

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.

Learning together to build teaching mastery

Professional learning is most effective and has greater impact on teaching expertise and student learning when it is collaborative. For Fullan (2014), this is about ‘social capital’ — the opportunity for colleagues to learn from each other, build confidence and develop mastery of their profession as teachers and leaders.

For the second year in a row, analysis of school review data has shown that capability building is the top area recommended for improvement for Queensland state schools and centres. Collaboration was a key theme.

This paper unpacks school review recommendations from 2020 to identify professional learning opportunities across key focus areas. In particular, it provides insights into collaborative professional learning in practice. The findings show how school staff learn together to build their expertise and maximise student learning outcomes.

Collaboration is a significant theme in domain five of the *National School Improvement Tool*, ‘An expert teaching team’.

The domain considers the extent to which

‘the school works to ensure the continuity of a culture of collaboration and teamwork over time across cohorts of teachers’

‘school leaders ensure that opportunities are created for teachers to work together and to learn from each other’s practices [...].’

‘the principal and other school leaders build networked school relationships that support leadership development [...].’

ACER 2012, p. 10

School reviews in 2020 (total: 301)

School types			
P-6	Secondary	P-9/10/12	Other
217	44	13	27*

Review types		
Full school	Priority support	Self-determined
245	54	2

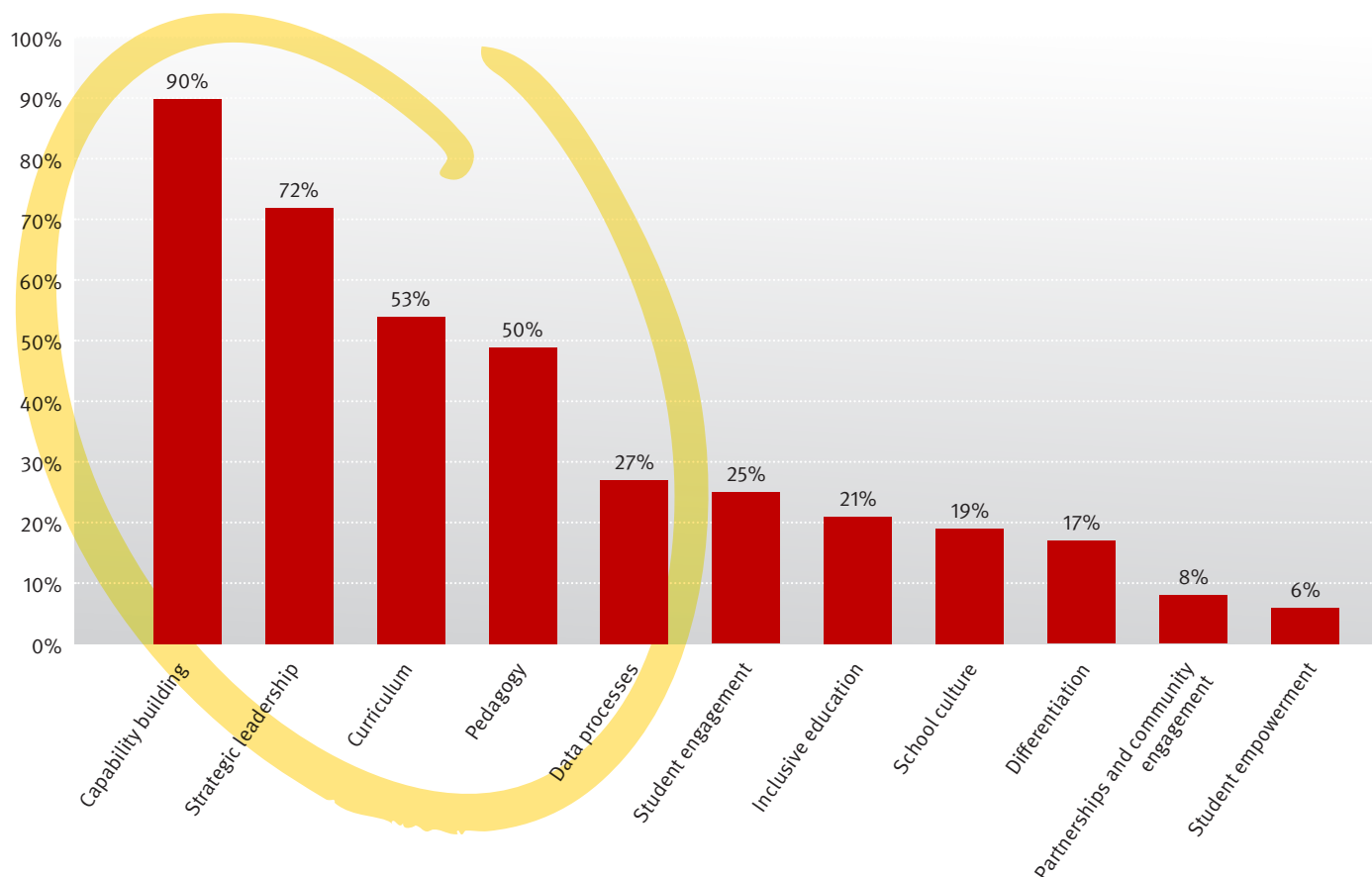
* Includes 14 special schools, five outdoor and environmental education centres, five schools of distance education, two educational units and one centre for continuing secondary education.

Key findings from school reviews

Reviews in 2020 confirmed the ‘big five’ improvement areas for schools identified in the insights paper, **Maximising our impact**, with capability building remaining the most common area.



Figure 1: Key areas recommended for improvement in 2020 – percentage of review schools

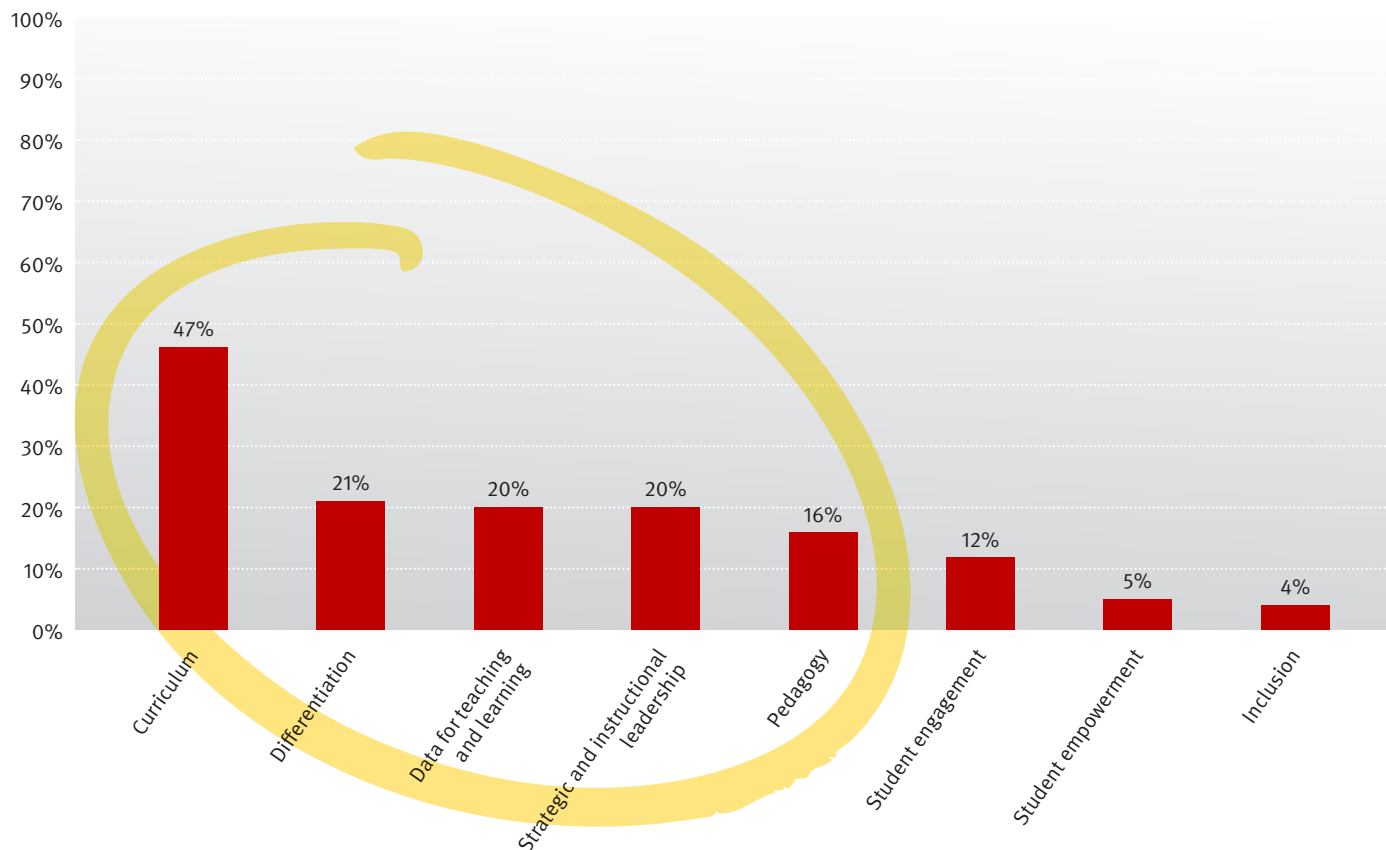


Note: N=298. Three review reports were not included in this analysis due to their different format.

The top areas for targeted professional learning

The top five areas identified for professional learning are curriculum, differentiation, data for teaching and learning, leadership and pedagogy.

Figure 2: The professional learning focus areas identified in 2020 reviews

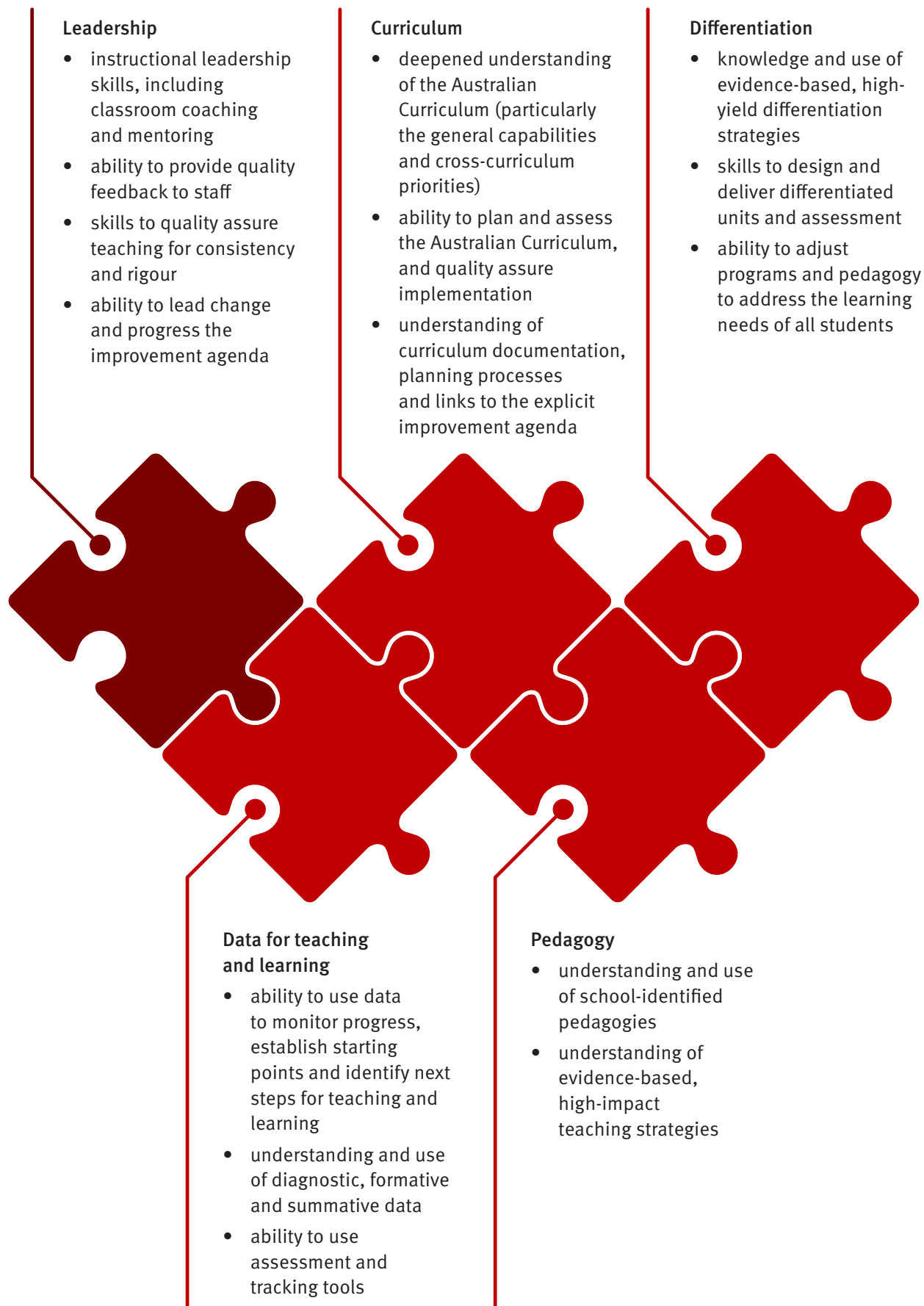


Note: N= 205.

Review recommendations can be unpacked or disaggregated further. The most common recommendations emphasise the need for a continuum of knowledge and skill development within each area of expertise, from beginning, early career and progression to mastery. Mastery is an ongoing process throughout a teacher’s career. The next key learning areas are summarised in Figure 3.



Figure 3: The top five focus areas for professional learning



■ Areas for leadership development

■ Areas for development of teaching expertise to mastery

Collaborative professional learning

Collaboration was an overarching theme across the review recommendations about capability building. These recommendations highlight three ways staff can connect to build their expertise:

- cultivating a culture of collaborative learning across the school
- collectively planning professional learning opportunities
- engaging in classroom coaching and feedback.

While the priorities identified for professional learning cover a range of areas, these collaborative approaches are applicable to all of them. They are the critical connectors colleagues can use to engage with each other to share and develop their collective expertise across the five focus areas of leadership, curriculum, data for teaching and learning, differentiation and pedagogy.

Cultivating a collaborative learning culture

A foundational aspect is for schools to foster a culture of collaboration where staff connect regularly and learn from each other. This includes dedicated time and further opportunities for collaborative professional learning. Areas identified for schools to consider were to:

- leverage existing collaborative activities to build expertise, for example, curriculum planning, moderation sessions and data discussions



Collaboration “is not just about individuals cooperating or their sense of collegiality ... It is about them purposefully engaging; it is about them developing a culture of learning together to best serve students’ needs.”

Sharratt & Plance, 2016, preface

- facilitate opportunities for staff to build networks with colleagues from other schools
- further develop professional learning communities or team approaches.

Planning for professional learning

Another key area involves staff working together to identify learning opportunities and develop a holistic and agreed approach for building capability. This planning includes consideration of individual staff learning needs and whole-school priorities. The frequency of the term ‘collaboratively’ across review recommendations highlights the importance of staff voice, consultation, shared decision making and ownership of professional learning. Most recommendations about planning focused on classroom coaching and feedback. The next steps for schools are to collaboratively:

- develop and enact a whole-school professional learning plan, aligning it with the school’s improvement agenda and staff annual performance development plans, and including opportunities for mentoring, coaching and feedback
- review, develop and implement a whole-school approach for staff to participate in classroom-based learning, including classroom coaching and mentoring.

Classroom coaching and feedback

Classroom coaching and feedback was the most prominent theme from school review recommendations about capability building. The frequent references to classroom-based learning as a collegial process highlight the importance of having a strong culture of support, collaboration and trust. Schools were encouraged to develop approaches to these activities that:

- provide regular and ongoing opportunities for staff to receive feedback on their classroom practice
- include structured and differentiated processes
- focus on areas aligned with the school’s priority areas or explicit improvement agenda.

“Constructive feedback based on classroom observation has consistently been shown to have a significant impact on student learning. Feedback creates a culture of exchanging ideas within and among schools.”

Jensen, 2012, p. 25

To generate discussion...

- How does our school cultivate a culture of professional collaboration among colleagues?
- What formal and informal opportunities are dedicated to collegial learning, within year levels and/or faculty teams, and across the school, and with other schools and networks?
- What opportunities exist for all teachers and leaders to receive regular feedback on their classroom practice?
- How are professional learning opportunities targeted to the needs and experience of all staff — from beginning teachers, middle career and experienced — to support the continual development of educational expertise?
- How does our school’s approach to professional learning balance individual and whole-school priorities?
- How do we assess and maximise the impact of professional learning activities on teaching, leading and learning?



Practical considerations for collaborative learning

Cultivate a high-trust culture for intentional collaboration

- Lead a deliberate effort to cultivate a professional team culture focused on collaboration and continual improvement among all staff.
- Prioritise and invest in professional development and leadership learning for all staff.
- Build a distributive leadership team and approach to model, guide and facilitate collaborative culture-building activities across the school.
- Prioritise respectful and trusting professional relationships among leaders, teachers, students and parents/carers.
- Encourage openness to feedback and critique across the school, which is supported by mutually agreed collegial engagement protocols.

Embed a whole-school approach to high-impact collaborative professional learning

- Think innovatively about in-classroom opportunities for collegial sharing and learning to take place.
- Build a school-wide plan that includes a range of opportunities for all staff to build their knowledge and skills in both individual and whole-school priority areas.
- Foster opportunities among colleagues where the sharing of classroom practice and evidence-based high-impact teaching and learning is common.
- Schedule time and dedicate resources for teachers and support teams to collaborate and visit classrooms.
- Invest in instructional leadership across the school. Expand the capacity for leaders to support and facilitate collegial learning processes, including team and staff meetings, moderation sessions and collaborative data conversations.

Leverage impact on teaching and learning

- Collaboratively develop the school-wide protocols for professional collaboration across all staff.
- Build a platform for robust discussions by applying protocols consistently across meetings and developing regular routines.
- Be increasingly targeted about professional learning activities. Strengthen alignment of the school’s professional learning plan and its improvement priorities.
- Ensure the investment of everyone’s time and resources achieves the intended outcomes. Include specific measures and targets to ensure activities are focused.
- Make it personal. Encourage teachers and leaders to use data to monitor their own effectiveness, share insights and harness a collective effort to improving student outcomes.

School snapshot

Case study: **Walking side by side to support student success at Kingsthorpe State School**

Kingsthorpe State School is using collaborative practices to build staff capability. Strong relationships, built on trust and openness, exist among staff and their professional networks, allowing leaders and teachers to 'walk side by side' delivering quality teaching to support student success.

Collectively planning professional development, growing a culture of collaborative learning and engaging in classroom observation and feedback underpin the progressive improvements in teaching expertise. The school considers this to be the key to their success.

Focused areas for professional development and targeted teaching are identified through the formal sharing and reflection of whole-school priorities. This incorporates the purposeful use of whole-school and cohort data that is interpreted and analysed between year level teachers. Teachers also have the opportunity to nominate areas they feel would build their capability to meet upcoming student needs. Scheduled planning days outlined in the annual professional development plan are used to reflect on data, and assess relevance and effectiveness of professional learning activities. Teachers can also put forward other professional development interests. Student feedback on specific subject comprehension is also used to identify potential areas for professional development.

The school's collaborative learning culture allows staff to connect regularly and exchange knowledge, experiences and expertise. Team meetings occur in different classrooms each week and start with teachers unpacking new classroom artefacts, practices and processes. Group planning days occur one day per term where all staff have the opportunity to be 'taken offline'. Teams collaboratively moderate, evaluate their data, and share classroom insights. New strategies are work-shopped with all staff prior to implementation, and collaboratively evaluated over time to inform future directions.

The school introduced SCORE (Skim and Scan, Connect and Question, Organise Your Thinking, Read and Reflect, Be the Expert) after the data identified a need to lift student reading comprehension across all year levels. The principal, who was a co-developer of SCORE lessons, used metacognitive processes and instructional leadership to model the teaching practices to teachers and teacher aides in weekly professional learning sessions. Data walls were used to track student progress and follow-up sessions were scheduled, allowing teachers to share their findings and evaluate the program's success.

Classroom observation and feedback has become a regular practice in the school and provides teachers with pedagogical feedback and a strong sense of support. What started as a way to identify pre-existing practices, that would help lift student reading comprehension, evolved into a systematic approach to peer learning and coaching. Informed by the work of Lyn Sharratt, the principal implemented a classroom open-door policy that aimed to break down existing barriers between teaching staff and encourage collegial engagement. The principal and teachers are now able to use non-contact time to visit their peers, watch each other work, share professional knowledge and discuss new ideas.

A collaborative learning culture also exists between schools. Scheduled time for termly visits to nearby cluster schools allows teachers to network with other teachers of similar sized schools. Together they participate in peer-to-peer learning, where teachers can observe different practices and moderate student outcomes.

The principal credits the school's sustained performance to these diverse collaborative practices that have fostered a culture of trust and openness: 'That's how we build staff capability, to evidence quality whole-school teaching practices and shared accountability for student learning and, most importantly, positively impact on student learning progression.'



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

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“Being more intentional in our collaboration means that we can share and grow our expertise to tackle the problems that matter and achieve big results.”

Peter Kelly, Deputy Director-General, State Schools



Developing a school-based research culture

“Practitioner research is increasingly acknowledged by education authorities across the world as a highly effective means of strengthening educators’ professional development.”

British Education Research Association, 2014

School-based research culture is acknowledged globally as an essential feature of effective schooling and high-performing school systems. A sustainable research culture in schools requires knowledgeable and supportive leadership to facilitate the development of research literacy of all staff. Research literacy (the ability and willingness to engage in and with research) is a key element of a school’s culture, as both an important characteristic of teacher identity and a driver for evidence-based decision making in schools.

QELi’s research culture masterclass, facilitated by Drs Geoff and Annette Hilton, is suitable for people in all leadership positions in educational settings who are interested in learning more about practitioner research and models for promoting it to develop a research culture within their schools. We suggest that the program would be particularly well suited to leadership teams.

Find out more here: qeli.qld.edu.au/research-culture-masterclass-2021

“I think teaching has changed from being more of an individual pursuit behind closed doors for a school year to one that has more of a team and peer learning approach that seeks to build professional communities and networks where knowledge can be shared and expertise developed.”

Gill Callister, 2018, p. 22.

Developing collective teacher efficacy

Developing the individual and collective expertise of teachers is the number one investment leaders can make to lift learner outcomes. Teaching Sprints is a simple, structured and powerful team-based method that enables teacher teams to engage in collaborative, evidence-informed improvement work for student achievement. Harnessing the collaborative time that you already have available, the Teaching Sprints approach can help your school to rapidly improve outcomes by building the collective efficacy of your teachers.

QELi’s masterclass explores literature about effective teacher learning and development, discusses core elements of the Teaching Sprints process, and explains how the Teaching Sprints process can be applied to improve outcomes in your school. It is suitable for team leaders, lead teachers, middle leaders, deputy principals and principals.

Find out more here: qeli.qld.edu.au/foundations-of-teaching-sprints-with-bronwyn-ryrie-jones



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