this.

- *Setting priorities:* Which student outcomes does the school want to improve the most?
- *Setting realistic expectations:* Which level of improvement should the school aim for?
- *Setting realistic timelines:* What timeline is most appropriate? (Masters, 2016).

Improvement plans are most effective when they are developed and evaluated in consultation with parents and the broader school community, and shared throughout the entire school (CESE, 2014).

Setting priorities: This requires schools to deeply consider who they are and who they want to be; what they currently do and what they want to do differently in the future; and what impacts they currently have and ultimately want to have on the learning and wellbeing of their students and school practices. Schools can examine the research and evidence base for what constitutes best or next practice in their identified areas for improvement. Priorities will vary between schools depending on identified needs and capacities.

Setting realistic expectations and timelines: It is important to keep a balance between setting ambitious goals while being realistic about the levels of improvement that can be achieved given current performance and conditions (Bellei, Vanni, Valenzuela, & Contreras, 2016).

Designing and implementing an improvement strategy

Based on the data analysed, a systematic improvement strategy (or strategies) can be developed for implementation. Key priorities may be broken into more specific and achievable goals from which to develop evidence-informed action plans. These usually include success measures which are continuously monitored, enabling the school to demonstrate improvement over

time. A variety of stakeholders may be involved in developing action plans.

Realistic timeframes are required to enact the improvement strategy and embed it in the school's collective and individual psyche and practices, and for real changes to be realised. Schools may make use of different strategies at different stages of the improvement process, by undertaking continuous and appropriate adjustment and refinement (Bellei et al., 2016).

Measuring and monitoring improvements

To effectively evaluate the impact of the improvement strategies being implemented, and to ascertain if changes have occurred, success measures identified within the school's action plans should be used. When tracking progress over time, schools consider whether:

- measures of changes are comparable over time and possibly across different measurement instruments
- changes are large enough and reflective of real improvements rather than random fluctuations or differences in data collection processes
- conclusions about improvement are based on sound evidence of trends over an extended period of time (Masters, 2016)

Reflecting on the improvement process

Undertaking a systematic school-wide evaluation will enable the school to learn from the results of their improvement efforts. The emphasis in this process is on the overall effectiveness of the improvement strategy and its impact on the targeted outcomes detailed in the action plans. The following questions are useful to help focus and guide the process. Answer these rigorously, with data and evidence.

- What challenges did the school encounter during the improvement process?
- Did the school's practices change as expected?
- Were the action plans implemented responsible for the improvements in student outcomes?
- How sustainable are the improvements?
- What are the lessons to be learned?
- Were there any unintended outcomes, and what impact did they have?

Answers to these questions may help inform ongoing improvement efforts (Masters, 2016).

It is worth emphasising that the points discussed here do not constitute a comprehensive checklist of what needs to be accomplished while undertaking school improvement. The activities taking place during school improvement do not operate in a vacuum or occur in a simplistic, linear, stepwise order, and the support features are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are organically interlinked – like pieces of a cohesive puzzle – supporting and enabling school improvement to occur and proceed effectively and sustainably.

How is school improvement measured?

School improvement should be measured with reference to both school practices and student outcomes, rather than by focusing solely on one or the other (CESE, 2014). Changes in school practices that do not result in improved student outcomes, and improvements in student outcomes that are not accounted for by improved school practices, do not necessarily indicate authentic and credible school improvement.

School practices

Three focal areas of school practices common to most improvement frameworks are learning, teaching and leadership (CESE, 2014).

Learning : The central moral purpose of schools and school improvement processes is the ongoing improvement of student academic and wellbeing outcomes, and the narrowing of achievement gaps (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 2014). Improvement in learning is often measured and achieved through:

- a culture of high expectations, as high performance and high expectations are positively correlated (Tucker, 2012)
- the provision of a curriculum with appropriately challenging subjects (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009)
- responsive teaching practices, which have been identified as among the most powerful influences on achievement and are characterised by the provision of mutual feedback between teachers and students (CESE, 2014).

Teaching : Teachers have been identified as the most powerful school-based factor for improving student academic and wellbeing outcomes. In fact, “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p.16). Research indicates that improvement in teaching practices often requires:

- *collaborative practices* which connect people with diverse roles, and align different parts of the school ecosystem to enable a coherent picture and consistent strategies for improvement (Kools & Stoll, 2016)
- *an emphasis on both subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge*. These are considered pre- or co-requisites of effective teaching in high performing education systems (CESE, 2014; OECD, 2011)
- *evidence-based and data-informed professional learning* that focuses on subject content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and how students learn has a stronger impact on student outcomes than a focus on pedagogy alone. Evidence indicates that professional learning that aligns to the school’s action plan is an essential component of school

improvement processes, be it school based or externally sourced (Cole, 2012; Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016)

- *a focus on data use and skills*, particularly those relating to the interpretation and use of assessment information. These appear to result in significant gains in student outcomes (CESE, 2014).

Leadership: School leadership has become more important than ever before. Evidence indicates that instructional leadership is the most effective leadership style for guiding schools through improvement and innovation. Instructional leaders set clear teaching objectives and have high expectations of students and teachers. In addition, effective leaders promote and participate in teacher learning and development, acting as role models within the school and a source of instructional advice for staff (Bendikson, Robinson, & Hattie, 2012).

Student outcomes

Student outcomes should be measured using data from formative and summative assessments. Three approaches commonly employed to measure trends in student academic achievement are:

- *status or absolute measures*: comparing the performance of one-year level over time, for example, Year 9 numeracy skills between 2013-16
- *gain or growth measures*: examining the change in academic performance of the same cohort between two points in time, for example, numeracy scores as students’ progress from Year 6 in 2013 to Year 9 in 2016
- *value-added measures*: investigating student growth over time while examining if the school has added value above the performance expected given school and student characteristics (CESE, 2014).

Restricting the measurement of student outcomes to academic achievement, however, may be limiting as this highlights’ only one area of student learning. It is recommended that schools expand measurement of student outcomes to include multiple measures of data, including social and emotional learning and development, ongoing formative assessment, school attendance, secondary school completion, and employability (CESE, 2014).

Concluding thoughts

School improvement starts from where a school is, and involves adapting, innovating and learning by doing (Collarbone, 2015). A number of features and actions which support school improvement have been identified in the literature. These include fostering a school-wide shared vision, conducting rigorous self-evaluation, creating well-developed improvement plans based on evidence, and establishing reliable ways of measuring and monitoring change in an ongoing way.

School improvement can involve school leaders, staff, school boards as well as the wider school community, including parents and relevant stakeholders. No two journeys to school improvement will be the same, and the approaches taken by schools are diverse. Decisions around where improvement is required and what should be prioritised should be shaped by a school's circumstances and agreed priorities, what is already in place (but might need improving), and what the school is seeking to cultivate. These should be appropriately determined by the whole school community, and through rigorous and evaluative data-informed processes. While schools each have different starting points, engaging in a robust and effective improvement process over a sustained period of time can enable each school to create the necessary conditions to foster better academic and wellbeing outcomes for each and every student.

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