Implementing a generic school improvement framework: experience of the National School Improvement Tool in Australian settings

Elizabeth A Hartnell-Young, ACER
Robert Marshall, ACER
Robert Hassell
Symposium 71: Implementing a generic school improvement framework: experience of the National School Improvement Tool in Australian settings.

Paper A: Development of a school improvement framework with broad application in different contexts

Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, Australian Council for Educational Research elizabeth.hartnell-young@acer.edu.au

Introduction

School improvement has been a focus of attention in Australia for some time, but the publication of results in international testing such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in recent times has heightened awareness of comparisons between Australian students and their peers in other countries (eg. Thomson, Hillman, Wernert, Schmid, Buckley, and Munene, 2012). This paper describes the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) developed in Australia to support school and system improvement efforts.

Although Australia's performance in PISA has remained above the OECD average in recent years, jurisdictions such as Hong Kong and Shanghai in China, and Singapore and Finland, had significantly higher results than Australia in PISA Reading tests in 2009 and several more had significantly higher results in Mathematics (Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, and Buckley, 2010). Overall, Australian students' mean score in PISA reading declined from 528 points in 2000 to 515 in 2009.

PIRLS, which Australia entered for the first time in 2011, is conducted at Year 4 and Year 8, and focuses on purposes for reading, processes of comprehension and reading behaviours and attitudes. Australia's results surprised many educators and led to headlines such as 'A decade of lost action on literacy' (Ferrari, 2012) and calls for a shake-up of teacher training. Many analyses comprised comparison with high-performing countries, such as that in Figure 1, which highlights the significant difference between the proportions of low performing students in Australia and Hong Kong.

Figure 1. PIRLS Year 4 reading: Comparison of Australian and Hong Kong students' performance.
Not only is the quality of performance of concern to many in Australia, but so too are the inequalities evident in a country that prides itself on fairness. Performances of sub-groups in PISA ranged widely, from indigenous males with lower reading levels and independent school students with higher levels of mathematical literacy, but when socio-economic status was taken into account these differences were not statistically significant. Unlike in Canada, Australia's results are characterised by low equity. The inequality in performance in Australia explained by differences within schools, rather than between schools, is the 5th highest of all OECD countries (OECD, 2007).

This has led state and federal governments in Australia to consider what could be done to improve Australia's overall performance, and to lift performance, first in areas of low socio-economic status and more recently within schools. Options for rewarding individual teachers have been canvassed, but not effectively implemented, as have rewards for schools that improve. The former Australian Government determined to improve Australia's standing in relation to the top-performers by driving 'school improvement', originally with the promise of rewards for schools demonstrating improved results. ACER was asked to provide advice on ways of measuring and rewarding schools (Masters 2012b) and suggested that 'practice-based measures' rather than 'outcomes-based measures' were needed.

As Fullan (2011, p. 11) argues, 'High-stakes accountability will only motivate a small percentage of teachers and, even if motivated, only a minority will know what changes to make in instruction to get better results'. Few school communities actually know what to do to improve their results, and as Masters (2012b) observes, there are currently no agreed practice-based measures of school performance or improvement based on the quality of teaching or of school leadership. In the absence of practice-based measures, comparative data from national and international test results are used to motivate improvement at school and system levels. However Elmore (2008) suggests that giving people in schools more data does not necessarily improve their practice.

**Identifying practices that influence school improvement**

The need to identify successful behaviours underpinned an empirical study in the state of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), presented at ICSEI (Hartnell-Young, 2010). It described the behaviours that were most common in schools that were performing better than expected in relation to their socio-economic status. The most common behaviours were:

- using data
- coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise
- raising staff expectations of students
- establishing and aligning vision, values and goals
- working in teams
- aligning professional learning
- raising students expectations
- assigning staff to key priority areas
- focusing on literacy and numeracy
- establishing partnerships (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, p. 3).

The paper concluded by asking how transferable these behaviours could be, to lead to improvements in more schools. It is intended that future research into the use of the National School Improvement Tool will consider this question.

The National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) is based on a synthesis of extensive school improvement and effectiveness literature (eg. Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore, 1995; Townsend, 2007). The broad term 'leadership' is often invoked as a prerequisite to achieving improvement. Indeed in the work described in this paper strong leadership is expected, echoing Grenny et al:
What qualifies people to be called leaders is their capacity to influence others to change their behaviour in order to achieve important results' (Grenny et al. 2013, p. 6). Masters (2012a) found that schools that make significant improvements in student achievement are led by people with a passion for improvement, who adopt a ‘no excuses’ policy and drive an explicit agenda.

Therefore, while direct measures of student outcomes are essential to all school improvement efforts, this Tool recognises that ‘school improvement’ fundamentally means improving what a school does on a daily basis. It deliberately does not describe everything that effective schools do, but focuses on those practices that are most directly related to school-wide improvements, and thus outcomes for students. In this sense, the Tool can be thought of as a core element of more comprehensive school improvement programs, frameworks and initiatives.

The Tool is designed to assist schools to review and reflect on their efforts to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning, to support targeted planning. It facilitates school-wide conversations – including with parents and families, school governing bodies, local communities and students themselves – about aspects of current practice, areas for improvement and evidence that progress is being made.

It consists of nine inter-related ‘domains’. These are:

- An explicit improvement agenda
- Analysis and discussion of data
- A culture that promotes learning
- Targeted use of school resources
- An expert teaching team
- Systematic curriculum delivery
- Differentiated teaching and learning
- Effective pedagogical practices
- School-community partnerships

Although it has been designed to give feedback in relation to each domain separately, experience suggests that the most effective way to use the Tool is to make observations and gather evidence broadly about a school’s practices before focusing on individual domains. Schools may then decide to give priority to particular domains in their improvement efforts.

Within each domain is the set of performance levels: ‘Low’, ‘Medium’, ‘High’ and ‘Outstanding’. They are presented as descriptors rather than quantitative measures. For example in Domain 1: an explicit school improvement agenda, an ‘Outstanding’ school would be one using the following practices:

The school leadership group, including, where appropriate, the governing council, has developed and is driving an explicit and detailed local school improvement agenda. This agenda is expressed in terms of specific improvements sought in student performances, is aligned with national and/or system-wide improvement priorities and includes clear targets with accompanying timelines which are rigorously actioned.

The school improvement agenda has been effective in focusing, and to some extent narrowing and sharpening, the whole school’s attention on core learning priorities.

There is a strong and optimistic commitment by all staff to the school improvement strategy and a clear belief that further improvement is possible. Teachers take responsibility for changes in practice required to achieve school targets and are using data on a regular basis to monitor the effectiveness of their own efforts to meet those targets (ACER, 2012, p. 3).

Here can be seen an improvement agenda owned and understood across the school, including governance, management and teaching personnel. The agenda involves a plan with clear targets and timelines.
In contrast, a low-performing school would be more focused on short-term issues and may have a culture of low expectations of its students. It is described thus:

There is no obvious plan for improving on current achievement levels. School leaders appear to be more focused on day-to-day operational matters than on analysing and understanding school data, setting targets for whole-school or communicating an improvement agenda to the school community.

Minimal attention is paid to data and there is very limited communication of school results or of intentions for improvement to parents, families and the wider school community.

Expectations for significant school improvement are low and staff tend to ‘explain’ current achievement levels in terms of students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and/or geographical location. There is little evidence that the staff of the school have a shared commitment to improving outcomes for every student, and this appears to be contributing to a culture of under performance. There is little evidence that the school is looking to external sources to identify evidence-based strategies for improvement (ACER, 2012, p. 3).

Those who conduct a school review, whether they be the leadership team or an external reviewer, should use available evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to come to a description of where the school sits at a point in time. They should refrain from subjective judgements. Multiple reviewers can moderate their ratings based on the evidence, which itself provides a base line for improvement planning. Marshall (2014) describes how peer reviews have been conducted by government school principals selected for the role in the state of Queensland. Over 1200 schools have been reviewed, and analyses suggest that these reviews could lead to useful practice-based measures (Masters, 2012b). Feedback across the country indicates that having a clear framework and involving the principal and leadership team are essential aspects of the process, and in all cases, it is clear that each school has control over the results of the review process to develop its plan.

In contrast to the Queensland example, Hassell (2014) shows how three very different independent schools in Western Australia have used the framework of the National School Improvement Tool for self review. In his examples, specific domains are selected for attention, rather than every domain in the Tool. It will be important to follow the progress of these schools to see how effective such a focus can be.

It is too early as yet to observe results in terms of outcomes of international testing. In December 2012, the Education Ministers of all states and territories in Australia endorsed the National School Improvement Tool as a very useful framework for reviewing current practice and planning for improvement. While a new government has since been elected, the Tool is likely to remain important if, at the school level, it continues to be seen as independent, generic and transferable, and intended to drive school improvement through school review, planning and implementation of a school improvement plan.

References


Introduction

Teachers and students suffer terribly when we protect, when we buffer teaching from inspection and scrutiny, and when we conveniently assume that everyone is doing a good job (Schmoker, 2007 p. 35).

This paper examines the implementation of a large scale system of school improvement through school audits in Queensland which commenced in 2010. With an area of 1,727,000 square kilometres, Queensland is the second largest state in Australia, after Western Australia. Queensland is nearly 5 times the size of Japan, 7 times the size of Great Britain and 2.5 times the size of Texas. There are approximately 1,250 State Government schools with a student population of approximately 492,000.

Across the globe there is currently a preoccupation with whole system reform. Fuelled by various international league tables of performance, many countries are grappling with transforming their education systems. International Assessment programs such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS have been introduced and allowed governments to compare education achievement across systems. As each year draws to a close, newspapers around the world report on the findings. The literature is abundant with commentary on the characteristics of high performing systems, schools, teachers and the conditions that lead to high standards of student achievement. Hattie (2012), Schmoker (2006 & 2011), Caldwell (2008), Barber and Mourshed (2007), Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009), Fullan (1999 & 2011) and Masters (2009, 2010, 2011 & 2012), have all contributed to the body of evidence about effective practices needed to raise learning outcomes in schools.

Background

In 1999, State Ministers of Education in Australia released a declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century. In order to measure student achievement in relation to the national goals, ministers agreed to a program, called the National Assessment Program (NAP), to collect, analyse and report nationally comparable data on student achievement in literacy, numeracy, science, ICT and civics and citizenship. Following the 1999 Declaration, the NAP Sample Assessment program started in 2003 with Science Literacy.

The 1999 Declaration on National Goals for Schooling was superseded by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008). Ministers agreed on eight actions to achieve these educational goals. One of these actions was to ‘Promote world-class curriculum and assessment’. The Melbourne Declaration also stated that ‘Assessment of student progress will be rigorous and comprehensive. It needs to reflect the curriculum, and draw on a combination of the professional judgement of teachers and testing, including national testing’.

The Melbourne Declaration also stated that the learning areas English and Mathematics are fundamental in all years of schooling, placing emphasis on the literacy and numeracy skills assessed by NAPLAN tests. The first NAPLAN tests took place in 2008 and were conducted by the then Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, now SCSEEC). This was the first time all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were assessed in...
literacy and numeracy using the same year level tests. The national tests, which replaced those administered by Australian states and territories, improved the comparability of students’ results across states and territories.

Following the release of disappointing Queensland results in the 2008 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) late in 2008, the Queensland Government commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to undertake an independent review of literacy, numeracy and science standards in Queensland primary schools.

The Queensland Education Performance Review (Masters, 2009) was conducted by Professor Geoff Masters of ACER between December 2008 and April 2009. It encompassed analyses of the performances of Queensland students in national and international achievement surveys, a synthesis of international research on the characteristics of highly effective teachers, schools and education systems, consultations with a range of stakeholders, and visits to a number of selected primary schools. ACER was commissioned to develop a Teaching and Learning audit instrument in 2009, based on international research on school improvement. The audit instrument was to be developed as a tool for use in reviewing teaching and learning practices in all Queensland state schools. The audit instrument was also based on Education Queensland’s Roadmap for P–10 curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting (Department of Education and Training, 2010) as well as the findings and recommendations from the report (Masters, 2009).

**Development of the Queensland Audit Tool**

The Department of Education and Training (DET) in Queensland developed an audit tool which was used as a method for school leaders to identify the systems and processes needed to ensure that effective teaching and learning occurred in every classroom in every school. A requirement of the Department was that the tool could be used as an independent evaluation tool as well as for self-evaluation by schools. The fundamental purpose of the tool was that it would be capable of providing guidance and direction to individual schools and of being aggregated to inform systemic priorities, professional development and training. Figure 1 shows the seven stages in developing the tool.

**Figure 1. Stages of Development for the Queensland Audit Tool (Matters & Jones, 2013, p. 5)**
The design of the tool was informed by research into effective school practices that have a positive effect on student learning. These practices identified include: a positive learning culture, strong student achievement orientation, and implementation of a high-quality curriculum, professional staff collaboration, high-quality school leadership, and regular assessments and evaluations of progress (Dedering & Müller, 2010). High-quality school leadership was seen to be a integral characteristic which has significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning. The tool comprised eight domains which were:

1. An explicit improvement agenda  
2. Analysis and discussion of data  
3. A culture that promotes learning  
4. Targeted use of school resources  
5. An expert teaching team  
6. Systematic curriculum delivery  
7. Differential classroom learning  
8. Effective teaching practices

The resulting Teaching and Learning School Improvement Framework (Masters, 2010) has since been redeveloped into the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) with the addition of a ninth domain, School-Community Partnerships.

Each of the domains had a number of indicators which are characteristic of the evidence one would expect to see in a school if the domain was present. Standards for each domain were also developed: Low, Medium, High and Outstanding indicators were articulated. An implicit belief as highlighted by Masters (2012, p. 19), is that schools can ‘continually improve their practices and processes. The assumption is that no matter where a school is on its improvement journey, it is capable of becoming still more effective.’

The descriptors for ratings of Medium and Low were pitched at what are considered to be commonly observed levels of practice: Low for little if any evidence of effective practice in that domain; and Medium for evidence of solid practice. Excellent practice was rated as High, while Outstanding, the aspirational level, was pitched at practices that would rarely be observed in education systems across the world.

School audits in 2010 and 2011

In 2010 the Queensland Government introduced a systematic auditing process for all government schools. The audits were conducted by practising Principals seconded into the role. Over the next two years 1,257 schools were audited by a total of 25 auditors in 2009-2010 and a further 16 in 2012. The process involved in the school audits comprised of one or more auditors, depending on the size of the school, spending two days in a school obtaining evidence as it relates to the audit tool. The auditors obtained relevant documents such as school policies, curriculum plans, appraisal processes, and reporting templates. Members of the school community including the leadership team, teachers, students and parents were interviewed and asked questions relevant to the audit tool.

The primary purpose of the school audit process was to provide high quality independent feedback, accompanied by an expectation that the feedback information would be used by leaders of a school to design and action school improvement plans and that the audit service itself, was not to be used as a tool to measure leadership or teacher performance. This last point was critical. Schools and the staff in them needed to know that the audit process was fair and transparent. In large part it was about respect. Campling, Assistant Director-General of DET, supports this emphatically. ‘There is power in a respected colleague providing feedback in a respectful manner.’ He adds, ‘the tool brings forth information about how schools have committed to an improvement agenda across a diverse range of situations, including rural, special schools and schools of low socioeconomic status with Indigenous enrolments’ (M. Campling, personal communication, October, 2013).

In effect, the school auditing was a peer review process. Principals and teachers in Queensland schools had great confidence in the fact that a practising principal and therefore a teacher, was coming into their school. They were more likely to understand the specific context of a school and
were far more likely to demonstrate empathy for the teachers being interviewed during the evidence collection process. Consequently, principals indicated high levels of satisfaction in the audit process. Matters & Jones (2013) report that 97% of principals in schools audited to date, were either satisfied or very satisfied with the audit process.

The report which is provided to the school and is for them to keep is not distributed to central administrators for external scrutiny. Two documents are created. The executive summary highlights commendations, affirmations and recommendations as identified by the auditor. The other part of the report is an eight page profile of each of the domains with highlights of the characteristics observed by the auditor. The purpose of the report is so the audited school can focus on issues to consider for its future school improvement planning process.

**Conducting a school audit**

The selection and training of auditors was rigorous. It was essential there was consistency in the process and that auditors would be respectful and mindful of the sensitive work they were conducting.

The actual process of a school audit involved two phases: pre-audit and audit.

**Pre-Audit Phase:** Once auditors had been appointed by DET central office to schools, the auditor would contact the selected school principal and discuss the arrangements for the audit. The auditor would request documents at this time which enabled a deeper understanding of the school’s context. In addition, information on the school’s website and any other relevant information were supplied to the auditor. The principal was responsible for preparing the staff for the visit and engaging their support for the process.

**Audit Phase:** This phase would typically take two days. The auditor interviewed the principal, the leadership team, and selected a sample of staff, parents and students to obtain a range of evidence that identified strategies and practices within the school as they related to the audit instrument.

The importance of the principal's role in school improvement was emphasised through the process. The auditor met with the school principal on several occasions. Typically, this was at least three times so the principal was able to have significant input into the process. It also served as an opportunity for the auditor to provide initial observations and supply feedback to the principal which assisted in the principal accepting and valuing the information. During the interviews it was essential that a wide range of people in the school had an opportunity to provide information. Not only did this provide comprehensive data but also it had the combined effect of many members of the school community being included and valued in the process.

At the end of day one of the audit, a formal meeting with the principal took place. This consisted of the auditor providing interim findings and also enabled a conversation about the nature of the interviews needed on the second day in order to obtain further data, which could confirm or rebut the findings found to date.

The final day of the audit concluded with an exit meeting with the principal. At this time the principal was provided with the eight page profile and the executive report, the nature of which has been previously discussed in this paper. An important feature of this exit interview is the auditor discussing what evidence could not be found. It was often what was missing that informed the final report as well as the characteristics of each domain that were visible. The auditor did not present the findings to staff of the school. This was the task of the principal. The final summary was sent to the principal within two weeks. The school community were then to be informed of the findings by the principal.

After receiving the audit report, the Principal was required to post the summary to the school’s website and then commence work in developing the school improvement planning based on the report. To underline the school’s ownership of the process, the reports were stored at the school and not at DET central office.
Success of the audit process

The 2013 NAPLAN Summary Report (ACARA, 2013) indicates that although Queensland is not the highest performing state in Australia, growth trends are significant. Queensland students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 have demonstrated the greatest growth in achievement across nearly every domain assessed compared to every other state and territory in Australia. Most of the other states have demonstrated steady performance over the same period in the domains assessed. However, compared to Queensland, the achievement data from other states in most domains has flattened.

A significant point to note is that the school auditing process has been done on a large scale over a number of years. Possibly the greatest indicator of its success has been the widespread support from the principals and teachers in Queensland schools. In addition to the high satisfaction rate from principals, teachers want the process to continue and it has been widely regarded as a high quality professional learning experience for them.

There are a number of lessons that can be taken from the process so far:

- the audits were well within the bounds of understood practice so the intellectual load on principals and auditors was not overpowering;
- the development of criteria and the use of standards-based assessment are the strengths of the tool, giving school leaders confidence that the process is transparent—there are no hidden agendas; and
- the research base is one of the strengths of the tool. School leaders feel confident that there is a level of objectivity in ratings that they do not normally associate with other types of opinion-based inspections of school practice (Matters & Jones, 2013, p. 22).

Perhaps the most significant feature of the audit process and why it has been so successful is the power of the conversations during the audit process. The audit instrument provided a clear and explicit set of criteria which was used to frame the audit process and therefore the discussions between the auditors and the people in schools. The process respected the context of a school and there was an explicit expectation that the auditors would understand that context before entering a particular school.

Conclusion

The National School Improvement Tool highlights the importance of schools attending to key domains. In Queensland the audit process has been about conversations rather than interrogations. The audit report describes the current situation in a school but deliberately does not specify the future strategies a school should pursue. It is up to the school leaders to develop a school improvement plan informed by the findings of the report. The audit tool has been a fit-for-purpose instrument which has enabled schools to evaluate their practices with the specific goal to improve teaching and learning.

The audit process always respected the context of the school being audited. The final result of the audit report and the beauty of it was that it presented a narrow and sharp focus for the school to frame their school improvement plan. Too often in school settings the improvement agenda is too general. The school audit process that have been conducted in Queensland provided specific feedback to a school and enabled the principal and the other staff with a clear vision of what they needed to focus on to improve the learning of all students.

In terms of the overall success of the audit process to date, we should refer to the original reason for the development of the audit tool. It was developed in response to the unsatisfactory achievement in NAP assessment and TIMSS in 2008 by students in Queensland Government state schools. The audit reports confirmed specific strategies and practices that schools need to implement if their students were to advance their learning. The following comment from a Principal clearly articulates the power of the auditing process:
The audits highlighted the need to place students and their outcomes at school at the centre of our teaching and learning practices. It is clear that we had to achieve specific targets for school improvement and, more importantly, for teachers to use data to inform their teaching. It was time to have an explicit school-wide pedagogy and agreed standards of teaching practice within the school (Campling, Savvakis and Sedgman, 2012, p. 72).

References


Symposium 71
Paper C: Focus on planning in independent schools in Western Australia

Robert Hassell
Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA)
rhassell@ais.wa.edu.au

Introduction

You are the Principal of a school which has a Year 5 cohort of 75 students. In May of their Year 5 education, 45 of these students have already attained the Australian Curriculum Year 5 Achievement standard for English, History, Mathematics and Science. How do you improve these students’ learning in these curricula disciplines? What do you do as the leader of this school when you discover that around sixty percent of all students at each Year Level in Primary School have already attained the National Year Level Achievement standard in most Learning Areas by the end of first Term?

Or, you are the Principal of a school where all of your students have not participated consistently in mainstream school for several years, but they are still at or below compulsory school age. Many of these students live on the streets and their main goal in life is to survive until the next day. These students have never attained a year level achievement grade in their school lives. However; they feel safe and have discovered things that they want to learn at your school. What will your school improvement plan say about their learning goals and how will you measure this improvement?

These two examples show the diversity of AISWA schools and how improvements in student learning are contextual. AISWA schools are incredibly different and are spread over every corner of this vast State of Western Australia.

The Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA) was established in 1962 as a non-profit organisation to support, represent and promote the interests of Independent Schools. AISWA had 158 Independent School members in 2012 with a total of 138,072 students. There were 44 Primary Schools (Kindergarten to Year 6 or 7; 3 year olds to 11 or 12 year olds), 12 Secondary Schools (Year 7 or 8 to Year 12; 12 or 13 year olds to 18 year olds) and 102 Primary and Secondary Schools (Kindergarten to Year 12). These schools had sixteen different religious or philosophical affiliations as shown in Table 1, with some schools being members of more than one affiliated group. For example, some Aboriginal Community Schools are members of the Christian Schools Australia grouping. Not all member schools have a designated affiliation with a faith, philosophy or grouping of schools. The schools also range in size, from schools of less than fifty students to our largest school which has more than 2,700 students on two campuses in Metropolitan Perth.

This paper will draw on three specific examples, including elaborations of the two schools briefly described above, from the twenty-four Western Australian schools in the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA) that have worked with consultants in 2013 using the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012). AISWA started using the National School Improvement Tool to introduce the Australian Government’s initiative, Better Schools: National Plan for School Improvement (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011).
Table 1: Affiliation of AISWA schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Independent Community School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventist Christian School</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
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<td>Baptist</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Christian Education National</td>
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<td>Free Reformed Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greek Orthodox</td>
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<td>Islamic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Rudolf Steiner</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uniting Church</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Two AISWA Consultants, Christopher Witt and Robert Hassell, have offered support to a group of twenty-four member schools who had asked for assistance in whole school improvement or were coming up for re-registration during 2013. The support needed to include the state requirements (Department of Education Services, Western Australia, 2012) which include a school improvement plan. The twenty-four schools which we have supported have covered the diversity of AISWA schools that I have described above. Their response to the support has also varied considerably, which reflects the independence of the schools, the priorities that they have identified and the time the leadership and teachers have decided to commit to school improvement. While the Department of Education Services recommends that schools use the National School Improvement Tool to prepare their plan, this is not mandated.

The AISWA support has been in the form of in-school consultancy, analysis of data, professional learning and planning. The two consultants have used the nine domains of the Tool to work with school boards, leadership teams and teachers towards a School Improvement Plan to help the school improve learning over a specified time period; and to collaborate with them in a process of self-auditing using the Tool.

School leaders in Western Australian Independent Schools have embraced the Tool as a way of identifying and implementing sustainable school improvements in their schools. The most consistent feedback is that the National School Improvement Tool provides schools with a clear and simple framework by which to identify and evaluate improvements in student learning. The two consultants have worked with each school in an overall time frame and in blocks of time that suit the school’s agenda, involving other AISWA consultants with more specific expertise in the process when schools need more precise support focused on particular school improvements. For instance; if a school focused on Domain 6: Systematic Curriculum Delivery, and the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the AISWA Australian Curriculum Team or AISWA Literacy or Numeracy Consultants worked with the school. AISWA Schools began introducing the Australian Curriculum as soon as the curriculum documents became available in 2010, but implementation is on-going and is particularly focused on assessment at this time.
The AISWA support has enabled each of these twenty-four schools to begin School Improvement Plans which meet both the Better Schools: National Plan for School Improvement Initiative and the Department of Education Services’ registration requirements:

- The school improvement plan describes the priorities identified through analysis of student learning (achievement, progress and engagement) and the strategies to improve teaching and learning
- The plan has been used as a key reference document for the governing body to enable it to carry out its responsibility for maintaining a satisfactory standard of education. It is linked to evaluation reports about curriculum implementation and the quality of education programs provided by the school (Department of Education Services, Western Australia, 2012, p. 11).

The consultants have recommended that the author of the School Improvement Plan be the principal and the audience for the document the school governing body. The plan is accompanied by an action plan which includes regular formal reports to the governing body regarding achievement against the identified improvements in student learning and the stated measurements. Three schools are described as examples of this process.

**School One: Specific curriculum focus**

This is a large, well established school in the Perth Metropolitan area. Our work has been predominantly with the Primary School leadership and teachers. The Primary School Principal was employed with a clear mandate to identify and promote specific improvements in learning for students who are already high achievers against the National Year Level Achievement standards. For example, in Year 3 Reading, eight of the forty-eight students had attained the Year 3 National Achievement Standard in Reading by about half way through their year. However, data analysis of standardised assessment information and school-based assessment had identified some areas where improvements could be made. These were in spelling as used in students’ own writing, which was not at the same quality as evidence from spelling assessment data from standardised tests and spelling tests in class. Mental numeracy strategies and geometry and measurement were two areas in Mathematics which were identified for improvement. The school’s curriculum leader had analysed this data and presented the information to the teachers, but teachers still needed assistance to appreciate the need for improvements in the areas that were identified.

At this point the school leadership invited the AISWA Consultants to work with them and their teachers on a School Improvement Plan. A crucial point in this process was teaching the teachers how to use assessment data effectively and reflectively. We started this process by analysing a set of standardised test data for six students from the Year 5 class, where we were able to compare their performance in reading (see Table 2) and writing (see Table 3) between Year 3 and Year 5. These students performance in Reading and Writing for the standardised assessment were all at or about the School Mean. What was immediately clear to the teachers was that there had not been significant improvement in the performance of these students between Year 3 and Year 5 in the aspects of reading and writing that were assessed.
Table 2: Comparative performance in standardised reading test of matched cohort from Year 3 to Year 5 (School One)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 3 Reading: The students:</th>
<th>Year 5 Reading: The students:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cannot link information in a text to a related illustration</td>
<td>Cannot identify the speaker or narrator in a poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot infer from a set of rules for a game how the game is won</td>
<td>Cannot infer why a person being interviewed might quote another text or author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot order and categorise information in a set of rules for a game</td>
<td>Cannot interpret implicit information in a narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot recognise character traits of a person described in a narrative</td>
<td>Cannot recognise the stated motivations of a character in a poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot order information in a time sequence from a short descriptive text</td>
<td>Cannot infer that purpose of an organisation which is described in an information text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot identify the purpose of a speakers response in a simple dialogue</td>
<td>Cannot interpret explicit detail in a poem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot connect information from one sentence to another sentence in a narrative</td>
<td>Cannot connect information across sections in an information text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Comparative performance in standardised writing test of matched cohort from Year 3 to Year 5 (School One)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 3 Writing: The students:</th>
<th>Year 5 Writing: The students:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have difficulty responding to the needs of a defined audience</td>
<td>Have difficulty writing correct simple and compound sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have very few examples of conventional spelling</td>
<td>Have very few examples of correct spelling of simple and/or common words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to write very short pieces with very few related content words</td>
<td>Tend to write very short pieces with very few related content words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use unrelated and sentences and ideas in their writing which are not linked to the topic</td>
<td>Use unrelated and sentences and ideas in their writing which are not linked to the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have very limited formation of correct sentences</td>
<td>Have very limited formation of correct sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not use capital letters or full stops accurately</td>
<td>Do not use capital letters or full stops accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot identify the genre of their writing and therefore maintain the structure e.g. An expository piece becomes a narrative</td>
<td>Cannot identify the genre of their writing and therefore maintain the structure e.g. An expository piece becomes a narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot use simple words or phrases precisely</td>
<td>Cannot use simple words or phrases precisely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We then turned to the National School Improvement Tool to process this information through Domain 6: Systematic Curriculum Delivery. The teachers acknowledged that this data was confirmed by school-based assessment data and that a systematic approach was needed to improve these identified aspects of learning, as well as those highlighted in Mathematics. The teachers individually audited the Primary School, using the criteria and the rubric for Domain 6. We then met to share the individual audits and discuss the outcome. This initial self audit resulted in the teachers' belief that the school was somewhere between medium to high on the Domain 6 rating.
The consequent discussion was robust and professional and led to the conclusion that across the school there was more evidence that the school was medium on the rubric rather than high, and that in the school’s plan the teachers, together with the school’s leadership, could work towards curriculum delivery being outstanding by the end of a three year period. However; the teachers wanted to interrogate the data further at a class level to identify all curriculum areas that needed improvement so that the plan could reflect specific improvements that related directly to the Australian Curriculum and to the performance level of the students against the Australian achievement standards.

Teachers also discussed Domain 8: Effective Pedagogical Practices and Domain 5: An Expert Teaching Team as other domains of the Tool, which would need close auditing and scrutiny to inform the school’s improvement plan. The first step in this process was when the teachers investigated how they were teaching guided reading across the Primary School and found that there were inconsistencies that needed to be addressed, so they have invited an AISWA Literacy consultant to work with them on a guided reading strategy. These professional learning strategies are being developed alongside the school improvement planning. The Primary School Principal is aiming to have a draft School Improvement Plan for 2014 – 2017 written by the end of 2013. The focus domains for this school will be Domain 6: Systematic Curriculum Delivery and Domain 8: Effective Pedagogical Practice. However; the teachers and leadership will also conduct a self-audit of the remaining seven domains to include in the plan. Their discussions have led to a belief that continuous school improvement will mean that they will address all of the domains in the Tool on a regular basis, whilst they focus on Domain 6 and Domain 8 over the next three years. An appendix to the school improvement plan will be an action plan that gives clear time frames, persons responsible and report dates at regular intervals, probably at the end of each school term. The Primary Principal is the main author of the school improvement plan and the audience is the Head of School and the school executive leadership. Formal reports to this audience will be provided bi-annually.

The school submitted a draft School Improvement Plan for Kindergarten to Year 12 for its Department of Education Services’ Registration and was commended on the content, organisation and intent of the plan. At a meeting with the Dean of Curriculum and the Primary Leadership Team for the Secondary School, we outlined the salient points for a whole school improvement plan. The Head of Primary School made it clear that the Primary School was at the beginning of a process and that they wanted to make sure that the plan drove improvements in learning for every student.

In the remaining two examples, details are only given where the process varied from School One.

School Two: Vision and passion

This school is a provincial school teaching Kindergarten to Year 12 (K-12) and the process has involved the Head of School, the leadership team and teachers. The Director of Studies first approached AISWA to assist with school improvement as part of preparations for re-registration with the Department of Education Services in Western Australia. The consultants’ first meeting was with the leadership team and focused on compliance until we introduced the National School Improvement Tool. We discussed the Tool and took the leadership through an audit of Domain 3: A Culture that Promotes Learning, because this domain seemed to marry with the school’s vision and mission statements and also reflected the Head of School’s philosophies about improving learning in the school. The modelling of the self-audit process during this meeting set the tone and our discussion caused the Head of School to reflect on how he saw learning in the school improving over the next three years.

The consultants left the leadership team with the task of auditing the remaining eight domains in the Tool and conducting a more thorough audit of Domain 3. We agreed that this more thorough audit had to be based on evidence and we discussed in some detail the types of data that the team had at their disposal to conduct this audit. This included academic data in the form of school-based assessments and a range of standardised tests; annual parent, teacher and student surveys;
attendance data and behaviour and well-being data for each student. In previous analyses of the academic data with AISWA consultants, it was clear that there was a significant range of learning abilities represented at each year level, sometimes a range of six to seven years. However, the school’s response to this dilemma had not been consistent, resulting in different approaches to teaching and learning in different areas of the school and sometimes in different classrooms.

Following a presentation by Professor Geoff Masters on the National School Improvement Tool, the Head of School decided that the plan should articulate real improvements in learning for students across the school. While continuing the focus for improvement in the school on Domain 3, he also wanted reference to Domain 2: Analysis and Discussion of Data and Domain 6: Systematic Curriculum Delivery. He also wanted a thorough and evidenced based audit of all nine domains, beginning with Domain 6, with all of the teachers in the school, so that ownership of the improvement process would emanate from the classroom, not from leadership. We also agreed in these discussions that the involvement of the middle management group, namely the Heads of Learning Area and the Primary School Leadership Team in this large school, was crucial to the success of any sustained improvement agenda. We met with these groups with the Dean of Studies and introduced the Tool and the improvement process to them. The response was mixed, from enthusiastic embracing of the process through to resistance or rejection. Clearly, these differing opinions and ownership would be a challenge for the school executive leadership and particularly the Head of School and the Dean of Studies.

The AISWA Consultants agreed to return to work with the middle management groups and to introduce the National School Improvement Tool to the whole staff, including Education Assistants. The consultants asked that the teachers read Domain 3: A Culture That Promotes Learning thoroughly and that they audit this domain using the rating descriptors as well as prepare an explanation of why they decided that the school was at this point on the continuum.

The resulting audit with more than eighty teachers was interesting in that it was very consistent. The staff clearly saw the school as being at Medium to High on this rubric, but the discussion that followed revealed that there were quite different views on why the school needed to improve its learning culture and some intense discussion about what learning was and how to promote it within the school. During this discussion there were two pivotal moments. The first was when we were talking about whether learning a second language helped students learn English better. The languages teacher was passionate and forthright in her views that this was the case and was applauded at the end of her speech, mainly because she had emphasised the need for collaboration in the school to improve students’ valuing of learning as intrinsic. The second moment was when the Head of School spoke clearly and also with passion about his vision for learning in the school and how he would like everyone in the room to work together to achieve improvements in learning for every child every day. We learnt later that this was the first time that he had spoken in this way to the whole staff and was the first time that he had so clearly articulated his vision for learning in the school.

This school has also submitted a draft School Improvement Plan to the Department of Education Services for registration, making it very clear that they are only part of the way through the process and that ownership of the plan by every teacher in the school is crucial to its success. The author for the School Improvement Plan in this school is the Head of School and the audience will be the School’s Governing Body, because the Head has articulated that he and the staff are accountable for the quality of learning in the school.

The first step in this process is a coherent approach to the collection of data and to this end the school executive is looking at a number of databases to help them achieve this consistency. An audit of the school’s data sets – academic, attendance, behaviour and well-being – is being conducted to determine whether the information being collected is giving the school an accurate picture of student learning. Alongside this process, AISWA consultants will continue their involvement with
the middle management group at the school under the leadership of the Dean of Studies and the executive leadership team. Both of these groups will lead the analysis and discussion of data, once the data sets have been audited, and they will lead the development of a process where sustained learning improvement can be identified from an evidence base and maintained. AISWA Consultants have been privileged to witness the journey that this school and the school leadership have taken in moving from school improvement as something that they were required to do, to a process that they are now excitedly embracing as their core business. The catalyst for this transformation has been the National School Improvement Tool and the willingness of the Head of School and the school leadership to embrace the need for change.

School Three: Every student can learn and grow

This school teaches and trains young people who generally come from outside the recognised and accepted secondary school system. Most students who attend the school have, for one reason or another, rejected or been rejected by mainstream education. The school offers its very diverse range of clients an opportunity to continue their education and achieve life goals that would otherwise be unattainable. The school provides a unique service giving specialised education and training to the young people from the local community in areas of identified need. Clearly, the focus of this school is student well-being and, initially, this often means simply giving the student a reason to be at school every day.

Once again, the school leadership approached the AISWA consultants to help them to write their School Improvement Plan for Department of Education Services registration. The school leadership and staff had already embraced the National School Improvement Tool as a vehicle through which they could articulate the vision and mission of the school and the education service that they provide for students. To this end, the teachers and school leaders had already begun a process of thorough and considered self-audit against the criteria in the Tool. Their difficulty was in two areas: Domain 2: Analysis and Discussion of Data and how to show that these students, many of whom were living on the streets, could and were improving in their learning. We discussed one example where a student had learnt not to smoke cigarettes in the entrance foyer of the school, because of the effect that this was having on school staff and other students. This student now arrives at school and finishes smoking before entering the building. The next step in their learning is to stop smoking before they enter the school grounds! How do you display this learning improvement?

What data sets did the school have at its disposal? As it turned out an incredibly rich set of data, that was regularly discussed – at least once a week and sometimes every day. Every student in the school has an Individual Education Plan and an Individual Behaviour Plan. Both of these documents are developed with the student’s input and are reviewed at least weekly with the student. In addition, the school leadership and staff conduct a risk assessment of each student every month – this is a fifty point checklist which looks at the student’s education outcomes, attendance, behaviour and well-being. However this data is all on paper, and teachers and staff find it difficult to keep up with the paperwork. However if a student is deemed at risk in any way, the response is swift and supportive, often enlisting the help of community agencies. As we read the National School Improvement Tool together we began to notice how often well-being was mentioned. Student well-being is the focus of this school and the learning that takes place is first and foremost based on the school being a safe place for the student on a daily basis. This became the background for the School Improvement Plan. The school has decided that Domain 3: A Culture That Promotes Learning and Domain 8: Effective Pedagogical Practice, both in the unique context of this school, are the areas that need to be improved over the next three years. The plan is written by the Principal and the audience for the plan is the School’s Governing Body. The Principal will report to the Governing Body every six months on agreed targeted improvements in student learning.

This school has embraced the whole notion of School Improvement and has used the Tool to articulate its belief that every person can learn. It has submitted the plan to the Department of Education Services as part of their registration process, but, as yet has not received feedback from
the Department. Regardless, the school has embarked on a process that they believe will work. One of the most important aspects of this change is that they are now working on ways to collect, monitor and communicate the information that they regularly collect on a student’s educational outcomes, well-being, attendance and behaviour. AISWA consultants will continue to support the school in this process.

**Conclusion**

School Improvement, specifically measurable improvements in student learning is core business. The National School Improvement Tool has provided a framework for each of the twenty-four schools that we have worked with to develop and write a plan to describe, explain and articulate how they would like to improve learning for the students in their care. Every one of the twenty-four School Improvement Plans that we have been involved in is different. The process of writing the plan and the involvement of school leaders, teachers and staff in that process has also been diverse. In every case however; there are two common elements – the commitment of the school principal or head of school to improving learning for students in their care and the simplicity of the National School Improvement Tool. The reward for the AISWA consultants has been to see school leaders and teachers so committed to sustained improvements to learning in their context.

**References**

