BARRIERS TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT & HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

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IN 2012, in partnership with Queensland Department of Education, the Australian Council *for* Educational Research (ACER) developed the *National School Improvement Tool* (NSIT). The NSIT has now been endorsed by Ministers of Education in all states and territories and is freely available online to all Australian schools for use in their school improvement planning.

The NSIT, which is grounded in international research, is comprised of nine inter-related domains:

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

ACER offers a school review service related to NSIT, in which we observe school practices and provide an evaluation of a school's teaching and learning practices against each of the nine domains. We then work with the school leadership team to develop a school improvement plan based on our findings.

While each domain is important for effective and sustained school improvement, we have observed two domains in particular where schools routinely need further development: Domain 1, *An explicit improvement agenda*; and Domain 2, *Analysis and discussion of data*. Also emerging from our observations have been clear indicators of specific actions Heads can take to lead improvement in these domains.

1. An explicit improvement agenda

Virtually all schools have a strategic plan or other documents which articulate the learning and teaching agenda for the school. However, we often find the improvement agenda of a school is not grounded in evidence from research and practice. Nor are intentions expressed in terms of measureable student outcomes. To drive improvement, schools need to develop a narrow and sharp learning agenda focused on core learning priorities.

We also find that, while Heads and members of leadership teams are almost always very clear about the school's learning and teaching goals, teachers are often unable to tell us clearly about the learning agenda the leadership team is driving. If teachers are able to tell us what the focus is for a school, too frequently the specific detail of what this looks like in practice is lacking. We see this in schools that are achieving solid academic achievement results as well as those at a lower level of performance.

Teachers are also often overwhelmed by the agenda a school is pursuing, so there is no real possibility of embedding the required behaviours. If there is a rapid implementation of initiatives in schools, teachers simply cannot keep up.

The issue is usually about leadership not being explicit in their communication and follow up. Implementation of initiatives without clear accountability measures is less likely to be effective and sustainable. Schools which operate effectively in this domain have clear goals, with specific targets accompanied by achievable timelines and high levels of accountability in regard to achieving the goals and targets. If you expect staff to do something, then inspect it! It is essential that school leaders ensure there is follow up and follow through.

2. Analysis and discussion of data

The issue for schools is not the lack of data, but how to use the data effectively to identify the needs of learners and assist teachers in their planning. Differentiation is a major focus for almost every school we visit. However, if a school cannot collect data efficiently and regularly, particularly at the classroom level, effective differentiation where teaching is targeted towards students on the basis of needs is unlikely.

ACER's observations reveal schools often do not have effective systems and protocols around data collection, analysis, discussion and use of data. Most schools have detailed records in the form of school reports or mark books kept by teachers and departments, but lack student performance records which show regularly collected evidence of improvement or regression over time.

Simple strategies such as using common assessment templates, storing data centrally and making the information available to *all* staff, will greatly enhance the likelihood of using data effectively. Effective schools ensure data are used throughout the school to identify gaps in student learning, to monitor improvement over time and to monitor growth across the years of school.

ACER Chief Executive Officer Professor Geoff Masters AO has identified that rapidly improving schools, and schools that produce unusually good outcomes given their student intakes and circumstances, tend to have a number of features in common: 'They pursue an explicit improvement agenda – they know what they want to see improve and they know how they will monitor success.' Our observations in schools confirm these two characteristics to be essential for ongoing and sustained improvement. □

LINK

The National School Improvement Tool is available for download at www.acer.edu.au/files/NSIT.pdf.