



The Bridge

Making research practical

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School effectiveness and school improvement

Abstract

School effectiveness is about the school and classroom processes that improve student outcomes, after adjusting for student demographics.

School improvement is about developing and enacting an appropriate strategy for achieving school effectiveness. It usually involves a school community aligning to a shared vision, conducting rigorous self-evaluation, building the capacity of staff, and using data to inform change.

A robust school improvement procedure with strong leadership catering for school context can embed effective practices and lift outcomes in a sustained way.



Penrith Christian School

The school improvement process

An effective school consistently achieves student outcomes at a high level. Hallinger (2018) categorised schools as being on one of four different paths:

- effective: consistent student success over time
- improving: student learning is improving over time
- coasting: student performance is moderate with little change over time
- ineffective: poor and/or declining student achievement over time.

School improvement involves enhancing practices and strengthening capacity to intentionally improve student outcomes and ensure student success is consistent over time. The impact of school improvement is maximised when the process is tailored to the school's needs and its agreed priorities (Hopkins, 2020; Jackson et al., 2018). For independent schools in NSW, this means incorporating the defining characteristics, philosophy, outlook, ethos, geographical context, and social demographics of the particular school.

There are also a range of different outcomes that schools may wish to focus on during the improvement process, including academic achievement, student agency, enjoyment of learning and student wellbeing. It is critical for schools to identify areas that require improvement and to prioritise these through quality, evidence-based and data-informed processes.

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).

However, some elements of the *process* for school improvement have appeared consistently in research literature.

The school improvement process appears to work best when the school has a clear vision shared by the school's leadership and a culture of improvement has been established (Hopkins 2020, 2022; Kools & Stoll, 2016; Kotter, 2011; Saminathen et al., 2021). Then, to implement effective practices with the right drivers, data should inform the setting of priorities and goals (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016; Kools & Stoll, 2016; Masters, 2016). Effective implementation needs a carefully designed strategy that includes measuring and monitoring plans for evaluating the improvement process (Bendikson & Meyer, 2022; Masters, 2016). Jackson et al. (2018) refers to these three stages as enabling context, *effective practices* and *effective implementation* (Figure 1).

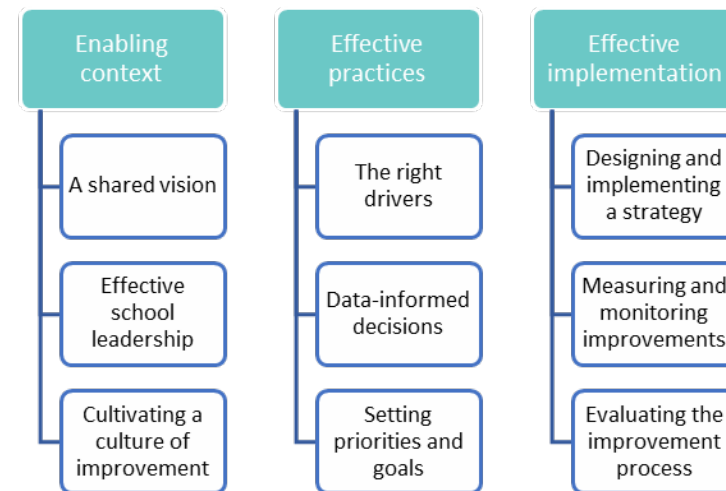


Figure 1. The school improvement process

Enabling context

A shared vision

A school's vision often goes beyond what might be specified in its improvement plan. In the independent sector, a school's vision may be driven by the existing philosophy or principles upon which the school was founded. Hopkins (2020, 2022) argues that a strategic vision needs a focus on learning to permeate across the school, particularly curriculum and pedagogy, for students to reach their potential. Principals should align staff to a clearly articulated vision and provide capacity to achieve the goals associated with the vision (Saminathen et al., 2021).

A shared vision can help unify diverse points of view and clearly outline the direction of the school.

Evidence indicates that a school vision is 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).

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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; Hopkins, 2022; OECD, 2013).

Leaders of effective schools also:

- 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).

Schools that conceptualise themselves as learning organisations have staff that regularly and actively participate in a process of learning. They are capable of dealing with rapid changes and facilitating organisational 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, 2013). In PLCs, members focus on student learning, work collaboratively and hold themselves accountable for results (DuFour & DuFour, 2013). Strong PLCs reportedly cultivate 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).



Kincoppal-Rose Bay School

Effective practices

The right drivers

It is important for schools to focus on the most effective drivers for improvement in their own context. For instance, Kirtman and Fullan (2016) suggest:

- capacity building rather than focusing on accountability
- teamwork rather than individual approaches
- focusing on pedagogy rather than letting technology drive the pedagogy
- strategic thinking rather than ad hoc approaches.

Evidence suggests that some improvement initiatives are unsuccessful when schools focus primarily on standards, assessments, monitoring, and interventions since these initiatives 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).

Data-informed decisions

The use of data is essential in the school improvement process. Developing a clear understanding of where a school is at in terms of practice and student outcomes 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 would be useful for baseline data to be gathered from within and by schools, but 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. Formal data collection need not be limited to summative assessment data but can also include surveys, interviews and systematic observations of students and teachers. Informal discussions, classroom observations and teachers' feedback to students can also contribute (Schildkamp, 2019).

People also interpret and make meaning out of data differently due to their own perspectives and biases, so it is important to involve a number of people from a range of roles in the analysis process.

Setting priorities and goals

Once baseline data have been collected and analysed to make sense of it all, it is then possible to prioritise areas of focus, set goals and develop improvement plans. However, it is important that goals are not set on the basis of what is easiest to measure because this practice leads to *goal displacement*, meaning other important goals are pushed aside (Schildkamp, 2019).

The following questions can be helpful in guiding the school improvement process.

- **Setting priorities:** Which student outcomes are the most urgent to improve?
- **Setting realistic expectations:** How much improvement should the school aim for?
- **Setting realistic timelines:** What timeline is most appropriate? (Masters, 2016).

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 research literature for what constitutes best 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 et al., 2016).

School leaders also need to consider the context of the school, such as the culture and values of the parents and the broader school community, and collectively develop and communicate goals to ensure there is balance on where efforts are placed (Schildkamp, 2019).

Effective implementation

Designing and implementing a strategy

Based on the data analysed, a systematic improvement strategy can be developed for implementation. To avoid being buried in a pile of data all at once, a *cycles of improvement* approach breaks the data down into specific and achievable goals (Bendikson & Meyer, 2022). These goals drive evidence-informed action plans, generally starting with the most urgent, and rolling out other priorities in a staggered manner. Each cycle of improvement should include a variety of success measures which are continuously monitored to demonstrate improvement over time. During the cycle, change leaders should provide feedback based on the data to teachers, engage them in any tweaks or reviews that need to be made, and celebrate the quick wins that are achieved along the way (Hopkins, 2020; Preston et al., 2017). “Once the routines, structures and habits that underpin cycles of improvement become established, schools’ improvement becomes continuous” (Bendikson & Meyer, 2022, p. 46).

School improvement works best when schools support each other and “system leadership drives implementation and adapt policies to context” (Hopkins, 2022, p. 17). Leadership usually needs to be more prescriptive if the school is moving from an ineffective or coasting trajectory (Hallinger, 2018) but can ease as the school gains capacity (Hopkins, 2022).

Measuring and monitoring

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).



Evaluating 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 and should be answered with rigorous 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 nine elements outlined above 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. Rather, the steps are organically interlinked — like pieces of a cohesive puzzle — supporting and enabling school improvement to occur and proceed effectively and sustainably.

Measuring school improvement

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 (Hopkins, 2022). 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” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p.16). Research indicates that improvement in teaching practices often requires:

- *collaborative practices* to connect people with diverse roles, align different parts of the school and thus produce a coherent picture and consistent improvement strategies (Kools & Stoll, 2016)
- *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 et al., 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 (Hopkins, 2022). 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 et al., 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 since it is just one aspect of the knowledge, skills and capabilities students should be developing at school. 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.



St Gabriel's School

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