School improvement — stories from Queensland state schools

To date, research has identified many determinants of school improvement (Hattie 2009; Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe 2008; Bowers and White 2014). It has also acknowledged a highly contextualised nature and the uniqueness of improvement trajectories (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Bellei et al. 2016). The School and Region Reviews branch sought to explore school improvement from the perspectives of educational leaders in different Queensland contexts.

This paper shares findings from a study of Queensland state schools demonstrating a strong trajectory of improvement. A survey was first conducted with the principals of these schools to identify key factors in school improvement journeys. These were further unpacked during a workshop with representatives of those schools and regional leaders.

By documenting a range of unique experiences across Queensland state schools, this paper aims to celebrate and share the learnings of school improvement, and to inspire and facilitate collaboration among schools to inform continuous improvement.

Use this paper to:

| collaboratively reflect on the improvement factors at your school | build collective ownership of school improvement | develop the strategy for addressing the challenges and acquiring support |

Queensland Government

Insights from the school improvement survey

Over the past 18 months, through a rigorous assessment of school performance data and additional contextual information, 19 Queensland state schools were identified as having a strong and consistent improvement trajectory. The selection of schools represents different school types, enrolment count, socioeconomic advantage and geographic region. A survey was conducted with the principals of these schools to explore the success factors and challenges in their school improvement journeys. The survey included open-ended questions, as well as multiple-choice questions developed using the *National School Improvement Tool* (NSIT).

Key factors of school improvement

Based on the experience of principals, the 3 key factors that contributed to success in school improvement were articulated as leadership and vision, school culture and capability.

Common factors in sustained school improvement		
Leadership and vision	**School culture**	**Capability**
• Clear direction • Strategic alignment • High expectations • Distributed leadership • Having a plan • Monitoring impact • Leadership stability	• Collective ownership • Trust • Staff commitment • Culture of learning • Growth mindset • Relationships • Shared values and beliefs	• Collaboration • High-performing teams • Leadership development • Working with other like minded schools • Peer observation and feedback

Within **leadership and vision**, respondents highlighted the importance of stability of leadership teams and a sustained strategic focus, including setting a clear direction for the school, planning, distributed leadership, and monitoring[1]. Promoting high expectations by leaders was also seen as vital for a school's success.

With regard to **school culture**, creating an environment of high trust, positive and professional relationships, staff commitment and ownership were seen as the key factors by participants, while some also emphasised the importance of a growth mindset and a culture of continuous learning.

Investing in developing staff and leaders' **capability** was seen by principals as another key determinant for success in school improvement. This was commonly done through teamwork, collegial engagement practices and working with other schools.

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[1] More insights from this study are discussed in the spotlight paper and a video on instructional leadership.

Unpacking the domains for school improvement

Respondents provided input around the top domains, according to the NSIT, that have been the most important in their school's sustained improvement. Not surprisingly, the top 3 choices corresponded with the 3 identified themes. The principals surveyed highlighted the importance of culture, an explicit improvement agenda, an expert teaching team and systematic curriculum delivery. These domains are included in the foundation and core parts of the School Improvement Hierarchy and are part of the State Schools School Improvement Model.

The main aspects of **a culture that promotes learning** identified by principals are:

- understanding the importance of positive relationships
- promoting high expectations for all students
- inclusive interactions between staff, students and families.

For **an explicit improvement agenda**, the following factors are considered as most important:

- commitment by all staff to improve teaching and learning
- a committed leadership team with clear objectives to improve outcomes for students
- clear strategies for improving the levels of student achievement and wellbeing.

The main elements to develop **an expert teaching team** involve:

- every staff member committing to continuous improvement in their teaching
- opportunities to work and learn together
- a culture of collaboration and teamwork.

Principals have seen the following aspects of **curriculum delivery** as vital for school improvement:

- a coherent whole-school curriculum, assessment and reporting plan
- staff capability building in curriculum planning and development
- developing learning opportunities that are accessible and challenging to enhance engagement and equitable outcomes for all students.

Success factors in Queensland state schools

The 3 key factors identified in the survey (leadership, school culture and capability) are interconnected and usually come into play together. Leadership and culture are 'two sides of the same coin' (Schein 1992). To be an effective school leader requires a supportive school culture, and to build such a culture is the essential function of school leadership. School leaders who pay attention to school culture and shape it through their words, non-verbal messages and actions, shape the pathway for change and success (Peterson and Deal 1998: 30). Leadership style and school culture were found to affect student achievement at both the classroom level (teachers' leadership style and learning culture) and the school level (principals' leadership style and organisational culture) (Kythreotis et al. 2010).

Similarly, leadership and capability are connected – school leadership requires developing a certain skillset and expertise, but at the same time, one of the key roles of school leaders is to lead professional learning within and beyond the school. It is about developing staff capability 'while learning alongside them about what works and what doesn't' (Fullan 2014: 55). Effective learning, on the other hand, requires the culture of continuous, collaborative improvement, which can be promoted by school leaders.

‚ Capacity building impacts the organisation because it develops the culture; accelerates the speed of change; fosters sustainability; and reinforces the strategy as people become involved in deeper learning, reflection, and problem solving across the organisation. ‚

(Fullan and Quinn 2016: 57–8)

Leadership and vision → High expectations

One of the key behaviours of principals in successful schools is 'establishing a clear focus on student learning, including having a vision, clear learning goals, and high expectations for learning for all students' (Cotton 2003: ix). Establishing high expectations by school leaders involves working closely with teaching staff, students, parents, families, and having high expectations of themselves.

Building high expectations at Pioneer State High School

The Pioneer State High School leadership team has focused on building community perception and high expectations for student learning and engagement at the school.

Faced with challenges with student enrolment and staff changes, a renewed vision for improvement based on high expectations where every student can succeed has been fostered over time. The review process helped the school revise their existing practices and develop the plan for improvement.

The school leadership team focused on a range of strategies to strengthen positive relationships among staff, students, parents, and the broader community. Staff worked on providing more personalised approaches for every student and building their deep understanding of family backgrounds. Proactive communication by teachers with families was developing mutual understanding and promoting parent and family engagement in their child's learning.

At the same time, enhancing a positive approach for staff and the focus on staff wellbeing were vital in building collective teacher efficacy. Work was done to enhance data practices and staff capability.

Nurturing positive relationships across the school community created a good foundation for building a culture of high expectations for learning. Every little improvement was seen as something to celebrate. Each staff meeting started with a positive improvement story backed by evidence.

By understanding the importance of positive and caring relationships for successful learning, Pioneer State High School leaders raised the standards and expectations across the school community. School staff have become more engaged with vulnerable families, and by proactive contact, positive communication and empathy, they improved the image within and outside the school community. Student enrolments have increased progressively, and staff turnover has decreased over time.

> How can I enhance my knowledge of the students and their families' backgrounds?

> How can we work with our school community to strengthen high expectations?

'School improvement is complex and only occurs when all members of the community engage with a vision for change.'

Principal (workshop participant)

Leadership → Clear direction

By building relationships of trust, principals can reinforce a strong, caring culture (Tamir and Ganon-Shilon 2021). High trust supports the implementation of change. It ensures teacher buy-in to collective decision making, reduces a sense of risk associated with change, and fosters mutual learning, making schools with high trust more likely to show improvements in student learning (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

Setting a unified direction for success at Capella State School

The leadership team at Capella State School have focused on leadership team stability and maintaining a strong school improvement journey with students at the centre.

After several years of leadership change, in 2019, the new principal focused on building staff and community trust and confidence in the leadership team. This required a deeper understanding of the school context and focusing on the common, whole-school priority — students.

Firstly, open conversations took place during staff meetings around what the school was doing and why. By being open and honest, the leadership team hoped to bring all staff onto the same page about their collective goal - putting students at the centre.

The leadership teams' words needed to be backed up by meaningful actions if the school was to succeed. So, together, the school leaders and staff looked at improvements which focus on students' engagement and learning. Positive Behaviour for Learning was implemented and embedded, and learning walls were further developed to make learning more visible across the school. Teachers were welcomed to discuss with school leaders the student data and important questions, such as:

- How are your students learning and achieving?
- How can they improve?
- What help do you need to help them improve?

Later, this extended to full school learning walks where the leadership team would observe and share their reflections, prompting discussions about how they could make learning more visible for all students.

Staff–community relationships were vital in building trust within the school. Opening lines of communication with the community and listening to their feedback, with visible leadership, gave the community a figure to connect with their children's learning, and teachers a figure to follow.

Identifying a collective purpose instilled a common language at Capella where strategies and outcomes would always be discussed in terms of what was best for students. This common vision and values with students at the centre helped increase ownership across the whole school, followed by a great lift in the teaching and learning culture and overall wellbeing within the school.

How can I ensure students are always at the centre of my daily work and decisions?

How can we enhance relationships and trust within our school community?

❝Culture is the starting point for everything else.❞

Principal (workshop participant)

School culture → Trust

Literature asserts that direction-setting practices are a key leadership function, and they aim to 'develop shared understandings about the organisation and its activities and goals that provide a compelling sense of purpose' (Sun and Leithwood 2015: 501). Clear and consistent direction setting is critical for the success of change as it can help build trust, commitment and empowerment of staff.

Building trust within and outside the school at Ingleside State School

By building trust and communicating a clear direction, the school leadership team at Ingleside State School was able to 'steer a clear course for the ship' towards improved student outcomes.

The school has continuously worked on building positive morale and relationships among staff and the Ingleside school community. The focus was on establishing positive communication and interactions with students and their families, but also on opening lines of communication to the broader community. This was well received and helped gain trust in the principal and, by extension, the school.

Establishing positive relationships created a supportive environment for the next step – building a culture focused on learning. The community felt supported and ready to take on a new direction and strive for stronger academic achievement. Discussions started with aligning pedagogy and curriculum practices, and a concerted effort was made to upgrade the reading resources within the school.

Through a caring approach to students and the community, the school has improved both staff morale and led to an overall improvement in students' engagement. From 2015 to 2020, the momentum generated from successfully implementing the renewed reading resources drove improvements not only in reading, but also in other learning areas.

❝ Curriculum improvement has been like peeling an onion, addressing the problem layer by layer until it is smaller and more manageable. ❞

Principal

❝ Trust comes from showing people that you care. ❞

Principal

How can I build trust-based relationships with other staff, students and parents?

How can we support and sustain a school's strategic direction over time?

❝ Clarity and consistency take time to achieve. ❞

Principal (workshop participant)

Capability → Leadership development

Continuous learning, as part of school improvement, includes building the capability of school leaders. Research suggests that principals' training and experiences are related to growth in school proficiency over time (Bowers and White 2014). Collaborative school leadership (shared among the principal and other staff and encouraging broad participation in decision making) has a positive impact on student learning through building the school's capacity for academic improvement (Hallinger and Heck 2010: 95-97).

Developing collaborative leaders at Freshwater State School

By focusing on leadership development, Freshwater State School has shifted their leadership model and worked to develop a staff culture based on collaboration, professional learning and authentic partnerships.

Collaborative professional learning has become a priority and the key tool to build professional teams that can learn together. Significant time was spent building the facilitation skills of the leadership team to lead collaboration, for example, during team meetings. This included unpacking what a leadership team meeting would look like, including what evidence should be gathered and used as the basis for discussions.

By learning to implement collaborative practices, Freshwater leaders were also learning a new style of leadership. Collaborative leadership approaches, including engaging staff voice and perceptions through school-developed surveys, have been implemented. Following the school's review, staff meetings were organised to collaboratively analyse the review findings.

In addition to incorporating staff input, the principal also put a premium on alignment between the vision and values of the principal, deputy, and the assistant regional director. Consistent use of symbolic language played an important role in building a united focus across the school's leadership team.

Developing leadership capability and a new leadership style helped to embed the structure of collaboration at Freshwater and had a great positive impact on the school culture. It built trust and genuine relationships, which in turn became a driver for collective efficacy and collaborative work.

> What is my leadership style? How does it affect school culture and ways of working? How could it be improved?

> How can we develop authentic relationships between staff and school leaders?

Capability → High-performing teams

For a school to develop its capacity to improve and learn, collaboration and teamwork are essential. Having strong teams can help focus the efforts in driving challenging improvement agendas. 'When teams are truly learning not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise' (Senge 2006: 9).

Maximising learning through teamwork at Swayneville State School

A small community at Swayneville State School has built strength, teamwork and an environment where every student and staff member can flourish.

Faced with the cyclone-related trauma that affected the community of Swayneville, the new principal built a vision for school improvement based on trust and collaboration.

In 2018, a leading external expert was engaged to provide training in developing high-performing teams (HPT). The training focused on how to get the best from all team members, how to learn with and from others and support others in their learning. It was a critical factor in establishing new ways of working towards a common goal at Swayneville. By unpacking the HPT tools together, staff developed a shared language and vision of improvement.

From there, the principal focused on enhancing teamwork at the school. The new year brought new opportunities. Refurbishments were carried out at the school and staff were given time to get to know each other, including the completion of a personality test. This helped to re-focus on people's needs and identify and leverage their strengths. The principal spent time seeking regular feedback and checking in with all staff. Team meetings were optimised by ensuring everyone, including support staff and cleaners were included. It was important for all staff to feel heard and valued.

Though it took nearly 6 months for some staff to get on board, a HPT model was adopted for all staff meetings. It has become a key measure to ensure a consistent approach in the ways of working and a regular feature in planning and data conversations. Today, a HPT is also led by teacher aides.

The HPT tools enhanced collaboration and trust, as Swayneville staff were working and learning together. They prompted shifts in mindsets and helped establish clear expectations. Teachers now have a strong sense of accountability and continually seek to improve. And most importantly, all staff have shared ownership of the school vision.

How can I better learn with and from my colleagues and support their learning?

How can we strengthen teamwork at our school?

‘ **Having a shared accountability and responsiveness to context are the book ends of school improvement work.** ’

Principal (workshop participant)

Overcoming challenges

During the workshop, principals identified a range of ways/approaches they had used to address barriers and challenges. They are listed below to promote peer-to-peer conversations and contribute to enhancing collegial culture in our system.

Seeing change as learning

- **Focus on solutions** – See challenges as opportunities to create solutions, rather than a reason to delay change.
- **Adapt** – Understand your context and make adjustments.
- **Be a learner** – Be vulnerable as a leader. We don't know it all. The learning journey happens together.
- **Celebrate** – Celebrate the journey and the successes that occur.

Communicating change

- **Build a shared understanding and ownership of change** – Explore the 'why' with staff and students, share the journey and next steps, and create a transparent evidence base showing how changes are implemented authentically across the school.
- **Build trust/share responsibility** – Build credibility and include others' suggestions. Listen to everyone's opinion and reflect this in decisions; reach consensus with staff.
- **Build relationships with parents and children** – Proactively reach out to parents; engender positive communication and ensure that parents are part of key conversations regarding students.

Supporting and empowering your staff

- **Grow your staff** – Ensure opportunities for professional growth for new staff, including comprehensive induction to help them identify with the school.
- **Acknowledge staff needs and empower them** – Give teachers their own space to have constructive conversations observe the practices of their colleagues, and apply their learnings in their own classrooms.
- **Consider soft data** – Observation, conversations, reaching out, being part of the community is what speaks to the improvement of the school.

What is my approach to overcoming challenges when implementing changes at a school?

How can we collaboratively learn from identifying and overcoming challenges of school improvement?

> School improvement requires resilience, communication, care, and ongoing monitoring. It is not always a "natural process" — it needs cultivation to grow in momentum in order to lift expectations for all stakeholders.
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> Principal (workshop participant)

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