Instructional leadership – leading the teaching and learning

School leadership has a significant impact in fostering student achievement. The impact of leadership is greatest where it is focused on improving teaching and learning and is amplified when responsibilities for leading teaching and learning are widely distributed across the school (AITSL 2018; Robinson et al. 2009, p. 40; Waters et al. 2003, p. 3).

What is instructional leadership?

In this paper, instructional leadership is defined as a core aspect of effective school leadership, which has an intentional focus and demonstrated impact on continuous improvement in quality teaching and learning.

Instructional leadership is a form of school leadership that places teaching and learning at the forefront of school decision making (Andrews et al. 1991, p. 97; Gumus et al. 2018, p. 29). It is an overarching orientation that gives structure to a school's direction, evidenced by core leadership practices and skills that support teaching and student outcomes, and drive school improvement and sustained success (Hallinger & Murphy 1985).

This paper explores insights from a review of literature on instructional leadership, draws on shared ideas from a school improvement workshop with state school leaders in 2021 and unpacks areas for consideration in Queensland state schools that were identified through school reviews. The paper presents an overview of evidence-based practices and practical considerations to assist schools with the work of instructional leadership so that it makes a difference for teachers and students.

Use this paper as a guide to:

build a common understanding of shared expectations across the school	align the school's resources to the instructional needs of teachers and students	manage the instructional program so that school goals are translated into classroom practice	promote a positive school learning environment that engages and inspires both staff and students	build the skills and knowledge of current and emerging leaders

Queensland Government

Findings from school reviews

Schools are reviewed using the *National School Improvement Tool* (NSIT), which is based on international research into the practices of highly effective schools and school leaders (ACER 2012, p. 1). Core elements of instructional leadership are found throughout the nine domains of the NSIT.

Core elements of instructional leadership are:
- defining shared expectations
- resourcing strategically
- managing the instructional program
- promoting a positive school learning environment
- developing leadership skills and knowledge.

– Hallinger & Murphy 1985; Robinson et al. 2009

Among the schools reviewed during Terms 1 to 3 in 2021, nearly all had at least one recommendation about instructional leadership. The most common recommendations were in relation to **managing the instructional program** (97 per cent). A clear majority (90 per cent) received recommendations about **promoting a positive school learning environment**, while 72 per cent had recommendations related to **resourcing strategically**.

Over half of schools reviewed (56 per cent) received recommendations about **defining shared expectations**. These included developing, refining, or communicating the improvement agenda, or recommendations about school vision or culture. A quarter of schools (25 per cent) were given recommendations about **developing instructional leadership skills and knowledge**. These were aimed at improving the ability to lead observation, feedback and coaching, school priorities and improvement, or staff capability development.

Instructional leadership is about:

'making sure the bulk of your conversations are around teaching and learning, and improving student outcomes' – Deputy principal

'being able to get in the classroom with teachers… working collaboratively and together' – Principal

'supporting your staff … to do the best work, to grow, and improve, and to develop a culture of loving learning' – Principal

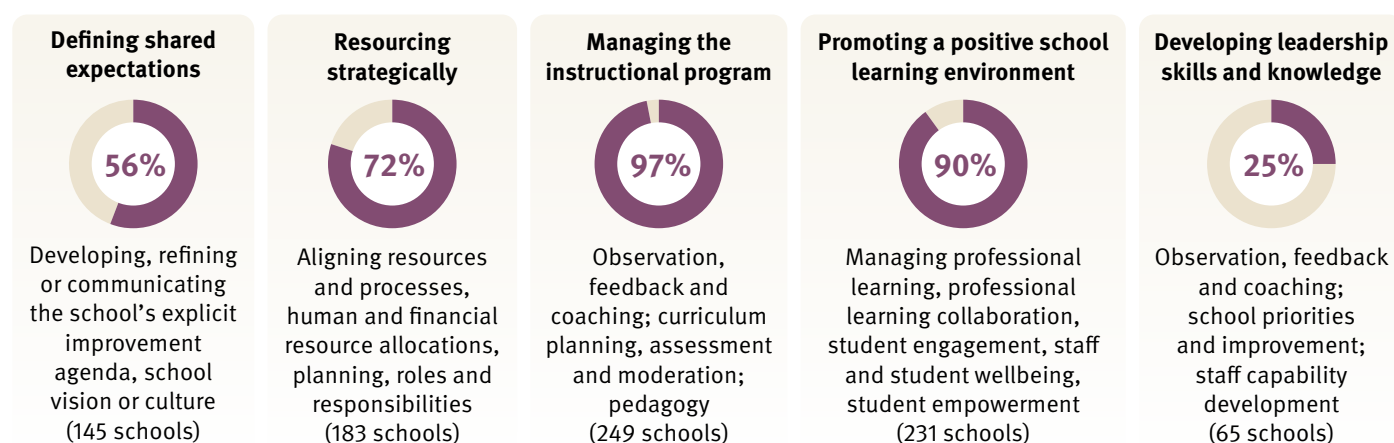'how you're putting student learning as a part of your strategic agenda' – Lead principal

Voices of Queensland state school leaders, school improvement workshop, November 2021

Quality assuring practice

Eighty-nine per cent of review schools received instructional leadership recommendations that referred to quality assuring practice. These applied to defining shared expectations, resourcing strategically, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning environment.

Review schools with recommendations relating to instructional leadership

Defining shared expectations

56%

Developing, refining or communicating the school's explicit improvement agenda, school vision or culture (145 schools)

Resourcing strategically

72%

Aligning resources and processes, human and financial resource allocations, planning, roles and responsibilities (183 schools)

Managing the instructional program

97%

Observation, feedback and coaching; curriculum planning, assessment and moderation; pedagogy (249 schools)

Promoting a positive school learning environment

90%

Managing professional learning, professional learning collaboration, student engagement, staff and student wellbeing, student empowerment (231 schools)

Developing leadership skills and knowledge

25%

Observation, feedback and coaching; school priorities and improvement; staff capability development (65 schools)

> ❝ Research is revealing the powerful impact that school leadership teams can have in improving the quality of teaching and learning. Effective leaders create cultures of high expectations, provide clarity about what teachers are to teach and students are to learn, establish strong professional learning communities and lead ongoing efforts to improve teaching practices. ❞
>
> – ACER 2012, p. 1

What the literature tells us

The research literature on instructional leadership identifies a range of practices and attributes employed by effective school leaders. These are the leadership behaviours prominent in successful school settings.

- The **practices** of instructional leadership are the tasks of effective school leaders – *what* effective school leaders do to lead the work.

- The **attributes** of instructional leadership are the capabilities needed to put the practices of instructional leadership to work – *how* effective school leaders lead the way.

The practices and attributes are the interdependent and complementary dimensions of instructional leadership that combine to lead the learning.

Practices: leading the work **+** Attributes: leading the way **=** Leading the learning

Practices – leading the work

Defining shared expectations

The research shows that defining shared expectations is the most influential instructional practice available to school leaders (Hallinger 2005, p. 225). This is where student learning, achievement and improvement are brought to the fore in school decision making, and a foundation of school culture is established (Robinson & Timperley 2007, pp. 250–251). Defining shared expectations entails setting and communicating school goals.

Setting goals focuses attention and resources, and accounts for a significant part of a leader's impact on school outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2004, p. 8). To be effective, goals need to have an annual focus, be few in number and applicable school-wide, respond to the demands of the school's environment, be data informed, and include measurable targets and milestones (Hallinger & Murphy 1987, pp. 20–22). For goals to be relevant, they need to be developed with the input of the school community (Hallinger 2005, p. 225).

Communicating school goals can create a sense of shared purpose and priority (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 221), and should emphasise the fundamentals of schooling (Andrews et al. 1991, p. 99) and secure commitment for change (ACER 2018, p. 23). For goals to motivate people, they need to be clear, personally compelling, challenging and achievable (Leithwood et al. 2004, p. 24). Communications can occur formally during instructional, curriculum and budgetary decision-making processes, and informally through other interactions and modelling of exemplar behaviour (Andrews et al. 1991, p. 99; Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 222).

Resourcing strategically

Instructional leaders secure resources that are aligned with teaching and learning (Robinson et al. 2008, p. 661; Robinson & Timperley 2007, pp. 251–252). They combine an understanding of the instructional needs of a school with an ability to target resources to meet those needs (Sebastian et al. 2019, p. 595). This is achieved through planning, strategic relationships and staff collaboration (Duke 1982, pp. 5–6). The literature highlights the importance of hiring appropriate staff and drawing on

> ❝ Instructional leadership is a collaborative approach between the school leader and the school team, working together to unpack the why and the how of what the school's improvement agenda is, whether this is through a curriculum or pedagogical piece. It's not about the leader being the absolute expert, but it's certainly about being a knowledgeable other and walking beside the school team so everyone is learning together. ❞
>
> – Lead principal, school improvement workshop, November 2021

expertise from the wider school community to achieve goals (ACER 2018, p. 11; Leithwood et al. 2008, p. 32).

Managing the instructional program

The management of a school's instructional program is aimed at ensuring school goals are aligned to and translated into classroom practice (Gumus et al. 2018, p. 29). This involves coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress, and supportively supervising and evaluating instruction.

Coordinating the curriculum entails managing the pacing, sequencing and coverage of content. Principals ensure continuity across year levels and that students are exposed to the material on which they are tested (Bossert et al. 1982, p. 41; Hallinger & Murphy 1987, p. 27). This work is supported by collaboration among teachers within and across year levels, curriculum backward mapping and documentation, and a common curriculum language (Lee et al. 2012).

Monitoring student progress is a key mechanism for line of sight into the classroom and quality assurance of the instructional program (Duke 1982, p. 6). The objectives are to evaluate the quality of instruction, make classroom allocations, diagnose program effectiveness, evaluate the results of changes in the instructional program, and measure progress towards school goals. It involves using standards-based, standardised and criterion-referenced assessment, providing interpretive analyses of test data in a concise form, providing teachers with test results in a timely and useful way, and discussing test results with staff as a whole, within year levels, and with individual teachers (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, pp. 222–223).

The research evidence suggests that **supervising and evaluating instruction** needs to be supportive. To be successful, it requires knowledgeable leaders that teachers can turn to, clearly communicated criteria for evaluation, support for teachers to improve performance, and discernible results in improved practice (Bamburg & Andrews 1991, p. 184). The most productive technique is classroom coaching, especially where it is used as a form of professional development. Walkthroughs need to support teacher professional learning if they are to be an effective line of sight into the classroom (Grissom et al. 2013, pp. 19, 26–28).

Promoting a positive school learning environment

The key practices that promote a positive school learning environment involve minimising disruptions to instruction, promoting professional development, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for students, upholding academic standards, and maintaining the principal's visibility in the school (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 223).

Instructional leaders **minimise disruptions to instruction** so that teachers can effectively apply their skills in the classroom and students can learn. They set clear expectations about protecting teaching and learning time. They ensure classes are not interrupted by announcements, requests from the office, excessive paperwork and meetings, system and parental pressures, student absenteeism and late arrivals (Duke 1982, p. 5; Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 223; Robinson et al. 2008, p. 664). This extends to applying an equitable code of behaviour, and early and effective conflict resolution (Leithwood 1988, p. 21).

> ❝ ... instructional leaders focus more on students. They're concerned with the teachers' and the school's impact on student learning and instructional issues, conducting classroom observations, ensuring professional development that enhances student learning, communicating high academic standards, and ensuring that all school environments are conducive to learning. ❞
>
> – Hattie 2015

Promoting professional development is an instructional leadership practice strongly linked to student outcomes (Robinson et al. 2008, p. 663; Tan et al. 2020, p. 13). Professional development is tailored to address teachers' needs and changing practice (Duke 1982, p. 4). Instructional leaders not only inform teachers of opportunities for staff development, but lead in-service training, ensuring professional development is closely linked to school goals and relevantly structured to groups and individuals (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 223). This is another area where leaders achieve line of sight on the conditions required for improvements in student learning, and where they can support and implement changes to class organisation, resourcing and assessment, working collaboratively with teachers (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 42; Timperley et al. 2007, p. 220).

Providing incentives for teachers involves establishing systems and practices that collaboratively engage staff in the collective effort of teaching and learning (Marks & Printy 2003), provide them with personal and professional support (Witziers et al. 2003, p. 406) and recognise teachers for their efforts (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 224). Instructional leadership is clearly linked to teacher motivation (Ertem 2021, p. 36). Collaboration encourages a strong sense of collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 42; Robinson & Timperley 2007, pp. 252–253). Order, support and certainty for staff influence commitment and effectiveness (Leithwood et al. 2004, p. 58), whereas encouraging and acknowledging good work has the effect of lifting staff morale, eliciting a sense of pride and loyalty in the school, and encouraging willingness to cooperate with colleagues and administrators (Bossert et al. 1982, p. 38).

Providing incentives for students is about recognising students for their effort, progress and achievement, and fostering a positive and empowering culture of learning. Recognition needs to be frequent, meaningful and rewarding (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 224). Students are motivated by a culture of high expectations about learning and behaviour (Duke 1982, p. 5; Hallinger 2005, p. 13), expressing optimism about students meeting goals (Bossert et al. 1982, p. 35) and giving students feedback on their work (Robinson et al. 2008, p. 662).

Upholding academic standards involves ensuring students master basic skills and achieve defined skills before entering subsequent year levels (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 224). This is part of developing a culture of high expectations (Lee et al. 2012, p. 668; Leithwood 1988, p. 21).

Maintaining purposeful visibility around the school and in classrooms increases interactions between school leaders, teachers and students (Hallinger & Murphy 1985, p. 223). The evidence suggests that being a visible presence needs to have purpose in advancing shared expectations (Andrews et al. 1991, p. 99) and focus on teaching and learning (Blase & Blase 2000, p. 137).

Elements of instructional leadership practices – a summary of the research

Defining shared expectations	Resourcing strategically	Managing the instructional program	Promoting a positive school learning environment
Setting clear goals	Aligning resources with instructional priorities	Coordinating the curriculum	Minimising disruptions to instruction
Communicating goals	Planning, strategic relationships, staff collaboration	Monitoring student progress	Promoting professional development
	Staffing and partnerships	Supportively supervising and evaluating instruction	Providing incentives for teachers and students
			Upholding academic standards
			Maintaining purposeful visibility

> For me, instructional leadership is about setting those really good examples from the leadership team – so what I expect my staff to do, I do myself. It's very important that they see me with them out there in the community, alongside them in their teaching, talking with them, checking in with them – and if there is something that I ask them to do, I would expect myself to do that as well. So, it's working with teachers, alongside my staff and making sure they are aware that I am in it with them.
>
> – Principal, school improvement workshop, November 2021

Attributes – leading the way

Among key interrelated attributes that school leaders bring to the tasks of instructional leadership are communication skills, content knowledge in curriculum and pedagogy, and the ability to solve complex problems (DeWitt 2020, p. 6; Grissom et al. 2021, pp. 54–57).

Communication skills include the ability to develop trust and clarity when leading people. Many of these are how people exercise emotional intelligence (AITSL 2017; Goleman 2016). They entail engaging in conversations that promote an openness to learning and build relational trust (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 47; Robinson 2015, pp. 1–2). Openness to learning involves conversational techniques that frame difficult situations, challenge assumptions, invite alternative views, manage feedback and deal constructively with conflict (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 47; Robinson & Timperley 2007, pp. 253–254). Relational trust is about communicating interpersonal respect, regard for others, competence and personal integrity (Robinson 2010, pp. 19–20). Good leadership communication is critical to supervising and evaluating instruction (Bamburg & Andrews 1991, p. 184) and is positively associated with student outcomes more generally (Marzano et al. 2005, p. 42).

Content knowledge in pedagogy and curriculum is especially important to understanding the effectiveness of teaching in the classroom, administrative decision making when managing the instructional program (Robinson 2010, pp. 7–8) and the effectiveness of collaborative learning and decision making (Stein & Nelson 2003, p. 446). Leadership is innovative and

authoritative when principals have deeper content knowledge (Printy 2008, p. 195). Teachers tend to trust and turn to instructional leaders who demonstrate expert content knowledge (Bamburg & Andrews 1991, p. 184) and this is linked to school success (Marzano et al. 2005, pp. 42–43).

Complex problem solving makes for effective instructional leaders because they are better able to 'uncover and understand all the requirements surrounding a particular task or issue and integrate them to identify the best solution for that particular time and place' (Robinson et al. 2009, p. 46). The level at which people perform in their problem solving depends on the extent to which strategies are structured by definable procedures for reaching the solution, clear solution criteria, the right data and information (Robinson 2010, p. 12). Solving complex problems is a more common feature of higher performing schools (Bendikson et al. 2012, p. 6; MacNeil et al. 2009, pp. 79, 81; Waters et al. 2003, p. 4).

> ' Instructional leadership looks like high expectations, consistency, being present and a role model, and walking beside my staff and the kids. It's a long game, very aligned. There are logical steps, taking that three or four year view of where you're going to be, and backward mapping from that point. '
>
> – Principal, school improvement workshop, November 2021

How attributes of instructional leadership are developed

watching teachers processes people responsibility engagement listening thinking learning adopting debriefs scenarios evidence openness conversations coaching questions repetition agility reflection training peers understanding collaboration inquiry variation practise discussion data context trialling observation feedback modelling method research experience trust time practice confidence iteration attention communicating steps routine focus norms protocols support meetings sharing consistency structure alignment instruction agreement leading purpose upskilling presence expectations transparency relationships

Voices of Queensland state school leaders, school improvement workshop, November 2021

To generate discussion...

- What do you do in your role to build a common understanding of shared expectations across the school?
- How can the school's resources be best aligned to the instructional needs of teachers and students?
- How can you manage the instructional program so that school goals are translated into classroom practice?
- How can you promote a positive school learning environment that prioritises instructional time and engages and inspires both staff and students?
- What do the attributes of instructional leaders look like and how do you build purposeful visibility?
- How can you go about developing instructional knowledge and skills in current and emerging leaders?
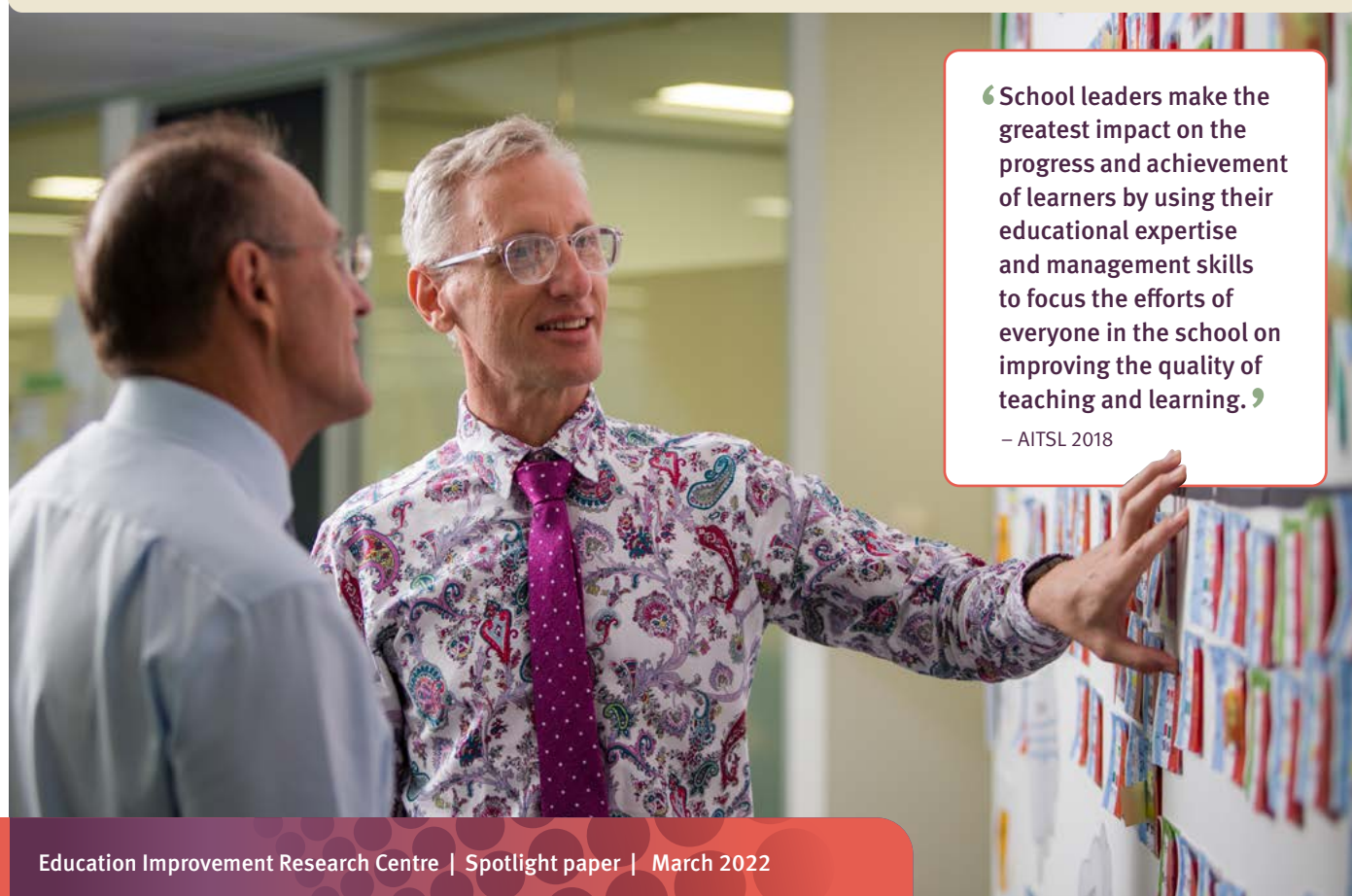
> School leaders make the greatest impact on the progress and achievement of learners by using their educational expertise and management skills to focus the efforts of everyone in the school on improving the quality of teaching and learning.
>
> – AITSL 2018

Practical considerations

Practical considerations

- Foster a collective commitment and focus on excellence in teaching, learning and leadership.

- Consider leadership at all levels. Build a leadership team that works widely across the school in strong alignment to drive the improvement agenda.

- Create a culture in which all leaders and staff have clarity of their role and focus on understanding their impact and improving their practice.

- Set high expectations and aspirations for learning and achievement for all students. Establish and regularly communicate clear goals and success measures at various levels.

- Consider ways to get 'purposeful visibility' – leading, modelling and working alongside teachers and students.

- Align resource allocation and strategically invest in people, infrastructure, resources and initiatives targeted to improve student learning.

- Prioritise instructional time and impact – consider the curriculum program and structures, minimise disruptions to learning time and maximise student engagement.

> 'Instructional leadership begins when school leadership teams really focus on making the core business of teaching and learning the explicit improvement agenda for the school. What it becomes is the cultural piece that follows where school leadership teams use the strategies and the approaches to leadership and really distribute that across the school, where leadership teams and staff work collectively to really build professional learning and collegial learning opportunities, to really focus on ongoing school improvement through the way that they do teaching and learning.'
>
> Assistant Regional Director, school improvement workshop, November 2021

- Invest in ongoing development in teaching expertise for all staff and leaders. Provide regular and differentiated opportunities for staff to engage with contemporary, research-based professional development in core areas such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and feedback.

- Create a collaborative and dynamic professional learning culture where continuous learning, reflection and growth are celebrated. Ensure all staff have regular opportunities for feedback on classroom practice.

- Invest in developing the educational leadership of current and emerging leaders.

Resources, references and reading

Instructional leadership perspectives across Queensland state schools
School improvement workshop, November 2021
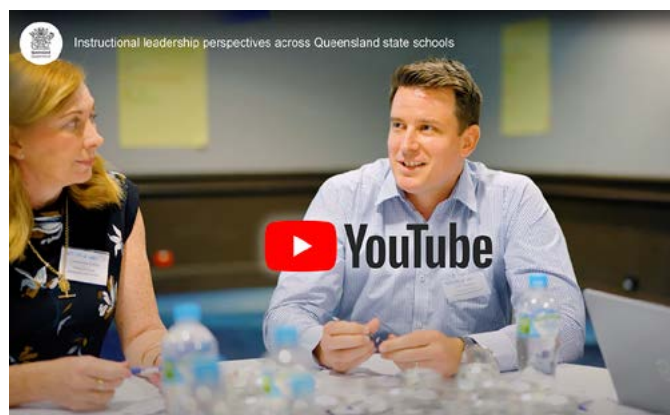
Department of Education resources

Assessment and Moderation Hub — Provides guidance in the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting, and precision in determining the right work.

Data literacy framework – Supports the development of the data literacy of all educators to support school improvement.

P–12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework — Specifies the curriculum, assessment and reporting requirements for all Queensland state schools' principals and staff delivering the curriculum from Prep to Year 12.

Pathways & Partnerships: Connecting and collaborating with industry to improve student outcomes (YouTube, Department of Education), youtu.be/S-8C9PAArWY?t=65.

Personalised pathways: A focus on general capabilities and 21st century skills (YouTube, Department of Education), youtu.be/z7zALjPTFwo?t=71.

Preparing students for an everchanging world (YouTube, Department of Education), youtu.be/fWmcIWox1FQ?t=128.

School performance planning website – Information on planning support for community engagement and governance. These processes are also embedded in State Schools Improvement Strategy, school improvement model and hierarchy.

Professional learning

AITSL, Leading for impact: Australian guidelines for school leadership development.

Center for Educational Leadership, 4 dimensions of instructional leadership.

Education Improvement Branch, Leadership for School Improvement program.

Education Improvement Branch, training webpage.

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Human Resources, Leadership capability development webpage (accessible to DoE staff only).

QELi, Leadership framework & behaviours of effective leaders.

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