

How Strong is Your School as a Professional Community?

The ACER Professional Community Framework and Questionnaire

Lawrence Ingvarson
ACER

**Building a Culture of Performance and
Development in your school**

Introduction

The *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*¹ identifies the pivotal role of school leaders in developing a culture of effective teaching, for leading, designing and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development.

Principals work with and through others to build a professional learning community that is focused on the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Through managing performance, effective continuing professional learning and regular feedback, they support all staff to achieve high standards and develop their leadership capacity. Principals support others, build capacity and treat people fairly and with respect.

What exactly is a professional learning community and how can school leaders gain a reliable indication of how well their school matches its characteristics?

The ACER *Professional Community Framework* (PCF)² provides a description of these characteristics in five domains, including key elements, indicators and rubrics for each domain.

Linked to the Framework is the ACER *Professional Community Questionnaire* (PCQ), a confidential on-line survey. It provides school leaders with a means of gauging the strength of their school as a professional learning community and identifying aspects that could be even stronger.

The PCF and the PCQ provide schools with a useful tool that complements ACER's *National School Improvement Tool*.

How might the ACER Professional Community Framework and Questionnaire be useful to you and your school?

Together, the PCF and the PCQ provide school leaders with a tool that can serve a variety of purposes. They provide:

- School staff with a detailed explanation of the key characteristics of a professional community, including key elements, indicators and rubrics.
- School leaders with a snapshot of where their school stands in relation to the characteristics of a professional community
- School leaders with a means of measuring change over time in strengthening their school as a professional community
- Aspiring and experienced school leaders applying for professional certification with a valid means of demonstrating the impact of their leadership over time
- Employing authorities who may wish to encourage, recognise and accredit schools as strong professional learning communities with a valid and independent means of measuring school improvement over time.

¹ <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/school-leadership/australian-professional-standard-for-principals-and-the-leadership-profiles.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

² <https://acer.ac/pcf>

What is a Professional Community?

The ACER *Professional Community Framework* is guided by a vision of schools as communities of professionals. Dufour (2004) defines a professional *learning* community as:

“ . . a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.”³

The ACER *PCF* defines a professional community as a group of professionals who regularly and systematically review how well their practices align with current professional standards and meet the needs of students. By definition, professional communities are learning communities.

Why is it important for schools to be strong professional communities?

How can school leadership make a difference to student learning outcomes? Research indicates that it is mainly by strengthening their schools as professional communities that school leaders improve the quality of teaching and student outcomes (Louis & Marks, 1998; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008)⁴.

The ACER Professional Community Framework is based on a synthesis of research about the characteristics of professional communities that lead to improved student outcomes⁵

However, it is important to recognize that a professional community does not just happen. Certain essential characteristics have to be in place if benefits are to flow on to teaching practices and students.

What are the key characteristics of effective professional communities?

- Professional communities are characterised by a distinctive set of values, challenges, working relationships and practices. A group of teachers is not necessarily a professional community. A group of teachers becomes a strong professional community when they commit to working together in ways that will review and improve each other's teaching practices.

³ DuFour, R. (2004). What is a “Professional Learning Community”? *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 6.

⁴ Louis, K.S. & Marks, H.M (1998). Does Professional Community Affect the Classroom? Teachers' Work and Student Experiences in Restructuring Schools. *American Journal of Education* 106 (4), 532-575.

Vicki Vescio, Dorene Ross, Alyson Adams 2008 A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24 (1), 80–91.

⁵ Leithwood, K. & Seashore-Louis K. (2011). *Linking Leadership to Student Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- A professional community is a way of life, not an add-on program. It is about the habitual ways teachers work together – different from the traditional model of schools where teachers often worked in isolation.
- Professional communities are learning communities. They are strongly linked in to wider professional networks and associations, from which they also learn. They are also highly desirable places in which to work, characterized as they are by effective leadership and management, lower levels of stress and higher staff retention.
- Professional communities are accountable communities. Traditional top down models of bureaucratic accountability are replaced by horizontal forms of professional accountability and shared responsibility for student learning and well-being.
- There may be several professional communities within a school. A group of teachers who teach at the same year level may form a professional community within a school. So might teachers within a music or mathematics department in a secondary school, or teachers who have a common interest in improving literacy or numeracy across a school.
- Peer review of how well clients are being served is a defining norm amongst members of professional communities. Professional communities build in time and opportunities for peer review of teaching quality based on evidence about teaching practices, opportunities for students to learn and learning outcomes. What defines a professional community is a shared commitment to work together to create an effective learning environment for students and teachers.

The ACER Professional Community Framework (PCF)

The ACER *Professional Community Framework* is also based on the *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework*⁶. It includes five main domains that characterize schools with a strong performance and development culture.

1. *A professional culture*
Schools with a strong professional culture are characterized by shared norms and values, a focus on student learning, collaborative approaches to work, reflective inquiry into teaching practices and deprivatisation of practice. Professional communities do not turn a blind eye to practices that are less than optimal for students.
2. *Leadership* that fosters and supports a professional culture
Leadership is essential in establishing conditions that support a vibrant and productive professional community. Leadership is a quality that pervades effective organisations. School leaders establish a shared vision for their school as an accountable professional community and a strategic plan for managing its

⁶ <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/professional-growth/australian-teacher-performance-and-development-framework>

implementation. Professional communities don't just happen – they have to be designed.

3. *A focus on student engagement, learning and well being*
Professional communities place high priority on gathering evidence about student outcomes that enables them to evaluate their performance, discuss its implications and plan more effectively. They make intelligent use of evidence to pinpoint areas of needed intervention in order to enhance learning outcomes for all students.
4. *A focus on improving professional knowledge and practice*
Professional communities are learning communities that are constantly building their capacity to teach well. They have a shared understanding of effective teaching and quality learning. They draw on ideas and research about better ways to teach, and create opportunities to discuss and evaluate them. They know the characteristics of effective methods for professional learning and create opportunities to engage in them
5. *Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience*
Individual members of a professional community accept responsibility to engage periodically in a process of reviewing their performance in the light of standards for accomplished teaching and feedback about its impact. These cycles of review enable teachers to identify goals for further development, seek opportunities for suitable professional learning and provide evidence that those goals have been achieved.

The PCF describes each of these domain in more detail in terms of key *elements*, *indicators* and *rubrics* (Complete versions of the PCF can be found at <https://acer.ac/pcf>).

Measuring how strong your school is as a professional community

The ACER Professional Community Questionnaire (PCQ)

The PCQ is based on the Professional Community Framework. It provides a means by which schools can gain a reliable indication of the strength of their professional community. The PCQ is provided to schools as an on-line survey that all teaching staff can complete confidentially. The PCQ contains 80 items and takes about 20-25 minutes to complete.

Reports based on the PCQ

Participating schools receive a comprehensive report based on the survey results, providing detailed information about where the school stands on each domain and each item in the survey. Examples of charts from an ACER report are provided below.

Reports can be customised to reflect the information needs of particular schools. For example, some schools only require a report based only on data for the whole school. Some schools, in addition, want the data to be broken down for sub-groups within the school, such as junior, middle and senior schools. Large schools may asked for breakdowns based on subject departments such as English, mathematics, science, etc.

Reports are provided within two weeks after staff have completed the PCQ. If the results of the PCQ are to be useful to schools, at least 80-90 percent of staff need to complete the survey.

Please note

It is highly advisable that school leaders wishing to use the PCQ ensure that the staff school staffs are well informed about the concept of a professional community and familiar with the Professional Community Framework in particular. Ideally, school leaders make sure that the Framework and the Questionnaire form an integral part of a wider school plan for school improvement.

Pricing

The cost for the on-line survey and a report based on the PCQ is \$1750.

Contact Person:

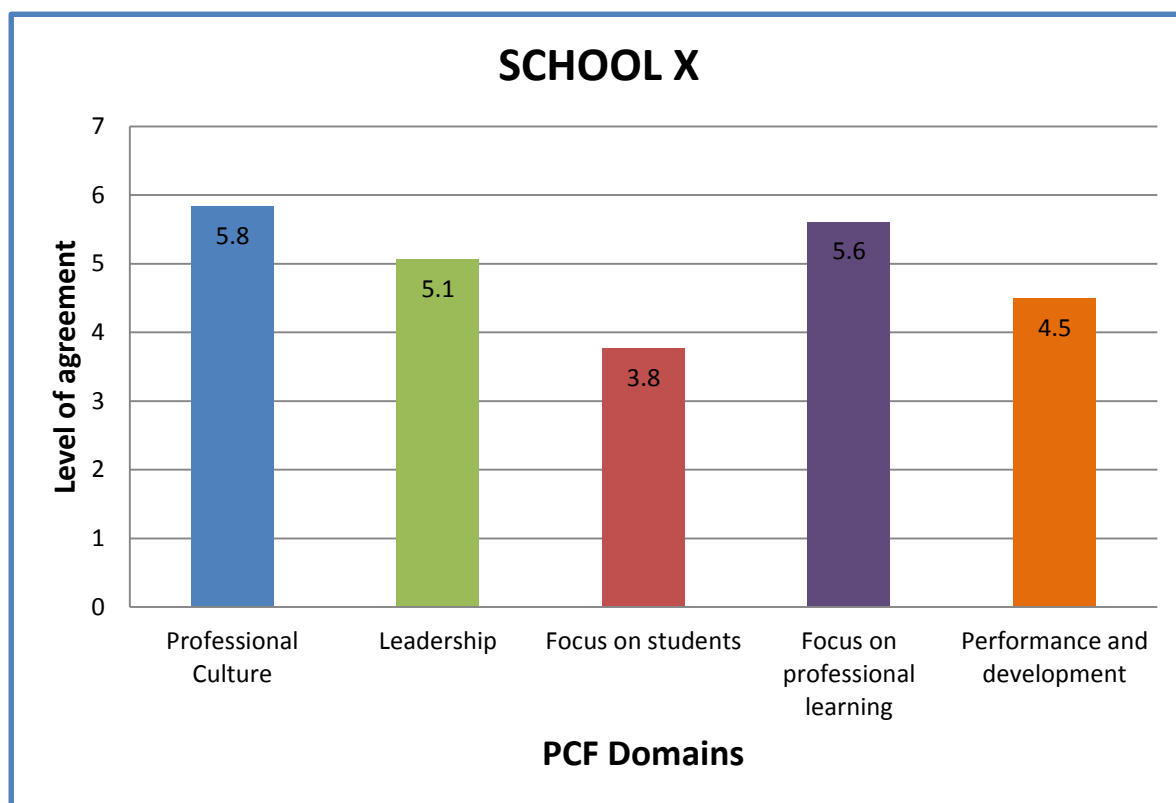
Dr Lawrence Ingvarson,

Mobile No: 0419 523 372

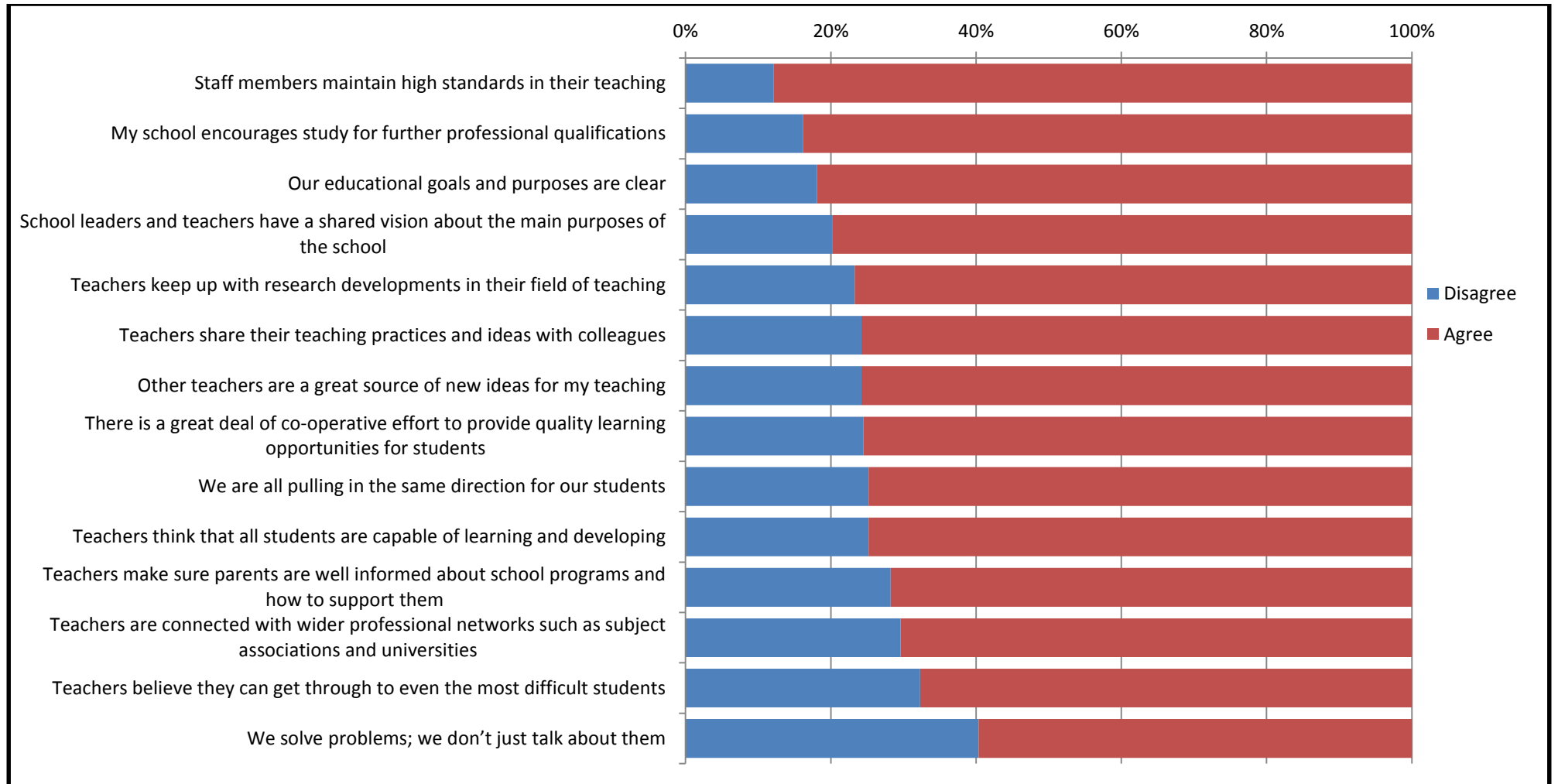
E-mail address: ingvarson@acer.edu.au

Examples of charts from a PCQ report

1. Overview of the five Domains: Results for School X



2. Domain 1: Professional Culture: Results for School X:



How Strong is Your School as a Professional Community?

Expression of Interest in the ACER Professional Community Framework and Questionnaire

Please leave with ACER EPPC staff, or e-mail these details to Lawrence Ingvarson
ingvarson@acer.edu.au

Name of school:	
Address:	
Telephone number:	
Name of contact person	
Email address	
Telephone number	

You will receive an email from ACER to confirm your EoI and links to a website where you can gain more detailed information about the Professional Community Framework and Questionnaire.