The background features a series of overlapping, semi-transparent purple geometric shapes, primarily triangles and quadrilaterals, that create a dynamic, layered effect. The colors range from light lavender to deep, dark purple. The shapes are arranged in a way that suggests movement and depth, with some shapes appearing to recede into the background while others come forward.

# Queensland Teaching and Learning Audits 2010–2012

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ACER thanks the many principals and auditors who gave generously of their time to be interviewed for this paper.

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# Preface

This paper describes the teaching and learning audits introduced in Queensland government schools in the period 2010-2012. The teaching and learning audits were based on an audit tool developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET).<sup>1</sup> The audit tool was a precursor to the *National School Improvement Tool* and, in 2010-2012, consisted of the first eight domains of the final tool.<sup>2</sup> The Queensland experience provides a valuable case study of one education system's use of the tool as a basis for external school reviews, school self-evaluations and school improvement planning.

In 2009 the Queensland Department commissioned ACER to develop a tool that could be used to review teaching and learning practices in all Queensland state schools – Prep to Year 12, urban, rural, remote, small and large. The development of the tool was based on international research into effective school improvement practices, the findings of *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* (Masters, 2009), and the Department's *Roadmap for P-10 curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting* (DET, 2009).

The Queensland Department subsequently designed and implemented a 'consistent and evidence-based audit process' (Campling, 2012) in collaboration with a stakeholder reference group that included representatives of the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU), the Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens' Associations (QCPCA), and the principals' associations.

In 2012 the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned ACER to produce this paper, which describes the development of the tool in 2009-10 and its implementation in Queensland schools since 2010, including changes made in 2012. The paper also analyses issues arising from the overall development and implementation process, identifies lessons learnt from that experience, and makes suggestions for how a similar process could be implemented in the future. The school review process described in this paper has proven to be an effective way to evaluate schools' teaching and learning practices, to encourage self-review, and to assist schools in setting priorities for their improvement planning.

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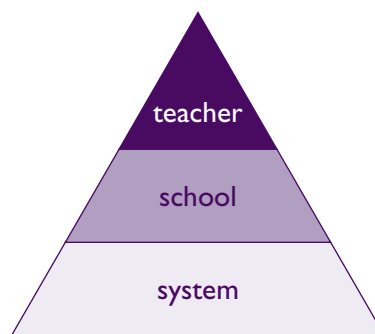
1 The Queensland Department of Education and Training was replaced by the Department of Education, Training and Employment in 2012.

2 The *National School Improvement Tool* was endorsed for use in Australian schools by the Ministers of Education meeting as the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) on 7 December 2012 and included a ninth domain, 'school-community partnerships'.

All Australian states and territories have committed to working together to build an equitable and high-quality schooling system. The focus on equity is to ensure that all young Australians, regardless of personal circumstances and background, have the opportunity to succeed and achieve their potential (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008). The focus on quality is to ensure that the schooling system achieves educational outcomes in line with other top performing nations (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

If these critical aspirations are to be realised, teachers and school leaders must be at the heart of any improvement agenda. Teachers have the ability to transform the lives of students and to inspire and nurture their development. School leaders have a critical role to play in supporting and fostering quality teaching, and in creating safe and orderly school environments (MCEETYA, 2008).

Improving student learning and achievement in schools is complex work, requiring classroom teachers, school leaders, education systems and governments to adopt a focus on making continual improvements in practice. Central to this focus is an understanding that the key to improving student outcomes is to improve classroom teaching (Masters, 2009). To do this, all parts of the schooling system need to focus on providing and aligning the policies, strategies, training, resources and conditions that assist teachers in strengthening their practice and school leaders in focusing on what matters most – good teaching.



**Figure 1:** Continuous improvement in student performance depends on the implementation of highly effective teaching practices, supported and driven by aligned school and system policies and practices (Source: Masters, 2009, p.3)

Advanced professions typically have standards of practice – evidence-based guidelines which the profession itself expects all practitioners to follow (Masters, 2010). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2011) has developed professional standards of practice for teachers and principals. These standards define effective teaching and explain what teachers and principals are expected to know, understand and be able to do in order to fulfill their professional obligations.

However, professional standards alone are not sufficient to drive improved performances across schools. Also required are mechanisms for assisting teachers and principals in the enhancement of their skills and for ensuring that the standards as written are evident in practice.

To complement and support standards of professional practice, Australian schools also require agreed standards of *school performance* – descriptions of highly effective whole-school practices and clear guidance on what schools can do to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning (Masters, 2012).

Richard Elmore argues that people in schools are already working ‘pretty reliably at the limit of their existing knowledge and skill’ (Elmore, 2008, p. 41), and that giving them information about the consequences of their practice (for example,

student achievement data), without direction on how to enhance student achievement, will not significantly improve that practice (Elmore, 2004; 2008). This position is supported by Michael Fullan, who concludes that the ‘right drivers’ for school improvement operate directly on, and change, work practices and cultures in schools (Fullan, 2011, pp. 5–9).

Reliable measures of school performance, work practices and school culture provide leaders and teachers with a basis for reflecting on and identifying strategies for enhancing student learning and achievement (Tasmanian Catholic Education Commission, 2011). School self-evaluation is an important factor in improving student outcomes (Masters, 2012). It provides a way of identifying current strengths and weaknesses and an informed basis for future improvement planning. To achieve the best possible outcomes for students, it is important that school communities are skilled in undertaking self-evaluation processes that focus attention on areas that make the greatest difference to student learning and achievement. At a system level, in addition to identifying schools with particular needs, data from school self-assessments can be used to identify best practice and innovation and to develop a substantive evidence base of what works to improve student learning outcomes.

ACER was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to develop a *National School Improvement Tool*. The tool, which builds on to earlier work to develop an audit tool for the Queensland department, identifies and measures school effectiveness across nine domains encompassing leadership, curriculum, teaching and learning. As such, the tool offers an approach to addressing a number of challenges, including:

- articulating and promoting standards of practice that are valued and supported by the profession;
- promoting highly effective, evidence-based practices;
- providing clarity to schools about what changes to make to improve student learning;
- ensuring schools are implementing identified best practice; and
- improving the day-to-day performance of schools by having direct impact on work practices and school cultures.

(Masters, 2012, p. Ix)

## antecedents

Following the release of Queensland results in the 2008 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) late in 2008, the Queensland Government commissioned ACER to undertake an independent review of literacy, numeracy and science standards in Queensland primary schools. The Queensland Education Performance Review (QEPR), which was conducted by Professor Geoff Masters between December 2008 and April 2009, encompassed analyses of the performances of Queensland students in national and international achievement surveys, a synthesis of international research on the characteristics of highly effective teachers, schools and education systems, consultations with a range of stakeholders, and visits to a number of selected primary schools.

In particular, ACER was asked to: (i) provide advice in the areas of curriculum, assessment and teacher quality; (ii) identify effective existing practices; (iii) propose ways in which these could be scaled up; and (iv) recommend new strategies or initiatives for improving levels of literacy, numeracy and science achievement in Queensland primary schools.

The QEPR report, *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* (Masters, 2009) concluded that improved outcomes in literacy, numeracy and science were likely to be facilitated by:

- access to a workforce that is very well prepared through pre-service teacher education programs;
- access to high-quality professional learning for teachers;
- access to ongoing expert advice and support for the teaching of literacy, numeracy and science;
- clarity about what teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn by particular stages of schooling, and support in monitoring the extent to which this is occurring; and
- access to high-quality professional learning and support for school leaders.

(Masters, 2009, pp. viii–ix)

As part of research into the characteristics of highly effective teachers, schools and education systems, Masters (2009) identified a number of features and practices that high-performing teachers, schools and systems have in common, and organised these practices into four key areas of shared practice; namely, high expectations, deep knowledge, targeted teaching, and continuous monitoring (Masters, 2009, p. 11) (see Table 1).

To assist schools in incorporating these practices into their everyday work, the Queensland Department produced a web-based resource entitled *Roadmap for P–10 curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting*. The *Roadmap* identified five priorities for improvement and offered practical guidance for Central Office, regions, schools and classrooms.

Table 1: Highly effective practices for continual improvement in student learning

	Highly effective teachers	Highly effective schools	Highly effective education systems
High expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set high expectations for student learning</li> <li>• Create safe and supportive classroom environments</li> <li>• Believe every student is capable of improvement</li> <li>• Encourage students to believe in their own capacity to learn</li> <li>• Clearly communicate expectations and standards</li> <li>• Set learning goals for individual students</li> <li>• Ensure that every student achieves proficiency in the basics appropriate to that year level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See learning as the central and key purpose of the school</li> <li>• Ensure classrooms are calm and busy, with minimal interruptions</li> <li>• Design school structures and allocate resources in pursuit of improved student learning</li> <li>• Have a safe and caring environment, including pastoral care</li> <li>• Promote values of respect, tolerance and inclusion</li> <li>• Follow an agenda of continual improvement and high expectations, driven by school leaders</li> <li>• Monitor school performance against an agreed set of targets or indicators</li> <li>• Celebrate and acknowledge teaching and student success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish high expectations for all schools and students, with low tolerance for ongoing poor performance</li> <li>• Believe that every school and student is capable of improvement</li> <li>• Do not accept factors such as low-socioeconomic status, rurality or Indigeneity as acceptable explanations for low performance or progress</li> <li>• Provide targeted support for students with special needs</li> <li>• Strive to ensure students throughout the system have access to excellent teaching</li> <li>• Set explicit system-wide targets for student outcomes and allocate resources to achieve these targets</li> <li>• Encourage schools to set their own targets and monitor progress</li> </ul>
Deep knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possess deep understandings and confidence in teaching subjects</li> <li>• Have studied to considerably greater depth than the level being taught</li> <li>• Possess deep understandings of how students learn subjects, including pre-requisite skills and knowledge for progress</li> <li>• Are aware of common student misunderstandings and errors</li> <li>• Are familiar with learning difficulties and appropriate interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consist of teachers who have studied subjects at an advanced level, are creative, highly intelligent and eager to learn</li> <li>• Find ways to recruit and retain teachers of this calibre, and to ensure subjects are taught by the most appropriately qualified teachers</li> <li>• Expect ongoing teacher learning</li> <li>• Encourage a collaborative professional learning culture, with a focus on improved teaching and learning</li> <li>• Create opportunities for teachers to collaborate to discuss and analyse student work</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for teachers to collaboratively plan, deliver and review the effectiveness of lessons</li> <li>• Are attentive to emerging research on effective teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise the recruitment of highly able people into teaching</li> <li>• Select teachers based on factors such as academic achievement, communication skills and motivation</li> <li>• Clarify what excellent teaching looks like, and work to promote those practices in all schools</li> <li>• Recognise the importance of one-on-one coaching in teachers' classrooms</li> <li>• Encourage principals to take on instructional leadership roles</li> </ul>

	Highly effective teachers	Highly effective schools	Highly effective education systems
Targeted teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the importance of ascertaining students' current levels of attainment</li> <li>Design learning opportunities appropriate to students' current levels of readiness and need</li> <li>Maximise student engagement through personalised teaching and learning</li> <li>Use effective teaching methods such as direct instruction</li> <li>Use intrinsic factors to motivate student learning</li> <li>Ensure that all students are appropriately engaged, challenged and extended, including those at the top of the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage and support teachers to identify individual learning needs and difficulties</li> <li>Make diagnostic tools, assessment instruments and professional support available to teachers</li> <li>Make past records of students' performances and difficulties available to teachers</li> <li>Maintain individual learning records to share across year levels</li> <li>Design programs and school structures around student needs</li> <li>Understand that students' literacy and numeracy skills may differ significantly, and ensure that all students are engaged and challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support schools to identify students who are starting to fall behind in their learning (e.g. state-wide testing to identify students below minimum standards and/or diagnostic tools)</li> <li>Provide sufficient support for students who are slipping behind, such as classroom teacher time, special education teachers, or extra classes for some students</li> </ul>
Continuous monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continually monitor individual student progress and provide feedback and encouragement to guide student action</li> <li>Assist students and parents to monitor progress over time, including across year levels</li> <li>Provide feedback to parents on ways to support learning</li> <li>Use feedback on student learning to monitor the effectiveness of teaching practices</li> <li>Recognise that improvements in teaching practice are always possible</li> <li>Prioritise professional learning and collaboration with colleagues in pursuit of improved teaching practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have strong accountability and performance monitoring systems</li> <li>Use reliable data to drive school-level decisions, interventions and initiatives</li> <li>Promote a culture of self-evaluation and reflection at all levels of the school</li> <li>Share performance information across the school and school community, including parents</li> <li>Build the in-school capacity to collect, analyse and interpret data</li> <li>Encourage parents and caregivers to discuss, monitor and support their children's learning</li> <li>Provide guidance to parents on ways to assist further learning</li> <li>Build partnerships with community organisations and agencies to assist in addressing individual needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitor performance of individual schools to identify and share best practice, identify underperformance and hold schools accountable for their results (through either test results or external review)</li> <li>Monitor student achievement over time to improve quality and equity in the system (e.g. through benchmarking against national and international surveys)</li> </ul>

The five priorities for improvement were:

1. strong leadership with an unrelenting focus on improvement;
2. a shared commitment to core priorities;
3. a quality curriculum and planning to improve learning;
4. teaching focused on the achievement of every student; and
5. monitoring student progress and responding to learning needs.

The Department then sought a mechanism to locate schools at a point in time in relation to the characteristics identified in Table 1 and the requirements articulated in the *Roadmap*. It sought a mechanism that would provide schools with access to reliable, independent feedback on their progress as well as insights into key strategies for improvement. As part of the implementation of the QEPR recommendations, the Department committed to the development and implementation of a tool for auditing curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment practices in all state schools in Queensland.



# 2

## Development of the Audit Tool

In September 2009, the Queensland Department contracted ACER to develop a ‘professional practice audit tool’ as a means for school leaders to identify the systems and processes needed to ensure that effective teaching and learning occurred in every classroom in every school.

### requirements of the tool

The Department required the tool to be in a form that could be used for independent evaluations of schools’ teaching and learning practices, as well as by schools for self-evaluation. The Department also required that the data from each school’s audit be capable of providing guidance and direction to individual schools and of being aggregated to inform systemic priorities, professional development and training. Specifically, it was expected that the tool would:

- enact the key elements in Table 1;
- align with the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment accountabilities articulated in the *Roadmap*;
- consider processes to examine student data;
- consider processes to build high-performing teaching teams; and
- assist schools to monitor their practice and ensure a focus on continuous improvement.

(DET, General Briefing Note – Procurement for ACER to develop tool, Sept. 2009)

### stages in developing the tool

There were seven stages in ACER’s development of the tool in collaboration with the Department. These are presented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

ACER undertook extensive research to inform the development of the tool. The tool was designed to examine the planning and implementation of each school’s curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment processes by describing good practice across eight domains previously identified by Masters (2010) as critical to school improvement. A process of refinement followed the development of a working draft of the tool. This occurred through a Teaching and Learning Audit Key Stakeholder Reference Group established by the Department and chaired by the Deputy Director-General. The reference group included senior officers of the Department whose portfolios related to the school audit process (school performance, teaching and learning, student services, human resources, regions),

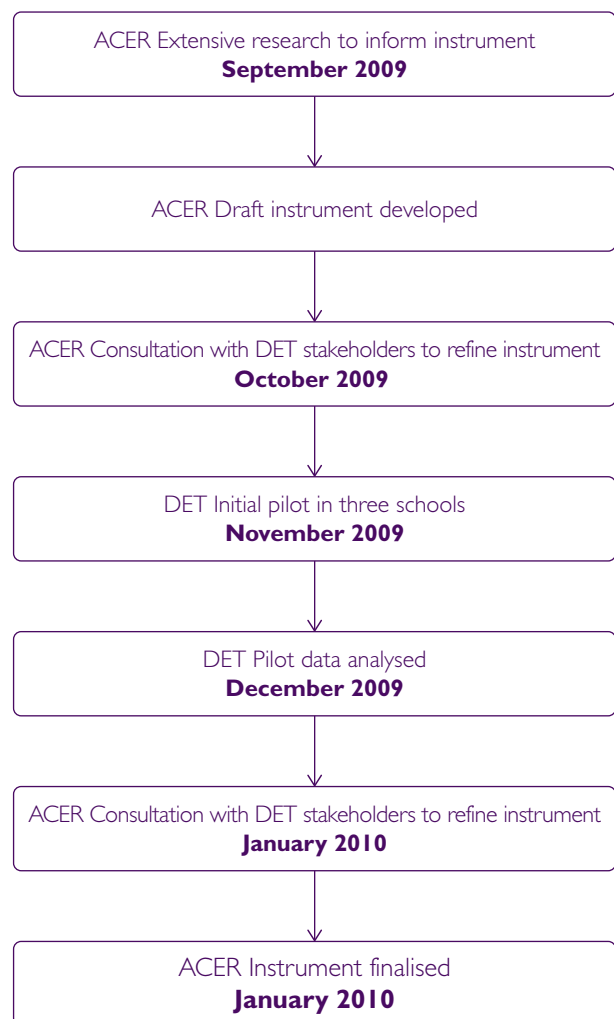


Figure 2: Seven stages in the development of the tool

representatives from QTU, QCPCA, and all principals' associations. This reference group guided the refinement and piloting of the tool through structured meetings and open discussions. The reference group's input proved to be essential in highlighting design elements that required consideration during the development stage.

Following an analysis of data collected from three pilot schools, the tool was refined in consultation with the stakeholders in the reference group. One significant refinement, for example, was the creation of a fourth developmental level, 'Outstanding'; the original version had only three levels (Low, Medium and High) in each of the eight domains.

A crucial element of the development process was the identification of the dimensions of a school's operation that would be rated on the basis of evidence collected by auditors. At the macro level the reference group supported the notion of auditing key curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools against identified benchmarks, expectations and accountabilities. The reference group verified the eight domains identified by Masters (2010) and described in detail below. Some editing of the wording of the criteria associated with the domains was required so that the descriptions, informed by the international literature, were appropriate for the Queensland context.

The group requested that, following each audit, schools be provided with a detailed report on each of the domains in terms of commendations (exemplary practice), affirmations (areas of effective practice) and recommendations (areas for development). The importance of providing schools with clarity about future development needs also was highlighted.

## design of the tool

The design of the tool was informed by research into school practices that have a positive impact on student learning. These practices include: a positive learning culture, strong student achievement orientation, implementation of a high-quality curriculum, professional staff collaboration, high-quality school leadership, and regular assessments and evaluations of progress (Dederling & Müller, 2010).

Of these characteristics, high-quality school leadership was identified as having a significant impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning, and so the design of the tool incorporated what is known from the research about the practices of highly effective school leaders.

Effective leaders create cultures of high expectations, provide clarity about what teachers are to teach and students are to learn, establish strong professional learning communities and lead ongoing efforts to improve teaching practices.

(Masters, 2010, p. i)

The tool was designed to be used by trained school auditors (principals who were currently in practice and who were recognised as being effective principals) to review and independently rate a school's performance in critical aspects of the school's day-to-day practices. Following the audit, the school was given recommendations for school-wide improvements in teaching and learning. School leaders could subsequently use the tool for school self-evaluation.

In addition, the tool provided information to the Department about the quality of a school's practices against a set of standards, to assist the Department in formulating policy and developing training programs.

## elements of the tool

The tool implemented in the period 2010–2012 consisted of eight interrelated domains (see Figure 3). During the independent audit of a school's teaching and learning practices, a judgment or 'rating' was made in relation to each of these domains.

- |                                     |                                     |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. An explicit improvement agenda   | 4. Targeted use of school resources | 7. Differential classroom learning |
| 2. Analysis and discussion of data  | 5. An expert teaching team          | 8. Effective teaching practices    |
| 3. A culture that promotes learning | 6. Systematic curriculum delivery   |                                    |

Figure 3: Domains of the tool (Queensland, 2010–2012)

For each domain, a general description (domain standard) was provided, accompanied by a number of ways in which that standard might be evident in a school (indicators). The general standard and accompanying evidence indicators are shown in Figure 4 for the first of the domains, ‘An Explicit Improvement Agenda’.

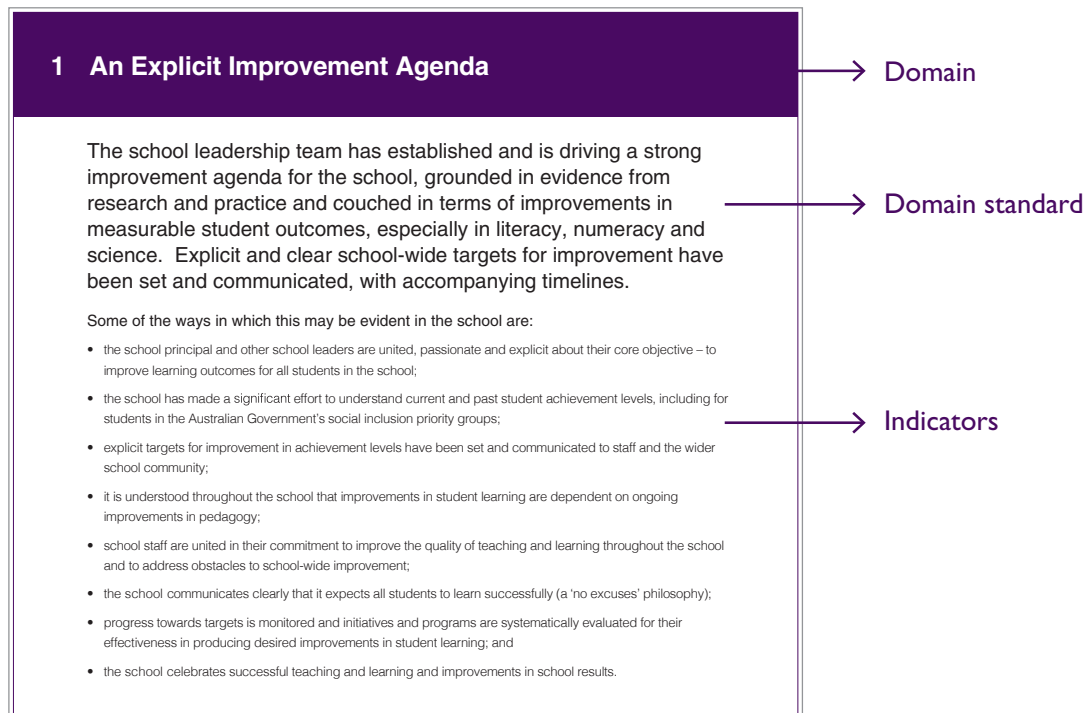


Figure 4: Example of a general domain standard

Implicit in the notion of school improvement is the belief that schools can continually improve their practices and processes. The assumption is that no matter where a school is on its improvement journey, it is capable of becoming still more effective (Masters, 2012, p. 19).

According to Elmore (2008):

School improvement is a developmental process ... Like most developmental processes this one involves more or less predictable stages. Moving a school through these stages requires, first, an understanding that there is a developmental process going on; and second, an understanding of what distinguishes schools at one stage of development from another.

(Elmore, 2008, p. 46)

The tool was underpinned by the premise that school improvement within and across the eight domains is a developmental process. This means that schools are at different stages on a continuum of development, and that each school’s current level of development can be inferred from indicators of progress (Masters, 2012, p. 20).

For each domain, a school’s practices were observed and rated as being at one of four developmental levels – Low, Medium, High or Outstanding. Sources of evidence upon which an auditor’s judgment was made were documents relating to the school’s programs, practices and procedures; the school’s website and data profile provided by the Department; and interviews with the principal and school leadership team, school staff, the president of the school’s parents and citizens’ association, and students. Auditors discussed school practices, inspected records and other evidence provided by the school and made their observations (for example, visits to classrooms and observing lessons in progress).

The descriptors for ratings of ‘Medium’ and ‘Low’ were pitched at what are considered to be commonly observed levels of practice: ‘Low’ for little if any evidence of effective practice in that domain; and ‘Medium’ for evidence of solid practice. Excellent practice was rated as ‘High’, while ‘Outstanding’, the aspirational level, was pitched at practices that would rarely be observed in education systems across the world.

<p><b>Outstanding</b></p> <p>The principal and other school leaders have developed and are driving an explicit and detailed local school improvement agenda. This agenda is couched in terms of specific improvements sought in student performances, is aligned with national or system-wide improvement priorities and includes clear targets with accompanying timelines which are rigorously actioned.</p> <p>The school improvement agenda has been effective in focusing, and to some extent narrowing and sharpening, the whole school's attention on core learning priorities.</p> <p>There is a strong and optimistic commitment by all staff to the school improvement strategy and a clear belief that further improvement is possible. Teachers take responsibility for the changes in their practice required to achieve school targets and are using data on a regular basis to monitor the effectiveness of their own efforts to meet those targets.</p> <p><b>High</b></p> <p>The school has developed an agenda for improvement and school leaders can describe the improvements they wish to see in student behaviours and outcomes. This agenda is communicated in staff meetings, school newsletters, parent-teacher meetings and on the school website using a variety of formats to suit local needs.</p> <p>The principal and other school leaders have analysed school performance data over a number of years and are aware of trends in student achievement levels. Targets for improvement are clear and accompanied by timelines.</p> <p>The school leadership team is clearly committed to finding ways to improve on current student outcomes. This is reflected in an eagerness to learn from research evidence, international experience and from other schools that have achieved significant improvements.</p> <p>There is evidence of a school-wide commitment to every student's success and staff of the school tell stories of significant student improvement.</p> <p><b>Medium</b></p> <p>The principal and other school leaders articulate a shared commitment to improvement, but limited attention has been given to specifying detail or to developing a school-wide approach (e.g. plans for improvement may lack coherence, be short term or without a whole-school focus). Plans for improvement do not appear to have been clearly communicated, widely implemented or to have impacted significantly on teachers' day-to-day work. Targets for improvement are not specific (e.g. not accompanied by timelines).</p> <p>The school's focus on data is driven more by external requirements (e.g. NAPLAN) than by an internal desire for good information to guide school decision making and to monitor progress.</p> <p>Although there is an expressed commitment to improvement, this is not reflected in a high level of enthusiasm for personal change on the part of staff.</p> <p>The communication of performance data to the school community tends to be sporadic and/or is limited only to information that the school is required to report.</p> <p><b>Low</b></p> <p>There is no obvious plan for improving on current achievement levels. The principal appears to be more focused on day-to-day operational matters than on analysing and understanding school data, setting targets for whole-school improvement or communicating an improvement agenda to the school community.</p> <p>Minimal attention is paid to data (e.g. NAPLAN results) and there is very limited communication of school results or of intentions for improvement to the wider school community.</p> <p>Expectations for significant school improvement are low and staff tend to 'explain' current achievement levels in terms of students' socioeconomic backgrounds and/or geographical location. There is little evidence that the staff of the school have a shared commitment to improving outcomes for every student and this appears to be contributing to a culture of underperformance.</p> <p>There is little evidence that the school is looking to external sources to identify evidence-based strategies for improvement.</p>
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Figure 5: Described levels of school practice (shown here for domain 1 – ‘an explicit improvement agenda’)

In 2010 and 2011 schools received a teaching and learning report outlining audit findings and responses. For each domain this report included: the domain standard (see Figure 4); a rating (Low, Medium, High or Outstanding – see Figure 5); and commendations, affirmations and recommendations. The principal then identified actions for improvement. In 2012 the format of the teaching and learning report was changed to include two sections – an executive summary highlighting one set of commendations, affirmations and recommendations across all eight domains, and an eight-page profile (one page per domain) highlighting the indicators evidenced in the audit process.

To support schools in the post-audit phase, the Department provided an accompanying reflection tool: *A Teaching and Learning Reflection Tool* (Campling, 2012) which provided examples of the practices in schools that had been identified as outstanding, posed questions for reflection, and suggested professional readings that might be useful to school leaders and teachers.

The Deputy Director-General in the Department had carriage of the design of the audit process. According to Campling (2012, p. 3) ‘the tool brings forth information about how schools have committed to an improvement agenda across a diverse range of situations, including rural, special schools and schools of low socioeconomic status with Indigenous enrolments’. This function of the tool was vital given the size and diversity of the state of Queensland.

In 2010, the Queensland Government introduced teaching and learning audits for all government schools. This section primarily describes the processes used in 2010 and 2011. Changes in processes for 2012 are described in more detail in Section 4.

Three experienced principals were selected for training as the first auditors for the teaching and learning audits, and their schools were the first schools to be audited in late 2009. The audits provided the Queensland Department with the opportunity to trial and refine the audit process, as well as strengthening the skills of the newly appointed auditors through application in real school contexts.

Following the audit of the initial three schools, all schools involved in the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities<sup>3</sup> were audited in early 2010.

A further 22 auditors were appointed in 2010 so that all 1257 state schools could be audited against the eight domains by the end of that year.

In total 25 auditors were appointed for 2009–2010, 19 for 2011, and 16 for 2012. The numbers of schools audited over that period were: 1257 (2009–2010), 461 (2011), and 321 (2012).

Audits are now carried out every four years (in the year of a Quadrennial School Review) or following the appointment of a new school principal. A school community may request an audit or an advisory audit within the four-year cycle, but no more than one audit is conducted at the same school within a 12-month period.

A strategy was developed for communicating to stakeholders, schools and their communities the key messages of the teaching and learning audits. The messages included the following:

- The purpose of the teaching and learning audit is to provide quality, independent feedback to school communities on how the school is performing against agreed standards.
- There is an expectation that principals will use this information to improve teaching and learning processes, practices and systems.
- There is an expectation that regions will support schools to develop and implement school improvement plans and incorporate agreed actions, where needed, following an audit.
- Teaching and learning audits will not be used to review the performance of a principal or any staff member. The audits are not part of the process for managing unsatisfactory performance.

Ensuring that schools had confidence in the teaching and learning audits as a fair and transparent process for all schools was a key consideration, with comprehensive quality assurance measures integrated at each stage of the process. To further build school confidence, the recruitment and selection of auditors, their training and the subsequent conduct of audits, including the quality of the associated report, were well planned and underpinned by these measures.

The rigour of the auditing process was particularly important to assuring the confidence of schools. School leaders and teachers needed to feel confident that the audit process, while taking into consideration their local contexts, was conducted consistently across all school sites, and that the ratings, especially when compared against other schools in Queensland, were accurate.

The procedural aspects of the audit process are now described – recruitment and training of auditors, allocation of auditors to schools, and the audit process itself.

<sup>3</sup> Through the *Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities*, the Australian Government committed \$1.5 billion over seven years (2008-09 to 2014-15) to support education reform activities in approximately 1700 low socio-economic status schools around the country.

## recruitment of auditors

Teaching and learning auditors were selected from high-performing, practising and experienced principals who were well respected by their peers, with appointment as an auditor for a maximum of one year. This length of tenure served two main functions: it provided schools with increased access to eligible principals so that they could benefit from the professional learning gained from auditors conducting audits in schools across Queensland. It also ensured that all auditors were recruited from positions as current school principals so they would bring relevant and recent experience to the process.

A thorough selection process was devised to ensure that teaching and learning auditors demonstrated expected leadership skills and interpersonal competencies, as well as the level of experience and expertise required to successfully undertake the audit process in schools. Applicants from among the rank of principals were required to respond to the following selection criteria:

Demonstrated leadership of a curriculum, teaching and learning environment, leading to the achievement of quality learning outcomes for all students.

Demonstrated strong interpersonal skills and demonstrated capacity to develop and sustain productive relationships within and beyond the school community.

The following selection process was established:

1. Principals interested in applying to be an auditor were required to submit an expression of interest.
2. Applicants were shortlisted and interviewed by a selection panel, including the Assistant Director-General (School Performance), a representative from the QTU, the QCPCA, and the principals' associations.
3. On completion of interviews, comprehensive referee reports were provided from the principal's supervisor – the Assistant Regional Director (ARD).
4. The selection panel provided recommendations for appointment to the Deputy Director-General for consideration and approval.

## training of auditors

Teaching and learning auditors underwent rigorous training conducted by senior officers of the Department and ACER. Training was undertaken in three formal phases; however, throughout their tenure, auditors had opportunities to meet informally to discuss and reflect on their learning and experiences. Schedules to establish collaborative audit groups were developed as part of the training process.

The first phase of training was five days of face-to-face interaction and covered content and practical skill development, including:

- an overview of current research underpinning highly effective leadership and teaching and learning practices;
- extensive practice in the development of the skills required to conduct effective interviews by using effective questioning and listening techniques;
- the development of an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the tool;
- an insight into the general principles to guide the approach taken by auditors (see Figure 6);
- an understanding of the skills and actions required to successfully implement an audit, including the gathering and evaluation of evidence;
- an overview of the Department's priorities to ensure all auditors had current knowledge and understanding of the strategic direction; and
- learning from experienced auditors through the sharing of resources and information used by auditors to promote consistent practice.

The second phase of training was over a two-week period. It focused on *in situ* training – undertaking the audit process at the school of a previous auditor and overseen by the trainers. This training, based in schools, gave trainees the

opportunity to apply their learning from the first phase. The purpose of this practice phase was to develop a consistent process of auditing across a range of school contexts. Trainee auditors worked in groups, in real school situations under the tutelage of an experienced auditor, to ensure all processes presented at the training program were embedded in practice and consistently applied, regardless of the school context. A moderation process was scheduled for the tenth day in this phase to ensure consistency of judgment against domain standards.

The third phase of training focused on developing the outcomes of completed audits. All auditors met formally twice in first term and subsequently once per term to evaluate audit findings and discuss and challenge practices and findings of audits. This collaborative process enabled auditors to reflect on their process implementation and auditing skills. The use of the tool was extensively discussed to refine and further develop the required skill sets of the auditors.

In conjunction with the formal training in these three phases and the informal meetings, auditors worked with the Lead Auditor, to refine and further develop their skills. The Lead Auditor worked in schools with auditors to monitor consistency of process and was also available to assist any auditor or principal during an audit process.

Consistency of judgments made by the auditors was critical for sustained confidence in the audit process, for schools and the Department. The following processes supported consistency of auditor judgments:

- collaborative audits in which two or more auditors audited a school together;
- formal moderation meetings to scrutinise audit results across schools (twice in first term and subsequently once per term);
- quality assurance through point-in-time on-site supervision by an experienced senior auditor who observed and provided developmental feedback on processes, practices and consistency of judgment;
- networking opportunities for auditors to consult each other within and between audits to ensure consistency of processes, practices and judgments;
- proofreading of the audit report executive summary by a trained writer to ensure messages were clearly and consistently articulated against identified indicators within each domain; and
- following a protocol devised by the Department (see Figure 6).

Treat people the way you would want to be treated yourself  
 Look for what is good in the school  
 Follow the process outlined in the training manual  
 Listen and be open  
 Leave your mental models at the gate  
 The truth is in the instrument  
 Line of sight is imperative when looking for embeddedness  
 Triangulate the data  
 Give feedback in a manner that is professional  
 It is an honour to visit a colleague's school  
 This is about colleagues working with colleagues  
 This is about school improvement

Figure 6: General principles to guide the approach taken by auditors

## assignment of auditors to schools

Clear criteria were developed to provide a transparent process for the assignment of auditors to schools.

- Wherever possible, auditors were only able to audit schools that were of a similar or smaller banding (size) to their own schools.
- The majority of schools engaged with one auditor. Two auditors were assigned to large/complex schools.
- The assignment of an auditor to a P–10/12 school took into account the auditor’s experience as a principal in relation to the size and complexity of the school they were leading.
- One auditor, from a large secondary school, was assigned to audit all Academy schools<sup>4</sup>. After 2010, auditors who had previously audited these schools assisted with the training of newly appointed auditors.
- One auditor was assigned for environmental, outdoor, education and training centres. After 2010, auditors who had previously audited these schools assisted with the training of newly appointed auditors.
- One auditor was assigned for special schools. After 2010, auditors who had previously audited these schools assisted with the training of newly appointed auditors.

## the audit process

During an audit, an independent and experienced principal/s who had been trained in the use of the tool engaged with a school to collect a range of data and information about programs, practices and procedures against each of the eight domains. The explicit purpose of the tool and audit process was to provide quality feedback to the school on how it was performing against key standards and, as a result of the findings, inform school planning and improvement processes. The time required to conduct each audit was determined by the school’s context and size, as was the structure of the day:

- Bands 5–7 *one day*
- Bands 8–9 *two days*
- Bands 10–11 *four days (or two auditors, each for two days)*
- Schools with more than 1,600 students *four days*.

Each auditor was issued with an *Auditors’ Handbook* as a reference for information about the audit process and expected procedures to enable them to perform their role as auditor as effectively and efficiently as possible. The critical nature of quality assurance of the audit process was clearly articulated in the Handbook to promote transparency, which was vital to the success and acceptance of the audits for and by schools. It also clearly outlined the audit timelines.

Principals whose schools were undergoing a teaching and learning audit were provided with a *Principals’ Handbook*. This Handbook provided principals with an outline of the audit process so that they knew what to expect, as well as what was expected of them. This allowed principals to prepare for the audit and to maximise the benefit of insights gained from the audit process.

In 2010 and 2011, staff of the Department’s Central Office forwarded the school’s audit report to the school principal (after completion by the auditor and after being quality assured by staff of the ‘State Schooling Implementation’ section of the Department) within 15 working days of the audit being conducted. The principal then had a further 10 working days to complete their responses to the audit reports and to return them to the School Performance team, Central Office. At this stage, the principal, in consultation with the ARD, was responsible for developing an action plan based on the responses provided, and then implementing and monitoring the implementation of the action plan.

The teaching and learning audit process is outlined in Figure 7 (the process shown here is as modified for 2012). It shows the responsibilities of the auditor, the principal and ARD, who acts as the principal’s supervisor. Figure 8 outlines the interactions between the auditor and the school.

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4 The Queensland Academies are state schools for highly-capable students in Years 10 to 12. They are located across three campuses in Brisbane and the Gold Coast.



Procedures under the modified teaching and learning audit process were that within 15 working days of the audit, the auditor would forward the executive summary and eight-page profile document to the school's principal after it had been quality assured by State Schooling Implementation staff. As soon as possible after receipt of the audit report documents, the principal would upload both reports to the school website. Within 10 weeks of the audit, the principal would consult with the school community and ARD in relation to the audit findings; modify and refine the School Plan (based on the audit report documents and results of consultation); and upload the modified School Plan to the school website. From this point, the principal would implement and monitor the modified school improvement plan under the supervision of the ARD.

The modified audit process had three phases: the pre-audit phase, the audit phase and the post-audit phase. These are outlined in Figure 7.

### Pre-audit phase

The audit process commenced with Central Office staff negotiating and creating a schedule of audits for a period of one school semester at a time. The centrally developed schedule of audits was designed to minimise travel by clustering of schools' audits in a similar geographical location.

Audit dates were communicated and confirmed with each individual school principal by Central Office staff.

At this stage, the Lead Auditor contacted the principal to introduce the audit team, confirm dates and discuss the process and required documents, as well as the schedule of interviews. Audits were generally not conducted in the first half of Term 1 or the second half of Term 4, unless specifically requested by the school community.

The Lead Auditor confirmed these discussions and arrangements with the principal by email. A form letter was attached to this email outlining the purpose and process of the audit as well as documents that would need to be perused.

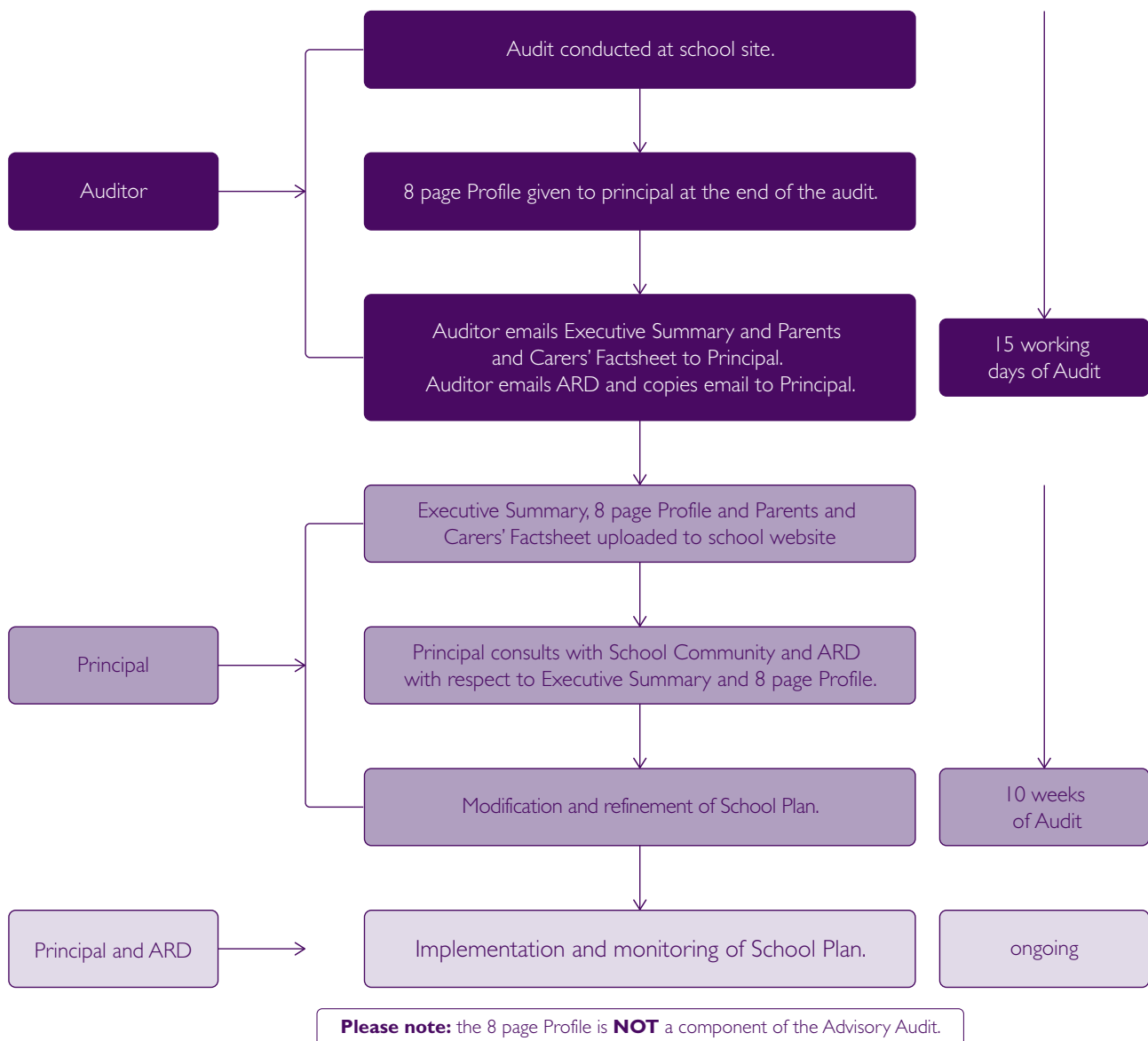


Figure 7: Outline of the teaching and learning audit process

In this phase, prior to the first visit to the school, the assigned auditor reviewed the school’s website, data profile and other documents supplied by the principal to develop a complete understanding of the school’s context.

### Audit phase

The audit phase involved the auditor interviewing the principal, school leadership team, staff, president of the parents and citizens’ association, and students to gather a range of evidence in key aspects of teaching and learning and to establish a correlation between school strategies and practices and the tool.

During the audit, the auditor met with the principal on at least three occasions to ensure that the principal had the opportunity to provide input as part of the process. Three formal meetings were held with the principal during the audit process:

1. Initial meeting on the morning of the first day;
2. Meeting halfway through the audit; and
3. Exit meeting.

Informal check-in meetings between auditor and principal were encouraged.

Auditors also collected a range of data and information about school practices, programs and procedures in the area of teaching and learning. Data collected was based on a review of school curriculum planning, units of work, pieces of assessment, school and classroom practices, and individual student work. Long- and medium-term teacher planning was also considered. The auditor and principal negotiated the selection of staff for interview to best demonstrate the school improvement agenda. To ensure the conduct of a valid audit, full school representation should occur.

The *Auditors' Handbook* provided auditors with specific guidelines for conducting the initial interview with the principal, school leadership team and subsequent interviews with teachers. It was clearly stated in the document that the engagement of all members of the school community was of paramount importance. There was also a focus on communicating clearly and staying closely aligned to the tool by using the relevant terminology and ensuring that all discussions and questions were related to it. The process placed an emphasis on asking open and clarifying questions during conversations, and sighting evidence of what the school was actually doing (for example, planning documents, assessment and data collection materials).

The auditor gave the principal interim feedback on the broad findings of the audit about halfway through the audit. The purpose was to give the principal general feedback about what the auditor was finding. It was also intended to reassure the principal and further establish confidence in the process. The interim feedback concluded with the auditor advising the principal of anything they may want to see during the remainder of the audit.

At the conclusion of the audit, at the exit meeting, the auditor presented and discussed with the principal the eight-page profile as well as aspects of the commendations, affirmations and recommendations contained in the executive summary. It was important that auditors were able to clearly list what could not be evidenced during the audit since this informed the recommendations section of the executive summary. An electronic version of the eight-page profile was either provided to the principal at this meeting or emailed; the executive summary was emailed to the principal within 15 working days.

The auditor offered an exit meeting to the staff upon request from the school. At this meeting, the auditor presented an overview of the teaching and learning audit outcomes, ensuring that commentary was grounded in the context of the school. The focus of this exit interview was for the auditor to highlight the strengths of the school and to flag where there may be areas for improvement. The auditor did not make any recommendations at this meeting with staff. It was the role of the principal to advise staff of the recommendations at subsequent meetings.

## Post-audit phase

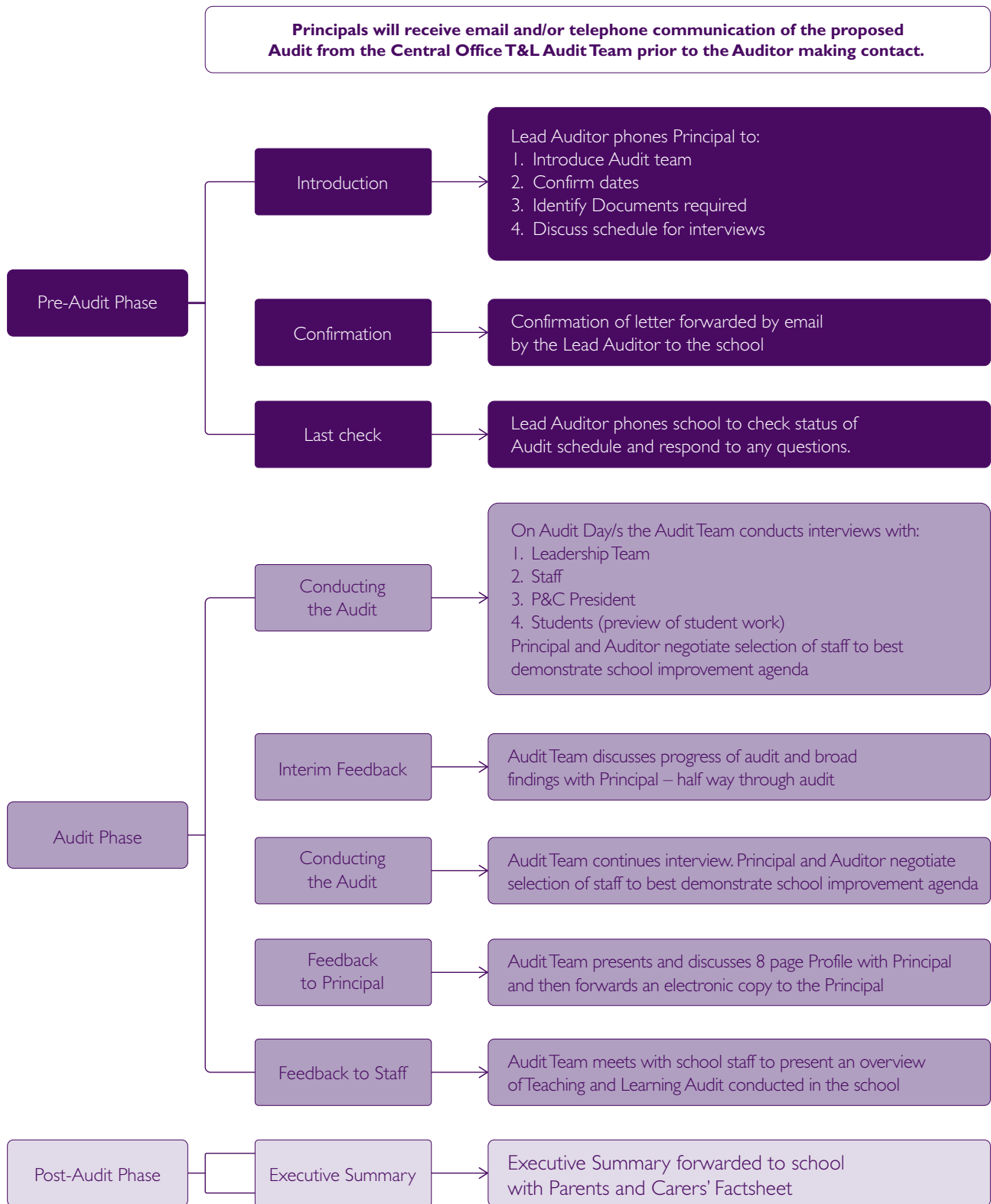
The executive summary was forwarded to the principal within 15 working days. Prior to this, the report was checked by Central Office personnel for quality assurance.

At the conclusion of the audit, the principal rated the school's satisfaction with the process and provided feedback on the conduct of auditors, communications throughout the audit process, and the extent to which the audit had helped inform school improvement processes.

The Assistant Director-General (State Schooling Implementation) and the Lead Auditor used feedback from principals and their satisfaction rating to provide developmental feedback to auditors. Feedback from principals following audits was analysed to ensure schools were satisfied with the process and that they had found the audit process useful as a way of informing school improvement processes.

As soon as possible upon receipt of the audit report documents, the principal posted the executive summary and an eight-page profile on the school website and commenced working with their supervisor, school staff and school community to incorporate the recommendations in the school's improvement planning documents. The school's modified improvement planning documents (School Plan) were uploaded within 10 weeks following the audit.

Audit Report documents (the executive summary and eight-page profile) were stored electronically at the school.



**Figure 8: Auditor interactions with schools**

## the audit report

The auditor compiled a final report consisting of two documents: an executive summary and an eight-page profile that included a rating of Low, Medium, High or Outstanding on each of the eight domains<sup>5</sup>.

The executive summary highlighted commendations, affirmations and recommendations identified by the auditor. This document recognised improvement gains since the previous audit, practices that should be commended, and important issues for the school to consider in future improvement planning processes. The executive summary was sent to the State Schooling Implementation team for quality assurance (checking and editing) and to the principal within 15 days of completion of audit.

The eight-page profile was developed from the audit and used by the auditor to highlight the indicators that best represented the school's performance at the time of the audit. On the basis of the highlighted indicators, the school was given a rating of Low, Medium, High or Outstanding on each domain. Indicators that were not highlighted identified areas for improvement and could be considered as the basis for future school planning. This was to support the school to aim to attain higher levels within each domain. The auditor provided the school with a copy of the eight-page profile and discussed key findings with the principal at the exit meeting.

The executive summary, eight-page profile and school ratings were made available to the wider school community through the school's website. These important documents informed the school planning process and the Department expected that both the executive summary and the eight-page profile would be used by the principal, school community and the principal's supervisor to adjust, refine and inform the school's four-year strategic plan (School Plan) and the Annual Implementation Plan. The principal had a key role in working with the school community to ensure inclusion of recommendations in the school's planning.

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5 As discussed in Section 4, this process was changed in 2012.

After the successful implementation of school audits in 2010 and 2011, the Department announced that it was committed to continuing teaching and learning audits in state schools. For the 2012 audits, a number of changes were made.

## rationale for changes

Following a Right to Information (RTI) application, the Queensland Government decided to release the results from all school audits into the public domain in early 2012. Following this, the QTU issued a directive that all QTU members suspend participation in the audit process until further notice. In February 2012 the Director-General suspended the teaching and learning audit process.

A list of concerns raised by the QTU follows:

- The audit tool should only be used as a school improvement indicator and never as a performance measurement tool or to rank schools within a league table.
- Auditors and users of the tool should acknowledge the complexities faced by schools at the time of the audit and accommodate these when using the benchmarks.
- Ratings should be more criteria-based assessment than broad benchmarking; that is, a school should not be placed in the lowest rating because it does not achieve all of the benchmarks in the higher level.

Negotiations between DETE and QTU were successful and audits recommenced in Semester 2, 2012. Outcomes of the negotiations included:

- The audit process would remain peer-to-peer (that is principal to principal) only.
- Classroom teaching and learning would remain the focus.
- The eight existing domains would be retained.
- Feedback on the audit would be for school improvement purposes only.
- The audit process would not be used as a measure of the principal's performance.
- The satisfaction survey, completed by principals, would be retained.
- The teaching and learning audit process would be retained with the following changes:
  - Schools would not be given an overall rating (Low, Medium, High or Outstanding) in each domain.
  - The executive summary would provide an overview of the school's context and would provide one set of commendations, affirmations and recommendations across the eight domains.
  - The eight-page profile would highlight the indicators evidenced across the four levels (Low, Medium, High and Outstanding).
  - School staff would be addressed by the auditor at the end of the audit.
  - The selection of interviewees would be the joint responsibility of the principal and auditor.
  - School actions would be embedded into the school improvement plan and no separate action plan would be required.
  - The executive summary, eight-page profile and refined school improvement plan would be published on the school website within 10 weeks of receiving the reports.
  - Data or reports for schools would not be stored centrally or regionally, and there would be no centralised data analysis of the results.

- Advisory audits would be introduced.
- It would be the responsibility of the principal to work with their ARD to inform them of their audit results and their planning and implementation intentions.

## description of changes

### Overall ratings

Overall ratings for domains were no longer assigned. The reaction from principals and auditors to this decision was mainly positive.

*The recent change from an overall rating for each domain to a 'quilt pattern' is a welcome change.*

*The removal of the overall rating for each domain is not helpful. It makes the development of a common language and understanding of standards more difficult and the judgments made more mysterious.*

*The current change to an eight-page profile from an overall rating per domain is positive. The report is now more like a criteria sheet with descriptors.*

*Initially it was a good idea to have overall ratings. Now the descriptors work well.*

### Advisory audits

Advisory audits, which were shorter than full audits, were introduced. The purpose of an advisory audit was to assist principals to gain an understanding of the audit instrument and descriptors, receive feedback on the school's progress since the last audit, receive feedback on practice in one or more domains as selected by the principal, and receive feedback across all eight domains on one of the school's priority areas for improvement such as reading.

Principals submitted an expression of interest, for either an advisory audit or a full audit, directly to Central Office. Their submission was considered by a panel chaired by the ADG (State Schooling Implementation). Although the school defined the depth and breadth of the advisory audit in consultation with staff and community, the panel decided whether a full or advisory audit would occur. Panel considerations included the length of time since the last audit, individual school circumstances, advice received from the ARD (the principal's supervisor), performance data, and the reasons given for the request.

Where an advisory audit was held, the ensuing executive summary was based on the scope and depth of the audit. Once received by the principal, it had to be shared with the principal's supervisor, the staff and school community. An eight-page summary was not completed as part of the advisory audit process.

## school review cycle

It was agreed that a teaching and learning audit would occur in each school every four years in conjunction with the school's Quadrennial School Review. There would not, however, be more than one audit per school within a 12-month period.

Audits were also scheduled in the following circumstances:

- When a new principal was appointed, the school would receive a full audit or an advisory audit in the term following their appointment at the school.
- Upon request by a school – it was only the school principal who could submit an expression of interest for an additional audit or an out-of-cycle audit.
- A new or re-opened school would receive a full audit in the second semester of the year following its opening for operation and an advisory audit in Term 4 of the first year of operation.

# 5

## Reviewing the Evidence

There were 1257 audits conducted in 2009–2010 and 461 in 2011. By October 2012 every school had been audited once and more than 660 schools had been audited twice.

By October 2012 some schools had shown significant improvement in teaching and learning processes, with the majority of schools showing positive change from one year to the next. Principals were reporting high levels of satisfaction with this intensive process of collaborative self-reflection, with satisfaction ratings consistently exceeding 90 per cent during the 2010 and 2011 audits.

The following quotations were extracted from principals' feedback.

*The audit is an efficient and a highly effective process to assist schools to improve school programs and practices.*

*The tool provides the information needed to develop an explicit improvement agenda with staff.*

*It provides clear guidance on what is required to improve student performance.*

*Although feedback can be confronting it is useful in providing information and direction for improvement.*

*The audits highlighted the need to place students and their outcomes at school at the centre of our teaching and learning practices. It is clear that we had to achieve specific targets for school improvement and, more importantly, for teachers to use data to inform their teaching. It was time to have an explicit school-wide pedagogy and agreed standards of teaching practice within the school.*

(Source: Campling, 2012, p. 5 regarding case study at Trinity Bay SHS, May 2012).

### satisfaction with the process

Principals were asked about their level of satisfaction with particular aspects of the audit process.

In 2010 and 2011, 92% and 93% of principals respectively were either satisfied or very satisfied with the audit process. Information at the time of writing this report is that 97% of principals in schools that have been audited to date were either satisfied or very satisfied with the audit process.

These outcomes are based on principals' responses to questions about communication during the audit process and opportunities for them to engage in the audit process as a feedback exercise.



This paper has described the introduction of, and experiences relating to, the Queensland Department's teaching and learning audit process, documenting the development of the tool, the appointment and training of auditors, communication strategies employed, and the audit process itself, including moderation. The paper has also reported on the audit outcomes, the responses of schools to the audit process, the experience of the auditors, and the results of audits in 2010, re-audits in 2011, and changes from 2011 to 2012.

This final section discusses some of the lessons learnt from these experiences and identifies issues for consideration in future school review processes based on the *National School Improvement Tool*.

## lessons learnt

### Degree of challenge

The teaching and learning audit process was well within the bounds of understood practice so the intellectual load on principals and auditors was not overpowering.

### Degree of workforce readiness

The audit process was introduced at a time when the Queensland school leadership agenda required renewed focus on curriculum and instructional leadership, and principals were seeking greater support from the Department in these areas. This, coupled with a decline in Queensland's overall performance in academic areas, provided a platform for the tool's development and acceptance.

### Degree of leadership from the top

The Director-General and the Deputy Director-General, who had occupied positions of leadership in schools and school districts, were well aware of the nature of the situation and the need for a school improvement agenda.

### Degree of involvement

Following the pilot audits of three schools, all Queensland schools were audited in the first year, with the advantage that all school leaders and teachers in the state had personal experience of the process, minimising the risk of misinformation and uncertainty through inclusion or exclusion in the audit process.

### Standards-referenced audits

One school leader described the tool as 'the state's biggest criteria sheet'. The development of criteria and the use of standards-based assessment are the strengths of the tool, giving school leaders confidence that the process is transparent – there are no hidden agendas. As one principal commented:

*I am now much more conscious of the importance of evidence – the line of sight between improvement strategies and evidence that these are in place and working.*

When standards are explicit and well articulated, they facilitate clear thinking and communication between auditors and serve the important function of reducing the possibility that judgments will be (or will be seen to be) arbitrary.

## Evidence-based practice

The eight domains of school improvement were based on a review (Masters, 2009) of the international research evidence on the practices of highly effective schools. The research base is one of the strengths of the tool. School leaders feel confident that there is a level of objectivity in ratings that they do not normally associate with other types of ‘opinion-based inspections’ of school practice.

Educators and policymakers generally subscribe to the notion of building education systems on ‘evidence-based’ practice – the idea that decisions at all levels should be grounded in data. Teachers need data to make more informed decisions about their students, and policymakers need data to make more informed decisions about the direction of education systems.

## Power of conversations during audit process

The thirst among educators for professional conversations cannot be overestimated. Many different conversations took place during the audit process: between auditor and principal and between auditor and teachers when gathering evidence; between auditors (in schools large enough to have two auditors) for triangulation and cross-checking decisions about the ratings for a particular school; between auditor and principal in providing feedback on the school’s practices; and between other members of the school community.

The conversations between auditors making decisions about the ratings for a particular school were described as ‘moderation’ in the sense that auditors came together in 2010 and 2011 to reach some level of agreement about the ratings to be assigned to a school’s practices in a particular domain. While the primary purpose of these conversations was to ensure that standards were consistently applied across schools, the secondary purpose (and one that principals and auditors frequently mentioned) was the valuable professional dialogue that moderation allowed and promoted.

The conversations between auditors and principals in the feedback phase were vital as the feedback was not just about what needed improvement, but also about how improvement could be achieved. For example, what domain should take priority in post-audit planning: the one with the weakest rating? The one with the highest rating? The one that is easiest to fix? The value of such conversations appeared to be a function of the peer-to-peer nature of the auditor–principal relationship (that is, auditors came from the rank of principal, and principals who were selected to be auditors did not remain in that position indefinitely).

In many cases these conversations extended beyond the audit process. Auditors working in schools with inexperienced principals often scheduled time after completion of the audit to work with those principals in a collegial fashion so that, on the basis of their deeper understanding of the tool, they could develop strategies for driving school improvement in identified areas of need.

*My most intense experiences were the conversations at the end of the day with inexperienced principals who didn’t know what they didn’t know. Once the audit process was completed I would spend time with the principal, in mentoring, coaching, explaining and helping the principal to identify where the school needed to improve and the strategies needed to achieve these improvements.*

*The power of the learning is in the conversations.*

*One of most intense experiences as an auditor was when feedback to the principal at the end of the first day differed from the principal’s expectation i.e. when the rating is lower than the principal expected it to be.*

*We need to think about how we want conversations to develop between practitioners and design reporting processes that support that.*

It would be unrealistic to expect all of those audited to be positive about the experience, however.

*Giving feedback that is not what the principal wants to hear. Most principals cooperate throughout the process – some resist all the way.*

Challenging conversations also formed a significant part of the auditors’ experiences. Principals generally are dedicated to leading their schools. For some principals the audit yielded a result that was not what was expected and so it was perceived negatively. Having had the impression that their school’s practices were effective in some domains and then

being exposed to independent and external scrutiny that revealed otherwise was a challenging experience for many. Nevertheless, auditors were expected to provide honest and substantial feedback in a way that respected the principal and resulted in change.

## The management of change

In accommodating the introduction of teaching and learning audits, the Department took into account the institutional history of the system. Change managers often assume that life begins with the moment of innovation. However, Professor Masters and the Department team appeared to view the audit tool and process as elements of broader systemic changes.

Despite the Department's success in managing the audit process, the consequences of improved school practices can be expected to take a number of years to become apparent. The educational literature describes significant time lags to achieve change in schools. According to Fullan (1999) it takes about three years in a primary school and (depending on size) about six years at secondary level for a change to have a demonstrable effect.

## feasibility and usefulness

In the final analysis there are two important questions to ask: Was the audit process feasible? Was the audit process useful?

### Was the audit process feasible?

The answer to this question is definitely yes. There are two conditions that must be satisfied for an innovation to be deemed feasible. It must be possible and it must be practicable. The Queensland experience shows that the auditing of schools' teaching and learning practices is possible – it has already been done in more than 1,000 schools across a large and diverse state, and more than once in half of those schools. And it is practicable in the sense that it has been accomplished with expediency and efficiency; factors that might have impeded the process were dealt with as they occurred. The question about practicability is not completely answered, however, until financial considerations are brought into the discussion. Those considerations are beyond the scope of this paper.

However, the Queensland model for auditing schools' teaching and learning practices requires auditors to be trained and 'on the road' for long periods of time (away from their own schools), travelling long distances and writing comprehensive descriptive and diagnostic reports.

### Was the audit process useful?

The answer to this question is also yes, but with one qualification. There are two conditions that must be satisfied for an innovation to be deemed useful. It must be fit for purpose, and it must not be used for a different (undeclared) purpose. The tool is fit for purpose – it has satisfied a clear and worthwhile purpose at system and school level and within the wider school community. At the same time, however, the reporting format used in 2010 and 2011 demonstrated a capacity to serve another purpose in another circumstance – the production of league tables of schools.

## issues for consideration

The teaching and learning audits undertaken in Queensland government schools in the period 2010–2012 highlight a number of issues that need to be considered by schools and school systems intending to use the *National School Improvement Tool*. These issues require policy decisions which, in general, will be determined by the purposes for which the tool is to be used.

### Will the tool be used for external reviews or only for school self-assessments?

As noted earlier in this paper, the audit tool was developed originally in response to the Queensland Department's desire for an instrument that could be used to make judgments of schools' practices to improve teaching and learning. In other words, it was developed with the intention that it be used in external school reviews. Following the initial audits of all

government schools in 2010, the tool has continued to be used as the basis for external audits as part of the Department's quadrennial school review cycle.

Beginning in 2012, the tool was used in a parallel way in external reviews of Northern Territory government schools. In addition, a small number of schools across Australia, including non-government schools, have requested external reviews against the tool. These have been undertaken jointly by ACER and the Queensland Department to ensure consistency of the audit process.

Once government schools in Queensland and the Northern Territory became aware of the existence of the tool and its intended use for external school reviews, they inevitably began evaluating their own internal practices in terms of the tool's domains and level indicators (which had, in fact, always been the Queensland Department's intention). So, even in contexts where the tool has been used as part of external reviews, the tool also has been used by schools for internal evaluations and self-reflection.

In Tasmania in 2012, the Department of Education printed and distributed an early version of the *National School Improvement Tool* to all schools for use in school self-reviews.

The tool provides a useful basis for both external and internal reviews of schools' current practices. The advantage of its use in external reviews is that an independent, objective set of judgments are made by reviewers who are able to evaluate school practices in terms of practices in other schools.

### If the tool is to be used for external reviews, who will undertake these reviews?

In the Queensland school audits, experienced principals with a track record in school improvement were trained as auditors and undertook all school audits using the tool. In small schools, a single auditor undertook the review; in larger schools, more than one auditor conducted the review. At the completion of an agreed period of auditing, auditors returned to their schools to resume their roles as principals and other principals were trained in the audit process. An advantage of this approach was that reviews were undertaken by practising principals rather than by line managers of principals. Feedback from the audits suggests that the resulting peer-to-peer conversations among principals were a valued aspect of the audit process.

In the Northern Territory, school reviews are undertaken by school review teams that include one or more principals trained in the review process and the regional Director School Performance (DSP). The Northern Territory Department worked with the Queensland Department and ACER in training members of NT review teams (Masters 2011). When reviews are conducted by more than one reviewer, valuable conversations are possible within school review teams as well as between the team and staff of the school. The inclusion of the regional Director School Performance also provided DSPs with additional direct information about how schools were performing and an added basis for improvement planning with the staff of the school.

In early 2013, in response to requests by individual schools across Australia for independent external reviews against the *National School Improvement Tool*, ACER collaborated with the Queensland Department to train a small number of reviewers in the use of the tool.

### Will ratings be made for each domain?

Another question to be addressed in using the *National School Improvement Tool* is whether a rating (Low, Medium, High or Outstanding) will be provided for each domain of the tool.

In Queensland in 2010–2011, ratings of this kind were given. The purpose was to give schools an indication of the quality of their practices at the time of the audit and to provide a framework for improvement planning and for monitoring progress over time. Initially, this seemed to work well, although there was some concern about the rules applied in making these ratings.

The tool itself did not specify rules for arriving at a rating. The rule applied in Queensland in 2010–2011 was that *all* indicators at a level had to be evidenced for the school to be judged to be performing at that level. For example, if all indicators for 'Medium' were observed, all but one of the indicators for 'High', and some of the indicators for 'Outstanding', then that school received a rating of 'Medium'. In other words, the decision rule did not permit on-balance decisions in which the absence of one indicator could be compensated for by the presence of another indicator at a higher level. This relatively strict rule resulted in some schools being unhappy with the ratings they received.

Added to this, the public release of school ratings by the Queensland Government and their subsequent publication in the media demonstrated that they could be used to construct league tables of schools. Prior to the publication of the school audit results, attempts by the media to construct school league tables had been based only on student outcome measures (usually literacy and numeracy test scores or Year 12 results). For the first time, the audit process allowed schools to be publicly compared on the basis of judgments of the quality of their practices.

As noted in Section 4, the result was that school ratings were not provided in Queensland from 2012. The outcomes of the audit process included instead detailed information about individual indicators evidenced in the audit process. There appears to have been a high level of satisfaction with this revised method of reporting the results of the audit process. Schools were able to see in their eight-page profile the details of the judgments that auditors made about their practices. Because the indicators were organised into the levels Low, Medium, High and Outstanding, the tool continued to provide schools with a sense of where they currently stood in each domain and what changes they needed to make to improve.

### How will audit results be used in conjunction with other school evidence?

Ultimately, how well a school is performing is reflected in the outcomes it delivers for its students. If a school's teaching and learning practices are improving, then improvements in student outcomes should follow. For this reason, schools require good data on student outcomes as well as good data on the quality of current school practices. Measures of outcomes and measures of practice are complementary.

In the Queensland school audits, it was noted that there was not a high correlation between how well schools performed in the audit and schools' results on national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. There are several possible explanations for this observation, including the fact that there is usually a lag of several years between changed school practices and improved student outcomes. Some schools also have high rates of student mobility, meaning that it is difficult to demonstrate improved student achievement despite improving school practices.

Nevertheless, the continued collection and cross-referencing of a range of evidence is important to understand how a school is performing and to monitor improving school practices and the impact of those practices. For example, during the period 2010–2012, an improvement in average school ratings on domains 1 to 4 of the tool were observed. These domains include domain 3, 'A culture that promotes learning'. However, parallel data on school disciplinary absences (suspensions and exclusions) showed a significant increase in the same time frame.

Finally, it was observed through the Queensland audits that the domains on which school change appeared most difficult to achieve were the domains that related most directly to the quality of classroom practice:

- Domain 5 An expert teaching team
- Domain 6 Systematic curriculum delivery
- Domain 7 Differentiated classroom learning
- Domain 8 Effective teaching practices.

These are also the domains for which improvement is most likely to lead to improved student outcomes. They are harder to improve because they require more specialised knowledge and understanding. They are also more 'personal' in that they are specifically aimed at influencing what happens in classrooms.

The *National School Improvement Tool* highlights the importance of schools attending to these key domains. For example, domain 8 describes the school leadership team 'establishing and communicating clear expectations concerning the use of highly effective teaching strategies throughout the school'. However, the tool itself does not specify what these highly effective teaching strategies might be. Improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, and thus improvements in student outcomes, depend on school leaders having a clear understanding of the nature of effective teaching and taking steps to ensure that such practice is occurring in all classrooms. Much more guidance is required to assist school leaders in their understanding and promotion of highly effective pedagogical practices.

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