Insights to inform school practice

School Improvement Unit
Research Centre
Insights paper 1
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Driving an explicit improvement agenda to maximise student outcomes

In Queensland, school reviews provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into school practices — first and foremost for individual schools, but also at a system level.

With every state school and centre reviewed at least once every four years, school reviews also provide a powerful opportunity to consider changes in practice over time, as well as to identify areas for continuous improvement across the system.

This paper presents insights from the most recent reviews conducted in Queensland state schools in Term 1 2019.

Key findings from school reviews

Each school review provides a number of key improvement strategies. These suggest the next steps for a school to consider in progressing on their improvement trajectory.

Analysis of school review reports identified the most common key improvement strategy for schools related to the school's explicit improvement agenda (EIA). This area has consistently been one of the top two areas for improvement in each of the last four years. The 2019 data shows that it remains a priority.

What is an EIA?

According to the *National School Improvement Tool* (NSIT), 'the school leadership team and/or governing body establish and drive a strong improvement agenda for the school, grounded in evidence from research and practice and expressed in terms of improvements in measurable student outcomes. Explicit and clear school-wide targets for improvement need to be set and communicated to parents and families, teachers and students, with accompanying timelines'.

(ACER 2012, p. 2)

Out of 72 school reviews undertaken in Term 1 2019, 61 (85 per cent) recommended key improvement strategies related to the EIA.
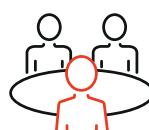
For the majority of schools, recommendations regarding the EIA ranked as either the first or second improvement strategy

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Maturing the school's improvement agenda

The 2019 school review recommendations referring to EIAs have focused on one or more of the following aspects:

- developing the EIA
- communicating the EIA
- implementing the EIA
- monitoring implementation of the EIA
- aligning school processes and resources to the EIA
- refining the EIA.

Schools have matured in their approach to the improvement agenda over the last four years

The percentage of schools advised to refine their EIAs has significantly decreased from 2015 (see figure below). In addition, the focus of the key improvement strategies has changed.

In 2019, the recommendations are focused more on developing greater precision and building a shared understanding of the improvement agenda across the school. By comparison, four years ago, schools were most often advised to narrow their improvement agendas by reducing the number of priorities.

From 2015 to 2019, a far greater proportion of schools received recommendations centred on strategically aligning school processes and resources (from 23 per cent to 46 per cent) and improving monitoring processes related to the EIA (from 6 per cent to 28 per cent).

These findings suggest that, over the last four years, schools have matured in their approach to improvement planning.

A common language around school improvement based on the nine domains of the NSIT has emerged and is developing across the system. The improvement focus in schools has moved from the basic building blocks of developing and communicating the EIA to the more sophisticated elements of direction setting, and to leadership in driving improvement in teaching and learning across the school.

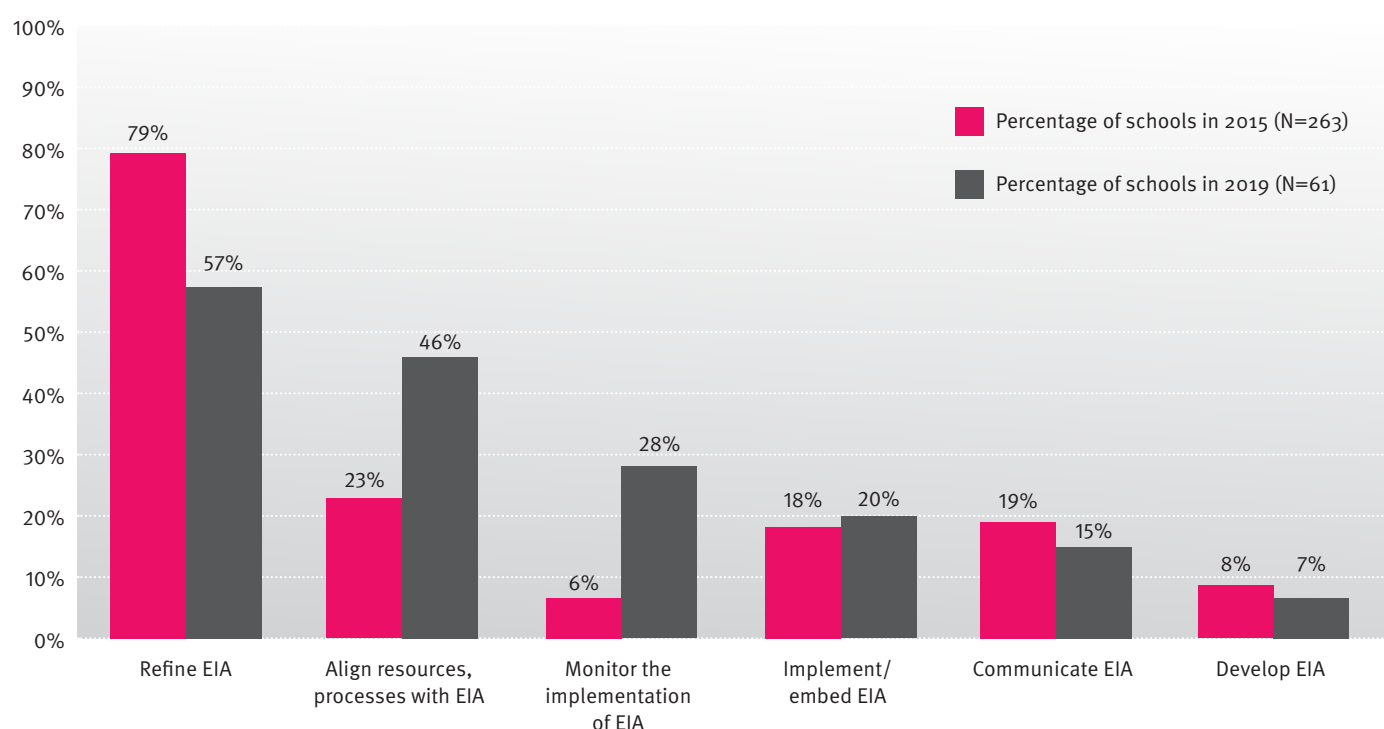## School reviews in Term 1 2019 – total 72

School types			
Primary	Secondary	P–10/12	Other*
58	6	4	4

Review types		
Full school	Priority support	Self-determined
57	15	0

* Includes two special schools, a specific purpose school and a TAFE

Figure 1: Key improvement strategies on EIA – 2015 to 2019

Legend:
- Percentage of schools in 2015 (N=263)
- Percentage of schools in 2019 (N=61)

	Refine EIA	Align resources, processes with EIA	Monitor the implementation of EIA	Implement/ embed EIA	Communicate EIA	Develop EIA
2015	79%	23%	6%	18%	19%	8%
2019	57%	46%	28%	20%	15%	7%

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Mobilising the improvement agenda

▶ Intentional collaboration

The most common recommendation (57 per cent of schools) was for schools to collaboratively refine their improvement agendas.

More specifically, recommendations referred to:

- clarifying the agreed improvement priorities with identified strategies, targets, timelines, aligned roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and success measures

- working with teachers to define and unpack the agreed effective practices relating to the EIA and what those practices look like in the classroom

- developing collaborative opportunities for teachers and school leaders to engage in deep discussions about student progress in order to generate strategies for continuous improvement and monitor progress over time.

Almost 60 per cent of schools were recommended to further refine their improvement agenda

▶ Stronger alignment

A significant proportion of schools (46 per cent) were advised to improve the alignment between their school's processes and resources and the EIA.

These strategies most often referred to the alignment of classroom observation and feedback. The planning and alignment of professional learning and capability development across the school with the EIA was also seen as a priority. Some schools were advised to review the school's pedagogical framework to include the agreed pedagogical strategies aligned to the EIA.

Other suggestions referred to:

- the alignment between the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of school leaders and the school's EIA

- the alignment between the EIA and other strategic documents

- the alignment of individual student learning goals with the EIA.

For around half of schools, stronger alignment between the EIA and school practices was recommended

Realising improvement and maximising impact

▶ Greater precision

More than a quarter of schools (28 per cent) were advised to develop and enact processes to monitor the implementation of the EIA and progress towards established targets.

This is critical in ensuring consistency of implemented practices across the school. This also provides the basis for systematic evaluation of the impact of improvement strategies on improved student outcomes.
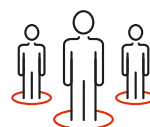
More than a quarter of schools were advised to strengthen monitoring and measurement of impact on student outcomes

To generate discussion …

- What collaborative opportunities exist in our school to develop and regularly review the EIA, and to build a shared understanding and greater precision across the school?

- How does the EIA guide the daily practice of staff at our school?

- What support and professional learning opportunities are provided to staff in our school to support the EIA?

- What quality assurance processes exist in our school to ensure the EIA is implemented consistently in all classrooms, and the impact is measured in terms of student progress and achievement?

- How does our school continuously monitor and track progress against EIA targets?

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Practical considerations for the explicit improvement agenda

1. Setting the direction for school improvement

- Collaboratively identify student learning needs and related problems of practice
- Express the agenda in terms of specific improvements sought in student achievement and progress
- Include measurable targets (at the school, year, department or faculty, class and individual student levels) with precisely defined success criteria and accompanying timelines
- Jointly develop an implementation plan with short-, medium- and long-term focus
- Build a shared understanding of what improvement strategies look like in classrooms

2. Leading school improvement

- Make the EIA 'everybody's business'
- Implement distributed leadership to drive collective effort and focus
- Build capability around core practices and actions for students, teachers and leaders
- Provide differentiated and targeted professional learning to advance the EIA
- Align resources and the focus of school processes, meeting cycles and agendas to the EIA

3. Building, maintaining and sustaining momentum for continuous improvement

- Document improvements to school practices and celebrate successes with the school community
- Work together to monitor progress and evaluate impact
- Build a culture of sharing of practice that demonstrates the EIA in action across the school
- Engage the school community in collaborative inquiry cycles focused on student learning
- Adapt improvement strategies for the next stage

> " *Effective leaders at every level have a clearly articulated vision; a short, sharply focused plan; and a clear line of sight to every classroom* "
>
> Lyn Sharratt, 2019

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References and further reading

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2012, *National School Improvement Tool*, ACER, Melbourne.

Hargreaves, A & Fullan, M 2012, *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school*, Teachers College Press, New York (see Chapter 7 and pp. 163–173).

Harris, A 2014, *Distributed leadership matters: perspectives, practicalities, and potential*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks (see Chapter 8).

Senge, P, Cambron-McCabe, N, Lucas, T, Smith, B, Dutton, J & Kleiner, A 2012, *Schools that learn: a fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*, Crown Business, New York.

Sharratt, Lyn 2019, *Clarity: what matters most in learning, teaching and leading*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks.

State Schools Performance
Resources

School Planning, Reviewing and Reporting Framework (PDF, 582KB)

The School Planning, Reviewing and Reporting Framework outlines the requirements for Queensland state schools to align their work with *Every student succeeding — State Schools Strategy*.

School improvement planning (PDF, 263KB)

The purpose of this guide is to:

- demonstrate how inquiry cycles can support the planning, implementation and review processes of evidence-informed school improvement
- support the strategic stakeholder conversations that could be used to develop the plan, including identifying the key impact measures and change indicators for improvement.

If you have any questions or feedback, please email the School Improvement Unit at siumb@qed.qld.gov.au

Evidence studies

Intentional collaboration

Improving Year 12 certification rates: **Spinifex State College (2016)** summary (181KB) and report (1.3MB)

Stronger alignment

Does the process of unpacking the Curriculum into the Classroom (C2C) units effectively have an impact on student level of achievement (LOA)? **Queens Beach State School (2017)** summary (422KB) and report (1.4MB)

Greater precision

A collaborative school-wide focus to improve junior secondary reading: **Helensvale State High School (2015)** summary (619KB) and report (549KB)

Professional learning

qeli.qld.edu.au/our-programs/

qeli.qld.edu.au/thought-leader-events

Visit qeli.qld.edu.au/research-spotlight-collaboration

- 10 obstacles to collaboration: the role of a teacher leader
- Inside-out and downside-up: how leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems
- Hand in glove: trust, collaboration and school improvement

Videos and podcasts

DuFour, R, *The foundation of a PLC*, vimeo.com/137903355 (9:32 minutes)

Fullan, M, *Building relationships of collaboration*, https://thelearningexchange.ca/videos/michael-fullan-building-relationships-of-collaboration/ (1:41 minutes)

Robinson, K, *Collaboration in the 21st century*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=63NTB70Obtw (5:58 minutes)

Teacher collaboration: spreading best practices school-wide, www.youtube.com/watch?v=85HUMHBXJf4 (3:25 minutes)

Wiliam, D, *Every teacher can improve*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqRcpA5rYTE (2:09 minutes)