

Insights to inform school practice

Education Improvement
Research Centre
Insights paper
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School reviews in Queensland provide powerful insights into school practice. With every state school and centre reviewed by the Education Improvement Branch every four years, reviews are an opportunity to consider changes in practice over time and to identify areas for continuous improvement across the system.

Strengthening the foundations for student learning

School culture provides the foundation for learning and wellbeing in all schools. It sets the tone and feel in classrooms, playgrounds and among the wider school community. For this reason, a culture that promotes learning sits at the base of the [School Improvement Hierarchy](#). Along with analysis and discussion of data, it is the bricks and mortar of sustained school improvement and the platform for every student succeeding.

A culture that promotes learning is evident in high expectations for all students, positive and caring relationships, and professional and collegial approaches. A high priority is given to students' social and emotional development, along with academic rigour in learning. There are also clear strategies that promote positive student behaviour, attendance and wellbeing, ensuring students have a safe, respectful, inclusive and calm learning environment.

This paper presents insights from the most recent school reviews conducted in Queensland state schools in late 2020 and early 2021. It explores some of the key elements underpinning school culture and, in particular, strategies that support student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing.

How does the *National School Improvement Tool* describe a culture that promotes learning?

'The school is driven by a deep belief that every student is capable of successful learning. A high priority is given to building and maintaining positive and caring relationships between staff, students and parents. There is a strong collegial culture of mutual trust and support among teachers and school leaders and parents are treated as partners in the promotion of student learning and wellbeing. The school works to maintain a learning environment that is safe, respectful, tolerant, inclusive and that promotes intellectual rigour.'

ACER 2012, p. 6

School reviews — Semester 2, 2020 and Term 1, 2021 (total: 288)

School types			
P-6	Secondary	P-9/10/12	Other
207	40	16	25*

* Comprises 17 special schools, five schools of distance education, one outdoor and environmental education centre, one educational unit and one centre for continuing secondary education.

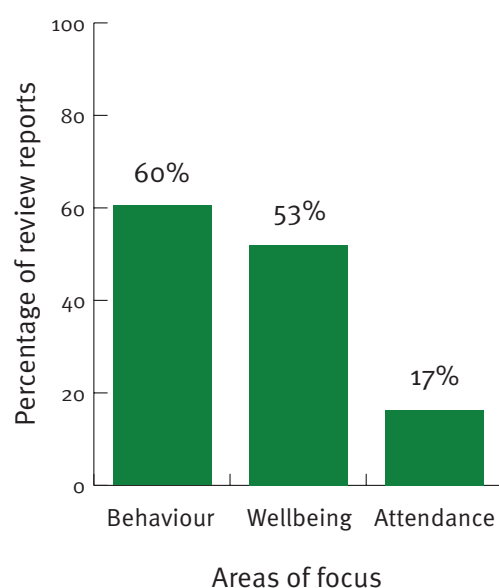
“Research shows that a vibrant and positive school culture with a shared enthusiasm for learning is key to successful student outcomes. This is even more critical when building a culture of engagement and achievement for every student.”

DoE 2021, p. 10

Key findings from school reviews

Domain three of the *National School Improvement Tool* is dedicated to a culture that promotes learning. Across school reviews, practices promoting student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing were among the top areas of focus for recommendations in domain three.

Figure 1: Domain three improvement strategies — Semester 2, 2020 and Term 1, 2021

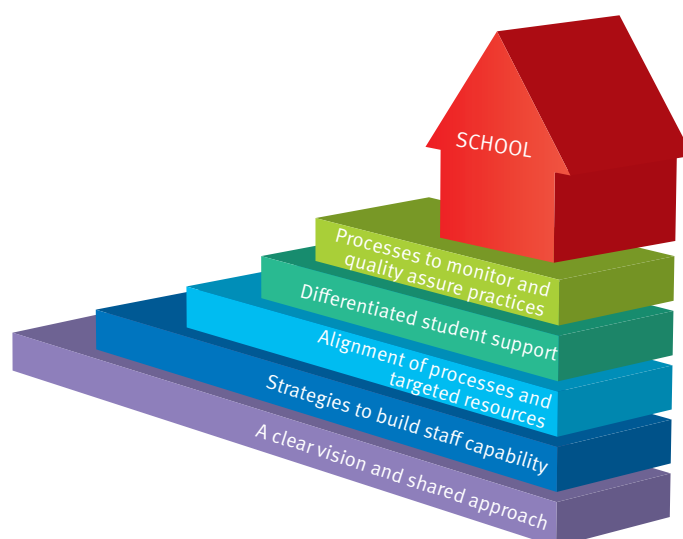


Notes: N=287. One review report was not included in this analysis due to its different format.

Building a strong vision and culture for student learning

School review reports contain a range of recommendations to support student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. A broad analysis of improvement strategies related to student engagement reveals five key considerations for schools:

- a clear vision and shared approach
- strategies to build staff capability
- alignment of processes and targeted resources
- differentiated student support
- processes to monitor and quality assure practices.



► A clear vision and shared approach

The most common review recommendations were for schools to collaboratively plan and document their approach towards building a culture that promotes learning. This sets the basis for a shared understanding of practices related to student engagement, including attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. Recommendations about student attendance focused on reviewing and developing action plans, policies and whole-school strategies. For behaviour, a majority of recommendations were to review aspects of a school's responsible behaviour plan for students, in drafting their student code of conduct. For wellbeing, the recommendations were about adopting a whole-school approach, and creating and refining student learning and wellbeing frameworks.

Example recommendations in the three focus areas suggested that schools:

- collaboratively develop, communicate and enact a whole-school attendance strategy, including the rigorous monitoring of attendance, and systematic implementation of intervention strategies for all students including target groups
- review the responsible behaviour plan for students and school behaviour procedures and expectations in transitioning to the student code of conduct
- develop a wellbeing framework that identifies systematic processes to support staff and student wellbeing and a clearly articulated approach to student case management and referral.

► Strategies to build staff capability

Staff capability was a key theme in review reports. These recommendations related to building staff skills in behaviour management, further developing cultural competency, establishing collective agreement of acceptable student behaviour for learning, and understanding diverse student needs. Common recommendations were to:

- strengthen staff understanding of, and commitment to, implementing Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) with fidelity, through provision of a differentiated professional development program, in addition to quality assurance of processes and procedures
- develop a comprehensive student wellbeing action plan, including professional development for all staff to build their understanding of the needs of the full range of learners.

► Alignment of processes and targeted resources

Review reports highlighted the need for schools to align processes and resources in order to maximise the impact of a school's approach to student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. These recommendations referred to aligning practices, programs and strategies; ensuring consistent language, values, expectations, practice and policy; and drawing together the resources of key staff and stakeholders. Considerations for schools included:

- reviewing, enhancing and sustaining systems that improve attendance, and aligning strategies with school and community partnerships
- collaboratively reviewing the whole-school approach to PBL to ensure alignment of practice, shared

understanding and consistent implementation across the school

- reviewing the student wellbeing framework and PBL program to clarify the role of each component and implement strategies consistently across the school.

► Differentiated student support

Differentiated student support was another key theme in review recommendations about student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. Recommendations referred to providing targeted student support, tiered interventions, referrals, individual plans, case management and specialised programs. Review reports recommended that differentiated support be part of a whole-school approach. The next steps were to:

- develop and implement a comprehensive approach to improving student attendance, providing differentiated support based on student needs
- collaboratively review school behaviour management practices to build school and community understanding of a differentiated behaviour approach that nurtures all student needs and circumstances, and is safe, tolerant and inclusive
- build processes to sustain whole-school differentiation practices and specialised programs to meet the diverse learning and wellbeing needs of students.

► Processes to monitor and quality assure practice

School review reports highlighted the role of reviewing, monitoring and quality assuring school practices. This is about schools regularly monitoring the implementation of strategies to see how they are progressing, and ensuring practices are enacted consistently and rigorously, and are having the desired impact. Recommendations referred to reviewing, updating, refining, monitoring and quality assuring practice. This included:

- collaboratively and regularly reviewing student attendance patterns, processes and strategies, resource allocations and outcomes to maximise student engagement in learning
- developing and enacting quality assurance practices to monitor implementation of the agreed behaviour expectations, routines and processes
- documenting and implementing a whole-school approach to student and staff wellbeing, and reviewing regularly for effectiveness.

“ Highly skilled teachers and educators have the ability to transform the lives of young people and inspire and nurture their personal and academic development. They provide significant encouragement, advice and support for learners outside the home, shaping teaching to nurture the unique abilities of every child. ”

COAG 2019, p. 11



“ Parents, carers and families are the first and most important educational influence in a child’s life. They have a critical role in early development, including social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical wellbeing. ”

COAG 2019, p. 10

The ninth domain of the *National School Improvement Tool*, school–community partnerships, runs alongside the School Improvement Hierarchy, indicating that it applies to all domains within the pyramid. This was apparent in the review reports containing recommendations about student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing. Review recommendations focusing on attendance emphasised the role of parents, families and the local community in supporting and maximising school attendance. Improvement strategies relating to student behaviour referred to parent/carer consultation, and their engagement with and understanding of the school’s approach to behaviour. Recommendations about partnerships also emphasised the role that parents/carers, families, community organisations and other schools play in supporting student learning and wellbeing.

For more on school partnerships, see insights paper ***Building pathways to success through powerful partnerships***.

To generate discussion ...

- How does our school foster a culture of high expectations and a commitment to excellence for every student to learn successfully?
- What school-wide, targeted and differentiated strategies are in place to monitor and enhance the engagement, wellbeing and academic outcomes for students across the school?
- How can we support staff across the school to develop a shared understanding, implement consistent processes and build capability to support students’ engagement and wellbeing?
- How does our school work in partnership with parents and carers to engage them in their child’s learning?
- How do we continuously monitor the impact and adapt strategies to ensure maximum engagement and academic success for every student?

Practical considerations

Build a strong vision and culture for student learning

- Be bold! Collaboratively develop an aspirational vision focused on high expectations and a commitment to excellence across the school.
- Use a range of data sources to identify and prioritise student, cohort and school-wide initiatives that promote student engagement and achievement.
- Take a systematic approach to supporting students' enhanced engagement around attendance and positive behaviour.
- Refine and align processes, and target resources, with areas of identified need in order to have an impact on priority areas.
- Continually monitor and differentiate strategies to maximise impact, particularly for students most at risk.

Foster excellence in student engagement, wellbeing and academic learning

- Foster high expectations for all staff and students in promoting student engagement, a focus on wellbeing, and a strong commitment to quality teaching and learning.
- Establish clear processes, roles and responsibilities, and implementation guidelines across the school, which promote high attendance and positive behaviour.
- Differentiate the level of support and intervention strategies for identified students and cohorts based on need.
- Provide support to staff and build capability to implement school-wide processes and practices around student engagement and wellbeing.
- Seek regular feedback from staff and use strategies to follow through and quality assure implementation to refine and ensure consistency across the school.

Nurture partnerships for learning

- Acknowledge parents and carers as their children's 'first teachers'; engage them as integral members of the school and as partners in student learning.
- Foster a shared understanding and ownership across the school community — among students, staff, parents/carers and the broader community — of the school's vision for students' success.
- Nurture and build relationships across the school with interactions that are professional, caring and inclusive, with a foundation of mutual trust and respect.
- Continue to build a strong collegial culture among staff where professional collaboration and learning are encouraged.
- Harness the collective efforts and resources within the community to contribute towards priority areas and create enriched opportunities, resources and outcomes for students.



School snapshot

Case study: Leaps and bounds with PBL at Biggenden State School

Biggenden State School is a P–10 rural school located 70 kilometres west of Maryborough. The school has leveraged the opportunities presented by committed staff and the school review process to produce a raft of reforms in positive student behaviour and classroom routines for learning. Biggenden has developed organisational processes, reinvigorated staff morale, and applied practices that are making a difference to how students engage with their teachers, each other and their learning.

The school rejuvenated its PBL professional learning committee (PLC). It meets every fortnight to interrogate school systems, processes and data. Learnings from those meetings feed back to the school's staff meeting the following week, and key messages are disseminated in weekly memos and on parade. This results in 'everybody being involved in PBL'. The PLC is all about collaboration. It produces a 'collective intelligence', where the team adds value and creates buy-in. 'This is when high-functioning teams are really working well'. Using a cycle of inquiry means the PLC is strategic and consistent in approach, providing a line of sight to monitor the effectiveness of initiatives, and efficiently aligning the right resources and support for each student. With data analysis as a standing PLC item, staff have honed their skills in data entry, use of OneSchool, and application of data to communicate and inform practices.

The growing staff morale developed through a belief in each other, the school's vision and a shared understanding of high expectations. This is driven by consistency of practice — having everybody on board with PBL and everybody speaking the same language. Collaboration, evidence-based practice, differentiation, a marginal gains approach to improvement, and trauma-informed practice have all brought new ways of thinking to student engagement. Staff now own the 'Biggenden brand', which is about projecting the school's culture of being a family school, with family values and high expectations. This is how the school understands its mission and how it presents itself to the world: a great school with 'good kids and the right people'. Staff drive and enthusiasm are impelled by the professional systems of coaching and feedback, high-quality media communication to the school community, and by validating the good work and celebrating successes.

The school has developed — and continuously reviews and refines — an aligned combination of PBL-based practices. Some of the game changers have been individual behaviour support plans, tiered rewards systems, restorative processes and structured play. The school forges collaborative partnerships with its students: they are active participants in school surveys, classroom goal setting, and co-developing individual behaviour support plans. Goals and strategies are strongly aligned to each student's personal values. Individual check-in dates are opportunities for reflection on student ownership, accountability, responsibility and progress. It is all about 'getting in between the next school disciplinary absence'. Parents expect consistency and fairness of process with PBL. Thorough record keeping and transparent decision making mean there are 'no surprises' and therefore greater acceptance from all stakeholders. The fortnightly saturation of key messages about PBL through social media now has parents quoting the language of PBL to staff.

Structured Play Daily Focus	
Monday	I use manners and speak kindly to others.
Tuesday	I listen respectfully to others' ideas and opinions.
Wednesday	I share and take turns with my peers.
Thursday	I think and speak using OAR and not BED.
Friday	I will accept winning and losing equally.

My Classroom PBL Goals	
My PBL and Social and Emotional Goals this term are (circle 1 of from each area and complete specific details):	
PBL	
✓ Big on Heart	_____
✓ Big on Responsibility	_____
✓ Big on Respect	_____
✓ Big on Learning	_____
Social and Emotional	
✓ Emotional intelligence	_____
✓ Resilience and Growth	_____
✓ Social Skills	_____

For further details about this case study, email the Education Improvement Branch at eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au.

School snapshot

Case study: Building a culture of trust and care at Pioneer State High School

Pioneer State High School, an urban school in Mackay, is cultivating a culture of trust across the school community. Relationship building is paramount to the school's commitment to providing a safe learning environment that gives every student the confidence to return to school day after day. This is reflected in the school's vision, values, behaviour expectations, and identity.

The principal is supported by a team of passionate teachers who care about their students succeeding. Teachers see their identity as grounded in the idea that they are here to help students overcome disadvantage; they take pride and see value in having a job that is about getting the best out of their students.

The core philosophy underpinning the school's culture is 'knowing your students'. For Pioneer State High School, this means giving students voice and the chance to 'be themselves'. Elevating student voice involves asking for feedback about what teachers can do to encourage students to come to school so that they feel safe, supported and engaged. This involves taking the time to have 'real conversations' with students who might arrive late, are out of uniform or feel unsettled. This approach is embraced by parents/carers and families who appreciate these small gestures and, in turn, feel heard.

The recently developed behaviour expectations of 'calm, communicate and care' clearly align with the school's vision to engage young people in meaningful ways. They connect with the everyday reality of Pioneer State High School, and are proudly displayed on the school

grounds. The principles were developed from the ground up — 'from talking to parents, staff and students'. They encompass an attitude that students can 'live by' rather than an ideal to 'live up' to. For the principal, 'when you ask students to care, you encourage them to show empathy'. This invites students to take ownership of their behaviour and their school culture.

The school's approach to behaviour management is inspired by the notion that all learning is social and emotional. The school builds student awareness and ownership of positive behaviour by encouraging students to reflect on how they strive and thrive throughout each day. In doing so, students 'know what to expect' and are 'more engaged'.

The promotion of Indigenous culture at the school provides another opportunity to give students voice. The school has been working with an Indigenous coach to focus the school's vision. Local Indigenous Elders currently train staff in Indigenous perspectives in curriculum. Staff devote much time to discussing how to best engage Indigenous students, and to understand the significance of building a sense of cultural pride. Students take great satisfaction in wearing their sports house polo shirts on Fridays. This has special meaning for students who designed the shirts' Indigenous logos.



For further details about this case study, email the Education Improvement Branch at eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au.

References, further reading and resources

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2012, *National School Improvement Tool*, ACER, Melbourne (online), www.acer.org/au/school-improvement/improvement-tools/national-school-improvement-tool.

Australian Education Research Organisation 2021, *Focused classrooms: managing the classroom to maximise learning*, Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (online), edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/AERO-Tried-and-tested-guide-Focused-classrooms.pdf.

Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports 2015, *Supporting and responding to behavior: evidence-based classroom strategies for teachers*, U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (online), www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2019, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, Education Council (online), www.dese.gov.au/indigenous-education/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration.

Department of Education (DoE) 2021, *Youth engagement practice insights* (online), advancingeducation.qld.gov.au/youthEngagement/Documents/practice-insights-for-youth-engagement.PDF.

Gurney, M 2021, 'Practical ways to support student engagement', *Teacher*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 11 March 2021, www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/practical-ways-to-support-student-engagement.

National Education Union 2020, *Belonging, behaviour and inclusion in schools: what does research tell us?* University College London (online), neu.org.uk/media/13036/view.

State Schools Division

- DoE Respectful Relationships Education Program learningplace.eq.edu.au/cx/resources/file/6956a602-d160-4946-88ab-9de60c000ee4/1/index.html (accessible to DoE staff only)
- Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student succeeding* education.qld.gov.au/initiatives-and-strategies/strategies-and-programs/every-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-student-succeeding
- P-12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework education.qld.gov.au/curriculums/Documents/p12-carf-framework.pdf
- Parent and community engagement framework education.qld.gov.au/parents/community-engagement/Documents/p12-carf-framework.pdf

- Positive Behaviour for Learning behaviour.education.qld.gov.au/supporting-student-behaviour/positive-behaviour-for-learning
- Queensland engagement and wellbeing survey resources intranet.qed.qld.gov.au/ResourceCentre/Statistics/queensland-engagement-wellbeing-survey (accessible to DoE staff only)
- Student learning and wellbeing framework education.qld.gov.au/students/student-health-safety-wellbeing/student-wellbeing



Inclusive Leadership program

The Inclusive Leadership program is a nine-month, face-to-face program that focuses on strengthening the capabilities of middle leaders and deputy principals. The program provides a closer exploration of the knowledge, skills and confidence to lead and develop others for effective leadership of inclusive school communities.

Find out more here: [Inclusive Leadership Program \(qeli.qld.edu.au\)](http://Inclusive Leadership Program (qeli.qld.edu.au))

Teach Like a Champion program

Former teacher, principal and charter-school founder, Doug Lemov, authored *Teach like a champion* after observing teachers getting exceptional results. This program focuses on techniques that champion teachers use to design, install and maintain systems and routines that students do automatically and with little to no teacher prompting.

Find out more here: [Teach Like A Champion \(qeli.qld.edu.au\)](http://Teach Like A Champion (qeli.qld.edu.au))

Flexispaces video series

Students may experience challenges at various junctions in their school life and, for most students, remaining at their school provides the best chance of success. A FlexiSpace is designed to retain students who are at risk of disengaging from their mainstream school.

Find out more about Flexispaces here: QELi TV

Universal Design for Learning program

Based on research, the Universal Design for Learning principles support educators to design learning experiences that support learners to overcome their barriers to learning.

Find out more here: [Universal Design for Learning program \(qeli.qld.edu.au\)](http://Universal Design for Learning program (qeli.qld.edu.au))



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