AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK
Using the National School Improvement Tool

Dr Deborah Seifert
Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young

FEBRUARY 2015

ACER

An initiative of the Centre for Education Policy and Practice

The Centre for Education Policy and Practice promotes the
interconnection between research, policy and practice. The Centre
investigates the impact of policy and practice in terms of research
evidence of what works to meet learners' needs and improve learning
outcomes, but also examines ways in which research can be informed
by a thorough understanding of the perspectives of policy makers
and practitioners. The work of the Centre, addressing all levels of
education and training, is organised around three themes: effective
teaching; effective institutional leadership; and effective system
leadership.

www.acer.edu.au/epp

The National School Improvement Tool was developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in collaboration with the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment. The Tool is grounded in international research, and its nine domains focus schools on whole school improvement in teaching and learning. The Australian government through its Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood endorsed the Tool for use nationally in 2012.

For the past two years, a team of ACER consultants led by Senior Project Director, Robert Marshall, has used the Tool in many school contexts. ACER's school improvement team conducts reviews and training for reviewers across Australia. From their experience, the consultants have observed the Tool's usefulness in a variety of contexts and settings, whether high performing or not, as it assists to set a baseline of current practice on which to build capacity for improvement, wherever that baseline may be.

ACER is not bound by an accountability relationship with any school. The process for using the Tool is independent and specific to ACER. The team supports schools, clusters, dioceses and systems to conduct school reviews and develop school improvement plans.

While acknowledging that direct measures of student outcomes are essential to inform school improvement efforts, the National School Improvement Tool recognises that school improvement must come from actions on a daily basis. It facilitates school-wide conversations –with parents and families, staff, school governing bodies, local communities and students themselves – about current practice, areas for improvement and evidence that progress is being made.

ACER Chief Executive Officer Professor Geoff Masters drew on an extensive literature base to develop the Tool. He says:

Rapidly improving schools, and schools that produce unusually good outcomes given their student intakes and circumstances, tend to have a number of features in common.

- *They pursue an explicit improvement agenda – they know what they want to see improve and they know how they will monitor success*
- *The staff of the school work together as a team, supporting each other and with a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in the school*
- *Efforts are made to identify and understand the learning needs of students in the school and to use available human and physical resources to address those needs*
- *The school builds relationships with parents and others outside the school in support of its improvement agenda.*

Experience with a common evidence base and a personal bank of knowledge means that ACER consultants can move from the macro to the micro and vice versa, investigate where themes are emerging, and seek to determine where intervention will be most effective. Consultants recognise the need to work differently in different schools according to context, as the understanding and use of data, the stages of development in pedagogy, levels of critical thinking and differentiation can vary widely from school to school.

Schools use the National School Improvement Tool in several ways. A school may undertake a self-review, or invite trained ACER consultants to conduct a review over 2-3 days and develop a formal report addressing each domain. The report gives feedback in relation to each domain separately, using qualitative rubrics across 'outstanding', high', 'medium' and 'low'. Evidence to support the judgement in each domain is included. Based on this evidence, the report also provides a set of overall Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. As a result, Regina Acton, former school principal and now ACER consultant, says 'the Tool gives the whole school community the same criteria and language for reviewing growth across the school'.

Following the review, consultants spend a day with a school's leadership team to facilitate a school improvement plan based on the review report. Schools may decide to give priority to particular domains in their improvement plan and a focused teaching and learning improvement plan can then be developed, based on these recommendations.

For example, one Victorian primary school used the review report to identify specific areas for attention in the school improvement plan. This included the need to improve their use of data within the school and the need to focus on literacy across all levels. The new school improvement plan gave staff a specific direction with agreed actions and clear goals to aim for.

Given their broad experience across a number of review frameworks both nationally and internationally, ACER consultants have much to offer. There are several themes or success factors which emerge from the consultants' reflections.

The 9 inter-related domains of the National School Improvement Tool have been applied in schools in Australia and other countries.
1. An explicit improvement agenda
2. Analysis and discussion of data
3. A culture that promotes learning
4. Targeted use of school resources
5. An expert teaching team
6. Systematic curriculum delivery
7. Differentiated teaching and learning
8. Effective pedagogical practices
9. School-community partnerships

SUCCESS FACTORS

1. Invitation-based review

When a school proactively seeks an ACER School Improvement Review it sets a positive environment for the work to flow through to a school improvement plan

By inviting a review, schools use the National School Improvement Tool by choice rather than as merely compliance with performance indicators for a system. It is clear that a school's ownership of the process is important, and the approach of inviting the ACER consultants into the school is powerful. The Principal and leadership team play an important part in preparing the school community (staff, students, parents) for the review, to ensure that all stakeholders understand the purpose and are involved.

Unlike a self review, an external review brings in the perspectives of consultants, themselves former principals and senior leaders who understand schools and have a wide-ranging view of current school practice.

As an added benefit, several schools have found that the ACER School Improvement Report has been useful as a platform for reporting to a school board or district as a way of identifying strengths, challenges and areas to focus on for improvement.

At a larger scale, ACER has been invited to support change across Australia in Government and Catholic schools to build capacity of policy officers and school leaders. Understanding of the National School Improvement Tool and how to gather appropriate evidence across the nine domains of the Tool enables them to make judgements about school improvement in their own settings.

2. Preparation and documentation

Preparation through documentation provided by the school is an important basis for the Review

The documentation provided by a school in the area of teaching and learning gives consultants a clear overview of a school's approach to curriculum as well as its organisational structure and priorities. This assists in giving a framework for the approach and in identifying areas to confirm or further investigate during the visit.

School documents are an important means of providing background prior to the onsite meetings. These may include:

- Strategic Plan and Annual Implementation Plan
- Curriculum plan
- Student handbook
- Staff List
- Assessment schedules
- Student performance trends
- Community projects
- Professional development priorities
- Curriculum planning tools
- Pedagogical frameworks for whole school; year level; learning area
- Special programs
- Data plan

Schools provide these documents digitally or in hard copy or by access to the school intranet. Consultants study the documentation prior to the visit, assisting them to understand school context, particular in-school vocabulary, values and culture. They will consider academic success, student engagement and planning strategies for teaching, learning and resources.

3. Principal as reviewer

Using the Principal as a school-based reviewer is an important factor in the success of a Review

Although the ACER consultants have wide experience, understanding the unique context of any particular school is vital. The consultants bring an external eye, but there is also a need for input from the school's perspective. For this reason principals act as part of the review team to reflect on findings from data, interviews and meetings. A relatively new principal provides an initial impression and external view, while a longer-standing principal will add valuable history and context.

ACER consultants meet with the Principal regularly through the review to discuss themes and evidence gained and test these against the Principal's knowledge of the school context. This leads to a report which takes into account school environment, background and local issues. With the principal so directly involved throughout the review process, they are a partner in the development of the Review Report.

Often, a school will have a long 'wish-list' for improvement, but time and resource constraints require them to prioritise and focus efforts and resources effectively. The recommendations from the ACER review team allow a school to refine and develop its explicit improvement agenda with specific school-wide targets which are narrow and sharp in terms of measurable outcomes, accompanied by timelines and accountability. The roles of the principal and leadership team are essential to understanding and implementing the plan.

4. Wide school community participation

The school's readiness to give access to all staff and students is vital

The intent of the review is to ascertain the extent to which practices are embedded. Is there is a 'line of sight' from documented policy through year levels, faculties, in classroom practice and for individual student learning? To do this, the ACER consultants need to talk with the widest possible range of teachers, students and parents.

Ian Probyn, who has conducted ACER reviews in New South Wales and South Australia, reflects:

> I have been impressed with the quality of observation of the students when we have interviewed them in groups. Once they have confidence in the process we are using, and the fact that it is a conversation where everyone can share, they provide direct assessments of the effectiveness of all the different parts of the school. By modelling active listening, the reviews themselves are contributing to student's understanding of their own influence, and the

ways in which they can shape the direction of their education.

The school is asked to arrange the schedule of meetings and classroom visits for the reviews, and it is clear that a wide range of year level and faculty teachers, students and parents should be included. Staff at various positions along a continuum of practice and opinion should also be included so that consultants can cross-reference information about practices in the school. This gives a wide range of comments for consultants to then establish themes and suggest priorities for the future. The involvement of some parents is vital, and their willingness to talk with consultants is an important part of the process.

ACER's Senior Project Director for School Improvement, Robert Marshall, has observed that there is often a 'hidden curriculum' in a school, meaning that documented policies are not always observed in practice. ACER consultants have found that they can assess the depth of the vision and the strength of implementation in speaking with stakeholders. There is also increased buy-in by the school community if there has been wide consultation for the Review Report.

Parents' willingness to talk with consultants is important because parents as well as students are seen as key commentators on school practice. Consultants will ask parents questions such as 'Why did you choose this school?', What is the talk in the community about this school?', and 'How do you know how your child is progressing at school?' A range of questions to parents assists in finding out the extent of particular practices across the school, and this is an important dimension of the process.

5. Post-review planning

Schools are using the ACER School Improvement Report as an effective basis for planning for improvement in teaching and learning.

As well as providing a report to the school, an ACER Review is followed by a planning session. This is an important part of the whole review process and

typically includes the senior leadership team as well as the Principal. This allows for an evidence-based as well as school-based approach to establishing a School Improvement Plan in Teaching and Learning as part of wider Strategic Planning.

The recommendations made in the report become the basis for a School Improvement Plan. For example, a school may be operating mostly at the Medium level of Domain 2 (Analysis and discussion of data). Evidence may have been found of regular timetabled meetings to analyse and discuss data at Learning Area Co-ordinator level, but that only some individual teachers effectively analyse data and utilise this for input into programs and for tracking student improvement.

A recommendation linked to this Domain might then be:

Develop an annual data plan, which includes systematically collected data on student progress, including academic and behavioural outcomes. The data plan should be available to all teaching and teaching support staff for the express purpose of analysis and discussion of data to inform teachers about student growth, which will inform lesson planning, and teaching based on student needs.

From this, a goal in a three-year School Improvement Plan for Teaching and Learning might be:

Effectively and purposefully use academic data to monitor and track student progress and improvement, at school, year and individual student level to enhance student growth.

The school can then establish strategies to meet this goal, and also a more detailed implementation plan for, say, one year ahead.

This approach can lead to effective micro-reform in a targeted area, rather than a school approaching improvement across an unattainably wide range of areas and spreading efforts too thinly across them all. It helps focus on answering the question 'What do we really want to aim for as our improvement agenda?'

SUMMARY

The National School Improvement Tool is appropriate in a range of systems, cultures and contexts.

The ACER School Improvement review and planning process has been used in schools across the State, Catholic and Independent sectors in Australia, as well as internationally. The focus of the domains is independent of system, religious or national context. The Tool has been used in secular, Christian (Catholic and Protestant), Islamic and Hindu schools. Schools based on specific education philosophies including Montessori have also been reviewed. Without exception the ACER consultants have commented that the Tool is relevant and useful in all of these contexts as it focuses on teaching and learning.

FURTHER INFORMATION

National School Improvement Tool
www.acer.edu.au/files/NSIT.pdf

For more information on the ACER School Improvement process and the associated research, please contact:

Robert Marshall
Senior Project Director
School Improvement
Australian Council for Educational Research
19 Prospect Hill Road
Camberwell VIC 3124
+61 3 9277 5346
+61 0439 665 965
Robert.Marshall@acer.edu.au

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why ask ACER consultants to do a review?

ACER consultants bring knowledge, expertise and a bank of experience as former principals or senior leaders. An external review allows for an independent view to gather evidence and develop a clear line of sight through all levels and stakeholder groups within the school, to then form appropriate, narrow and sharp recommendations on which to build school improvement plans.

When is a good time to do a review?

- Early in a new principal's incumbency an ACER Review can provide a 'point in time' summary and a road map for school improvement work.
- After a principal's extended leave, a review is useful as a way of mapping improvement and identifying areas for future focus.
- Mid-contract, a principal may choose to invite ACER to undertake a review to allow for big picture planning in teaching and learning.
- Near the end of a principal's contract, a review is useful as an overarching recording of teaching and learning current and recommended practices.
- If there has been a significant change in the leadership team, schools report that an ACER Review is extremely worthwhile to bind a team through focusing on improvement.
- Schools entering a new Strategic Planning cycle will find the review can be instrumental in establishing the Teaching and Learning goals for the overall plan.

How should a school prepare and what data should be considered?

Part of the purpose of an ACER School Improvement Review is to assist with focusing on use of data and on what data will be most useful in tracking improvement. Information provided to consultants prior to the visit is useful to set context, however the ongoing attention to the use of data may be discussed and included in a recommendation with the ACER Review Report.

What is the role of leadership, staff, students and parents?

School leadership must include access to all stakeholders in the process of the review schedule, to increase a sense of ownership and the validity of conclusions reached.

What is the impact of an ACER School Improvement Review?

Improvement in teaching and learning depends on the development and empowerment of principals and teachers. In the short term, an ACER School Improvement Review allows external experts to delve deeply into a school's practice and then to filter, plait and weave themes and recommendations which will lead to clear goals for an explicit improvement plan in the area of teaching and learning.

To identify longer-term impact, ACER is currently conducting research into the use and effectiveness of the School Improvement processes described in this article.