

## Maximising Our Impact

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In 2019, the Education Improvement Branch of Education Queensland started undertaking school reviews to examine the role that regions play in supporting school improvement. In 2020, this brief was expanded across the stages of early childhood and schooling to strengthen the continuity and alignment of learning and wellbeing for children and young people. By undertaking reviews, the Branch argues it has gained valuable insights into school practice across the state. In this case study the Authors share their findings and review insights so as to inform the field about how systemic school reviews help inform the improvement of schooling.

*A wealthy CEO ... asked a young teacher, 'And what do you make?' The teacher replied, 'I make kids work harder than they thought they could. I make them question – criticise – write – read ... You know what I make? I make a difference.'* Thomas L Friedman, Pulitzer prize-winning author.

ANECDOTES LIKE THIS may seem cliché, but it is widely agreed in education circles that most teachers and school leaders joined the profession because they want to make a difference in the lives of their students. As Andy Hargreaves wrote, it is an 'occupational truism' that 'teachers ultimately do what they do for the children' (1999, p. 87). The same holds true for school leaders who 'want to make a difference to children's and young person's lives and learning' (Mulford, 2008, p. iv).

Education research has long highlighted the impact teachers and school leaders can have on student learning. John Hattie emphasises the powerful role that teachers play in the 'learning equation' (2003, p. 2). After teachers, principals are often considered 'the second most crucial in-school influencers' of student learning (Fullan, 2014; ).

Clearly, we know the difference teachers and school leaders can make. The question is *how* can schools maximise their impact on student learning? School reviews in Queensland provide powerful insights into this question.

## What Can School Reviews Tell Us?

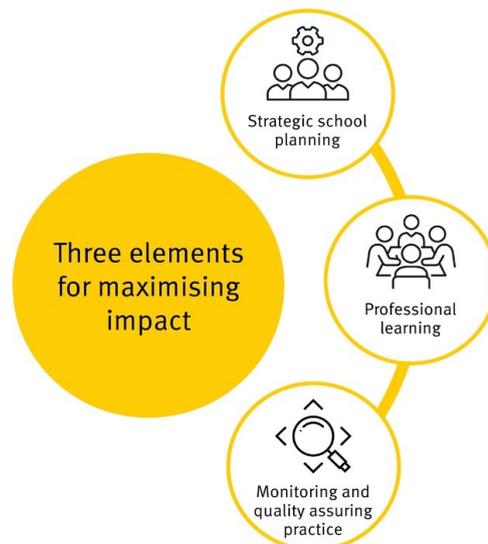
The Education Improvement Branch (EIB), previously known as the School Improvement Unit, reviews every state school and education centre in Queensland over a four-year cycle. The purpose of the reviews is to give schools and centres tailored feedback and support to inform and guide their improvement journeys. The EIB also offers a range of training programs to build staff capability in leading and implementing school improvement.

As our new name suggests, the EIB is expanding its work. In 2019, we started undertaking regional reviews to look at the role regions play in supporting school improvement. In 2020, we are expanding our focus across the stages of early childhood and schooling to strengthen the continuity and alignment of learning and wellbeing for children and young people. We will also strengthen our approach to reviewing and supporting continuous improvement for rural and remote Queensland state schools delivering kindergarten programs.

By undertaking reviews, the EIB gains valuable insights into school practice across the state. We regularly share our findings to contribute to broader understandings of school and system improvement in Queensland.

In 2019, the EIB reviewed 360 Queensland state schools. This included a range of school types, but the majority (246) were primary schools. Taking 357 review reports<sup>1</sup>, the EIB examined all of the key improvement strategies. These are the next steps reviewers suggest schools and centres can take in their improvement journeys.

In analysing the findings from these reviews, the EIB considered two questions: What were the most common review recommendations in 2019? And what do these tell us about how schools can maximise their impact on student learning?



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<sup>1</sup>Due to their unique format, we excluded three reports produced by schools who organised their own self-determined review.

## Three Elements for Maximising Impact

### Figure 1. Three Elements for Maximising Impact

The top key improvement strategies in 2019 related to the following five areas: staff capability, strategic leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, data.

The call to action within these recommendations varied, ranging from ‘develop’ to ‘refine’, to ‘implement’ or ‘review’ depending on where schools were at in their improvement journeys.

Across these ‘big five’ areas, however, three common elements were identified for maximising impact on student learning: strategic school planning, professional learning, and monitoring and quality assuring practice. All three elements contribute to the core work of schools – improving student outcomes.

### The First Element:

#### Strategic school planning

This element is about developing a shared purpose and a vision of what successful outcomes will look like. Review recommendations referred to a range of plans to support schools in setting a strategic direction. Across the five improvement areas, two key features were highlighted: that planning documents have a whole-school emphasis and are collaboratively developed.

Recommendations also emphasised the importance of having a clear purpose and alignment with school priorities and expectations. These themes can be seen in the following examples:

- › **Staff capability** | Collaboratively develop a whole-school collegial engagement framework or professional learning plan that includes regular opportunities for staff to participate in classroom-based learning (such as modelling, mentoring, and observation, coaching and feedback cycles).
- › **Strategic leadership** | Collaboratively narrow and sharpen the school’s explicit improvement agenda, including clear strategies, timelines, achievable targets and success checks that are communicated to all members of the school community.
- › **Curriculum** | Collaboratively develop a whole-school curriculum plan that aligns with the Australian Curriculum and includes locally relevant units.
- › **Pedagogy** | Collaboratively develop the school’s pedagogical framework to establish school-wide practices and expectations, ensuring alignment with the explicit improvement agenda, and including processes to quality assure its implementation.

- › **Data** | Collaboratively develop, implement and communicate a whole- school data plan that identifies: what data will be collected and why, who will collect it, when it will be collected, where the data will be stored, and how it will be used.

### **The Second Element: Professional learning**

The second element is about facilitating and targeting professional learning to support the school's vision. This was the top area for improvement among the 'big five'. The theme was less prominent for strategic leadership, but we did see key recommendations about aligning roles and responsibilities (and therefore particular skillsets) with the school's explicit improvement agenda. In this case, professional learning is something of a prerequisite, rather than an explicit recommendation.

Some of the themes identified in the first element cropped up again here. This included collaborating with colleagues to share and reflect on practice, and aligning professional learning with improvement priorities. Four professional learning areas were apparent:

- › **Strategic leadership** | Align the roles and responsibilities (and therefore the skill sets) of the leadership team and staff to ensure there are accountabilities in the actioning of the school's explicit improvement agenda.
- › **Curriculum** | Enhance collaborative curriculum planning to build staff understanding and capability, ensuring curriculum units reflect the rigour and intent of all learning areas of the Australian Curriculum.
- › **Pedagogy** | Build staff capability to differentiate practice and engage, challenge and extend all students in their learning.
- › **Data** | Provide regular opportunities for school leaders and teachers to develop their data literacy through collaborative discussion and analysis of whole-school and classroom data.

### **The Third Element: Monitoring and quality assuring practice**

In making student learning 'visible', Hattie highlights the importance of knowing 'on a regular basis, the nature and magnitude of your impact' (Hattie, 2012, p. vii). This is the third element for maximising impact. It involves measuring the effects of school practice on student outcomes and making adjustments for further improvement.

Review recommendations highlighted the importance of quality assuring practice and monitoring progress. The below examples are common:

- › **Staff capability** | Implement or enhance instructional leadership and peer instructional practices to develop shared understanding, and quality assure and align teaching practices.

- › **Strategic leadership** | Develop, monitor and quality assure measures, targets and timelines for implementing the explicit improvement agenda to ensure consistency and effectiveness of practice.
- › **Curriculum** | Quality assure, review and monitor the delivery of the Australian Curriculum, and associated assessment, to ensure the required content descriptions are taught and that students are assessed against the achievement standards.
- › **Pedagogy** | Quality assure, monitor, review and refine pedagogical practices to ensure teachers have a shared understanding of the agreed approaches.
- › **Data** | Build and promote a culture of self-evaluation, review and reflection on student data to generate strategies for continuous improvement and identify growth.

### **What Can We Do With These Findings?**

Reviews provide individual schools with feedback to inform their practice.

Collectively, they also provide valuable insights into education improvement across Queensland. The three elements identified in the 2019 review reports can prompt reflection and discussion in schools about where they are in their own improvement journeys. Schools can use these elements to consider ways to maximise their impact and make a meaningful difference to their students.

### **Reflection Questions**

- › How does our school communicate our vision for learning and build ownership of the explicit improvement agenda among school leaders, staff, students, parents and the community?
- › What is our school's 'action plan' for improvement? How will we monitor our progress and maximise our impact on student outcomes?
- › In what ways does our school cultivate collaborative cultures and support continuous professional learning?
- › What opportunities for differentiated support and professional learning are provided for all staff, including classroom-based learning, mentoring and coaching arrangements?
- › What support and quality assurance processes exist in our school to ensure practices are implemented consistently?
- › How does our school build a data culture of 'discovery and action', using data to inform the starting points for learning, monitor progress, evaluate impact and inform next steps?

*The EIB's insights papers and school case studies are available online at [www.schoolreviews.education.qld.gov.au](http://www.schoolreviews.education.qld.gov.au).*

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