

# Executive summary

Highlights from the 2018 school reviews



Between 2015 and 2018, the School Improvement Unit (SIU) conducted 1305 reviews across Queensland, engaging approximately a quarter of all schools in the review process each year. 2018 marked the end of the first four-year school review cycle in the state. This report presents findings from the 275 school reviews conducted in 2018, and identifies some key changes in school improvement practice over the past four years.

Each school review report provides insights into individual school practice. Together, the reports from the first four years of reviews provide valuable system-level learnings. They reveal shifts in practice resulting from new knowledge permeating the Queensland state school system through collaboration within and among schools and across the system.

Overall, the recommendations documented in school review reports over the last four years indicate a positive shift, reflecting the maturing approach of Queensland state schools and their leaders to school improvement. The challenge now, however, is to sustain these improvements.

Building on the SIU's previous three annual reports, this report is the final part of a four-volume analysis of the first review cycle. The findings are intended to inform the continued improvement of Queensland state schools into the future. By describing the achievements of schools and the system, and outlining the next steps, the report can be used to promote reflection and collaborative conversations within and between school communities and their leaders, helping them to determine where they are at in their school improvement journey.

## Achievements

Over the past four years, a number of achievements in Queensland state schools have been identified.

### Strategic leadership

Many schools have moved on from foundational aspects of planning, such as identifying and narrowing improvement priorities, to addressing other, more advanced aspects of strategic leadership and direction setting. By the end of the cycle, the approach of many school leaders to school improvement has become more collaborative and strategic to include working with teachers to unpack the explicit improvement agenda, aligning school resources and processes with improvement priorities, and monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of improvement initiatives.

Over the last four years, there has been a greater focus on building a shared understanding of school improvement by collaboratively developing school improvement agendas. Each year, a greater number of schools were using a collaborative inquiry approach to identify improvement priorities and related problems of practice, and to generate improvement strategies.

In addition, the understanding of school improvement as a continuous and highly contextualised process has grown in the Queensland education system. This is evident in the many schools that have focused on building their capacity to improve by creating opportunities for collaborative reflection and inquiry.

Between 2015 and 2018, many school leaders embraced effective approaches to leading change, using evidence to inform their decisions and engaging staff in school improvement activities. Critical to this has been the growth of distributed leadership models. Each year has seen a greater proportion of schools using shared leadership to drive the improvement agenda, implement specific initiatives and draw together staff in reviewing a school's vision.

### Data collection and use

Increasingly, Queensland state schools have engaged in collecting, analysing and using data. Since 2015, data collection in many schools has become more refined, consistent and balanced. Schools have shifted their focus from collecting large and numerous datasets to collecting data in a strategic way to inform teaching practice and school decision making. As a result, the practice of school improvement, as well as teaching and learning in Queensland state schools, has become better informed by data. In addition, there has been more collaborative discussion and analysis of data over time.

### The use of resources

Over the four-year period, the use of resources by schools has become more targeted and better aligned with improvement priorities. Financial resources, human resources and professional learning effectively supported successful implementation of school improvement agendas in many schools.

### Staff capability

Between 2015 and 2018, there has been a growing recognition in the Queensland state school system of the importance of continuously investing in the professional learning of school staff. Professional collaboration and learning communities have flourished. An increasing number of schools over this period developed collegial engagement processes involving observation and feedback, and promoted a culture of sharing, learning and collegiality as a critical success factor in implementing improvement strategies. Many school leaders have become learning-focused instructional leaders, modelling effective teaching for their teachers.

### School culture

As a result of their improvement agendas, many schools over the four-year period significantly changed the ways in which they worked. There has been a growing awareness in the system of the importance of culture change for the success of school improvement. Pre-existing 'ways of thinking', values and mental models often need to be challenged and changed before developing new 'ways of working'. Addressing challenges related to school culture before the introduction of new practices was critical for sustaining the implemented changes.

## Next steps

To build on the significant achievements identified across the Queensland state school system and to ensure their sustainability, further progress can be achieved through greater focus on collaboration, precision and alignment.

Greater collaboration in school improvement planning means engaging all school staff and the broader school community in developing the explicit improvement agenda and setting the direction for the school.

Greater precision can be brought by refining, clarifying and unpacking the key elements of the school improvement agenda with school staff. Refining and unpacking the school's explicit improvement agenda means including specific priorities, targets, timelines, strategies, core practices, aligned responsibilities and measures of success. It also calls for clarifying expectations and accountabilities of all staff and developing a deep understanding of agreed changes.

Alignment can be enhanced by reviewing how the key school processes and resources support the improvement priorities. Alignment with improvement priorities concerns professional learning opportunities and planning, collegial engagement practices, whole-school frameworks, policies and practices, and roles and responsibilities of leaders.

A more collaborative approach to planning and professional learning can help schools further enhance staff capability. It is important to precisely define and communicate staff roles and accountabilities, collaboratively develop a whole-school professional learning plan, and ensure this plan, as well as professional learning opportunities offered to staff, are aligned to improvement priorities.

Professional learning collaboration is more than a professional learning activity; it is a way of working for the whole school. This could be achieved by involving all staff in a whole-school practice of observation, feedback and coaching, and continuous staff engagement in professional learning communities and networks within and beyond the school.

Greater depth, precision and alignment of data discussions with improvement priorities can be powerful in promoting a culture of self-reflection and self-evaluation. The use of data in schools can be enhanced by providing more time for teachers and leaders to collaboratively discuss student achievement and progress, and by ensuring data discussions are rigorous and systematic, and provide teachers with meaningful information and feedback to inform their practice.

More intentional collaboration opportunities for school teachers and leaders can help to enhance consistent implementation of pedagogical practices. Greater precision in refining pedagogical frameworks may help build a shared understanding of pedagogical practices.

Greater alignment of curriculum programs and assessment tasks with the Australian Curriculum is essential. Further work in this area requires collaboratively reviewing whole-school curriculum plans and building a shared understanding of Australian Curriculum expectations and consistent delivery of the content. Collaborative curriculum planning also includes unpacking success criteria and moderation practices to deepen understanding of, and promote coherence and consistency in, curriculum and assessment.

School improvement is a continuous learning journey. For many schools, their first review was a 'spark' that initiated this journey. Schools are part of a bigger system from which they can learn, so to further advance Queensland state school education, openness to learning at individual, school and system levels is critical.

