

PLAN TO IMPROVE

Engagement in school-wide improvement

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How do principals, leadership teams and teachers use the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) and associated school review processes to improve the overall quality of teaching and reduce classroom variation in their schools?

An ACER field study to test the effectiveness and generalisability of the NSIT and the practices around school review and strategic planning identifies what works in various school contexts in relation to indicators of quality practice, rather than indicators of outcomes.

The field study has involved 16 schools drawn mostly from the pool of schools that have commissioned ACER to undertake school reviews using the NSIT since 2013, and draws conclusions based on interviews at two points in time with school leaders and teachers, analysis of school data, comments from ACER school improvement consultants and general conclusions drawn from their specific school review reports for the 16 schools.

What is the NSIT?

The NSIT provides schools with a way of reflecting on their current practices, identifying areas in which improvements could be made, and monitoring improvements in practice over time across a framework of nine domains:

- an explicit improvement agenda
- analysis and discussion of data
- a culture that promotes learning
- targeted use of school resources
- an expert teaching team
- systematic curriculum delivery
- differentiated teaching and learning
- effective pedagogical practices, and
- school-community partnerships.

Initial interviews with school leaders and teachers in the field study, surveyed following their use of the NSIT, reveal three important drivers of improvement.

■ Implementing an existing improvement agenda

‘I was quite delighted in many of the findings... That was really affirming for everyone in the school. For me it has been an ongoing reflective tool.’

Principal, Catholic school, NSW

■ Developing and accepting a new improvement agenda

‘The tool just gave us another high point of leverage...to move these things along. It just gave us a framework of more substance.’

Principal, independent school, NSW

■ Building collective capacity for improvement.

‘One of the strengths of the review process using the NSIT is that it can promote a culture of collaboration with all of the school community.’

ACER school improvement consultant

Further findings from the field study in relation to within-school variation and further outcomes for school improvement will depend on analysis of growth data and feedback through a second round of interviews.

To find out more about reviewing your school with the National School Improvement Tool contact Robert Marshall at ACER on (03) 9277 5346

Strong school leadership

Professor Geoff Masters, commenting in his report, *A Shared Challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* for the Queensland Department of Education and Training on the characteristics of high-performing schools, notes that ‘the strength of the school leadership is an important characteristic.’

The field study reveals that most school leaders understand that their role is critical to the enactment of an improvement agenda, and that one key to developing and sustaining school improvement is to recruit the support of external consultants.

‘From my perspective, a bonus in the use of external consultants was that it supported the upskilling of the school’s leadership team.’

Principal, independent school, Victoria

‘We wanted (our school improvement review) to be external, independent of us, and that has helped us to shape what we needed to do next.’

Principal, government school, Western Australia

Why conduct a school review?

According to the field study, the reasons for conducting a review are wide-ranging, reflecting the different contexts of schools involved in the research project.

‘I arrived at the school in May 2013 and really it was an opportunity for us to take stock and review why we were in the situation we were in and from an outside view.’

Principal, government school, ACT

School leaders desire to know what the current reality of their school is. They understand that their perceptions will be tested and acknowledge that this is a crucial starting point.

‘Using an external tool and external reviewers assists in circumventing any possibility that any new direction that might emerge would be seen as simply the preferred direction of the Head at that particular point in time.’

Principal, Catholic school, NSW

They also desire to profile their school’s progress against an evidence-based framework in a way that ensures that all stakeholders have a voice.

‘We were attracted by the opportunity to access external experts who had experience in using the NSIT in a nuanced way and who could interpret the results without bringing their own agenda to it.’

Principal, Catholic school, NSW

School leaders recognise that the review report is the basis for building a highly reflective learning culture to facilitate quality teaching and learning. They know that the review report identifies strengths (commendations) and achievements (affirmations), respects the work already undertaken and acknowledges success.

‘We’re progressively getting most of our staff on board to be continually aiming for improvement and to have that learning culture – one of high expectations, and one (in which) all the teachers believe that all students can learn... The review will help us because it confirms or validates the work that the staff have been doing has made an improvement.’

Principal, government school, QLD

Consensus to take action

Field study initial interviews reveal that school leaders recognise the importance of trust, clarity and collaboration in building consensus to take action.

‘As Headmaster, I wanted to be part of the process – to sit with staff in the process rather than lead it.’

Principal, Catholic school, NSW

Review report recommendations arise from the NSIT profiled evidence. They are prioritised by leadership teams, informing school improvement plan goals.

‘I think it gives you a language that’s going to be common. And it gave you an idea about what you need to start looking for to go to the next category and it gives you some achievable goals.’

Principal, government secondary school, ACT

This emphasis on building consensus to take action is not simply about engagement, but empowerment.

‘While the report is a way of engaging the school leadership and school community with some clear external perceptions of where the school is, and how it can be changed, one of the unmeasured, and I believe valuable, outcomes is an increased sense of empowerment in the community in how discussion can contribute to improving education in their school.’

ACER school improvement consultant

Plan to improve

Engagement and empowerment also foster ownership of the resulting improvement agenda or school improvement plan.

‘The best part of the review is that it concludes with the development of a school improvement plan, written by the school’s leadership while guided by the reviewers.’

Principal, independent school, Victoria

The NSIT and associated school review processes contribute to school improvement through the use of an explicit improvement agenda that has been developed using wide-ranging consultative practices.

‘The first challenge was to provide a platform that would allow for a collaborative approach to development.’

Principal, independent school, Victoria

According to Geoff Masters, in *Schools as Learning Organisations: Developing a school improvement plan*, ‘a school improvement plan is an element of a deeper improvement culture in a school, underpinned by a set of shared beliefs, values, commitments and understanding.

‘A school improvement plan is not only an intention to make meaningful improvements in day-to-day work, but also an opportunity to accumulate from practice professional knowledge about how to improve.’

References

Australian Council for Educational Research. (2012) *The National School Improvement Tool*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research. Available at www.acer.edu.au/files/NSIT.pdf


Masters, G. (2016) *Schools as Learning Organisations, Developing a school improvement plan*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.


Masters, G. (2009). *A Shared Challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools*. Report commissioned by the Queensland Department of Education and Training. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

For more information

www.acer.edu.au/school-improvement

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Further Details

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