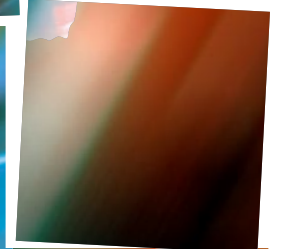


Signposts: Research points to how Victorian government schools have improved student performance

Paper No. 16 May 2009

Every
child,
every
opportunity



**Published by the
Education Policy and Research Division
Office for Policy, Research and Innovation
Department of Education and
Early Childhood Development**
Melbourne
May 2009

© State of Victoria (Department of Education
and Early Childhood Development) 2009

The copyright in this document is owned by the State of
Victoria. No part may be reproduced by any process except
in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968,
NEALS (see below) or with permission.



An educational institution situated in
Australia which is not conducted for
profit, or a body responsible for
administering such an institution, may
copy and communicate the materials,
other than third-party materials, for the
educational purposes of the institution.

Authorised by the Department of Education and
Early Childhood Development,
2 Treasury Place, East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002.

This document is also available on the internet at
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/>

ISBN 978-0-7594-0553-0

Foreword

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that all children in Victoria, regardless of the school they attend, have access to quality teaching and learning opportunities that promote mastery of a broad range of skills, behaviours and knowledge.


As there are significant variations in school performance state wide, the 2003 *Blueprint for Government Schools* and the 2008 *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* set out a plan to promote excellent learning opportunities for children in every school across the state by improving school performance.

Data from Victorian government schools show that many of them display year by year improvement on a range of indicators, including student outcomes. Some of these schools achieve this in spite of factors such as the low socio-economic status of many of their students, which is often related to lower performance.

However, there are many schools in Victoria that have demonstrated great success in improving student outcomes, despite challenging circumstances. This publication is based on field research into the behaviours exhibited by selected Victorian schools that have shown gains in student achievement over a sustained period. The findings provide an opportunity for school leaders to learn from the real experiences and successes of the Victorian education community. They may be the catalyst for change, provide new direction and next steps for developing schools, and provide reassurance that schools in difficult circumstances have pathways to success.

Both locally and internationally, there is much interest in how schools achieve and sustain high performance, and in particular how they overcome significant obstacles to raise levels of student achievement. This research has the advantage of being grounded in the particular social, economic, political and educational policy framework unique to Victoria, making the results highly relevant to Victorian schools.

I am pleased to present these reports to stimulate discussion and generate action for school improvement.



Dr Dahle Suggett
Deputy Secretary
Office for Policy, Research and Innovation

Contents

1. Executive summary	1
1.1 Asking the big questions	1
1.2 Which school practices and behaviours are linked to student success in Victorian schools, regardless of student characteristics?	2
1.3 How are these practices and behaviours transferable across schools in Victoria?	3
1.4 What are the starting points for schools wishing to implement, strengthen and sustain the practices that lead to success?	6
1.5 Where to now?	7
2. Behaviours of improving and high-performing schools	9
2.1. Leadership as a basis for improvement	9
2.2. Key behaviours and practices of improving and high-performing schools	12
1. Using data	12
2. Coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise	15
3. Raising teachers' expectations of students	18
4. Establishing and aligning vision, values and goals	20
5. Working in teams	23
6. Aligning professional learning	27
7. Raising students' expectations	31
8. Assigning staff to key priority areas	35
9. Focusing on literacy and numeracy	38
10. Establishing partnerships	41
11. Personalising through individual learning plans	45
12. Engaging students	47
13. Articulating clear staff performance expectations	51
14. Targeting resources to student needs	55
15. Releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning	59
16. Recognising staff and student achievement	61

Contents continued

3. How eight of Victoria's best-performing schools are adding value	64
3.1. Introduction	64
3.2. The preconditions for improvement	64
3.3. Sustaining improvement over time	65
3.4. Braybrook College: Building a culture and structures for high achievement	66
3.5. Coomoora Primary School: Getting the best from what you have	70
3.6. St Albans Secondary College: Building a culture of achievement	74
3.7. Dandenong North Primary School: Ready and able to learn	77
3.8. Kings Park Primary School: Closing the gap, raising the bar, expanding horizons	80
3.9. Springvale South Primary School: In relentless pursuit of excellence	83
3.10. St Albans Meadows Primary School: Making a difference for every child	87
3.11. Albion North Primary School: Building a positive tone for learning	91
3.12. International comparisons	94
4. Conclusions	96
Appendix: How the schools were selected	97
References	99
Glossary	104
Acknowledgements	109

1. Executive summary

The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008) underlines the importance of providing opportunities for every child to succeed, in every circumstance. The Blueprint points out that, while previous reforms are paying dividends, improvement is not yet consistent across all schools. So, to support a reform agenda for all schools to improve, this research by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) was specifically designed to investigate the nature of the practices in those schools where Victorian strategies are showing positive results. We wanted to have greater knowledge of the practices of Victorian schools that lead to consistent gains in student achievement over a sustained period, irrespective of the background of the students.

It was in this context that we developed a research program with two key reports.

The first included three phases. In Phase 1 we identified the high-frequency behaviours of schools that have sustained improvement in student outcomes over 10 years. Phase 2 validated these behaviours against a control group of stable and declining schools. In Phase 3 we used observations and interviews to create more detailed descriptions of the behaviours.

Concurrently, a second report was developed, based on research focusing on schools in low socio-economic communities that were achieving higher than expected outcomes. This publication includes both reports.

1.1 Asking the big questions

There are three big questions which concern many of us:

- ***Which school practices and behaviours drive student success in Victorian schools, regardless of student characteristics?***
- ***How are these practices transferable across schools in Victoria?***
- ***What are the starting points for schools wishing to implement, strengthen and sustain the practices that lead to success?***

DEECD commissioned this research in an attempt to answer these questions. The findings intentionally do not include a theory or model for school improvement. Rather, the research aimed to identify more explicit practices or behaviours in successful Victorian schools that make sense for others in this state. The findings are therefore drawn from examples that are local and contextualised in the practices and language of Victorian schools.

The DEECD research is based on studies of the practices that are related to high levels of school improvement and performance. Data collected routinely in schools – such as student outcomes, opinion surveys, Student Family Occupation (SFO) and other demographic data and school review reports – were supplemented by a schedule of observations in schools and structured on-site interviews with principals and staff.



While this research enriches our knowledge of each practice, it confirms that it is not only the direction of activity, but the intensity and linkages between practices that set some schools apart in achieving success for all students. The literature explaining school improvement consistently argues that schools do not improve performance by doing a few things differently. Rather, schools that succeed usually have a sustained focus on multiple factors. For this reason, it is not enough to focus on single strategies, or even to consider them as a checklist. The findings show that schools that add value intentionally incorporate and link many of the practices described here and develop them to a high level. A series of case studies of the practices is included to demonstrate how this worked in Victorian schools.

1.2 Which school practices and behaviours are linked to student success in Victorian schools, regardless of student characteristics?

In Phase 1, 28 practices and behaviours were identified in those Victorian schools that have sustained improvement in student outcomes over ten years. It is clear that practices or behaviours depend on effective leadership, occur within particular school settings and are connected to each other. The research was designed to go to the next level of observation to identify those practices that occurred with high frequency across the schools and with high intensity within each school.

All of the behaviours identified in Phase 1 were tested in Phase 2 by comparing improving schools with a control group of schools where performance was stable or had declined over a similar period. Schools whose student outcomes were on a strong upward trajectory displayed a range of high-frequency, high-intensity behaviours consistent with the Phase 1 research. The declining schools showed patchy implementation, and while stable schools exhibited some of the practices of improving schools, they either displayed fewer of them, or they were less focused and less strategic. As a result, the practices and behaviours shown in Table 1.1 were confirmed as important, when implemented consistently across a school.

Table 1.1: Practices and behaviours of selected Victorian schools that have improved student performance

 In order of increasing frequency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using data 2. Coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise 3. Raising staff expectations of students 4. Establishing and aligning values, vision and goals 5. Working in teams 6. Aligning professional learning 7. Raising students' expectations 8. Assigning staff to key priority areas 9. Focusing on literacy and numeracy 10. Establishing partnerships 11. Personalising through individual learning plans 12. Engaging students 13. Articulating clear staff performance expectations 14. Targeting resources to student needs 15. Releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning 16. Recognising staff and student achievement
---	--

1.3 How are these practices and behaviours transferable across schools in Victoria?

A list as in Table 1.1 is not enough. Transferability will be best supported by helpful descriptions of what schools actually do, and what is meant by the terms listed above. Therefore, follow-up studies in Phase 3 focused on the key behaviours of **high-performing schools that had shown sustained improvement**, in order to provide more detail about the actual practices and their contexts. The selected schools showed consistent improvement in absolute scores, as well as achieving results which were higher than expected taking into account the socio-economic profile of students, and the location and size of the school. Site visits and interviews fleshed out what schools were actually doing. Within each observed behaviour, these schools used a range of strategies that can be used by other schools across the state. In summary, these are:

Using data

Successful schools collect and use a wide range of data, in addition to that required by the Department, share it widely with staff, and develop their skills in interpreting different types of evidence. They reflect deeply and link data to professional practice. They diagnose strengths and weaknesses in particular subject areas, track individual students and identify school-wide improvements. Most of these schools

'Data are the start of a journey in terms of our planning. Our data at the end of a year mark the starting point for the next year.'

disaggregate data for detailed analysis of individuals and small groups, rather than year-level cohorts or average values.

Coaching, mentoring and sharing

Schools are at various stages towards a more collaborative and transparent working environment. Teachers are often paired, in some cases with regular meeting time allocated. In some schools, observations by peers or members of the leadership team are followed by feedback discussions. Coaching and modelling of interactions with students also takes place, and some schools mentor and support new teachers beyond Victorian Institute of Teaching requirements.

Raising staff expectations of students

For most schools studied this has been an important factor and a major challenge. Issues included understanding the difficulties faced by some families; really knowing the students; holding a belief that all students can learn; reinforcing teachers' sense of efficacy; and promoting a sense of pride and self respect.

Aligning values, vision and goals

Driving the participating schools is the belief that students and their learning are at the centre, and that constant learning by teachers is fundamental to school improvement. They know that socio-economic circumstances can be overcome. These schools reported using data to support discussions of values, vision and goals, involving the students in their formulation, and setting aside time to revisit them.

Working in teams

Teamwork is a way of life in improving schools, in many areas and at many levels. Organisational structures and scheduling arrangements support working together in the short or long term, and links between teams are also important, often through leadership roles in relation to the whole school.

Aligning professional learning

Participating schools have coherent plans and programs of professional development that align individual needs with school priorities. They use data to identify areas most in need of improvement in the school, and discuss professional development needs with teachers, sometimes using structured self assessments. Schools allocate substantial resources and use a mix of in-school and out-of-school activities and on-the-job learning in teams.

Raising students' expectations

In many of the schools there is a strong belief that all students can learn and achieve. They generate opportunities for students to take responsibility, and have high expectations of general behaviour. They aim to meet or exceed state performance benchmarks, not just those for 'like schools'. High attendance is rewarded.

Assigning staff to key priority areas

The needs of the students drive staffing decisions, and as these differ across schools, so do the solutions. Staff members are allocated to areas such as attendance, homework clubs, wellbeing and English as a Second Language. Many schools expect teachers to move across year levels and responsibilities over time, to encourage professional learning and renewal.

'Every member of staff is in a mentoring relationship, while the school's leaders have mentors from outside the school.'

'We start with awareness: attendance matters. This is a strong message to the community.'

‘The leadership team is the engine of change in our school. We need to build change all the time.’

‘Video-taping of lessons is a powerful tool to supplement informal classroom observation.’

‘Teachers must know the kids, know where they are at and know how much they can be pushed.’

Focusing on literacy and numeracy

Participating schools often make literacy and numeracy a priority for the whole school, not just for designated teachers. They diagnose student performance on entry and establish methods for early intervention, monitoring through a range of tests, including NAPLAN. Most participating primary schools allocate additional staff to literacy support, while some reduce class sizes. Some secondary schools timetable literacy and numeracy classes to identify skill levels and needs for targeted assistance. Regional coaches work with small teams of teachers.

Establishing partnerships

Successful schools have strengthened the partnership between the school and students' homes, because parents have an important role to play in supporting learning. Some schools employ community engagement officers, and others work with police, welfare agencies, businesses and philanthropic organisations. Links with employers have been helpful in supporting students' transition to work.

Personalising through individual learning plans

Several schools make a point of getting to know their students and their abilities and experiences deeply, and helping them to develop personal learning goals that are documented in individual learning plans. These are monitored and supported through specific allocations of staff to address the needs of individual students.

Engaging students

A starting point for engaging students is often an engaging curriculum and methods of teaching. Successful schools use feedback from students to review and modify the curriculum. Some have structures that foster closer teacher-student relationships, such as mini-schools and learning communities.

Articulating clear staff performance expectations

Expectations are communicated regularly and in many ways in the participating schools. They form the basis of teacher performance plans and review processes within the Performance and Development Culture framework. Expectations are supported by role modelling, professional development and, ultimately, exit strategies.

Targeting resources to student needs

Early intervention is supported by targeted resources, particularly for literacy in the primary years. Schools use specialist staff and smaller class sizes to address identified needs at both the lower and higher ends of the achievement spectrum. Welfare support is provided by a range of professionals directly employed by schools, working in conjunction with welfare agencies.

Releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning

Many schools encourage collaboration and allocate time to teams to work together with a focus on professional learning. This enables staff to share ideas, plan and observe each other in practice. In several schools staff use online tools for these purposes.

Recognising staff and student achievement

Schools recognise a wide range of student achievement and improvement in public forums, through awards, certificates and scholarships as well as by displaying products created by students in

the school and on websites. Staff efforts and achievements are recognised by their peers, leaders and the wider school community.

While these are listed as separate characteristics, it is clear from the detailed descriptions in the following sections, that the practices interact with and support each other, creating a synergy that provides the impetus for improvement. However, tackling all areas at once can be quite daunting. The schools reported here realised that they must make a decision to focus on a small number of behaviours to start and sustain improvement.

1.4 What are the starting points for schools wishing to implement, strengthen and sustain the practices that lead to success?

A further research project commissioned by DEECD focused on eight metropolitan schools that had many students from disadvantaged backgrounds and were identified as performing above 'like' schools with similar student characteristics.

The selection of the schools was based on their performance on criteria known to be linked to high student achievement, such as:

- ***staff perceptions of student behaviour and motivation***
- ***an effective organisational climate***
- ***a supportive leadership culture.***

The study particularly looked for common approaches that could be transferable to other schools, and collected evidence through site visits and interviews. While each school was unique to some extent, the findings relate to all in the sample. The research team concluded that the starting point reported by the successful schools involved preconditions necessary for improvement to begin, followed by means of sustaining improvement. Table 1.2 shows these characteristics.

Table 1.2: Conditions necessary to commence and sustain high performance in selected schools in Victoria

Preconditions:

- strong leadership
- high expectations and high teacher efficacy
- an orderly learning environment
- a clear focus on 'what matters most'

Conditions for sustainability:

- building teaching and leadership capacity and expertise
- providing structure and scaffolding for student learning
- using data systematically to analyse trends and personalise learning
- strong professional learning teams
- capitalising on Department initiatives, such as the Performance and Development Culture
- engendering pride in the school

Major improvement did not come quickly. In each school, a stable and consistent leadership team worked on a strategic approach to improvement and change for several years.

1.5 Where to now?

This outline of the results of recent research using a wide range of data helps to answer the first big question: which school practices and behaviours drive student success in Victorian schools, regardless of student characteristics? The findings have emphasised that a multi-faceted approach is required, rather than focusing on isolated factors. While the behaviours and strategies can be seen as distinctive elements, it is their interdependence that characterises the successful schools.

Perhaps more difficult to answer, the second question considers how these practices are transferable across the system. But there are enough similarities across Victorian schools to determine the broad directions for improvement, while enabling differentiated support for school improvement. With the expanded role for networks of schools and regional network leaders, individual school and network planning could be usefully informed by this research. Many schools wishing to improve recognise they are already implementing several of the behaviours and practices listed, but the opportunities for improvement lie in greater breadth and intensity, and in linking and integration of more of the practices.

The final question posed is: what are the starting points for schools wishing to implement, strengthen and sustain the practices that lead to success? It is important when following a general direction to recognise the local context, so identifying current local strengths and building on these is a good place to start. The research suggests that structures around the organisation of teachers' work and leadership

are important for initiating change and sustaining improvement. Without a strong foundation, it is difficult for improvement efforts to be sustained.

The following two sections: *Behaviours of improving and high-performing schools* and *How eight of Victoria's best-performing schools are adding value* describe in more detail what was found in the participating schools. In reflecting on these sections, the connections between them are clear, and relevant for other Victorian schools.

In Victoria at this exciting time, there are clear opportunities to develop actions from the Blueprint, particularly relating to workforce reform and system improvement, coupled with the stimulus of additional funding that arises as a result of the National Partnerships for Low Socio-Economic Status (SES), Literacy and Numeracy and Teacher Quality. These developments make this research extremely timely for Victorian schools.

When reading the following reports, consider these questions for your own context

- Where should our school start?
- What additional data should we collect and how can we analyse it all?
- What are the differences in improving performance in primary and secondary schools?
- What does it cost to improve school climate?
- How much time is required?
- How could we raise students' expectations?
- How could we raise teachers' expectations?
- What other staff do we need?
- What support do schools require from regional networks?
- How can we draw on current DEECD initiatives?
- What about students with disabilities?
- What about rural locations?
- What about socio-economic status?
- What about small schools?
- What about transient populations?
- How is ICT useful?
- How well do our teams work?
- What links do we make between student achievement data and professional development programs?
- What is the relationship between individual effectiveness and school effectiveness?

2. Behaviours of improving and high-performing schools

Raising levels of student achievement is a major goal for all Victorian schools. Some schools have proven particularly effective in doing this, producing consistent gains in achievement over a number of years. Learning how schools do this can assist others in pursuing their own improvement. This report identifies strategies that produce and reinforce the behaviours of high-performing and improving schools. The study was undertaken in high-performing primary and secondary schools that have also shown consistent gains in student achievement over a sustained period. The final sample contained 17 schools, nine primary and eight secondary, identified as high-performing on the basis of a number of parameters (see Appendix). There are lessons to be learnt from them that can help other schools promote improvements in student learning.

2.1. Leadership as a basis for improvement

All the research in this publication identified leadership as a critical component of an effective school, so leadership is presented here as underpinning all other behaviours. The recent OECD report, *Improving School Leadership*, noted that school leadership plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. Effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling (OECD, 2008).

Despite the differences in leadership styles, many leaders in this study determined to connect with others and promote empowerment of staff by distributing authority and responsibility across the school, providing teachers with genuine opportunities to participate directly in decisions about curriculum, professional learning priorities, school and resource management, and other policy decisions.

Principals and leadership teams have a direct effect on the productivity of schools and teachers through their role in developing clear vision and goals, working to establish a positive climate conducive to quality teaching and learning, encouraging and rewarding effort, monitoring performance and progress, and keeping abreast of what is happening in classrooms. Schools participating in the study pointed to strong leadership as fundamental to school improvement and to their own success. Leadership is a broad concept and styles can vary widely. In some schools there was evidence of the heroic principal with drive and energy who had become an agent for change through skilful identification of needs, development of clear purposes and goals and the ability to inspire others to share this vision. In others, leadership and decision-making was more a shared process involving leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Distributed leadership is a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise and contribute to school wellbeing by working together. It was developed in the following ways.

Broadening participation of staff

Every school visited was establishing a collaborative approach to management using the range of leadership qualities that teachers and staff already possess and display, encouraging and enabling participation in decision-making processes and establishing an ethos that is open, supportive and collaborative.

Consulting with staff on a regular basis

All the participating schools work to create a climate where staff feel free to express ideas and views. To do this means having regular meetings and providing other opportunities for staff input. This is achieved in most schools through staff meetings, committee structures, learning teams and particular projects that arise during the school year. All principals spoke about the opportunities in their school for staff input and the emphasis on valuing their views, not just paying lip service to the process.

As well as staff meetings and other formal gatherings, some principals directly consulted staff on an individual basis or in groups. This was often achieved by attending team meetings for this purpose, gaining input on pressing issues and finding out about issues for staff, teaching and classrooms.

Training staff as leaders

Focusing on the leadership capacity within the whole school, and not just on the principal and leading teachers, has been identified as important to achieving higher levels of motivation and improved feelings of self-efficacy among staff (Day et al., 2007). If distributed leadership is to work well, teachers need to have the skills and confidence needed to participate and share in the leadership. This means providing appropriate training and professional development and guidance to encourage and support staff to develop and learn in their roles.

‘the most effective principals are those who view themselves as leaders of leaders and who encourage leadership and autonomy throughout the school’(Muijs & Harris, 2003)

One of the main areas of capacity building for teacher leadership is improving teachers’ self-confidence to act as leaders in their schools (Gehrke, 1991; Clemson-Ingram & Fessler, 1997). Much research has shown that leadership can be learned and developed (Muijs & Harris, 2003), but it is clear that leadership development requires strong support and specific forms of professional development of staff. This includes theories and practices of leadership and management, working in teams, understanding shared decision-making processes, benefits of cooperation, conflict resolution and different approaches to management and leadership.

Some of the schools have developed opportunities for staff to lead initiatives and developments, and provided professional development to develop their leadership capacities. Some teachers attend leadership and team-building courses and conferences, others are sponsored to undertake postgraduate study in school leadership. Principals also mentioned the role of coaching, mentoring and sharing of expertise. In one school which has distributed leadership as a key part of its strategic plan, mentoring and coaching were used to develop leadership and collaborative skills for various staff members. Another school introduced a coaching and mentoring program to develop the

senior leadership team. The leadership training program was then extended to all staff.

Distributing leadership at Brimbank College

Over the past 10 years, the school has drawn on the work of Elmore (2000), Covey (1989) and Goleman et al. (2002) to increase staff agency and capacity across the school.

Structures were set in place to improve the degree of consultation and staff input across the school. A local consultative team was established, together with four other teams: leadership, curriculum, student services and a union sub-branch team. There was a strong emphasis on encouraging teams to develop staff capacity and to explore new ideas and practices.

The school's values of Achievement, Care, Trust and Support (ACTS) are seen as applicable to both students and staff. Leadership has worked to foster an environment in which difficulties, problems and concerns experienced by staff were openly discussed rather than hidden.

All practices are open to examination and improvement, including those of the leadership team, and support and encouragement are provided to facilitate change. The school places a strong emphasis on involving more staff in leadership roles, and has built staff committee participation into teacher development plans.

Leading teachers were renamed Educational Leaders and encouraged to take a more active management role. They were given both training and responsibility for some staff reviews and for the professional development, learning and performance plans of some school staff.

A school-level working conditions agreement was negotiated to ensure that staff were happy with working requirements, and able to balance their commitments within and beyond the school. This allows teachers a voice in determining their own conditions and fostered stronger staff commitment and morale.

There is strong ownership of initiatives across the leadership team, with many staff able to initiate changes and develop programs.

Sharing expertise in Preston North East Primary School

A central facet of distributed leadership is sharing decisions and processes across the community. Distributed leadership cannot occur where knowledge and power remain tightly bound to the school principal.

At Preston North East, the principal shares an office, by choice, with the assistant principal and their desks face each other. This arrangement allows for discussion and joint decision-making, and both feel that they are able to learn and benefit from their diverse skills and strengths.

The school also encourages teachers to provide feedback to the leadership team. One team member noted 'We take feedback from the teams on what is wanted and that provides the focus for the best use of our time and energies'. The school explicitly promotes shared problem solving among staff, with significant time for discussion of teaching, student behaviour and student achievement.

2.2. Key behaviours and practices of improving and high-performing schools

In the following sections the key behaviours and practices of the selected Victorian government schools, which are both improving and high-performing, are described in detail.

1. Using data

‘Teachers here are not fearful of data. They are able to look at where we are and where we are going.’

Using data to improve teaching and learning is a key characteristic of improving and effective schools (Harris, Chapman, Muijs et al., 2006). In a large review of data use in schools, Kirkup et al. (2005) noted that good practice emerged from the use to which the data was put rather than specific systems or tools. Analysing data only becomes effective if it stimulates questions about the actual learning that is taking place and how it can be developed further.

Participating schools make extensive use of data to inform provision, from the quality of teaching and the development of staff, to ensuring that weak student achievement is monitored and addressed. Data are used for tracking and monitoring achievement progress, target setting, teacher performance management and informing strategic planning. Schools reported that data promoted better quality teaching and learning by facilitating:

- accurate measurement of student achievements
- diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses in key subject areas
- performance-related assessments for teacher review and professional development planning
- more effective allocation of staff and resources
- monitoring the effectiveness of initiatives and strategies, and
- setting priorities and targets.

Strategies for using data

Making data available to all staff
Using a wide range of supplementary data sources
Collecting data frequently
Examining data for meaning and linking it to professional practices
Collecting and learning from data on areas besides student achievement
Communicating data across the school

Using data to inform practice at Doncaster Gardens Primary School

Doncaster Gardens uses diagnostic assessment instruments from sources such as ACER as well as school spelling and phonic tests. Unit teams analyse the data to identify student needs and inform teacher practice.

The school provides in-school planning time as well as after school meeting time to interpret the data. It is viewed as a very important element of teacher development aimed at improving teacher practice.

The teachers carefully work through the data to determine the focus for a particular year for a grade, a unit or for the whole school. Writing became a priority for one year through this process, based on teacher assessments and statewide test results.

At the start of every year each grade teacher is provided with a full set of data about each student they are responsible for, to ensure that they are clear about student progress and learning needs.

Doncaster Gardens generates its own data sets, such as literacy levels of every student indicating whether he or she is at, below or above expected levels.

There is continuous assessment of students and formal reports with assessments at the mid year and the end of the year. Staff have access to all data gathered in the school and are encouraged to discuss and use it.

Schools described how data were disaggregated to both team level (considering, for example, how capably Grade 3/4 children are handling the mathematics curriculum) and the individual teacher level (analysing where individual teachers may need to improve aspects of their teaching). In some schools, data were further disaggregated to consider the achievement of various sub-groups (for example, boys, or students of non-English-speaking background). Discussion then focused on adjusting practice in the light of the findings. For example, through data analysis one school realised that writing results were weaker than anticipated and made adjustments to the school timetable to increase the time spent teaching writing skills.

An iterative process, influenced by action research, involves analysing the data and making adjustments to classroom practice, followed by further assessment and data analysis to determine the impact of the changes. This leads back to consideration of classroom practice.

One school paid for an external consultant to work with the leadership team to make better use of student achievement data. Members of the leadership team then worked with other teams to share their learning and make better use of student achievement data. Over time, staff have gained in experience and skills in being able to examine and apply data that they collect, are given or work with.

Using data to inform practice at Reservoir Primary School

Teachers disaggregate NAPLAN data to track achievement of specific demographic groups, because the cohort average is not enough when tailoring teaching to learning needs. Particular attention is paid to data on Writing, which is one of the school's priorities.

The cohort average is used as a rough guide in comparing school achievement against benchmarks. The school consistently achieves better than the state mean, creating a great deal of pride and energy in the school community.

Data from the Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) program informs the school's pedagogy for engagement. Students report through PoLT surveys regarding the strategies and activities that help them progress in their learning.

For the purposes of monitoring progress, teachers find the most important data is what they collect on a regular or ongoing basis: Running Records at least every five weeks, Early Numeracy and On-Demand Testing. Teacher and student survey data are also highly valued as feedback on professional performance.

Strategies for coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise

Pairing teachers through buddy and mentoring systems

Providing opportunities for teachers to be observed and given feedback

Encouraging the school community to provide feedback to the leadership team

Providing opportunities to model effective practice

Working towards structures that allow for team teaching and flexible practice

Providing future leaders with coaching and mentoring

Providing induction for new teachers that goes beyond VIT requirements

2. Coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise

Research indicates that the quality and expertise of individual teachers has a profound effect on student learning (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2000; Hattie, 2003) and that these effects are cumulative over time (Marzano, 2003). Schools striving to improve therefore have a strong focus on increasing the capacity of individual staff.

One important way of doing this is to provide coaching and mentoring, and to allow all staff to share expertise and learn from one another. Some of the most common practices are outlined below.

Pairing teachers through buddy and mentoring systems

One primary school pairs all teachers so that a stronger or more experienced teacher works with a less experienced teacher drawn from the same mini-school. At another primary school, staff members identify in their individual professional development plans the ways in which they would like to improve their teaching skills in the following twelve months. Another staff member with particularly strong skills in a nominated area will then be asked to assist with coaching and mentoring. All incoming staff members are also asked to nominate any areas in which they feel they will need assistance, and are matched with another staff member for support.

Providing opportunities for teachers to be observed and given feedback

In many of the most successful schools, there was regular observation of teachers in their classes, from once a week to once a term. One school had introduced Learning Walks, in which members of the leadership team observed staff teaching and met with the teacher following the lesson. Teachers were asked to identify the strengths of the lesson they had taught, and areas for improvement. Senior staff then discussed the lesson and ways in which the teaching and learning could be enhanced.

Encouraging the school community to provide feedback to the leadership team

In schools with strong learning cultures, members of the leadership group are also aware of the need for continual improvement of their own practice. For this reason, they encourage feedback from a range of sources, including encouraging genuine student feedback.

Providing opportunities to model effective practice

In some schools, in addition to observing teachers, members of the leadership team spent time in classes modelling effective practice.

Working towards structures that allow for team teaching and flexible practice

School design has an impact on how teachers work together. Several schools had introduced flexible learning spaces that facilitated staff learning from one another, joint planning and team teaching.

Coaching and mentoring future leaders

As well as increasing the quality of teaching in the school, most of the schools built future capacity by developing leaders. The most common practice was for principals to act as mentors for others.

'We debrief all the time. No one is isolated. We model behaviour to each other and this way of working is also a model for the staff.'

Providing induction for new teachers that goes beyond Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) requirements

A feature of some schools in the study was the mentoring and support for new teachers that went beyond standard requirements. In one secondary school, there was a deliberate policy of giving new teachers two years before applying for VIT registration, to give them an extended period of support, and provide further time in which to consolidate their skills.

Several schools have high-quality programs in place for induction, and one secondary school has thought carefully about how best to support new and returning teaching staff. The school's program includes the following components:

1. **Pre-commencement:** this induction phase lasts for at least one full day. A buddy is allocated who acts as a guide for the teacher through the first term. This buddy provides guidance on aspects of school organisation, access to resources and other administrative matters. New staff members are provided with information on timetables, structures and curriculum details.
2. **Laying the foundations:** for the first eight weeks of the year the school conducts a program once a week that sets out and explores some foundational teaching and learning strategies for new staff. The program is run by expert teachers, and they address such areas as dealing with challenging students, e-learning and developing comments for reports.
3. **Continuing professional growth:** after the first eight weeks, when the new teacher has become familiar with the school and relevant staff, a mentor is appointed for the remainder of the year. The selection of mentors is critical to the philosophy of the school. Mentors reflect the values of the school and assist in building teaching skills. New teachers reported that the induction process built a stronger engagement with the school and improved their teaching skills, especially in team teaching.

Coaching and Mentoring at Seabrook Primary School

Seabrook pairs all teachers so that in each pair there is a stronger or more experienced teacher with a less experienced one drawn from the same mini-school. For the first month of the school year, meeting times after school give each teacher pair time to meet and work together to enable the less experienced teacher to establish their teaching and classroom management practices on as sound a footing as possible for the rest of the year. The school sees this as a major strategy in building teacher capacity throughout the school.

Observation and feedback includes Learning Walks. Structures and protocols have been developed to cover the observations and there is an expectation that everyone will take part. The school also makes extensive use of the Transforming Learning online program whereby students are able to give feedback to their teachers on the climate that the teachers create in the classroom.

The school has also introduced a professional learning mechanism, 'Chat Rooms', which have a specific meeting time allocated to them. They are designed to provide encouragement and opportunities for teachers to tell others in the school what they are doing in their classrooms.

Seabrook has obtained its Performance and Development Culture in 2007 and is focusing teachers on five areas of performance: student achievement, classroom observation, student portfolios, observation of the professional work of the teacher and the level of participation of the teacher in the broad professional life of the school.

Building leadership capacity is a priority for the school and each year between eight and 15 teachers take part in a Future Leaders program. This has enabled the school to build up a strong leadership group with the three levels of strong leadership teams.

3. Raising teachers' expectations of students

'all students can learn, and there are no excuses for poor student performance'

One of the most consistent findings about effective schools is that they are places in which the expectations set for staff and students are high (Emmerson et al., 2004; Sammons et al., 1995; Henchey, 2001; Lein et al., 1996; Montgomery et al., 1993). To improve performance, schools articulate clearly what is expected of staff and students and nurture the belief that all students can and will learn and succeed. Teachers are aware of the impact of their expectations on students, and of their role in cultivating aspirations through assessment and feedback about academic performance. This is especially important for students with limited family support (Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

Targeting professional development to focus on teachers' perceptions and expectations of students

Fostering a shared view among teachers that all students can achieve has been a major challenge for most of the participating schools. School leadership teams have set out to change a pervasive belief that low achievement is an inevitable result of students' personal or family backgrounds.

At the same time, as one school stated, setting high expectations should be balanced by an appreciation of the circumstances of individual students, underlining the need for appropriate and sensitive teaching approaches.

'Teachers have to take a different approach towards building relationships. They have to be role models in their own work and relationships. That also gets more out of kids. Teachers must know the kids, know where they are at and know how much they can be pushed.'

The importance of teachers having high expectations is recognised in all of the schools, and the expectations are articulated in school vision statements. Efforts to raise expectations are often direct and explicit, with professional development support.

Improving teaching practice through team teaching and role modelling

The strategies that have a positive impact on teacher expectations are not necessarily ones that are directly aimed at doing so. In one secondary college, for instance, the strategy has been to focus on improving teacher practice in order to raise their expectations. Teachers in teams work together to devise more effective teaching strategies, which in turn lead to improved student effort and levels of achievement.

Using evidence of improved performance to reinforce teachers' sense of efficacy

There are a number of examples where schools celebrated the 'small victories' that are experienced en route to success (DuFour & Burnette, 2002). Schools encourage teachers to use achievement data to track students' progress and to monitor that progress against external

Strategies for raising teachers' expectations of students

Targeting professional development to focus on teachers' perceptions and expectations of students

Improving teaching practice through team teaching and role modelling

Using evidence of improved performance to reinforce teachers' sense of efficacy

Promoting a sense of pride and self-respect within the school community

benchmarks. Where data show improvement, teachers realise that their efforts can have an impact, and this in turn raises expectations of both teachers and students.

Promoting a sense of pride and self-respect within the school community

High expectations of students were also encouraged through taking pride in how the school appeared to the wider community: for instance, by paying attention to the physical environment of the school, the display of students' work, and student dress.

Raising teachers' expectations of students at Maffra Secondary College

Teachers ran a professional development activity to better understand the circumstances of many of their students. This was designed to raise teachers' awareness that disadvantage and poverty are influences but not an insurmountable obstacle to students being successful in school.

The school has increased the amount of contact between teachers and smaller groups of students, so that teachers can become more aware of the skills and needs of individual students. In Year 7 students have the same teachers in Mathematics and Science and in English and Humanities. In Year 9, students have the same teachers in the core unit, which is structured largely around inquiry-based projects. The core unit occupies from four to six periods across the cycle. As in Year 7, the number of teachers in Year 9 is kept to a minimum. Generally, teachers in Year 9 only teach in that team.

The new developments in Year 7 and Year 9 have helped teachers to assess a wider range of achievement and to understand what individual students need to do to improve.

4. Establishing and aligning vision, values and goals

Establishing a clearly-articulated vision for the school and working to ensure the vision and goals are shared by all staff has consistently been found to be one of the identifying characteristics of highly effective schools (Fraser & Petch, 2003; Sammons et al., 1995; Hopkins, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2004). One of the most important functions the principal and leadership group play is to articulate this vision and generate a commitment to it among the school community.

Common elements of school values and vision in participating schools

The most frequent aspects of the values and visions of the schools in the study were:

- All students can learn and achieve: there are no excuses for poor student achievement.
- Home background does not determine what students can achieve.
- The teachers are there for the students: everything the school does is about improving outcomes for the students. While teachers' interests are considered, these are in the context of students' needs.
- Students can only learn, and the school can only improve, if teachers are also in the constant process of learning and improving what they do in the classroom.
- Learning is the core mission of the school and everything else comes second.

'Teachers place high value on kids and don't accept excuses for failure. They are committed to the families and the community. Our targets are state targets, not ones adjusted to a lower cohort or Like-School Group.'

Dedicating time and space to discuss and reach agreement on values, visions and goals

Processes for establishing a shared vision among staff varied across schools. Some pointed to a specific time and activities with a strong focus on developing a shared vision, such as a conference or staff workshops. Often these sessions were used to set a new direction for the school and address particular problems that were dragging down school performance. One primary school ran a series of workshops with staff in which they worked towards a common understanding of the mission and values of the school. Principals and leadership teams used a variety of practices to assist others to recognise the need for change. Several schools used an outside 'expert' to drive discussions. In other instances, principals had used achievement data to highlight the need for improvement.

Strategies for raising establishing and aligning vision, values and goals

Dedicating time and space to discuss and reach agreement on values, visions and goals

Working with the school community to ensure school-wide commitment

Dedicating time to revisit values, vision and goals as the school and its context change

Leading by example and focusing on a small number of core goals

Vision, values and goals at Benalla College

Benalla College was keen to align its curriculum provision more closely with student needs. There was a need for a common vision, so the school held a whole-school conference to articulate a set of values and a vision.

Three to four months before the conference, a working party was established, including teachers, School Services Officers and some leadership staff. The working party conducted and videoed student focus groups in which students discussed what they wanted from their learning, how they best learnt, and how they felt about school. Students from all year levels were randomly chosen to participate in these focus groups.

A workshop was held for parents to discuss the values they wanted to see embedded within the school. A survey on school values and vision was also conducted to gain staff views.

This collection of data was the basis for the whole-school conference. Staff formed groups to look at the themes expressed by the students and reported back to the whole staff. Others looked at staff and parent data. Discussion groups were deliberately formulated to include staff members from different areas across the school and promote the exchange of ideas.

The data provided valuable feedback on what members of the school community wanted, and how students defined good classrooms and good teaching. Staff members were particularly moved by some students' responses about their experience of school.

From working on the data, staff developed a vision statement and underpinning values. Increasing achievement, raising expectations and working together emerged as central themes in the school's mission.

Working with the school community to ensure school-wide commitment

In addition to developing a set of values and a vision among staff, schools worked to develop students' commitment to core values. One primary school identified resilience, honesty and loyalty, and implemented a *Start-up Program*, which is conducted for at least a week at the beginning of each year. During this time, every class in the school follows a program of activities that examines school values, school rules, classroom rules, and what is considered high-quality work. This is powerful in articulating for the whole school community the directions and ethos of the school. In another primary school, students themselves were asked to develop playground rules, based on the common values of the school.

Dedicating time to revisit values, vision and goals as the school and its context change

A number of the schools in the study emphasised the importance of having formal opportunities to return to the school vision for reflection and discussion at least once a year. They noted that change is evolutionary, so that the emphasis on different aspects of the school's vision may shift across time.

Setting aside time to revisit the school's vision was also considered important in ensuring commitment to the vision across staff and

students as the membership of the school community shifted over time. In many instances, induction for incoming staff included discussion of the school's vision and values, and revisiting the school's values on a regular basis allowed newer staff to provide input, and move towards ownership of the school's goals.

In many instances schools followed a 'small is beautiful' ideology: the school vision was very sharply focused, and the number of values was kept to a minimum, often no more than four.

Where efforts and energy were concentrated on the most important matters, this allowed the school to achieve more. Reflecting other research findings on school improvement; schools that demonstrate marked improvement have developed 'a small number of clear, agreed and inflexible goals, with ambitious targets for pupils' academic achievement at their heart' (Reynolds et al., 2004).

Vision, values and goals at Preston Primary School

The central vision of the school is high levels of learning and achievement for all children.

These expectations of the students apply equally to all students with the school pursuing a policy of extending the high end students as far as possible while putting a great deal of effort into ensuring that struggling students are able to close the gap and improve.

The school's values are strongly defined and are currently listed as Teamwork, Respect, Responsibility, Integrity and Resilience.

The school re-visits its vision and values each year in a process that is led by the principal and the leadership team, but also involves staff and students. After initial consideration by the leadership team any proposed changes to the vision and values are referred to the staff in their units (and their students) and then finalised at a whole staff meeting.

The change process is seen as an evolutionary one with a new vision growing from a previous vision.

This school focuses on a few key priorities and change agendas, while at the same time undertaking a very large number of programs and activities. Each teacher's performance and development plan includes only three goals – one drawn from the school's annual plan, one drawn from the work of the teacher's unit and one personal goal.

Strategies for working in teams

Building professional learning teams through organisational units

Developing an effective leadership team through empowerment, trust, training and support

Building team work and school-wide collaboration through communication, training and staff involvement

5. Working in teams

Evidence shows the importance of teams, rather than individuals, in changing schools (Day et al, 2007). Teamwork occurs in many areas and at many levels. Task-specific teams of short duration are formed to deal with a particular function, such as organising a school event, while formal, ongoing, long-term teams have scheduled regular meetings across a school year. The latter may be responsible for assessment, curriculum, in-service training, student welfare and wellbeing. In some cases teams may include participants from the broader school community such as parent, student, staff and council representatives. In the schools visited in this study, a range of practices contributed to the building and establishment of effective teams.

Building professional learning teams through organisational units

Organisational models, such as mini-schools, are a means of promoting a team approach to planning, teaching and pastoral care with a group of teachers dedicated to a group of students. They can foster effective relationships among members of staff as well as between staff and students. Sometimes schools are grouped into unit teams organised around year levels. Where small groups of teachers are allocated to a cohort of students for all of the teaching and for pastoral care, and become responsible for the learning as well as wellbeing of students, improvements in the quality of relationships lead to enhanced engagement (Russell et al., 2005).

Team-based approaches to planning, teaching, learning and pastoral care support relationship building. Students, particularly those who are disengaged, need more individualised attention at school, and schools need to foster strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect. In several of the schools in this study, strong and positive relationships between students were identified as a motivator for attending school. The schools succeeded in creating more personal settings where students feel comfortable and more connected with teachers and other staff.

Developing an effective leadership team through empowerment, trust, training and support

Most schools displayed effective leadership, although the nature and style of leadership varied. Some of the schools had strong principals who provided direction and vision, while others displayed more dispersed leadership with more collaborative decision-making in leadership or senior management teams. Irrespective of the model or type, leadership in the broadest sense was certainly evident in all schools, and all schools were well managed. Not every high-performing or improving school relied on a charismatic or innovative principal for its achievements. In some there was evidence of distributed leadership, with a strong role played by an active and empowered leadership team.

‘The leadership team is the engine of change in our school. We need to build change all the time. The leadership team has given our school the capacity to adapt.’

One school found that several features were important in developing an effective leadership team including:

- clearly setting out the expectations and roles for members of the leadership team, including team norms and expectations for working together
- providing training in essential skills, including in the use of data, such as interpreting and working with student and school data from NAPLAN and VCE results
- establishing an agenda process so that each meeting includes time for discussing student achievement, teaching, assessment and progress, as well as for discussing a new idea, suggested innovation, new reading, skill or teaching practice
- establishing open input, feedback and communication channels so that school/community views can feed into the leadership team meetings and communication is fed back to all staff and groups
- creating opportunities for assessing and reflecting on how effectively the team itself is working.

'In our meetings everyone has an opinion, even if they are reluctant to speak. If an issue is dividing the team we encourage everyone to give their opinion.'

In one secondary school, with about 900 students, the leadership team involves 14 members, and is sometimes expanded to 17 when dealing with particular issues. The following strategies are important in the effectiveness of this team:

- commitment to only holding meetings when there is reason and a clear agenda (not wanting to waste staff time)
- treating team members with respect, allowing for all to be heard and taken seriously
- all meetings carefully planned and documented, with enough notice, time and opportunity for preparation
- agendas go out early and rules of procedures are strictly followed
- all decisions are discussed and debated openly
- agenda is open to contributions from all, but running items are the school's focus on student achievement, positive student engagement, and student wellbeing.

Working in teams at Preston Primary School

Teachers work in teams based on year levels and focus their attention on the issues around planning curriculum and pedagogy. This means that at every grade level all the teachers take joint responsibility for the whole year-level cohort. The seven teams plan their teaching together every week. The teams have to be balanced and cohesive. Leadership is a key, and four of the team leaders are leading teachers.

Leadership is distributed throughout the school with the team structure a strong focus for deciding what jobs are allocated to individuals. Whole of school meetings are kept to a minimum in preference to team meetings so that teams can plan together for teaching and learning. This is the main focus of the school. Teams meet every week for two, fifty-minute sessions. Team leaders use their laptops and a projector to facilitate these meetings. This allows teaching plans and student needs to be addressed as team discussion evolves. Members can easily get a copy of updated documents on their USB sticks (in future the intranet will carry these documents). Team meetings focus on individual students' wellbeing and academic progress, and strategies that address both of these dimensions. The principal visits these teams in their planning sessions, which allows her to make regular contact with the teams. These visits also provide regular opportunities for teams (or individuals) to communicate with the principal.

Succession planning is considered and the school is looking for the next level of leaders, who can take responsibility for leading colleagues in particular tasks. The school is supportive of teachers but also has to be tough with the occasional teacher who doesn't share the vision of the school: promoting the interests of the children. In one or two cases contracts have not been renewed after the school has supported a teacher with an extended period of professional development and mentoring. If an incoming teacher's approach disrupts the team and causes angst among its members the person has to be let go. This occurs only after an extended period of professional support.

Teams of teachers are able to make decisions within the framework of the existing school vision and values. Each year there is a core of teachers who remain within each mini-school while other teachers move to other areas of the school. The key criterion here is the balance of staff in each team and at each level. The school strongly believes that student needs take priority over staff preferences when allocating staff.

Building team work and school-wide collaboration through communication, training and staff involvement

Research studies point out that teachers are more likely to change their teaching when they are consistently involved in the processes of collaborative inquiry, decision-making, planning and implementation (e.g. Goodlad et al., 2004). A consistent characteristic of both improving and high-performing schools is that teachers are not isolated: they work cooperatively with other teachers, co-ordinators, welfare staff, library/media specialists and administrators in undertaking their tasks and achieving the school's goals. In many of the schools visited there was a clear emphasis on involving and engaging staff as much as possible in all areas of responsibility and in

some schools this was viewed as the essential ingredient to their success.

'The school operates as one large family that works in teams. We have a model of distributed leadership, which was started 10 to 12 years ago and has developed over time. In selecting new staff we question them about the college values from the very first. We strive to ensure that staff members are enthusiastic about our values and will give the college a great boost because they are aligned with our mission and priorities.'

Facilitating teacher teams is important. As several schools mentioned, it is not sufficient just to organise time and schedule meetings when establishing teams.

Working in teams at Kurnai College

At Kurnai College, teams are based on individual year levels. They comprise about six teachers who are responsible for an allocated number of students. Each team has a very large responsibility for the teaching and the welfare of the students for whom they are responsible.

The teams remain together and may advance with a group of students at the end of a year. While there is some orchestrated movement between teams (by the leadership) to achieve a rough balance in the effectiveness of each of the teams, most of the movement is caused by teachers coming to and leaving the school.

At the teacher team level, team leaders are able to make day-to-day decisions about student management, welfare and similar matters. The team structure of the school shares a number of features with the mini-school structure except that the teams are tied in to an overall timetable arrangement and share a great many tasks and responsibilities across the school.

The other type of teaching team is the Learning Circle, which is drawn from across the college, involves teachers and support staff, and meets once a term for professional discussion purposes. Each of the Learning Circles has an allocation from the professional development budget which they can use for their own development at their discretion. The focus of the Learning Circles is best teaching practice and what works in the classroom.

Strategies for aligning professional learning

Aligning professional learning to school priorities

Identifying individual teachers' needs through review and assessment

Building professional learning based on assessments of student needs

Identifying appropriate types of professional learning

Sharing teaching skills and experiences through open classrooms

Group approaches to professional learning through teaching teams

Allocating enough resources to meet professional learning needs

6. Aligning professional learning

Professional development is most effective where it is aligned to a school's key goals or priorities. Research by Muijs et al. (2004) on improving schools found that to be effective, professional development needs to be linked to the school's goals, not just those of the individual, and needs to be embedded in the workplace. Schools that have raised student achievement levels over time and shown consistent improvement have considered professional development as a major part of improvement planning. Funding is available for staff development in all Victorian government schools. Coherent professional development programs aligned to school priorities as well as individual needs are a feature of both high-performing and improving schools. They achieve this in a variety of ways.

Aligning professional learning to school priorities

Most of the successful schools in this study could articulate clearly their priorities for development. This was most evident in the primary schools where every school identified a set of goals or priorities, most usually related to literacy, mathematics or achievement levels, which had shaped policy, schedules, support services, professional development and planning.

Staff professional learning was shaped around these priorities. One school used its priorities of Literacy and English as a Second Language, ICT and Mathematics, and other critical areas, to identify what teachers would need to do to achieve improvement, and targeted its resources accordingly. At nearly all participating primary schools, the discipline policy, class scheduling, student support services, and professional development goals for teachers were established with one goal in mind: to positively impact student learning and achievement.

The Annual Implementation Plan, generated as part of the four-year strategic planning and review cycle, was used to set the framework for professional learning around school improvement targets in some cases. Professional learning in one school was at two levels. One involved whole of school activities (all staff undertaking professional development related to a key target for improvement: literacy), while the second involving learning teams responsible for specific areas within the school.

Identifying individual teachers' needs through review and assessment

While schools place a strong emphasis on aligning professional development to the school's priorities, they also respond to individual teacher needs, recognising that not all teachers are at the same point, not all have the same skill levels, and some require more support in contributing to school targets. To identify individual teacher needs, schools use scheduled review and performance interviews to discuss areas of strengths and weaknesses to develop and target appropriate professional development. In one school, the review included assessments of teacher skills provided by team leaders, as well as data on student progress and needs identified through monitoring and mentoring. School priorities were sometimes supplemented with targeted training where this was assessed as necessary and of benefit. The process resulted in carefully considered individual training plans.

The school used a simple spreadsheet on which staff listed their strengths and weaknesses against each of the priorities in the school improvement plan. This helped them to focus their self-assessment on areas that were immediately relevant to the school's priorities and goals as articulated in the Annual Improvement Plan.

At one school where teachers were deeply involved in a variety of professional development initiatives, they helped design their own professional development plans which they presented to the principal and leadership group for approval. As a result, support was provided for teachers to attend conferences and workshops that were worthwhile in terms of the school's priorities and the needs of the individual teacher. In this way the leadership team at the school was seen to actively support teachers' professional development.

Building professional learning based on assessments of student needs

Using data is important when aligning professional learning to school priorities. In some schools, the leadership team drew on a wide range of evidence to decide which areas were most in need of improvement. Such evidence included students' assessment data, observations of teaching and scrutiny of student work, feedback from planning teams, and formal discussions with team leaders.

'Data are the start of a journey in terms of our planning. Our data at the end of a year mark the starting point for the next year. We have a system for passing on data from one level to the next, so next year's teachers will know where every child is at for the beginning of the year. They receive hard data on each child and examples of their work in separate portfolios in English and Mathematics.'

The leadership team and principal use the data extensively in their forward planning and to develop a plan for professional learning for the teachers involved with specific groups of students.

In all of the participating schools there was a very strong link between the priorities of the professional learning program and the school data on student achievement and engagement.

Identifying appropriate types of professional learning

Once schools have identified their needs, it is critical to identify relevant professional development to address them. Professional development plans outlined by schools covered various types of staff: teachers, team leaders, leadership team and support staff. Their plans were clearly based on school improvement goals and priorities and identified actions, the people responsible, and how the objectives would be achieved through the most suitable type of professional development. Resources often included relief staff to cover the time needed for training. In addition, specialist professional training was preferred where it identified clear outcomes for the activities and built in time for reflection, discussion and evaluation.

Much of the professional learning in schools did not involve attending external programs, but was school based, sometimes facilitated by external consultants and often designed around specific programs,

activities or tasks. Schools often extracted the most relevant material from broader programs and oriented it to their own needs.

When teachers attend external programs, there is often an expectation that they will report back and, where appropriate, run follow up programs in the school. This way, the whole school or specific teams can benefit.

Sharing teaching skills and experiences through open classrooms

Not all professional training involves ready-made or customised packages. Several schools reported professional activities in which teachers worked together to design curriculum modules, and developed and shared classroom practice, learning from each other. One common way of sharing is through classroom observation.

'The aim is sharing of knowledge and the development of approaches that work best. In this way it is not threatening to staff, but supportive and developmental. The observer is not coming to watch the specific teacher, but the lesson and the way it works, as planned by the team.'

Group approaches to professional learning through teaching teams

Some of the schools in this study organise their professional learning through teams of teachers based on stages of schooling or groups of students. In this way professional learning is a collegiate activity.

In one secondary college, professional learning is embedded into the way the teachers interact with each other in their organisational teams. There is a great deal of professional discussion, planning and meetings around the 'inquiry-based approach' to curriculum and pedagogy that is used throughout the school. Classroom observations and student achievement data are used as a basis for professional training plans that address team needs, framed within the school's Annual Implementation Plan. Resourcing comes from the school's professional development budget, supplemented by additional money allocated from the organisation team budgets. There is very little use of external expertise as the school believes that the expertise already exists in the school.

Allocating enough resources to meet training needs

All participating schools made sufficient resources available to support teachers' professional development.

Aligning professional learning at Copperfield College

Teachers' professional learning is viewed as a collegiate activity focused more on the different teaching teams. Professional learning is connected to the school priorities through each teacher's professional development plan which is aligned to the school's priorities and the priorities of the particular teaching team.

The funding is allocated to individuals and to teaching teams, which determine how it would be best used to ensure that teacher development is linked to the school priorities. Time out of school and budget spent are monitored to ensure fair allocations. .

The school itself sponsors professional development for its staff which focuses on the school priorities. Chief among these is literacy, but other issues, designed to improve the capacity and professional culture of teachers, are addressed.

Recent internal professional development has been focused on the implementation of the Performance and Development Culture initiative in the school. The current focus of professional learning is within the teaching teams to develop these teams more as professional learning teams.

While professional development is done outside the school, there is an increasing emphasis on using the internal expertise available. About half of all professional development is now carried out internally, a change from the patterns of the past.

Strategies for raising students' expectations

Establishing high academic aspirations through an emphasis on excellence for all

Implementing strong attendance programs with dedicated staff, active, immediate follow up and rewards for high attendance

Establishing high standards of student behaviour, and effectively managing behavioural issues

Generating opportunities for student responsibility and leadership

Offering extension programs for advanced students

7. Raising students' expectations

A central component of the vision of high-performing schools is that all students can learn and achieve. This is promoted through leadership practices that create high expectations for both student learning and student behaviour: expectations which schools embed within the teaching program (Sammons et al., 1995; Henchey, 2001; Lein et al., 1996; Montgomery et al., 1993). These expectations are reinforced through ongoing teacher evaluations of student performance (Day, Sammons et al. 2007; Gutman & Akerman 2008; Emmerson et al., 2004).

The strategies discussed here deal with students' expectations, which naturally interact with those of teachers described previously.

Establishing high academic aspirations among all students through an emphasis on excellence for all

Schools in this study set themselves high academic standards. In the case of several schools with a high Student Family Occupation (SFO) index, the schools aim to meet or exceed state means, rather than to merely match targets for other schools categorised as 'like schools'. They give students the message that, 'Good enough is not good enough', and believe that all should aim to excel. This goal is summed up by a respondent from one school:

We want three things from everyone:

- to try their hardest
- to allow others to try their hardest
- to respect everyone's efforts in trying their hardest.

Implementing strong attendance programs with active, immediate follow up and rewards for high attendance

The research literature clearly shows that strong attendance policies that involve active follow-up of absences and rewards for high attendance improve student learning and increase secondary student retention (Petzko, 1991; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The message that students need to be at school in order to learn is reflected in the expectations many schools in this study have and their policies designed to achieve the goal of high student attendance.

Brimbank College caters for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2007 its average absence rate was 7.9 days per student, compared to the state mean of around 15 days, and its real retention rate from Year 7 to 12 was 64 per cent, compared to a state mean of 48 per cent.

Most of the secondary schools have actively implemented the 'It's not OK to be away' program, and have set minimum attendance requirements for students to achieve a pass in their school subjects. In many of these schools, students are able to make up missed lessons through redemption classes at lunch times, after school or in the last weeks of the school year. Rolls are marked frequently: in some cases for each lesson. With a small number of lessons per day and the use of technology, staff have rapid access to attendance data. This is generally coordinated by an attendance officer with specific responsibility to follow up unexplained absences.

Schools that have focused on the issue of student attendance report notable changes in parental culture: parents have become proactive in contacting the school if their child is going to be absent, and there is much less time lost on occasions such as birthdays, visits or other non-essential reasons. As a senior member of staff at one school commented:

'We start with awareness: attendance matters. This is a strong message to the community. Flippant excuses are no longer acceptable.'

High attendance is acknowledged in some schools with individual certificates, and in others with whole-class awards, such as going on excursions or allowing extra time for using computers.

Latecomers at one school are welcomed rather than discouraged, as this has been found to lead to better attendance for some families.

In one school, the attendance officer worked with families experiencing major barriers to regular attendance, and this made a huge difference in lifting the outcomes for a number of at-risk students.

Several schools have found it effective to timetable particularly engaging activities at the start of the day and to ensure that they start promptly. Students have even put pressure on parents to be certain they arrive on time as they are so keen to be involved in the activities. This practice alone seems to have had a major impact on student punctuality.

Establishing high standards of student behaviour, and effectively managing behavioural issues

Expectations of student behaviour in the participating schools are high and behavioural issues tend to be managed promptly and positively. There is a strong emphasis on promoting behaviours that result in effective learning and good citizenship. In one school, the importance of the link between student behaviour and effective learning is strongly established at the classroom level at the start of the year by means of a Behaviour Agreement reached between each student and their teacher, which is constantly reinforced.

Schools also aim to create an environment which is safe and friendly for all students, and an important aspect of increasing student responsibility is to use restorative justice practices as the basis for dealing with student behaviour.

Emphasis is on enabling students to understand the consequences of their behaviour for other students and for members of the broader school community. There is less emphasis on punishment and a stronger concentration on helping students identify more appropriate behaviours for similar situations in the future.

Generating opportunities for student responsibility and leadership

Promoting leadership qualities in students engenders a sense of responsibility and raises their expectations. Primary schools give students responsibility in a range of ways. The explicit approach in one school is that all Year 6 students are treated as leaders, and they are

expected to model good behaviour and set standards for the rest of the student body. The development of leadership skills is encouraged through the role senior students assume in organising school assemblies, and they are invited to come up with proposals for other ways in which they can be involved in running the school.

Offering extension programs for advanced students

High-performing and improving schools set themselves the goal of success for all, and work hard to ensure that low-achieving students are not allowed to ‘fall through the gaps’. Many also provide additional programs to stretch those students who need more challenging activities.

‘Many students come from families with high expectations, but the school has made a point of pushing those further for the higher achieving students, while also putting mechanisms in place to lift the expectations of lower achieving students.’

Raising students' expectations at Moorabbin Primary School

There is an expectation that every child will strive to reach their full potential. Steps are put in place to help each child improve.

Communication with parents regarding student progress includes plans to improve which are emphasised and discussed.

Teachers use reward systems to encourage students (e.g. after a particular time on task the student can move to a favoured activity e.g. Lego Technic).

Teachers continually emphasise expected behaviour. Discipline is strictly monitored and teachers are consistent with their expectations of student behaviour and the consequences of any misdemeanours.

Teachers celebrate student success as much as possible (e.g. during assembly, displaying student work, articles and photographs in newsletters, points and award systems in class).

Teachers encourage constant activity and challenge. The school operates a Club program at lunchtime, including chess and gardening.

Teachers encourage students to feel good about themselves and about the school.

Expectations of students are made explicit through discussions about their work, behaviour, manners and appearance. As these students move up the school they are involved in constructing a class vision.

Expectations are reinforced by the careful and on-going teacher evaluation of student performance.

Raising students' expectations at Noble Park Primary School

Students are given responsibility, sending the message that the school has confidence in them and their skills.

Senior students at Noble Park run the school assembly, and the students are responsible for a house points system used to promote school values. Student house captains are responsible for organising and supervising the cleaning of the school yard, and have developed real pride in the appearance of the school.

A buddy system pairs older and younger students, and a Mathematics Trail program has students from Grades 5 and 6 working with children in the P-2 area.

Students organised a mini-Olympics, and established a school garden. They can volunteer to be part of an environmental group called the Green Team.

Noble Park has a student school council and treats students' ideas with respect. When one suggested that demonstrating singing skills was as important as demonstrating sporting skills, the school organised a very successful choir competition with five other local primary schools.

Strategies for assigning staff to key priority areas

Placing the needs of students before all other considerations

Targeting factors affecting student achievement by allocating additional staff

Ensuring that expertise and experience are balanced across the school

Moving teachers across year levels and responsibilities to foster professional renewal

8. Assigning staff to key priority areas

Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources can help schools improve student outcomes. A recent review of the Student Resource Package in Victorian government schools, found that schools which placed their resources strategically across year levels tend to promote higher levels of student achievement (Lamb, 2007). This is in contrast to placing the most experienced staff in the later years. Similarly, several overseas studies have found that strategic use of teachers is a feature of high-performing schools (e.g. Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008). It often involves schools assigning their best staff to key priority areas. Staffing practices across the schools in the present study tended to be diverse and responsive to local need. In some of the most effective schools, approaches to staffing were highly strategic.

Placing the needs of students before all other considerations in assigning staff

Principals were clear that the needs of the school and the students were the most important factors in making staff allocations.

'Consideration is given to the experience profile, staff preferences, providing opportunities for staff to take on new or expanded roles and the need to build capacity. But the overriding criterion is what is best for the whole school.'

Ensuring that student and educational needs are central in determining staff allocation appears to be vital in lifting student achievement.

Targeting factors affecting student achievement by allocating additional staff

In one primary school with a very high Student Family Occupation (SFO) index, the number of specialist staff had been reduced and class sizes reduced to between 16 and 18 students across the school. Staff believed this created better relationships between students and staff, allowed for greater attention to individual students' needs, and reduced the incidence of behavioural issues.

Several of the secondary schools had allocated additional staff to focus on literacy and numeracy, and one had run a remedial program in literacy using students from a nearby university. One secondary school with a high SFO index offered a restricted range of VCE subjects in order to expand its Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program, which had been found to increase student engagement and retention.

In some schools, staff were allocated to responsibilities that were intended to impact on student learning, such as attendance programs which reduced student absences and led to higher student achievement. One secondary college had allocated additional staff to welfare to meet high levels of student need in this area. At a primary school with students from many nationalities and significant numbers of refugee students, extra funds had been allocated to provide a wellbeing officer, cultural aides and additional English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

Ensuring that expertise and experience are balanced across the school

Because of their focus on student needs, most of the successful schools made consistent efforts to ensure a balance of staff abilities across the school. This allowed for formal or informal mentoring of teachers, and prevented the development of weak areas in the school. One secondary school principal's comments are typical of many schools in the study:

'The school tries to allocate staff equitably across the learning communities in terms of their performance and expertise. We avoid the phenomenon of strong teachers congregating in one or two teams, leaving some other teams floundering.'

Balancing expertise across the school appears to facilitate teacher learning, strengthening the development of less experienced staff, and fosters work teams in which standards are lifted to those of the best performers.

Moving teachers across year levels and responsibilities to foster professional renewal

Another characteristic of many of the schools in the study was encouraging teacher movement within the school for professional renewal. Principals believed that it was important for staff to change the year levels they were teaching, and for the combinations of teachers working together to be changed every few years, in order to prevent professional staleness. In some schools this was formally stipulated, while in others, it was an expectation rather than a formal policy. Principals aimed to balance stability with professional renewal.

'Generally teachers (including unit leaders) will be attached to particular units for three to four years. After that, they're required to move to a different unit or assume a different role.'

This type of movement allowed teachers to increase expertise and learn from a wide variety of other teachers.

Assigning staff at Seabrook Primary School

The main criterion used to determine where staff will be working in the school is the need for balance in all areas; including a balance of capacity and gender. Generally teachers (including unit leaders) will be attached to particular units for 3–4 years and then be required to move to a different unit or assume a different role. The movement and placement of staff is designed to ensure that each unit has the right balance of leaders and teachers and the right balance of teachers' ability and experience.

Because of the recognised need to provide leadership positions for younger members of staff who are interested in leadership, some priority is given to providing for their needs.

First priority is given to assigning the leading teachers and one of the expert teachers to the positions of unit leaders, after which the year level coordinators are allocated to the units in a manner which identifies the most appropriate people, but also allocates them to most appropriate unit to ensure that the teamwork at the unit level is not compromised in any way.

Unit leaders are also given the responsibility of mentoring teachers in their team.

The principal meets weekly, within the timetable, with the three assistant principals representing the three mini-schools (preparatory school, middle school and senior school). The principal class team also meets weekly with the heads of school representing each mini-school.

Each week the specialist leader and unit leaders (P–6) and are involved in the broader leadership team including all principal class, leading teachers, heads of school and unit leaders. All other staff are involved in weekly meetings at the unit level with the support of the appropriate head of school and assistant principal. This meeting structure is to ensure effective communication is maintained within the mini-schools and across the whole school. In all teams, professional dialogue about pedagogy takes precedence over operational matters enabling all staff members to understand and implement the vision and goals of the school.

9. Focusing on literacy and numeracy

Student achievement is raised when there is a strong focus on acquiring and developing literacy and numeracy skills, and also on maximising the time devoted to these areas (Barth et al., 1999; Sammons et al., 1995). Early intervention programs to support literacy and numeracy skills are a feature of schools that raise achievement retention. The earlier such programs are implemented the greater their success (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Field et al., 2007).

Making literacy and numeracy skills a priority within the primary school curriculum

The majority of schools nominated skills development in literacy and numeracy as a key element in lifting student achievement.

'[Our] budget is driven by the school's strategic plan and its priorities: literacy, numeracy and inquiry learning ... The main resource is the teachers. We allow teachers to focus on the main task: the priorities of numeracy and literacy. There is a minimum of interruptions. Meetings are very focused, with agendas tightly controlled. Teachers' time is precious and cannot be wasted. We take feedback from the teams on what is wanted and that provides the focus for the best use of time.'

Some of the primary schools implement whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy. Some teach literacy and numeracy separately in the early years and then integrate them into the broader curriculum as students move up the school, while in other schools there are designated daily literacy and numeracy sessions at all levels. One and a half to two hours per day is the typical allotment for literacy in years P–2. In some schools, the time allocation is consistent across all year levels, and in others it may be slightly less for the later years. Through priority setting and following their strategic plans, schools ensure that allocated blocks of time for literacy and numeracy are protected.

Using data on student achievement to underpin programs to develop and improve literacy and numeracy skills, and monitor student progress

Schools increasingly act on the basis of evidence, particularly student achievement data. Many report using diagnostic testing (involving tests such as PAT Reading and PAT Mathematics, and TORCH) as the basis for teaching and intervention programs. In one primary school, students are continually monitored, using teacher observation and testing such as NAPLAN, to identify learning difficulties, with individual learning plans in place for each student to ensure that they are able to continuously improve as they move through the school. These plans cover areas of literacy and numeracy, and social and emotional development.

Most of the secondary schools concentrate their efforts on particular year levels, or on cohorts of students with high needs for literacy and numeracy skill development, based on analysis of available data. One secondary school, introduced a specific program for students in Years

Strategies for focusing on literacy and numeracy

Making literacy and numeracy skills a priority in primary school curriculum

Using data on student achievement to underpin programs to develop and improve literacy and numeracy skills, and monitor student progress

Early intervention to address skill gaps and target assistance

Emphasising the importance of literacy across the curriculum and providing professional learning opportunities that equip all teachers to promote such skills

Extending literacy program provision into the later years of secondary schooling

7 and 8 after school data revealed a significant issue with literacy levels among Year 7 students.

Early intervention to address skill gaps and target assistance

At least one secondary school assesses all Year 7 students on entry, identifies students with high levels of need and provides intensive assistance in small groups. Literacy classes are offered on a weekly basis with teaching targeted to the skill levels.

Similar practices occur in primary school for entering students, often organised around the Reading Recovery program. However, some of the schools offered additional literacy classes covering a broader range of skills.

Common strategies to address literacy and numeracy

Block timetabling of literacy, and sometimes numeracy in Years 7 and 8 to enable targeted teaching for more individualised learning

For instance, at one school English and mathematics classes are blocked at Years 7 and 8 for five one-hour periods, to allow students to be grouped and taught according to their level of achievement.

Increasing the time allocation to these subject areas

At one school the number of periods per week is to be increased from four to five for both literacy and numeracy next year, for Years 7 to 9.

Increasing allocation of staff time

This occurs at two levels. Additional teachers and teachers' aides are provided as literacy support staff at many schools. Additional staff are also deployed in leadership or coordination roles, with specific responsibility for literacy and numeracy. One secondary school appointed two leading teachers, one for numeracy and the other for literacy.

Including especially targeted programs

One secondary school runs a phonics-based language program for those students who are having significant problems with literacy.

Accessing additional support from outside the school

One school currently gets assistance from the regional literacy and numeracy coaches who are working with small teams of two to three teachers within the school, to assist staff to better meet the learning needs of students. At another school additional funding has come through the Language Support program.

Emphasising the importance of literacy across the curriculum and providing professional learning opportunities that equip all teachers to promote such skills

Recognising that literacy problems are not just the domain of the English teachers, schools provide professional development for all staff. Some give priority to those teaching at the year levels involved in targeted literacy programs.

‘Literacy teaching is incorporated into lessons in all subjects and this has been shown not only to assist students in other subject areas but also improve overall teaching practice.’

Extending literacy program provision into the later years of secondary schooling

Some students reach the later years still lacking the literacy and numeracy skills they need to stay on and complete their schooling and to function effectively after leaving school. One school runs an alternative pathways program for Year 10 students who are at risk of leaving school early. Students are selected into the program because they have shown difficult behaviours and have low literacy and numeracy skills. The program, which emphasises flexibility, has a literacy and numeracy focus.

The same school also offers literacy extension classes to Year 11 students who are not undertaking a VET subject, during the time when VET students are out of the school. Over 100 students were involved in literacy extension at the time of this study, and participation was found to increase engagement and broaden their subject options.

Focusing on literacy and numeracy at Carrum Primary School

Carrum focuses very heavily on literacy with the Reading Recovery program at Year 1 and the literacy support program operating throughout the school.

While Reading Recovery is made available in Year 1 for those students who need it (with a maximum of four students doing it at any one time) the focus of the school is to develop the skills of the teachers to the point that they are able to support the individual needs of students with learning difficulties within the classroom.

Students who are seriously struggling with literacy and numeracy – apart from those doing Reading Recovery – are placed with teachers who are able to support them effectively within their classrooms.

The school also fully and openly documents student achievement in literacy and numeracy and ensures that this information is available to the teachers.

The school has developed a whole school timetable of two 2-hour blocks in the morning (9 to 11 and 11.30 to 1.30) to accommodate the two-hour literacy block every morning for all classes in the school and one hour of dedicated mathematics also in the morning. The two-hour literacy block is seen as sacrosanct and left free of interruptions.

Additional staff support is provided within the classrooms with literacy assistants working with classes and teachers in Years Prep–2.

There are formal meetings with all parents twice a year covering literacy and numeracy and all other areas of student work, but the school also provides some time after school each day where all teachers are available to speak to parents about the progress of their children.

Strategies for establishing partnerships

Creating positive relationships with parents by maximising opportunities for informal communication and involvement

Using a variety of approaches to reporting to parents on student progress

Forging links with other education providers: co-operation between kindergartens, primary and secondary schools to ease the transition process

Establishing links with the wider community to provide programs that promote student engagement

Establishing links with the wider community to directly support student learning

Establishing links with the wider community to improve student welfare

Establishing links with employers and others to help students make the transition from school

10. Establishing partnerships

Establishing productive partnerships with parents is another important behaviour of improving schools.

There is strong evidence for the influence of parental involvement in improving student outcomes (see Jeynes, 2007). Forging strong links with parents is particularly important for underperforming schools (Harris et al., 2006; Ofsted, 2008) and is characteristic of schools that have improved in challenging settings (Reynolds et al., 2004; Barth et al., 1999).

The most immediate and perhaps most beneficial partnership for schools to nurture and develop is the one between the school and the students' homes. However, schools can also create and maintain a range of collaborative relationships or partnerships with others – education providers and a large range of organisations in their wider community – which can be similarly and mutually helpful.

The family-school partnership

The value of a close partnership between school and home has been emphasised by the recent adoption of the Family-School Partnerships Framework (Commonwealth Government, 2008). This national framework contains principles to guide schools and families in developing partnerships, lists the key dimensions of family-school partnerships, and outlines a comprehensive range of practical suggestions for school communities and for school systems when establishing such partnerships. The seven key dimensions are:

- communicating
- connecting learning at home and at school
- building community and identity
- recognising the role of the family
- consultative decision-making
- collaborating beyond the school, and
- participating.

Parents have the greatest influence on achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home. This support makes the maximum difference to achievement (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Creating positive relationships with parents by maximising opportunities for informal communication and involvement

The frequency of interactions between the school and parents, and the level of parent involvement, is generally higher in primary than in secondary schools. The point of contact for parents in secondary school is most commonly their child's home group teacher or sub-school coordinator, although staff in the leadership group are also available for various matters. Parents in some of the secondary schools assist with extra-curricular activities such as drama and music performances.

A few secondary schools reported more active parent involvement. In one, the leadership team commented on the frequent parental visits to the school. They also considered the school council to be highly active, and praised the parents' association for its involvement in various extra-curricular activities. One college conducted four parent-teacher

interview sessions each year, compared with the usual two. Another highlighted the efforts it made to support and broaden the involvement of parents, including the extensive use of interpreters at parent-teacher interviews and general meetings, and follow up, via telephone, of parents who were unable to attend.

Using a variety of approaches to reporting to parents on student progress

A small number of secondary schools have implemented student-led interviews to encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning. Another advantage of this approach is that it can be less threatening for parents of students who are struggling.

In one school, the first parent/teacher/student interview for the year for Year 9 students is a standard interview based on the student's report and largely led by the teacher. Later, in term 3, the reporting session takes the form of a student-led conference. Teachers assist their students to prepare for and conduct the conference.

Another school has recently extended student-led interviews into the senior years, following their success at junior levels. Since the introduction of this initiative, parent attendance at interviews has risen markedly, from 25 to 80 per cent. The college has found that this process of students speaking to their parents about their learning also helps to reinforce the idea that learning is a three-way partnership.

Partnerships between the school and the community

Schools surveyed for this study have entered into an array of partnership arrangements, with a range of organisations and individuals, including other service providers, community organisations, businesses and individual employers.

At least one college has appointed a community engagement officer specifically to help connect one of its regional campuses to the local community.

There is a large and well established body of international research literature concerning the advantages of working through social partnerships that involve government agencies and service providers, business, and civil society (for instance, OECD 2001; Kjaer, Abrahamson et al. 2003). Such partnerships range from bottom-up, local arrangements, to more directed partnerships established by governments to achieve specific policy goals, with strong central control through funding and accountability requirements. Australian research which investigated the operation of partnerships and networks in education (Seddon & Billett 2004; Robinson & Keating 2005a; Robinson & Keating 2005b; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008b) draws attention to the challenges of working in partnership but also emphasises the numerous benefits, including improved outcomes for students. Schools report multiple benefits, although there is scope for more partnership building.

Forging links with other education providers: co-operation between kindergartens, primary and secondary schools to ease the transition process

Schools can smooth the process for students and their parents, at the crucial transition points from early childhood education into primary school, and from primary to secondary school. All primary schools have established strong links with kindergartens in their surrounding

catchment area, and secondary schools with their feeder primary schools. This facilitates communication between staff concerning the achievement and needs of individual students, who often made preliminary visits to become familiar with their new surroundings.

Establishing links with the wider community to provide programs that promote student engagement

Many schools in the study worked hard to forge strategic connections with other educational providers and community organisations. These relationships enabled community-based learning for students. The programs at three secondary colleges are generally offered as electives, are frequently targeted at students in the middle years of secondary school, and involve students working in various locations, such as nearby primary schools, special schools, kindergartens, aged care homes, and in one case an animal shelter.

Establishing links with the wider community to directly support student learning

Some secondary schools have implemented initiatives to engage the community that specifically focus on promoting student learning and achievement. Community Learning Centres, staffed by teachers as well as other support staff, have been established at each campus of a regional college to encourage the local community to find out more about the school and to help students with their work out of school hours.

At some schools, homework clubs are also a mechanism for connections to the wider community. One school employed former students, now at university, to tutor its students and is also starting to use ex-students as mentors or coaches. At another school, the homework club is run in conjunction with a service provided by the local council, with tutors available to assist students with various aspects of their study.

Establishing links with the wider community to improve student welfare

All of the secondary schools and some primary schools use external agencies for more specialised student welfare support. A large metropolitan school draws on Community Policing, the Migrant Resource Centre, and church-based welfare agencies. Philanthropic foundations provide scholarships in cases of hardship for items of uniform, fees and, in one case, the purchase of a musical instrument for a talented student.

Establishing links with employers and others to help students make the transition from school

Many secondary schools seek outside expertise from organisations such as Group Training Organisations for programs that provide career and employment-related information for students, as well as assistance in finding work placements for VET in Schools and school-based apprenticeships. In one school these organisations have an office in the school, and they come once a week to help teachers and students sort through issues.

Broader curriculum provision in the post compulsory years including through VET in Schools, and more structured support for students through Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs), are two means by which

schools can help larger numbers of young people make a successful transition from school. Access to suitable work placements is vital to the success of VET in Schools, which in turn is often dependent on the quality of relationships with local employers. Transition outcomes are very positive for students in schools that have these links into community.

Establishing partnerships at Maffra Secondary College

Maffra has high retention rates due to its success in obtaining apprenticeships for many students who complete Year 12. The MIPs and later years teams make an effort to find appropriate work placements for students' VET subjects, which in turn create opportunities for later apprenticeships.

Nearly all students find jobs or are in study, and strong links into a very connected community is a key factor in this result. The school tracks exit students even more closely than the formal On Track system can achieve because it has access to a well-informed, informal network.

Students sometimes return to the college well after leaving to ask for advice from careers teachers.

The community expectations are that students will work hard and be good people, and to this end the school also ensures that students participate in a variety of community work.

Strategies for implementing individual learning plans

Providing individualised programs for students most in need of additional support

Personalising learning through goal setting

Targeting individual learning needs through specialist teachers and reduced class sizes

11. Personalising through individual learning plans

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) are one means of ensuring that students at risk of not reaching their full potential achieve better outcomes. Teachers with good knowledge of individual students are able to help them set goals and to achieve them through targeted support in areas of need.

Providing individualised programs for students most in need of additional support

Some of the participating primary schools used ILPs for relatively small numbers of students with learning difficulties or behavioural problems. A few participating schools developed ILPs for a wider cohort. One school developed exemplar ILPs for high-, middle- and low-achieving students. In another school, all students assessed as being below the expected level, as well as students assessed as being well above it, were given an ILP. In a third school, ILPs encompassing students' literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional development, were in place for all children, ensuring continuous improvement as they moved through the school.

Individualising learning through the use of personal goal setting

Research in the field of applied psychology indicates that setting specific, measurable goals can contribute powerfully to improving performance (Locke, 1996). A number of primary and secondary schools require students to think about and record the personal learning goals they wish to set themselves. These are documented in a separate section of the student's report, and discussed at parent/teacher/student meetings. In primary schools this process of goal setting is done collaboratively between teacher and student, while in secondary schools it is undertaken as part of the school's pastoral care program, which is centred on the home group. Home group teachers allocate time on a regular basis in which to review students' goal setting.

'There is a rigorous process of goal setting for kids with guidance from their pastoral teachers. They are not forced to take on goals en masse. Instead they set goals individually based on what they like, on what they can explain to themselves and others, and on what they genuinely want. Confronting what they want to do may include how they handle the experience of leaving home: moving to Melbourne or other places for study or work is a common experience. Students' life goals and the supporting personal learning are developed in the context of their identity within their home town.'

Individual goal setting promotes student ownership of their learning, facilitates teacher knowledge of what students wish to learn, and can provide an important feedback tool for students and parents. It can also assist teachers to individualise their teaching by tailoring it to students' learning goals.

Targeting individual learning needs through specialist teachers and reduced class sizes

Schools attempted to individualise learning and address individual needs in a number of other ways. One principal defined the approach as organising the school around the individual needs of each child. There was constant monitoring of skills and progress to create student profiles. Schools varied in how they responded to addressing needs that arise in this context.

In one primary school with a very high SFO index, the principal had used funds to reduce class sizes. The school believes that smaller class sizes have a number of benefits, including: better relationships with sometimes challenging student and parent cohorts, freeing teachers to provide more individualised attention and support to those struggling, and relieving some classroom management pressures on teachers. This is one model of catering to individual need and supporting weaker students.

In other schools, rather than reducing specialist staff, there was a focus on providing additional support staff (sometimes through increasing class sizes) to address individual needs. In several primary schools additional literacy teachers worked with grade teachers to support weaker students, and some of these schools also provided additional mathematics support. Classes were larger, but more teachers were established as specialists who could work to address the needs of individual students or groups of students through targeted programs of support.

Strategies for engaging students

Using student feedback to monitor curriculum

Adopting changes in teaching practice to focus on team teaching

Providing curriculum that is relevant to students' interests and needs, with a greater element of student choice and active community-based learning

Establishing organisational structures that promote students' sense of belonging and closer teacher-student relationships

12. Engaging students

Student engagement in school, and student disaffection, are important influences on student achievement and student outcomes (Willms, 2003; Audas & Willms, 2001). Students disengage when programs are not challenging, according to Bryk et al. (1998), so that stimulating teaching that engages and challenges students is central to improving student learning outcomes. This is linked to teachers having high expectations of students; where teachers believe students will not, or cannot learn, the tasks are likely to be easy. In schools with improving student outcomes, teachers are able to adapt their pedagogical approaches and demonstrate flexibility in light of student needs and interests.

Adopting more student-centred pedagogy using student feedback to monitor curriculum appropriateness

Classroom activities generally include a mix of experiences along a continuum from teacher-centred to student-centred. Student-centred learning is identified by a few participating schools as an important means to improve student engagement. Where this shift in emphasis is pursued, schools re-focus staff on school vision and value statements, professional development, team teaching, and the example set by leadership teams, particularly at Key Learning Area level. 'It needs great KLA leaders who know the content not just administration', said one principal.

For primary schools, this can mean adopting an inquiry-based learning approach, in which engaging students is a key objective. Inquiry learning is learner-centred in that students set themselves a task or an issue to consider, use higher order thinking skills to work out what they need to know and do, and investigate and gather information to reach their own conclusions, thereby generating knowledge that is meaningful to them.

While curriculum should be interesting and challenging to students, and teachers should present topics in a way increases student engagement, one respondent cautioned that teachers could not expect their classes to master material to which they had not been previously exposed:

'Children need at least 60 per cent of the knowledge for a new topic. Teachers understand that learning is from the known to the unknown. Engaging children means teachers have to plan teaching and learning.'

As a natural extension of adopting a student-centred approach, teachers use student feedback to review and modify curriculum. This feedback on what students regard as interesting and important for their personal learning is gathered informally as well as via student surveys. Information about classroom climate in at least one school is obtained through the Transforming Learning instrument, to monitor the appropriateness of the curriculum.

In one school, student responses led to the development of a peer-teaching program which was enthusiastically adopted by the student body.

Adopting changes in teaching practice to focus on team teaching

Team teaching is widely seen in these schools as a significant means of promoting effective teaching and increasing student engagement. One principal described how team planning of teaching strategies not only leads to improved student engagement but also raises teacher engagement. Through the planning process, teachers discuss different strategies for developing stimulating classroom activities. They share information on how to anticipate the expectations of different groups of students and ways of providing them with challenging responses.

Providing curriculum that is relevant to students' interests and needs, with a greater element of student choice and involving active community-based learning

If teaching is to be effective and engaging it needs to build on students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, and to involve them in activities which have relevance outside the school context (National Research Council, 2004). To apply this principle, several participating secondary schools have made changes in curriculum offerings in the middle years.

One secondary school has a community elective program in which Year 9 students volunteer for half a day a week with a local community organisation such as a kindergarten or aged care home. Alternatively, they can choose to work on a large scale piece of art commissioned for the school or a public community space, become involved in an environmental project, or organise sporting activities for younger students. This outer suburban school also has a City School program for Year 9 students in which they spend a week in central Melbourne. Among other activities this involves inquiry-based group research on a particular hypothesis, such as the efficiency of public transport.

At another secondary college, Year 9 students choose from a large number of elective arts and technology units, many with projects involving activities outside the school. The college has also introduced an initiative called 'Challenge Day'. Running for one day a week throughout the year, the program aims to build teamwork and leadership by setting the students personal, physical and community challenges.

Some schools also recognise the need to provide alternatives for students who have not reached the post compulsory years when they can undertake full VCAL or VET in Schools programs.

Faced with a group of Year 10 students who were disenchanted with the mainstream offerings but who were not yet eligible for VCAL, one school implemented an alternative Pathways Program.

The Pathways program has four main elements: intensive literacy and numeracy; personal development and welfare; health, physical education and drama; and a work related component in which students do work experience, training or both.

The issue of disengagement and the need for 'real world relevance' may be less pressing in primary than in secondary schools. Nevertheless, in several of the participating primary schools lesson plans are regularly reviewed to ensure they incorporate activities that are seen as worthwhile and challenging to students. One school uses the Success for Boys program to engage boys more fully in writing, while another nominated the Rock and Water program as popular and

engaging for boys. Where lack of engagement becomes an issue in the later primary years, the approach in some schools is to introduce activities to encourage greater student responsibility. One school has focused on developing team, rather than individual, achievement in a particular task as a means of building responsibility through group solidarity.

Establishing organisational structures that promote students' sense of belonging and closer teacher-student relationships

In larger schools where some students may struggle to find their place, school-within-school structures have been developed to foster closer teacher-student relationships and improve student engagement. Variously called mini-schools, teams, and learning communities, and incorporating two or more year levels into discrete administrative and physical units, these groupings create a stronger connection between teachers and students.

Many of the schools regard home groups as the first line of pastoral care. They recognise that regular and ongoing contact between a teacher and the same group of students throughout the year is one means of building a familiar and trusting environment for students. Some schools have made changes to the home group structure in order to strengthen teacher-student relationships and improve engagement. An alternative home group model extends vertically across the school from Years 7 to 12, so that students remain with their home group teacher throughout their secondary schooling, ensuring continuity over the years. Through this arrangement, the home group teacher comes to know the students well, developing an overview of their progress in successive years and building sound relationships with their parents over that time.

Engaging students at Carrum Primary School

Teaching teams are expected to work on developing pedagogy designed to engage students. They are also responsible for student pastoral care and promoting strong relationships with students.

Programs include peer support groups at Years 3 and 5, an organised buddy system, a school choir and a gardening group. The school farm with animals provides a real interest for the students, and the Years 4, 5 and 6 students are given a great deal of responsibility for it.

Curriculum programs such as the HEROS (Heat and Energy Resource Officers who monitor the use of energy in the school) are designed to appeal to boys in particular.

There is a focus on teacher-student and student-student relations with an emphasis on 'respect' as a fundamental value to guide behaviour. All students are very well known by more than one teacher.

The school has addressed problems with student attendance and punctuality by relentlessly following up on student absences and running a campaign through the school council and the school newsletter.

Some of the most engaging activities occur at the start of the day to encourage punctuality and this has really worked.

Strategies for articulating clear staff performance expectations

Articulating expectations through formal policy guidelines and procedures

Making expectations clear through review and assessment

Making expectations clear through teacher performance plans

Leading by example and providing a role model

Articulating staff performance expectations through school and unit planning

Addressing weak staff performance with support, monitoring and due process

13. Articulating clear staff performance expectations

Researchers and policy-makers agree on the relationship between teacher quality or teacher performance and student achievement (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wright et al., 1997). Some research suggests that a focus on teaching standards and performance (e.g. Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005) is important in increasing student levels of achievement in improving schools. For these reasons, a critical issue for all schools is how to measure and deal with variations in the quality of teaching and, as part of this process, establishing clear staff performance expectations. The improving schools visited as part of this research used various strategies to articulate and inform staff of the performance expectations.

Articulating staff performance expectations through formal policy guidelines and procedures

Staff handbooks are a common way of providing detailed information about school procedures, policies, routines and roles. This can include details on conditions of employment, what is expected of staff, where to find things, and who to ask if there are questions. Handbooks can also be used to provide an explicit outline of what is expected of staff in terms of general duties, professional roles in the classroom, and performance expectations.

Much of what is formally presented in handbooks and policy guidelines is repeated regularly in many schools at staff meetings and through memos and emails. One primary school said 'expectations are reinforced at weekly staff meeting where there is opportunity for wide discussion with all staff. Also, the leadership team meets formally every fortnight and meets with small numbers of staff to discuss and remind all about what is expected of them.' This is reinforced through emails reminding staff of what is expected of them as individuals in their classrooms with the need to provide a high quality educational experience that can promote student achievement and progress. These expectations are also reinforced by the high priority given to giving teachers sufficient planning and meeting time during the year where performance expectations feature as points of discussion.

Making staff performance expectations clear through review and assessment

Some schools establish formal professional standards which define quality teaching as well as the teacher's broader role in the school. In one school, the standards or criteria are set out in two documents. The first is the Performance and Development Culture document which focuses on staff performance and review linked to professional learning, and the second, an outline of policies for building staff capacity within the school. Teaching can be assessed and reviewed according to the standards, and in the process, teacher performance expectations become clearly articulated because they form the basis for evaluation.

To share the load of reviewing individual plans in one school, all leading teachers, in pairs, are reviewers of six to eight teachers. The school's philosophy of performance evaluation states that the evaluation process exists to facilitate improvement in instruction. The review process has three formal meetings through the year, at the beginning, the middle and the end of the cycle:

- At the beginning of the cycle the teacher nominates a project with an outcome in professional learning and improvement in a particular area of practice. This project often grows out of a coaching activity not involving either of the two reviewers.
- The mid-cycle meeting reviews progress.
- The end-of-cycle meeting comes to an agreed statement on the year's achievement in the nominated project. All teachers are observed by another teacher several times a year, whether a buddy, coach, mentor or reviewer.

Making expectations clear through teacher performance plans

Teachers' performance plans are generally devised within the framework of the Performance and Development Culture, and are a key mechanism for articulating performance expectations. In one school the principal discusses the school goals with the whole staff at the start of the year and then has individual discussions with each member of staff to assist them to determine how they are going to implement a school goal, an area goal, and a personal goal, which must relate to the school context. As in other areas the principal leads by example by showing the staff her own performance plan. Expectations are articulated by the principal in terms of student achievement as demonstrated by data.

After the individual discussions are held with teachers at the start of the year there is formal feedback provided by the principal at the middle of the year and the end of the year. There is also a considerable amount of individual feedback given to teachers during the year by both the principal and the assistant principal.

'The use of the Performance and Development Culture framework and mechanisms has given the school a process and a language that has enabled effective feedback to be given to teachers, mainly by the principal but also at times, by others.'

Leading by example and providing a role model

In many schools leading by example is expected, and senior staff provide role models for good practice and teacher performance. This is expressed as, 'what I do, is what I expect of you' and was stated explicitly in several of the participating schools. One secondary college reported that teacher performance was influenced more by encouragement and modelling of the behaviour set by the school leaders than by talking about expectations. Performance was also influenced by the operations of the teaching teams and the influence that the leaders of these teams have as role models for others.

Articulating staff performance expectations through school and unit planning

Another approach to articulating staff performance expectations occurs through school and team level planning. This is a group approach with

group accountability. In one school the process was described in the following way:

The expectations of staff are made clear by the school leaders through meetings and individual discussions. There is a constant focus on performance through the various forums attended by staff, including grade level and team meetings.

Teachers work in teams and through their planning for the curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and student welfare, individual teams develop clear expectations of performance based on team and school priorities which can be assessed and measured. In such schools, the performance of teams was often assessed using: (1) data on student achievement and other relevant data, (2) student portfolios, (3) shared classroom observations, and (4) general observations of professional contribution.

Addressing weak staff performance with support, monitoring and due process

Improving and high-performing schools are very aware of the importance of teaching quality and take steps to ensure consistency across the staff. Many of the schools in this study highlighted the importance of monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning as a key element to improving student achievement. Many also stressed the need for identifying teachers with weaknesses and providing them with appropriate and intense professional development and strong support.

Ultimately some teachers do not improve despite the support of others and intensive professional development opportunities. In these instances, at most of the improving schools, the principal took responsibility for managing professional development and assessing and reviewing performance. Teachers in this situation were given time and support to improve their practice but, if this failed, were supported in applying for other jobs. Having a formal procedure of due process which is transparent and clear to everyone is important for dealing with poor performance.

Articulating staff performance expectations at Kurnai College

Expectations of staff performance are established through the Performance and Development Culture.

Professionally-orientated Learning Circles are used to enable teachers to develop and monitor their performance plans.

Teachers draw their goals and targets from the Annual Implementation Plan. The principal signs off on the individual performance plans but does not vet or monitor them. The whole process is seen very much as a professional developmental one, rather than an accountability one.

Teacher underperformance is handled quite separately and directly by teaching teams initially and then by the principal if there is no improvement.

Feedback on performance is given as part of a peer appraisal process within the year level team. Teachers are informed about how the team should operate and also how to provide feedback based on classroom observation.

It is accepted as part of the college culture that the college and campus principals will visit teachers' classrooms.

Strategies for targeting resources to student needs

Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill development

Providing specific programs to counter low achievement

Smaller class sizes for students with identified needs

Supplementary classroom programs to assist learners

Addressing welfare needs for students through targeted assistance

14. Targeting resources to student needs

All Victorian government schools are provided with core funding to meet mainstream costs of providing high-quality education. Some schools receive supplementary equity funding in recognition of the additional learning needs associated with certain groups of students that they serve: English as a Second Language (ESL) students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, low achievers, Indigenous students, at-risk students and children with integration needs. Even schools that do not receive any equity funding will have diversity among students meaning that they may need to target resources.

Barth et al. (1999) found that high-performing schools producing strong results for all students monitored achievement from the early year levels and provided extra support for those in need at the first signs of difficulty. The high-performing and improving schools in this study targeted resources to students using strategies depending on the populations of students, the learning and other needs identified among students, and the school priorities. Some of the practices used to target resources were school-wide, involving all students, while others were specific to groups of students with particular needs. Several of the key practices are outlined below.

Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth

Schools recognise that if some students fall well behind as they get to the higher levels of primary school or secondary school it is often too late to address their needs effectively. Some students enter school (either in Prep or in Year 7) well behind the skill levels of other students. In improving schools (those which have raised average levels of achievement consistently over the last decade) there is a concerted effort to identify students who had fallen behind and to intervene early to reduce the gap between them and other students.

In primary schools, this is often done within the framework of the 'Prep to 2' initiative, which provides resources for smaller classes and funding for Reading Recovery. At one school there was a heavy focus on literacy as a priority area, providing Reading Recovery for the Year 1 students and an additional 0.5 teacher for literacy support in the early years'. Considerable support was provided to improve the skill levels of students who were struggling through more one-on-one time working specifically on key literacy skills such as reading, or small group work with extra time dedicated to literacy skills.

In secondary schools, this is sometimes done through using additional resources to provide year-level-wide programs, by identifying students with weaker skills and targeting their needs through intensive support in withdrawal groups, or combining both methods. At one school this was done by offering weekly timetabled literacy and numeracy classes for students in Years 7 and 8. The sessions run for two normal class periods per week. Assessments identify skill levels and targeted assistance is provided to students with poorly developed skills.

One school allocates its resources very strategically to support its two major priorities: literacy and VCE. The school allocates staffing and financial resources to support these priorities and also gives timetabling priority to these programs.

Providing programs to counter low achievement

Some schools address low achievement across all year levels. The programs tend to focus on subjects such as mathematics, English and science and often involve additional time for teaching and learning. One secondary college has very clear priorities: literacy, mathematics and ICT. Additional teachers are provided in these areas to assist low achievers. Extra staff time is put into literacy support – one of the priorities for the school – at every year level. This time amounts approximately to the equivalent of 1.5 teachers and is used to support students who are in danger of falling behind as well as those who need extension work. Approximately 0.5 of a teacher's load is also allocated to mathematics to support students who are at risk of falling behind. Some staff time is also provided to support and promote the development and use of ICT in classrooms. In order to meet student needs, the school has built an additional ICT classroom which has been funded from locally-raised funds.

Smaller class sizes for students with identified needs

Although the findings are not conclusive, some research suggests that smaller class sizes can contribute to better relationships between teachers and students, better quality instruction and improved outcomes if teachers adjust their styles (Pritchard, 1999). A feature of some of the participating schools was a policy of smaller class sizes in the early years, at both primary and secondary levels. In priority subject areas, schools allocate groups of students to smaller classes or provide normal size classes with additional support staff to allow for withdrawal groups to target skills for students who need extra support. For the literacy program, one secondary school grouped all Year 7 and 8 students according to achievement. Classes of low-achieving students were kept small (around eight students) and class size increased with achievement levels, so that the strongest students were in classes of 25.

Supplementary classroom programs to assist learners

Some schools provide supplementary or enrichment programs to support higher levels of achievement. The clearest example of this was provided by a secondary school that has embraced the VCE 'Head Start' program. The program operates over two weeks for Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11 students prior to the normal commencement of VCE. In other schools the program is mainly targeted at Year 12 students about to undertake their final Units 3 and 4.

The Head Start program – now in its fifth year at the school – occupies the first two weeks in December. The timetable for the next year is established and some texts are distributed. The teachers in Head Start are the students' teachers for the following year. New teachers come for Head Start and the induction program commences at the same time. Teachers design assessment tasks in the Head Start program and identify their students' capacities, so they are better able to design the next year's learning for their students. They also spend part of the time supporting individual students.

Targeting student needs at Copperfield College

The school allocates its resources very strategically in support of its two major priorities, literacy and VCE. It allocates staffing and financial resources to support these priorities and also gives timetabling priority to these programs.

Four teachers are working out of normal classes to support the literacy program which is provided for all Year 7 and 8 students.

The school has constructed a purpose-built VCE Centre as a means of focusing on improving student aspirations, work ethic and outcomes. It is a focal point for the VCE students and their work, housing staff and resources for student management, MIPs and career advice.

Two additional teachers are allocated to the VCE program to allow English classes to be limited to a maximum of 20 and to ensure that the VCE Centre – where all VCE students do their private study – is supervised at all times.

The supervision is designed to provide students with access to teachers for assistance and to encourage them to use their study time more effectively.

The school has strong student welfare and career planning programs to meet the needs of certain groups of students, particularly those most at risk. Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) are used for at-risk students from Year 7.

The school has allocated its own money to alter classrooms to allow them to be used more effectively to support the schools teaching program.

Addressing welfare needs for students through targeted assistance

Welfare support is sometimes necessary for students who have high levels of need associated with family or personal problems. Personal and family problems associated with poverty, family breakdown or neglect, and mental health issues can be substantial barriers to learning. Integrated service models and onsite support can help assist in such circumstances.

One school established a welfare centre with a welfare coordinator, school nurse and a visiting GP. The centre provides coordinated services for students in need as well as operating programs on interpersonal and social issues.

Some of the schools were effective in mobilising support for students in need to assist with improving outcomes. One school catered for a large number of students from stressed family circumstances, many of whom end up living independently or in foster care from a very young age, and can find it difficult to develop regular attendance patterns and good study habits. The school runs a breakfast club, which fosters relationships and allows students a healthier start to the day. There is intensive pathways work for at-risk students in Years 10 to 12 and a special engagement program for the school's Indigenous students. The school has worked hard to forge strong links with a range of welfare and support providers.

Creating stronger links with the local community and drawing on community resources to support the school's efforts were also ways of dealing with the welfare needs of particular groups of students. In a secondary college with a sizeable Indigenous population, the college leadership focused its resources very strongly in recent years on promoting community engagement to provide additional support for students. A community engagement officer was appointed and a community learning centre established at each campus of the school, staffed by teachers and support staff, to encourage the local community to find out more about the school and to assist the students with their work after school. A key goal in this approach was, according to the principal, to support learning, develop a stronger work ethic and connect better with particular groups in the community. To support this effort, a Koorie educator, a social worker, and a chaplain have been employed as additional school staff to support students in a variety of ways and to connect the campuses of the school more effectively to particular groups in the community.

Targeting student needs at Doncaster Gardens Primary School

The school is very strategic about allocating its resources. Its priorities are very clear: literacy and ESL, ICT, mathematics, and teacher release for planning and development.

A great deal of extra staff time is put into literacy support throughout the school, using local funds. This time amounts approximately to the equivalent of 1.5 teachers and is used to support students who are in danger of falling behind as well as those who need extension work.

Additional staff time is of approximately 0.5 of a teacher also allocated to mathematics to support students.

Some staff time is also provided to support and promote the development and use of ICT in classrooms with the assistant principal taking leadership in this area. In addition there is a high level of funding of equipment, such as electronic white boards in every classroom.

In order to meet student needs, the school has built an additional classroom, funded from locally-raised funds.

Strategies for releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning

Scheduling time for planning and reflection

Scheduling time for team-based professional learning

Facilitating discussion, planning and organisation online

15. Releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning

Many schools have established team-based approaches to the organisation of teaching and learning. Teaching units are often based on year levels or stages of schooling and responsible for pastoral care as well as classroom teaching. In secondary schools this sometimes involves flexible learning centres that use team-based approaches to teaching, sometimes with teachers organised along subject lines, and increasingly in an inter-disciplinary way using an integrated approach to the curriculum. In all of these arrangements, there is a strong need for teachers to work together in the planning, design, organisation and delivery of programs. Teachers therefore need time to plan together, to talk about programs of study, units of work, duties and responsibilities; to share ideas about what works, assessment practices, and cohort needs as well as the needs and progress of individual students. Professional development also needs to be planned at the team or group level, to target priority areas and maximise effectiveness.

Scheduling time for planning and reflection

Interdisciplinary curriculum development, and team-based approaches to curriculum and student management and teaching, are premised on teachers' collaborative relationships. Many aspects of practice in improving schools involve greater collaboration among teachers. The practice of distributed leadership, evident in several schools, is also consistent with collaboration as an essential ingredient in successful schools.

Collaboration, however, requires time for planning and reflection. Some schools achieve this by allocating planning and reflection time as a routine part of the timetable. At one primary school group planning by teachers is a major feature and it is given high priority. There are four teams based on two main stages, Prep to 2 and Years 3 to 6. In addition there is a team of the specialist teachers and a team of teachers focused on the environment. In each school term one week is given over to teacher planning with teachers released for one full school day to plan together for the following term.

At a large metropolitan secondary school, teaching teams are organised around combined year levels with two Year 7 and 8 teaching teams, two Year 9 and 10 teams, and two VCE teams. The teams are given one timetabled planning period a week to plan and discuss their work. In addition there are four meetings of all campus staff and one whole school staff meeting with the purpose of discussing professional issues with a strong teacher learning focus. The team meetings are informal, while the campus and whole school staff meetings are more formal because of their size.

Scheduling time for team-based professional learning

Professional learning can be the result of formally-organised activities offered for groups of teachers, and also through sharing good practice. According to Little (1982) effective schools can be differentiated from less effective schools by the degree of teacher collegiality, or collaboration they practise, characterised by four specific behaviours: (1) teachers talking frequently, continuously, and concretely about the practice of teaching, (2) observing others' teaching frequently and offering constructive feedback and criticism, (3) working together to

plan, design, evaluate, and prepare instructional materials and curriculum, and (4) teaching each other about the practice of teaching.

Time release is often necessary for teams to operate effectively. At one secondary college, there are four major learning circles engaged in planning and development across the college, with timetabled meetings to engage in professional discussion and undertake professional development. Teachers work together to design curriculum modules, and, in targeting priority areas for student skill development, learn from each other in developing, observing and sharing classroom practice.

Facilitating discussion, planning and organisation online

Formal and informal meetings provide the framework for discussion, planning and professional development, and in several schools this is further facilitated through the use of the local intranet. At one secondary school, the intranet is used to exchange meeting documents, reports and other materials, and for the exchange of ideas among team members.

Releasing staff for planning at Doncaster Gardens Primary School

Planning and development time for the staff to be able to meet in their unit teams, analyse data and other information about students, and plan their teaching including changes and improvements they want to make, is seen as important in the school.

At the start of every term, grade-level teachers are timetabled off classes for a day for intensive planning and development activities.

Unit team meetings once a week after school encourage consideration of both professional and administrative matters.

Unit teams and the smaller teams of grade teachers within them operate as administrative and professional teams over the whole year.

The conduct of planning days and meetings is left in the hands of the unit leaders with strong mentoring by the principal.

Strategies for recognising staff and student achievement

Acknowledging student achievement in a wide range of areas, and at all levels of attainment

Acknowledging personally and publicly, the individual and collective efforts and achievements of staff

16. Recognising staff and student achievement

Recognition of student achievement is a form of positive reinforcement that has been found to characterise effective schools (Dolejs, 2006; Sammons et al., 1995). Acknowledgement of staff achievement allows teachers to feel their efforts are noted and valued, and can help build staff morale. Schools involved in the study use many strategies to regularly emphasise the value they place on the achievements of their students and staff, both in teams and individually.

Acknowledging student achievement in a wide range of areas, and at all levels of attainment

To build a culture in which everyone can achieve and can feel worthwhile, schools commend students for a wide range of achievements, not only academic or sporting successes. High ability and high effort are also recognised. Improved and improving performance is noticed and celebrated, not only the 'best' performance, so that students know that their efforts in a variety of areas could be acknowledged.

One school finds ways to recognise all students at all levels of ability:

'Even students having difficulties are recognised. They are not buried under the others. We monitor progress and look at student data all the time to look for new ways of helping students. We don't give up and use students' backgrounds as an excuse.'

Some of the primary schools encourage peer recognition of student behaviours and qualities in line with the 'You Can Do It' program. A teacher in one school encourages children in the classroom to give 'Bobby Dazzler' awards at the end of each day to another child for any one of a variety of qualities the child may have displayed:

'Children are good at boosting one another. They often do this if they see someone is in need of boosting. Children love the responsibility of giving each other awards. Giving "Bobby Dazzlers" is one of their favourite activities. In the course of the week most children get acknowledgement.'

Other ways in which schools recognise the various achievements of their students are:

- Teachers draw the attention of the class to good work, and give positive reinforcement of good behaviour, such as recognition of a child who overcame personal frustrations to respond positively in a group activity.
- Academic achievement may be recognised by presenting spelling certificates and mathematics prizes or the opportunity to participate in learning extension activities, such as Tournaments of Minds.
- 'Student of the month' awards for every subject in every year level.
- Student achievement awards at school assemblies, and publicised through school newsletters.
- Students' efforts across all learning areas are recognised at annual awards nights. The Year 12 final farewell is a major occasion for

acknowledging student effort in many areas, and community organisations such as Rotary and Lions contribute to awards and scholarships.

- Nominating students for external scholarships available from a philanthropic organisation
- Reports to parents refer not only to achievements but also list awards that the student has gained. Teachers may also make a point of passing on praise to parents for particular achievements or improvements made by students.
- Students who show improved achievement have lunch with the principal. The principal also meets with all high-performing students in Year 12 at a morning tea, and uses the occasion to ask them what has helped them to achieve their excellent results, and how the school might help others to improve.
- Displaying students' work in public arenas such as noticeboards and in school newsletters as well as recognition at assemblies and other public meetings sends a signal to the school community that teachers take pride in their students, and is part of a broader strategy to raise expectations and standards.

Acknowledging, both personally as well as publicly, the individual and collective efforts and achievements of staff

Schools also recognise staff achievement as a means of fostering staff enthusiasm and building morale. In most schools individual effort is acknowledged through private emails or personal interactions with the principal or leadership team. This personal approach is preferred due to concern about the professional and personal sensitivities of other staff, and possibility of negative response (the 'tall poppy' syndrome).

In one school students give awards to teachers. In another, an agenda item at staff meetings is listed as 'something great in your room', which enables teachers to share rewarding moments. This is a positive addition to the more usual function of this forum, which is to discuss and receive feedback on challenging classroom situations.

Recognition of staff also comes from the wider school community in some instances. The parents and friends association at one primary school presented a plaque 'for excellent teaching' to the staff as a whole following a successful school review process.

Recognising staff and student achievement at Bellfield Primary School

Bellfield has a high SFO index, making it one of the most disadvantaged primary schools in the state. In spite of this, its Year 3 statewide test results were at or above state means from 2004 to 2007. The school has a particularly extensive range of regular awards.

- Class-based awards cover academic achievement and pro-social behaviour.
- Awards for art, music, computer and physical education send the message that achievement in these areas is also important.
- Awards are given in sports, environment, and Best Player in the Yard.

Bellfield participates in the Gateways program, which the school's high achievers see as a reward for their efforts.

Recognising staff and student achievement at Chandler Secondary College

Achievement across many domains is recognised: concert band, annual arts festival, musical evenings, multicultural corroboree, choir, productions, debating teams, an executive student leadership team, and a student council.

Assemblies, newsletters and the school website are vehicles for recognition.

Individual students are nominated by staff for a principal's award, which can be for a variety of achievements and are highly valued by students.

Individual staff who have made a significant contribution over and above their expected duties receive personalised notes from the principal, and their work is profiled in the school newsletter and staff meetings.

Chandler Secondary College merged with three other schools to form Keysborough Secondary College on 1 January 2009.

3. How eight of Victoria's best-performing schools are adding value

3.1. Introduction

This report describes the experiences of eight high-performing government schools in Victoria, each with a high-density Student Family Occupation (SFO) Index. The SFO index is a measure of socio-economic status used in Victoria. These eight schools are achieving outcomes not only above schools in the same SFO band, but commonly above the mean level of performance for the state. They are also outperforming many schools with much lower levels of disadvantage than they experience themselves.

DEECD commissioned the project to identify:

- how each of the schools has achieved its level of success
- which behaviours were common and therefore replicable in other schools
- what other schools can adopt to ensure continued improvement.

While each description is unique, and reflects the specific local circumstances and strategic responses adopted by the schools, there is enough commonality to draw conclusions that will help improve other schools in disadvantaged areas.

These ten behaviours and practices are in two different categories: those which constituted the preconditions for substantial improvement to occur and arguably provide a place for a school to start; and those that enable schools to build on these preconditions and sustain improvement over time. While the behaviours and strategies described in this section are not exactly the same as those already highlighted in section 2, they are clearly related. They were implemented by high-performing Victorian government schools, and suggest that schools consider a sequence of behaviours and strategies.

3.2. The preconditions for improvement

The research found an interconnected package of strategies that are preconditions for any substantial program of improvement to take hold in a school.

Strong leadership that is shared – Each school has strong leadership with a clear vision and direction for the school and a high degree of leadership stability over time. Leaders establish the conditions in which teachers can provide high quality teaching.

High levels of expectation and teacher efficacy – Each school promotes high expectations for all students, setting higher targets than merely matching equivalent schools. High expectations for students lead staff to believe they have the capacity to make a difference for the students they teach.

Ensuring an orderly learning environment – Establishing an orderly learning environment – where each student is known by at least one member of staff – was the starting point for improvement in each case.

What the data show

While the actual circumstances and experiences of each of the eight schools are unique, an analysis of their key data sets – student achievement; staff, student and parent opinion; student absences; and student retention – reveals that in all cases the relatively high levels of student learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy and the VCE are paralleled by:

- much lower levels of absenteeism than schools in their SFO band and, in most cases, levels of attendance that put them in the top bands of the state. All of these schools have succeeded in getting most students to attend most of the time
- generally high staff opinion, on most variables in each of the schools, with a positive and often very positive view of students' motivation to learn.
- student opinion of the three key teaching and learning variables of Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher Empathy and Stimulating Learning in the top 50 per cent of the state as a whole and commonly well above that level
- relatively high levels of real retention in the case of the two secondary schools. This is an observable difference between these and other lesser performing schools and may be a consequence of the other factors

This is not only because effective teaching and learning cannot occur in disorderly classrooms, but also because it provided a key mechanism to enable teachers to work consistently towards a common goal.

A focus on key priorities – Each school has relatively few priorities which are focused on the core student needs. They also have a clear sense of how to prioritise.

3.3. Sustaining improvement over time

These interrelated strategies, adopted by the eight schools, build on the preconditions above to sustain improvement beyond the initial successes.

Building teaching and leadership expertise – All of the schools work to build teacher capacity around their core priorities, including the development of leadership skills, particularly at the middle leadership level responsible for a variety of areas and professional learning teams. This includes recruiting expertise where this can be identified and is required, and using the full range of capacities existing within current staff.

Structure teaching to ensure all students succeed – The schools all adopt a structured approach to teaching and learning. Their leaders work to improve their understanding of effective teaching strategies and demonstrate a relatively sophisticated understanding of how students learn. This is supported by assessment regimes that ensure students are well known and that their needs are being met.

Using data to drive improvement – Sharing and using data to analyse school and student performance, and then drive improvement, is a feature of each school. The rich array of data available through the Department is supplemented by additional sources of evidence to provide a comprehensive picture of student performance and individual students' needs, and data are systematically shared and discussed by the staff.

A culture of sharing and responsibility – High levels of staff collegiality and mutual support are encouraged, with active professional learning teams and a clear expectation that teaching and learning programs will be documented and shared. The high degree of sharing is a powerful means of turning individual teacher efficacy into a sense of collective efficacy, and a strong perception that teachers can have a positive effect on student learning through their teams.

Tailoring initiatives to the overall direction of the school – The schools all strive to ensure that broader Department initiatives are integrated with the overall direction and priorities they have set, giving added impetus and rigour to their local goals.

Engendering pride in the school – All of the schools take pride in their buildings and grounds as well as the work the students produce. This reflects a general expectation that everything they do is of high quality.

Following is a detailed description of each school.

3.4. Braybrook College: Building a culture and structures for high achievement

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards has been taken very seriously as a means of revamping curriculum and pedagogy in the college. The Principles of Learning and Teaching were used to inform discussions as the VELS was introduced, and the college expects that the interdisciplinary domains will be integrated with the disciplines, and will start to drive how people teach.

Braybrook College is a single campus, coeducational Year 7 to 12 college of around 1000 students, largely serving the areas of Sunshine and Footscray. The college prides itself on its 'emphasis on providing individual help and support within a safe and caring environment', embodied in its motto, *Pride in Achievement*. Its mission is to ensure that 'all members of the school community strive for excellence within a safe and supportive environment where diversity is valued and where students can develop the academic and social skills necessary to become successful members of society'.

Strong leadership

Turning around significant enrolment decline and sustaining a strong and growing school is a task that the college has pursued for the last 20 years. This commenced with the arrival of a new principal who brought a clear vision and sense of moral purpose which, according to one school leader, 'made us believe that every kid is entitled to the best we can give and, in particular, access to quality teaching to get the best outcomes'.

Initially adopting what was described as a 'commanding style of leadership blended with strong consultation', the principal then worked through this guiding belief, starting with the leadership team. The team was supported to embrace and espouse this vision as they took it to the rest of the staff. It was able to build sufficient critical mass for the notion that 'it's essentially the students first, get the pedagogy right, and how can we help you to do that?'

Achieving this critical mass, it was suggested, comes from a combination of leadership stability in the college and a willingness to let new ideas flourish, provided they can be mapped to the process of improvement and a significant degree of staff support can be gained.

Leadership is widely distributed, with conscious and focused efforts to build the capacity of the 17-member leadership team. The college has developed its own leadership development program which includes tools for individual leaders, as well as feedback to inform their own professional and personal improvement.

The leadership team meets fortnightly for 90 minutes, when it generally spends the first half hour on theory and analysis of 'what's going on around us'; the second thirty minutes in focused discussion on an issue of importance to the college; and the remainder of the time sharing intelligence on what's happening within the college.

The college has sought to develop its leading teachers as leaders who promote the vision and priorities of the school, reflecting the belief of the three principal class members that, to keep the school strong, it is necessary to build the capacity of its middle level leaders and the effectiveness of their teams. When the research team visited, it appeared that all staff clearly owned the vision and direction of the school.

One interesting strategy, agreed by all of the leaders, is to ensure there is always a building program, no matter how large or small, for improving facilities each year. Maintaining and upgrading facilities is a priority at Braybrook because it develops more pride in the school.

High expectations and demands

The vision of the college includes high expectations for what students should do and achieve. The college learned it had to be clear about mapping and sequencing of work to ensure the curriculum is coherent within and across the years, and prepares students for the VCE. This has led to a more structured set of learning experiences through which the students all progress, and which teachers and students know in advance. It also is reflected in whole-school programs the college has chosen to adopt to meet students' specific learning needs, such as the Drop Everything and Read program aimed at improving literacy in Years 7 and 8. All students read a fiction book for 20 minutes during period 5 selected from tubs of books provided for each class or, preferably borrowed from the library. Teachers also read during this time. This has 'definitely improved the culture of reading and prepared us to engage in professional learning this year to raise the profile of literacy in the school'.

The focus has been that 'when it comes to getting outcomes, we have to ensure we have teachers in the classroom who are innovative, rather than seeking to innovate the curriculum'. This means the focus is more on pedagogy and how it can be improved.

The shift in emphasis described represents 'a culture shift from a welfare school to one that still values welfare, but strives for academic excellence as well'. Previously, one leader said, 'we shielded kids and sought to keep them happy, but without challenging them to really achieve'. By contrast, all now feel the expectations are high and 'we have structures and supports to help the kids achieve'.

'The belief that you can't expect more of these kids is severely challenged in this school.'

The Work Ethic Committee is a high-level group in the college that helps to ensure that all students are ready to work and classes are places to learn. Thus, in this school, students are not only provided with diaries, but teachers regularly examine them. The college diary includes a set of study hints. By the end of week six in the year, teachers make an assessment of each student in terms of the college work expectations, and parents are advised. Students whose work ethic is lacking are offered homework club participation in Years 9 and 10, or other supports in other years, with a view to turning their behaviour around. While the focus of these assessments is effort rather than achievement per se, it does contribute to a positive work culture in the college and the better than expected outcomes that the students achieve.

High expectations and achievement are reinforced by conscious and coordinated celebrations of success. As well as the student honour board, the sub-schools ensure that achievement in academic, sporting

and other co-curricular realms are valued and recognised in the school. At Year 10, for instance, the coordinator analyses all reports and invites 'outstanding performers' to a special breakfast to acknowledge what they have achieved. In addition, the top student from each home group at that level is presented with a USB stick gift at a special assembly before their peers.

Getting the preconditions in place

For all of the leaders interviewed, the precondition for achieving the learning culture that now exists was a concerted effort by successive school principals and other key leaders, which has been sustained for almost 20 years, to ensure an orderly learning environment in the school.

'You can't teach unless the kids are sitting, orderly, willing to listen, to work and to learn'. That, according to all who were interviewed, is the mantra of the school, which continually is reinforced. Certainly the research team noted a sense of order with students in classrooms and the corridors clear, a very clean school with no graffiti in sight, and the principal enforcing the uniform policy as we walked together around the school.

What was described as a 'fairly traditional structure' prevails. While a conscious effort is made to get the 'right' teachers with the students, the primary focus is on what one leader described as 'creating coherent structures where kids feel comfortable and teachers can manage them'. There is a clear expectation that students are on time and equipped for their work, with a set of consequences that are known in advance and consistently applied.

Student attendance is a problem in the local area and hence a priority in the college, with the result that absences are below the average levels for the state. The provision of equity funding, which is seen as making a very important contribution to the outcomes achieved, has enabled the college to employ an attendance officer, and a youth officer who follows up targeted students, even bringing them to school. Rolls are marked in every lesson and parents are called to follow up absences, generally on the same day.

Similarly, implementation of the college uniform policy is, to use one leader's word, 'dynamite'; because of the overall message it sends. A VCE student out of uniform, for instance, will be sent home to change and return as soon as they can. It is seen as an important symbol of the culture of the college and ensuring an environment in which students can learn.

There is little doubt in the minds of all leaders interviewed that discipline and order is one of the key reasons for the college's success. It is mixed with a strong sense of caring, most clearly enacted in the way that year level coordinators move through the school with their students to ensure they all are well known. This, together with a policy that deliberately keeps classes small, has led to what all described as a very positive atmosphere in which to work and to learn.

Teachers are very clear in the direction and processes to be pursued, and there are clear protocols and procedures which everyone knows. The result is that a very stable environment exists, where there are clear expectations, a great deal of consistency and a strong sense of connection which has generated a positive image within the community.

Building on this base

Having initially focused heavily on order in the classroom and through the school, Braybrook College now is really working to improve the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment it provides, along with professional learning that underpins success in this regard. Starting from the premise that 'innovation and excitement really reside in the classroom and the role the teacher performs' the college has, like many others, established professional learning teams. Team leaders have focused on getting teachers to share more of their work, not only so standards and different practices can be seen, but also to ensure more feedback is received as Performance and Development Culture accreditation is pursued. Similarly, the principal is working with faculty leaders to take more of a curriculum leadership role and each has been asked to develop specific goals for discussion on how their learning area can be improved. This staged approach reflects a general college approach of starting small, achieving success and only then spreading out.

There is an awareness that teachers often become overwhelmed if too much change is pursued. Thus, the college only introduces change when it thinks the change is 'appropriate and relevant to our structure'. Such key approaches as a focus on standards, the core subject structure and student management are always maintained as the framework in which change occurs.

Braybrook College is a school where, one teacher commented, 'you feel there is a leader, a direction, a structure, a chance to try new things provided you gain the support and have done the research, and, though we may not always agree, we really value the certainty'.

3.5. Coomoora Primary School: Getting the best from what you have

The core goal for its 440–450 students, who primarily come from a non-English-speaking (Cambodian, Vietnamese and to a lesser extent Chinese) background, is to ensure excellence and equity for all it enrolls. The school is explicit about recognising achievement in all aspects of the curriculum and teachers are expected to be explicit about what is being taught and assessed.

Changing expectations and targeting needs

All students are expected to achieve their personal best. Because the school receives substantial funding to address disadvantage, it aims for the state benchmarks rather than comparison with 'like' schools.

There is a strong accountability process, whereby people are expected to deliver on agreed 'stretch goals'. School decisions are always based on the best interest of the students and what will promote successful outcomes across the school. Teams are structured with a mix of experienced and less experienced staff. All teachers must change roles, on a cyclical basis, every five years. This allows for stability and consolidation along with regular change, and contributes to teachers' continued and supported learning as they take on a new role.

Student attendance is a particularly important expectation. Having experienced attendance problems some years ago, the school year now starts with all staff reviewing the attendance, behaviour and expectations of targeted students. Teachers receive details of individual students' attendance so they know who to closely monitor as the year unfolds, and they are vigilant about following up student absences.

With solid attendance in place, the school determines the learning capabilities of each student in order to decide on the best teaching and learning approach. Diagnostic assessment is crucial to clarify student achievement and to identify students in need of intervention support, so teacher judgments are verified with reference to objective sources such as statewide testing and PAT for Mathematics and Reading. More recently, the school has been working with ACER, and other schools, to trial a tool for tracking student learning against set benchmarks. This tool effectively consolidates individual student, grade and cohort data and provides achievement profiles for individual students and cohorts across the school.

Teaching and learning coordinators work with teams to regularly review programs and student achievement. During their professional leave, three teachers developed a data base to track the lowest performing students as part of their objective of supporting students identified as achieving well below expected standards. Another team developed a school-wide plan to better meet the learning needs of students performing at above expected standards.

Extensive welfare support is provided by a full-time youth worker, a part time guidance officer, a speech pathologist, a social worker and a school chaplain. An annual, whole-school welfare screening process is in place whereby the assistant principal meets with the guidance officer and class teachers early in term two to consider issues relating to the

learning, welfare, physical or social development needs of students and identify strategies to address these concerns.

This is underpinned by a consistent, whole-school approach to behaviour management that focuses on promoting a positive, respectful school environment and rewards good behaviour. At the start of the year, teachers and students negotiate expected class behaviour, rules and associated consequences. These expectations, an agreed action plan and consequences are communicated to parents. The school emphasises positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviour and 'manners and values' programs are consistently promoted throughout the school.

Literacy teaching at the core

Literacy development is the major focus in the school because the students 'don't have access to extensive literacy resources, and non-English-speaking parents find it difficult to support students with their school-based learning'. A wide range of additional programs exists to enrich and complement core programs that aim to develop students who are competent in reading, writing, speaking and mathematics.

The first six months of the Prep program focuses on school readiness. The program emphasises establishing good routines, developing oral language, appropriate social interaction, independence and developing basic concepts.

A very structured Prep–6 literacy planner has been developed to promote consistency in teaching practice and expectations through explicit teaching that addresses individual student needs. Literacy and numeracy blocks are at the centre of the curriculum. The school's approach maximises students' time on task, which the school supports by ensuring there are no interruptions in class time.

Professional development is particularly important, including optional focused workshop sessions on Wednesday mornings. These workshops, based on a combination of staff feedback and identified school needs, are provided by staff with particular expertise, such as Reading Recovery strategies to assist struggling readers; supporting ESL students in class; and planning an inclusive program in mathematics. Just like the teaching the school promotes in each class, the workshops are short, explicit sessions with clear strategies, activities and tools the teachers can use.

People working to the best effect

Leading teachers and team leaders support and guide the work of the teams. Mentoring is particularly important, especially for new teachers and graduates who get an extra period a week to work with their mentor, having experienced an initial day of induction to the school. This reflects and also partly arises from the valuable experience of becoming a Performance and Development Culture accredited school. The staff used the accreditation as an opportunity to review practices and processes in order to promote quality professional learning and development.

The school's timetable reflects its key priorities and needs, including the provision of mentoring and student intervention support. Its primary focus is to ensure that time allocations support the key priorities of literacy and numeracy, and effectively address student and staff needs. Every team is allocated one weekly session to plan their teaching and learning approach, and then provided with one day a

term to plan on a broader scale. Weekly, one team is released from teaching duties for the afternoon to undertake needs based professional development. Recently, for instance, the school invested heavily in numeracy interviews, so the Prep–2 team worked with a leading teacher to determine how to effectively use the data to plan for targeted teaching and learning.

Strong instructional leadership and planning

The basic approach of leadership in the school is, as one principal class member described, ‘to identify one or two important initiatives and focus on embedding those effectively, rather than undertaking too much’.

The leadership team is the driver of this approach, and a conscious effort is made to ensure it is proactive and focused. Leadership meetings start with a round table discussion of issues related to each team in order to identify and address concerns in a timely manner. Teams are encouraged to share effective strategies and explore solutions to teaching and learning challenges.

At end of the year, the principal meets with teams to determine successes and identify future teaching, learning and welfare goals. These are incorporated in the school’s Annual Implementation Plan. Teams begin the year discussing goals applicable to their cohort of students and determining key strategies required to achieve those goals. Teams regularly reflect on their progress and adjust programs in response to student needs.

Organisation and communication to support change

Underpinning all of this is a very strong commitment to quality organisation and communication across the school. It not only has clear processes for communication and operations of which all are aware, but every member of staff has a detailed role description that outlines their professional expectations. These are reviewed and adjusted annually. In October, all school programs are reviewed through the teaching and learning teams. More specifically, the strengths and areas for future improvement and professional development are identified. Feedback is collated and forwarded to the appropriate program leader for discussion by representatives from each area at the annual program review meeting. This leads to the development of a report for school council that sets out the strengths of the program and articulates future goals.

Organisation and order are very strong in this school. Minutes are kept of all meetings and emailed through the school and there is at least one representative from each area on all major project groups to ensure all have a voice.

The school runs very smoothly, though it is acknowledged this did take many years to achieve. In part this reflects a degree of leadership stability over time, but also the belief that they should never be satisfied with the status quo. The prevailing ethos seems to be that ‘if we can achieve our goals more effectively, we will strive to refine the processes we have in place’. Important factors have been what the school sees as the ‘big ideas’ in the Department initiatives, such as the Blueprint (which was described as ‘brilliant because it provided a reference point for school improvement), the Principles of Learning and Teaching (which ‘facilitated focused professional discussion around good teaching, learning and assessment practices, and affirmed the breadth of excellent strategies already in place across the school’) and the more effective use of data, because of the way they ‘validate what

we are aiming to achieve and support us to identify areas for future improvement'. In that sense, they fit with an observable restlessness that comes from the top which seems to say, 'we should always strive to do our best for every student'.

3.6. St Albans Secondary College: Building a culture of achievement

St Albans Secondary College opened in 1956 and has welcomed new arrivals to Australia from its diverse, multicultural community. The school has had consistently strong enrolments and prides itself on nurturing 'academic success, a culture of support and positive identity' where each student is helped 'to develop the confidence to follow their interests, hopes and dreams for the future'.

Its broad curriculum is supplemented by a co-curricular program that includes 'intellectually rewarding' activities such as interschool debating, student leadership programs, subject area competitions and a university mentoring program.

The school runs a program for students who require additional learning support, accelerated learning and enrichment programs to cater for high achievers in various domains, and an International Students Program to enrich the school community as a whole.

The school is divided into three sub-schools (Years 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12), each with a team of year level coordinators who monitor the academic, social and emotional progress of students and liaise regularly with their teachers and parents.

Strong leadership throughout

In its early years, St Albans was what one long-standing leader described as 'a very tough school'. The fact it dealt with this relatively well translated into a positive local reputation as a 'strong community school with very dedicated teachers and good relationships', but not necessarily a school that delivered academic success. This started to change as the school capitalised on the strengths of the changing multicultural community in which it resides (in particular, the support for education from its growing Vietnamese intake). As well, the arrival of a principal who stayed for a considerable period and instituted a consistent approach to student management was a precursor for building the academic performance of the school.

By strategically working with parents and the community, and recruiting new staff with required expertise, the incoming principal was able to institute a whole school approach to welfare and discipline. As one key leader said, 'teachers always had pride in the school and a strong connection to the kids, but leadership stability and a new consistent structure enabled us to express it in the community as well'.

Twenty years on, the school's leadership plays a very active role in setting the tone and feel of the school. They set very high expectations for students and staff alike, expressed in such mantras as 'all kids can learn; you can all achieve; we expect you to achieve your personal best; we expect you to participate in a learning community; and you have rights, but with that also come responsibilities'.

The leadership structure is designed to facilitate both day-to-day management and strategic thinking and action in the school. The principal class and daily organiser, for instance, meet weekly to deal with operational issues and matters of staff welfare that arise. Similarly, there is a weekly meeting of the principal class group to discuss higher level issues and plan.

The principal class group meets with the 13 leading teachers twice a term, but it is too large a group to form a functioning leadership team. Thus, the leading teachers are divided into groups related to the school's strategic and annual implementation plans, which cover student learning projects, staff development, and student development. These groups, which also include other teachers, are each led by a member of the principal class, and have both a clear focus and regular meeting times. They not only ensure a strategic focus on the core priorities, but have also helped to develop the leadership capacities of the middle level leaders in the school.

Creating an orderly environment

The school capitalised on a new industrial agreement to develop a more sophisticated sub-school structure. The three sub-schools each have their own leader with a significant time allowance and payment in recognition of their critical role in the school. Each sub-school has its own charter which extends beyond student management to encompass programs to meet its students' needs. The sub-schools emphasise teacher-student relationships, and drive consistency. The initial focus on student management to underpin learning has evolved into a broader focus on wellbeing and programs to engage and challenge students.

Ensuring a safe, orderly learning environment is central to 'ensuring the teachers can teach and the kids can learn'. Students at St Albans 'are expected to be in uniform, in class on time, attending at school, with their materials and ready to work'. The students know what's expected of them, 'and by and large they do it'.

Raising the status of curriculum

In recent years, emphasis has shifted towards ensuring a consistent, coherent curriculum is in place. A detailed curriculum handbook includes suitable pedagogy and assessment, and is available on the school's intranet.

The result is that curriculum now is planned, is based on clear expectations, and people are accountable to the leadership for curriculum. Curriculum development and implementation now forms part of the Annual Implementation Plan, and the roles of the English and mathematics learning area leaders have been elevated.

The opportunity to become part of the Leading Schools Fund (LSF) helped structure the focus on pedagogy with a related emphasis on data analysis and student voice. The school was successful in gaining additional staff and created opportunities for people to work together. In 2007, a Teacher Support Program was introduced, where teachers work in pairs for a period a week to plan around defined milestones related to the teaching and learning objectives of the school, then observe each other and provide mutual feedback. This has had a very positive evaluation from the teachers involved.

A stronger focus on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is underpinned by a major in-school professional development program where all staff undertake three in-school professional development modules a year.

Supporting a positive work ethic

The school has a very hard-working staff and promotes a strong work ethic to students. The latest student survey results show the students'

view of their own motivation at close to the top of the state. The leadership makes the students' work ethic explicit and, to use the words of one, 'exhorts them to higher achievement by telling them how good their predecessors were, how good their teachers are, and how good they have to be, and that it takes effort and work'. This comes with some hard-edged expectations when needed and associated structures of challenge and support. Attendance levels and expectations about the number of units a student must successfully complete are built into the school's policy and practices for student monitoring and advancement.

The school reports to parents in a variety of ways at least eight times a year. This high level of monitoring and reporting is underpinned by a whole school system designed to ensure that every student is well known and that their specific needs are addressed. Each coordinator interviews every child for whom they are responsible at the start of the year. At Year 7, where students are just starting at the school, the coordinator will check their books, see that they have friends and generally make sure they are happy at their new school. The result, one school leader explained, is that it is 'getting harder for students to fly under the radar' and this is reinforced by the comprehensive data that the school maintains for all year levels.

With these systems in place, the school now is moving to develop its community partnerships and emphasis on student voice.

St Albans is a Beacon Foundation school, which enables Year 10 students in particular to engage with industry and the world of work.

This supplements a very strong Managed Individual Pathways program in the school which begins with individual interviews and course counselling in Year 9 and builds from there so that all students leave Year 12 for a post-school destination of worth, as exemplified by excellent destination data results for students last year.

Using data and celebrating success

VCE results remain a feature of data analysis in the school. Teachers have been working with the Australian Council for Educational Research over the last few years to review their VCE data. In addition, the LSF funding helped create a VCE Learning Coordinator position to support focused conversations with teachers. This has contributed to greater alignment between the Year 10, 11 and 12 exams, the development of learning area improvement plans, and succession planning for VCE staff through initial mentoring of teachers taking targeted subjects in Year 11.

As this approach is extended down the school, it is developing a comprehensive data and assessment protocol to guide its teachers' work. This is strengthened by the expectation that learning area coordinators have responsibility for their subject area at every year level regardless of whether they teach there themselves. The protocol clearly specifies what data exists in the school, when it is collected, who analyses it, how it is used, and then what is done with it. This is to be supplemented by a locally-devised welfare and achievement data base covering all students in the school, which learning managers can update to ensure the school 'really knows all that it needs to know and that the data precedes the child'.

3.7. Dandenong North Primary School: Ready and able to learn

This school of almost 550 students, with a stable leadership team, has changed markedly over the last 20 years. Once a relatively well-to-do school, with the largest 'Mothers' Club' in the state, it has been transformed by migration and a growth in rental properties, and is now designated a 'disadvantaged' school. Seventy per cent of students come from a non-English-speaking background with a significant number of recent refugees, primarily from Afghanistan and the Sudan.

Realising that staff meetings had become dominated by the implementation of 'the rules', the leadership worked to create a positive ethos and practice based on 'the four Cs: care, courtesy, cooperation and common sense'.

The four Cs are displayed in every classroom as guiding principles for all actions in the school, and have replaced the multiplicity of rules as the benchmarks against which behaviour is judged.

With this overarching philosophy in place, the school developed its management and self-esteem program which won a regional curriculum award. This emphasises positive behaviours and is designed to ensure that feedback is immediate and relevant to the situation at the time. Teachers award students different badges in recognition of 'good things they have done' and regularly give out formal certificates. The badges are proudly displayed and contribute to a calm and engaged atmosphere in the school. Above all, they reflect the thinking behind the new ethos that, as one leader explained, 'you have to get the kids paying attention and orderly before you can teach them and they can learn'.

The four Cs includes a peer mediators and buddy program that brings students together at lunch and in lessons they share. Specific modules on the approach have been developed and used for inducting new staff into the school: one of the factors behind its early accreditation as a Performance and Development Culture school.

A 'Close Encounters' program which sees students awarded with raffle tickets for good behaviour and playing nicely in the yard, is mirrored by a 'Closer Encounters' scheme for staff. Staff deposit carbon copied vouchers which recognise the contribution of others, with the originals provided to the teachers concerned, and they periodically are drawn out for a prize. It's a simple and practical activity that reinforces the basic approach and is so valued in the school that a special payment is made to the teacher running the scheme.

Ready to learn in the class

Having established the basic precondition of order, the school's focus turned to ensuring that all students are ready and willing to learn. Students are supported to enter their classes able to learn and believing that this is their task. This is evident in the school's response to the arrival of new students through the year.

A Reception Program of one week for English speakers and two weeks for refugees introduces them to the school and its expectations. They are tested to determine their literacy and numeracy

levels and eased into some of their programs. Then they move smoothly to their mainstream classes with their Individual Learning Plan.

At a more general level, the school has put substantial resources and effort into ensuring that any student falling behind is supported. Thus there is support ranging from substantial withdrawal programs in English and mathematics to structures that ensure good attendance at school. Two retired principals have returned as part time welfare teachers offering socialisation programs, contact with parents regarding absences, counselling and connections to other services.

The right people in place

A central strategy used to gain and maintain high results is ensuring the 'right' people are on staff, and that they are doing the right jobs in the school. It is important to get the mix of experience right. The school's budget is focused on people rather than facilities. As a result, every available space is filled with teachers and students working in small groups that supplement what is happening in the other classes round the school.

'The focus on quality staffing means that, apart from the principal class itself, the leadership team comprises all who want to join it.'

No meetings are closed, since communication is key and they always focus on students and their needs. Leadership is highly distributed through the school with most of the action in teams.

Data as a circuit breaker

High expectations were not always a feature of the school, as there was a tendency to believe 'you can only expect so much of these sorts of kids'.

The principal established a connection with a neighbouring school with a solid reputation for success, and arranged for their students to undertake a set of Dandenong North Primary tests. Despite the prevailing view that the other school's students were doing relatively better, the Dandenong North students performed better. This constituted a pivotal 'turning point' for the staff because it helped raise the expectations they had of their own student group. In addition, it also spurred the school to become more attentive to its own data – examining data in more depth and determining how its students perform – which resulted in higher expectations and challenges.

A focused approach

This increased understanding of the students and their needs is reflected in the very high priority accorded to literacy and numeracy in the school.

Direct teaching is premised on the notion 'we need to find out what they do not know, and teach it'. There is much pre- and post-testing of students. One teacher starts her class at 7.30 am for reading and benchmarking activities, which her students join as they progressively arrive. Although it is done on a voluntary basis, it is starting to spread.

Phonics and reading are the basis of learning in these early years where students with limited English need to develop the language to succeed. Students who are falling behind are referred to the learning improvement teacher who works with them in small groups. Beyond

this, the school uses its teacher aides in the classroom and in taking small groups, and funds additional teachers.

Benchmark achievement in literacy and numeracy is the primary goal and, it was explained, 'if you're a class teacher and can't get your students there, you are expected to ask for help because there's plenty of support'. The school recognised that having established a strong literacy base in the early years, comprehension was weak in Year 3 and after trialling and research, has introduced the commercial 'Cars and Stars' program which already is yielding results.

The school does not particularly favour the use of open-plan classrooms, because the building's acoustics are bad, and students need to focus without distractions. This is especially important for refugees who had disrupted schooling in the past. The school is not opposed to 'innovation' in pedagogy, but rather insists that any innovation that is tried, must build on a strong literacy/numeracy base. Similarly, any initiatives that are introduced, whether from in or out of the school, must fit with the direction and priorities of the school and demonstrate that they add value to what exists.

Layers of support

There is a very strong sense of collegiality which underpins the overall approach. In part this relates to the size of the school which affords a level of 'interaction and tension' that a small school cannot provide. Staff talk about teaching and learning because 'no-one wants to drop the ball or be the weak link ... and people help each other to succeed'. This is modelled by the leadership where the response to someone being in difficulty in class is to throw in extra professional support, often at considerable expense, so the dysfunctional context can be changed. At a broader level, the school constantly draws on the expertise it has or can source to help its teachers improve. It did, for instance, entice back an excellent mathematics teacher who had retired to help raise the overall mathematics capacity of the staff, and consultants are regularly engaged to provide sample lessons for teachers to observe voluntarily.

Strategies like this promote a general culture of sharing and seeking support to 'do the best for all of the kids'.

The school has built a small observation room with a one-way mirror to view model lessons. Teachers are rostered to observe others taking classes there, using a structured observation log to monitor the teacher's behaviours.

The log also provides space for observer comments on: explanations to the students of the purpose of what they are doing; how behaviour is managed; the reasons why a teacher might take 'their foot off the accelerator'; interruptions; and something the observer might copy. The log and associated observations have been used to provide feedback to the teacher observed, and this has been so well received it will now become a permanent feature.

One staff member used the room to have parents observe the class to help them gain a better appreciation of the teacher's approach. This has led to some lessons being observed by teachers and parents, encouraging dialogue between the two.

3.8. Kings Park Primary School: Closing the gap, raising the bar, expanding horizons

The school is explicit about holding high expectations for its 530 students, 80 per cent of whom are from a non-English speaking background (35 per cent Vietnamese), while also providing a caring and secure environment designed to meet their personal and social needs. The overarching premise of the school is that by the time the students leave at the end of Year 6, they should have ‘the ability to access information, utilise skills, and possess values to be independent communicators and lifelong learners’.

The school motto ‘Learn to live’ is prominently displayed at the entrance to the office block, and reinforced by the slogan, ‘closing the gap, raising the bar, expanding horizons’.

Starting with values

The school started its own values program in 1999, aiming to capitalise on an already successful Early Years Literacy program in Prep–2, which it felt was not being followed through well enough into the following grades. The staff agreed on the guiding values to be taught in each class. Professional development was provided on the approach and a range of resources purchased. This led to a consistent, school-wide approach to student welfare, discipline and student management in which teachers develop a set of positive rules for the class that are discussed and negotiated as needed with the students. These rules have clear and common consequences across the school, consistently applied.

It took approximately three years to embed the approach, which is sustained through recruiting and inducting new staff who are in tune with what has become ‘the ethos of the school’.

A kitchen garden program provides important experiential activities for students, especially boys, and is a prominent feature of the physical look of the school.

A strategic approach to change

The school leaders noticed that many of the teachers were using worksheets too often and there was insufficient explicit teaching as a result. Given this, the school decided that all teachers would be ‘recycled back to the Prep–1 group’ with the only negotiable factor being when this occurred. The effect was to ‘start to build a culture of people wanting to change’, with the result that teachers themselves now readily raise in review discussions their desire to have the opportunity to try another grade. It proved to be a successful way ‘to reinvigorate and regenerate staff’.

One teacher was appointed as a literacy coach: modelling lessons, observing others, giving feedback and selecting resources for teachers. The school also has two people providing Reading Recovery and language support, with one position serving as a ‘permanent anchor’ and the other filled by a member of staff on a rotating basis

over time. This means there are many trained teachers in the school, to support individual students and to develop teacher capacity.

The school has employed an information technology technician so teachers are not hampered by problems with computers. ICT leaders work with teams of teachers to integrate ICT into teaching and learning programs, and provide ICT-related professional development, including a voluntary breakfast training session every Friday for teachers seeking to learn particular skills.

When ten interactive whiteboards were introduced, teachers undertook training with their students, which helped overcome the concern that teachers have 'to know everything'. It also demonstrated that the students are an important resource on which the teachers can draw.

This approach is supplemented by a conscious effort by the school leaders 'to keep things manageable for the staff and ensure that what comes from outside integrates with what already is proving successful in the school'. They rework documents on new initiatives to fit 'the Kings Park template'. An initiative such as Performance and Development Culture accreditation, therefore, was eagerly embraced because it gave the opportunity to 'fine tune what we already had'. Staff were able to formally explore 'our own approach and surface some gaps we then had to fill'. Similarly, the VELS was seen as 'a real vindication of the direction the school already was heading, so our transition to it was not very difficult, though it gave us a huge step up in improving our assessment practices'.

Succession planning for all jobs

All teachers, and especially young teachers, are supported to develop their leadership skills by taking on leadership roles, and are encouraged to become 'multi-skilled leaders', not just specialists in one field. Every leader in the school has an understudy who is being trained to step up to the job. This not only enhances individual leadership and job satisfaction, but also ensures that quality leadership and performance is sustained over time.

When digital portfolios were introduced for students in the school, all members of staff were also required to create them, to ensure they learned the technology and documented their professional learning.

The school has its own needs analysis document to assess the knowledge and skills needed for different aspects of the curriculum. Everyone does a self-assessment, and these documents are analysed and fed back to staff to inform the development of professional learning programs and plans for different teams and for the school as a whole. When it comes time for formal reviews with the principal, teachers bring their laptops to show their portfolios and as a means of tracking their own development and growth.

Explicit curriculum, targets and support

The fundamental focus of the school is to ensure, as one leader put it, 'that we get the literacy right'. With this in mind, the school aims to keep its junior classes at or below 22. The Program Aides work within classrooms under the guidance of the class teacher to provide targeted support for all students. The learning environment is well structured,

with a rich array of teaching and learning resources in the school to support explicit teaching.

With the success of the early years program, the school has used inquiry learning for Years 3–6 since leaders undertook professional learning in this area. All staff were trained in the approach, and several school-based experts then initiated an inquiry-based approach which has progressively spread through the school.

The point of the exercise, according to one school leader, was to have:

‘a common model which infuses the use of ICT and which forms the basis of a common language about pedagogy ... We had literacy and numeracy in place, with explicit teaching and the necessary blocks, and then wanted to wrap the rest of the curriculum in a do-able, more structured, engaging model with explicit teaching of skills and learning tools’.

This quite explicit teaching approach is backed by a comprehensive assessment regime that sees every student assessed for literacy on entering school, because ‘literacy is the gateway’. Prep students are assessed before they arrive using a combination of interview, meeting the parents and a school-devised test so that all ‘at-risk’ students (defined as the bottom 20 per cent) are identified and an individual learning plan is developed for each one.

The school moderates assessment. There are at least three classes at each grade level in the school which means a critical mass of different students’ work can be gathered for teachers to moderate. From this, the school has been able to establish its own annotated work samples which are consolidated into books available to teachers in the different grades. These also inform team planning and each team develops an annual, term and then shorter work program for literacy, numeracy and inquiry that are maintained online. These plans follow a consistent format which contributes to a consistent Prep–6 whole-school approach, and teachers do not need to learn completely new things when their rotation to another grade level occurs.

With consistency of this sort, it was explained,

‘any teacher can locate their kids against the VELs beyond more than just one level’.

This creates the conditions for explicit learning targets to be set. The school always has used and analysed data effectively, but what is new is the setting of achievable team targets for student learning with reference to statewide standards.

With assessment, teachers looked to literacy in the early years. There ‘assessment is used to guide teaching’ and they found that numeracy needed the same sort of approach. Thus they sourced a consistent commercial assessment tool which they backed with substantial resources to guide the planning undertaken by teams. By using the tests at the beginning, middle and end of the year, teams are able to see growth. This has led to new conversations among teachers about numeracy. They now group students in different ways related to identified needs and use the data to determine what they should be doing with these groups, and when.

3.9. Springvale South Primary School: In relentless pursuit of excellence

With 80 per cent of its intake of just over 220 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – primarily Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian plus a slowly growing group of Sudanese refugees – the school has decided to use the ESL, welfare and language support funding it receives to reduce class sizes and employ more staff. This, together with locally-raised funds, has meant that class sizes vary from 16 to 21 and enable more one-to-one interaction with students. It then is supplemented by the efforts the school makes to extend the limited range of opportunities and experiences the students have outside of school, with participation in the music eisteddfods, choir performances and team sports.

Central to a personalised approach are the efforts to help staff accurately identify and meet different needs. The Department's Language Support program has been particularly valuable in this regard. Two teachers were trained in the program and then allocated a number of staff meetings to train other staff so, as one school leader put it, 'we all use the same approach to identify needs and the same language in class'. These two teachers now ensure the program is implemented in classes across the school. The focus is on oral language because of the particular needs of the students and the way in which it contributes to being able to read and write.

A major challenge has been to inculcate new staff to an approach that primarily focuses on differentiation, so individual needs can be met. To this end it has avoided appointing learning coordinators, and instead has used its expert teachers in each of the defined areas of the school (Prep, Years 1–2, 3–4, and 5–6). As a result, there is an expert who can help look after the new graduates whilst also taking responsibility for ensuring that teachers in the area, 'teach to the best of their ability'.

One contextual factor that is increasingly impacting on the school is its participation in a major local regeneration project aimed at consolidating five primary schools into three. The focus is to ensure that any new buildings come with 'teachers who can deliver curriculum in new ways that meet student needs'. This has generated substantial discussion among the school staff and parents about such approaches as cooperative learning and the ways in which facilities will need to be designed with this in mind. The aim, to use one leader's words, is to ensure 'that the pedagogy drives the change in facilities because buildings in themselves won't change a thing'.

Lifting the bar

The fundamental principle driving the school's leaders in particular is that students at Springvale South can learn and the expectations of them have to be raised. This is relentlessly pursued under the banner of creating classrooms where you would put your own children to learn.

'If I don't want my child in a classroom, I can't expect parents to put their kids in that class. So I have to help the teacher improve to the point where I do want to put my kids there.'

This has sometimes caused discomfort in the school as conversations are held about expectations and the degree of challenge a teacher imparts. Tension is eased by the focus on positive aspects of the

teacher's approach as the basis for discussing where and how they can improve. More recently, these informal interactions have been supplemented by the formal processes of performance review in the middle and end of the year as a part of the process of continuous improvement in the school.

The extensive discussion has resulted in significant improvements. Students are increasingly being involved through goal setting and regular review of their performance against the goals, as the basis for stretching themselves further.

Leading from the front

The principal class plays a particularly active role in driving improvement in this school. Despite the pressure of various management tasks, they clearly view themselves as educational leaders and display this to staff by, to use their own words, 'regularly asking questions, lifting the bar for expectations, backing other leaders up and making people accountable'. They are relentless in the task, which increasingly is appreciated throughout the school.

The primary vehicle through which the principal class members work is the leadership team, including four expert teachers, which discusses expectations and pedagogy 'all of the time'. Initially curriculum was the focus to ensure that their integrated approach was sufficiently comprehensive and, even more importantly, had sufficient emphasis on literacy and numeracy as the foundation for all future student success. Now that 'polished' curriculum documentation and planners are in place, largely as a result of reviewing their curriculum against the expectations of the VELS, the team is in a position where it can look more closely to what is happening behind the classroom door. The Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) have provided something of an impetus for this with teachers increasingly assessing their practice against the PoLT and considering feedback from students' completed questionnaires to identify their pedagogical strengths and gaps. This has helped the school to focus more clearly on differentiation to meet its varying student needs, supported by the belief that 'every kid can learn, provided we find the right strategies and buttons to push'.

Standards to which all conform

Central to the work of raising expectations and results has been a very strong student welfare and discipline policy based on the notion that 'unless you have kids in class ready to learn, you can't get good outcomes'. This involved developing a whole school approach, rather than teachers working differently as before, using five school rules that everybody knows: be in the right place at the right time; treat everyone with courtesy; work and play in a safe, cooperative manner; listen to and follow all reasonable instructions; and treat the property of the school and others with respect. These rules, which are prominently displayed throughout the school, are positively reinforced and there are clear consequences if they are infringed. What is more important still is that they are consistently and fairly applied and the students know this will be the case. Getting such consistency, it is acknowledged, did not just happen, and required substantial consultation, involvement, time and refinement as required. New teachers are inducted to help consolidate the approach and the school is finding it is working well, especially for newly arrived students from ESL training who often require more structure in their lives.

The overall approach, which is supplemented by an emphasis on 'Stop, Think, Do' as a process for students to use, includes 'reward times' through the year where positive behaviours are recognised and rewarded in affordable ways that students enjoy, such as games sessions, teddy bear picnics and swimming afternoons. February is considered a time for building relationships, so meetings and other extraneous demands are limited as much as possible, and teachers can focus on developing their relations with their class.

A range of other programs and activities then help cement the approach, such as buddy programs between grades to enable students of different ages to do activities together and specific targeted programs like 'bullying and teasing'. The school particularly promotes values and values-based behaviour and has established a prominent and striking 'helping hands tree', where students who are voted by their peers as having done something positive in relation to the school's value of the fortnight can paste a cut-out of their hand.

Consistent with their expectation that students are ready to learn, the school also emphasises regular attendance at school. An 'it's not OK to be away' section of the newsletter, for instance, documents absences by grade level and encourages competition to be the grade with the fewest students away. Absences are rigorously followed up and classroom teachers increasingly are taking responsibility for ensuring that any necessary calls to parents are made.

Setting rigorous targets

A key message for teachers is that 'they have to make a difference to kids', and the school's leaders check work programs, visit classes and address curriculum at staff meetings to ensure this is the case. At a more formal level, literacy and numeracy targets are built into individual performance plans, which include goals that are aligned to the goals of the school. When it comes to performance review, teachers are expected to present evidence of achievement in relation to their goals and targets, backed up by the leadership observations in class and the comments of expert teachers who have had time allocated to meet with others in a mentoring role.

Targets are the centrepiece of the effort to progressively raise the bar in the school, and transcend any view that 'you can't expect more of these kids'.

The targets are based on where the kids are, as determined by pre-testing, and what they ought to achieve over the course of the year. Although this proved challenging at first, people are warming to the approach, especially as they share more of their work and increasingly embrace the common expectation that 'good enough is not good enough'. As a result, the evidence teachers are presenting in their reviews is becoming more specific, not only about the approaches they use, but also why they have chosen that path.

Through processes of this sort, the school has also become more rigorous about its approach to student work, as evidenced by the handling of homework through the school. Consultations with parents revealed mixed responses. Teachers therefore developed a policy whereby homework would be optional for students in P-2, when all have reading and tables to do, and optional for students in Years 3-6. Parents and students make the decision, and then sign a contract committing the parents to supervise and ensure that the homework is done. About 90 per cent of students opted in, and the homework

comprises open-ended activities to be completed each week. Teachers consistently provide feedback on the work received, since the activities link to other teaching tasks rather than being isolated from what happens in the class.

Building capacity

The Department's Language Support program and associated professional development has proved especially useful to the school in making a difference to the pedagogy that is used. Particularly valuable was the way in which targeted students (identified through testing) work with the teacher to set goals and then, having pursued these for some time, are tested again so a new and more challenging goal can be set. This sort of approach has been supplemented by a range of highly targeted professional development programs aimed at building teacher capacity, such as a whole-school spelling program which developed teachers' understanding of key concepts that they had been previously assumed to know.

Expert teacher mentors are released to model for new teachers and a consultant was engaged to model comprehension strategies for groups of teachers.

In 2009 the same will occur for writing and mathematics as all teachers take responsibility for progressively improving the school's national test results, not just leaving it to teachers in Year 3 and Year 5.

One tactic to reinforce pedagogical change was to reduce the allocation for photocopying in the school. This has reduced the reliance on worksheets and helped teachers shift to a broader repertoire of teaching techniques matched to the needs of different students. It builds on professional development in mathematics that introduced open-ended problem solving as an alternative to the worksheet approach. The outcome, according to leaders in the school, is that 'people are doing better things in class'. There is greater understanding of different students' needs, and acceptance that, 'if you are to treat kids fairly, you have to treat them differently'. It is reinforced by a focus on assessment for learning so there are 'more authentic tasks and increased self assessment by the kids'.

3.10. St Albans Meadows Primary School: Making a difference for every child

St Albans Meadows Primary School was established in 1980 in an area somewhat isolated by a ring road and dominated by a housing estate. The majority of its approximately 340 students are drawn from the estate. About 80 per cent are from non-English-speaking backgrounds and 35 per cent of these are of Vietnamese descent.

All classrooms have data projectors and some have interactive whiteboards. All students in Years 5 and 6 have their own take-home laptop computer and the school is investigating the use of iPod Touch technology in Year 2.

Visitors to the website can view 'KidTube' movies made by groups of students – from scripting and story boarding through to shooting and editing of the final product – and listen to episodes of SAM radio that students have produced as part of their literacy work in the school.

Good people

When asked why the school gets such good student achievement results, its leaders respond that it comes down to having the right people in place. As one said, 'you start with good human beings and ensure they have the right attitude for working with children'.

With this perspective in mind, the journey of improvement on which the school embarked a decade or more ago started with developing an ethos which, put simply, is encompassed in their motto, 'SAM Cares'. The principal class in the school, who have all been there for a considerable time, then set about building a leadership and staff team that was philosophically attuned to this approach. This involved 'getting like minded people with vision and passion and growing the staff that we had'. This was supplemented by professional development aimed at building teachers' leadership skills, since 'everyone at St Albans Meadows has a leadership role'.

Opinions are valued in the school. This, the same teacher observed, 'stems from the leadership and is helped by the existence of clear processes that 'we all know and consistently follow'. Feedback is welcomed because 'it's not a criticism, it's a help'.

It is generally assumed that everyone wants to do something extra to improve the school and they should be encouraged and supported to do so. One teacher established a Vietnamese Homework Club, where she put an hour a week 'of her own time' to help keen students without the supports at home to learn how to manage and complete the homework they are set. This now runs with the support of a Vietnamese teacher's aide and other teachers. Similarly, an Early Bird Readers program has been established for students who do not read at home and who come early to school to read together with students from Year 6. Performing arts and sports opportunities are provided on the same basis, consistent with the shared commitment to 'SAM Cares'.

Not surprisingly, given these beliefs, the school puts all of its special needs and discretionary money into people, and to a lesser extent facilities in which they then can work, to ensure the students have the

range of programs and support that they need. It is a people-intensive environment that includes a substantial number of teacher aides, all of whom are trained up at the school to better do their jobs. This could not occur without the equity funding the school receives, and once it does come the school makes sure, as one leader observed, 'that every funded child is well looked after and then there's enough in how we structure our programs to extend out to other children as well'.

Knowing their students

With the right people in place, the school ensures that they all know their students well. This reflects the leaders' firmly-held view that 'we are going to make a difference here'. It started some years ago when the principal worked with a guidance officer to clarify each student's actual needs, in part to gain appropriate funding for particular students, but also to ensure the development of appropriate programs of support. These include interventions for students falling behind, and a high-end literature program for high achievers in the school. A range of assessments are in place.

The basic question tends to be 'why is this child achieving/not achieving and what do we have to do to extend/support them?'

The school then created a comprehensive data base on every student in the school, to ensure they all are well known, and that there is something that addresses their needs. It starts with a basic screening program aimed at determining what the students know and what they need to know, and is symbolically reinforced by the fact the principal ensures he knows every child in the school and gives each of them a special pencil on their birthday.

The school seeks to get to know the students before they start, visiting feeder kindergartens to meet prospective students and inviting them to a six-week induction program that includes activities to determine their readiness for school and identify early intervention needs. Having good diagnostic information of this sort has helped slot students into appropriate programs and support. The statewide test results are also used as part of the diagnostic suite and the school looks at the outcomes for every student in Years 3 and 5 to signal students in need of targeted support, such as an oral language program the school has developed itself.

This program is aimed at students identified through the Record of Oral Language test, and engages around eight students at a time in a series of activities led by two teachers working in a dedicated Oral Language Room. It generally starts with a whole-group input session related to the topics under investigation in their class, before undertaking separate small group activities aimed at getting students talking and developing their oral language skills and then finishing with some whole group sharing time. One of the teachers involved described it as 'an experiential, developmentally-focused approach which provides the students with the structure they need'. Regular assessment is used to determine when students can be 'weaned off' the program, though they also can return to it should their subsequent classroom assessment indicate this is required. It is a program which reflects the general feeling in the school that there is a range of ways in which students' needs can be met, and the school ensures that, as one leader put it, 'no child is left out'. The extensive data base is used to monitor student achievement and the programs offered by the

school determine 'who goes into what program so that everyone's needs are met'.

Growing the staff

Just as staff are expected to know their students well, so too the leadership seeks to know the staff and, in particular, what they can do as the basis for ensuring the school finds the best possible fit. This has been helped by the capacity to select their own staff who are going to fit the direction they want to head, but the school still needs, to use the words of one leader, 'to grow our own people in terms of the vision we have for this school'.

The leadership team, comprising the principal class and leading teachers, is a key driving force, and part of their responsibility is to train the people they lead. Team leaders specifically are encouraged, as one member explained, 'to not be frightened of empowering the team ... (because) you know your job is done when others can take it over'. This clearly is part of the succession planning in the school.

Everyone in the school has an individual performance plan that is negotiated with their team leaders, whose own plans are in turn determined in consultation with the principal. These plans all essentially seek to address the three questions, 'where do you want to go, how do you get there and what can we do to help?'

The plans are designed to open teaching practice to scrutiny and the feedback of peers. This occurs secure in the knowledge that, as one leader observed, 'mistakes are OK in this school, provided they're acknowledged and not denied, and an attempt is made to fix and learn from them'.

Video-taping of lessons is a powerful tool to supplement informal classroom observations. Teachers are filmed and videos discussed to help each other improve. The approach has been strengthened by using video as part of the peer coaching component of the Catalyst program.

Sitting behind this and other professional learning strategies is a belief 'that teachers have to know their craft'. Thus, they also are mentored and given strategies to be good teachers in class. They are buddied with others to have good role models, and their plans are examined and discussed to determine where they can grow consistent with the school vision and direction to ensure 'we are all on the same page'.

Using ICT to support change

The school is part of the Catalyst program to change teacher practice through ICT. This reflects its focus on using ICT to drive pedagogical change.

Every student in Years 5 and 6 has a laptop that the school leases, for which they pay only a minimal fee, and which they take home for their ongoing homework and research. Students are being empowered by this in the same way the school seeks to empower its staff. This is evident in the school-grown 'ilearn ulearn' program whereby the students are teaching school support officers to use the Apple Macintosh computers to improve their own work. This is supplemented by voluntary lunchtime sessions that students run for their peers on skills they want to learn, and these are videoed for future reference and a record of the event.

All senior students have comprehensive e-portfolios which they use to keep and present their work. These are displayed, using interactive whiteboards, as the basis for student-led conferences, which are very popular with parents and are generating a more thoughtful approach to student self-assessment.

The school intranet includes all of the e-portfolios for teachers to view and use for assessment purposes on an ongoing basis through the year. Importantly, in terms of the ongoing efforts to grow the capacity of staff, the intranet includes links to websites to build resources for teachers to use in literacy and mathematics, audio-books, graduation movies the students have made, book-marked websites using the del.icio.us social bookmarking tool, and units of work including rubrics and assessment tools for teachers to use. All of the units are written in a similar way based around an inquiry model of teaching and learning.

This focus on ICT reflects the school's objective 'to personalise student learning more'. We are, according to one Year 5-6 teacher, in an age where access to knowledge has greatly increased, and 'we need to give students the power to find out what they need or want to find out'. ICT provides teachers with 'the ability to personalise learning more while pursuing the common projects the students undertake'.

This doesn't, of course, negate the importance the school already accords to good teaching and learning in class. Rather it means that when units are planned, and good teaching and learning practices have been taken into account, a conscious effort is made to look at the technology and how it fits in. In other words, according to this key teacher in the school, 'we don't start with the technology, but we do recognise that we have a digital environment and so we put more emphasis on how we can use ICT to help. We're not looking for reasons to use ICT, but it tends to jump out at us'.

This is supplemented with substantial support, consistent with the general approach of the school that, as one leader put it, 'everyone is at a different stage of the journey but they are on the same path, and we have to take and develop them from where they are at to where they need to go'.

3.11. Albion North Primary School: Building a positive tone for learning

This school of around 220 students embarked on a process of cultural change several years ago, centring on active student participation as encompassed in its motto, 'Learn by doing'.

Following a building program, the new rooms in the school are much larger, enabling more creative ways of grouping students to learn. The school has added interactive whiteboards to these new facilities to strengthen the shift to a more engaging and participatory teaching and learning approach, along with a 'thinking curriculum' approach underpinned by Art Costa's Habits of Mind.

The improved facilities were supported by 'a very careful approach' to staff selection when opportunities arose; with a particular focus on ICT-savvy graduates and teachers who helped raise the level of ICT confidence and teaching repertoire in the school. At the same time, the school consciously used its student achievement data, including the statewide test results, to raise the expectations the teachers held for their students, predominantly from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

'We receive a lot of equity funding', one leader observed, 'and should do more with it than just match a like group of schools'. With this in mind, the school now compares itself to overall state levels at the very least.

Resilience and consistency in the school

Changing the culture of the school began by tackling a perceived lack of discipline structure and changing the student management approach. This reflected a strong leadership belief that 'when you create order and structure, people spend more time on teaching and learning, and if you have dysfunctional classrooms, teaching suffers as a result'.

Over the past decade, the school has developed a systematic and consistent approach to student welfare and discipline, and has recently adopted the formal Solving the Jigsaw approach. This centres on the full welfare program called Name It, and is reinforced by the Welfare Officer.

The implementation of this welfare and discipline program is not only evident in the high level of order observed in classrooms and the school, and the better teaching and learning that flows from that, but also in very positive student opinion results. Since Name It started in the school, the results on the Student Attitudes to School survey have improved.

Top down support

Support from the top has been crucial in helping to transform the school. This support, which includes substantial professional development related to school and individual needs, along with working together in teams, is designed to ensure that teachers are 'empowered' to do their jobs. The prevailing ethos within the leadership team is that 'you give people their roles and then you support them to run with it'. Professional learning teams are carefully structured to ensure a balance of experience and inexperience, and a spread of expertise. Teams meet regularly, have adequate budgets to sustain their work, and develop team action plans signed off by the principal.

The teams are timetabled together for one and a half hours per week; a morning for each team at the end of the term; and a full day during the year to develop their plans. It is expected that these will align to the school's overall strategic and annual implementation plans which encompass the broader vision for the school. The principal class members sit in on team meetings, 'not as spies, but as participants to make sure that the bigger picture is understood'.

The school also operates a strong mentoring program which sees teachers placed with 'critical friends' rather than just friends.

Every member of staff is in a mentoring relationship, while the leaders have mentors from outside the school. This, according to one school leader, 'helps with succession planning and is a terrific way for people with expertise to help others to develop'.

Data are 'strongly and overtly' used to support planning and teaching in the school. It is regularly discussed and dissected by all staff.

A strong literacy focus

Literacy has a particularly high priority in the school. Initially the Early Years Literacy program provided the basis, especially in the first three years of school. This was aided by Reading Recovery as an intervention for students at risk of falling behind. Given this, the teachers employed since have always been people who follow the early years structure and approach.

Two retired teachers work part-time with targeted students. Working with up to six students in withdrawal settings during literacy block time these teachers have, according to leaders in the school, 'made a huge difference in bringing up the tail'. The literacy support program teacher is rostered in to the junior area of the school from 9 to 11 am, so that any group will have two or even three adults in the room.

With around 60–70 per cent Vietnamese and a further 10 per cent Sudanese students in its intake, the school finds a significant proportion of students arrive without the language base or maturity level to launch straight into the early years program in Prep. Many have not attended kindergarten. Thus, the first term or so is commonly spent getting them ready for learning in school.

The strong focus on literacy and to a slightly lesser extent, mathematics, is supported by in-house professional development conducted every Monday afternoon to enable teachers to share practice. A roster is prepared to ensure that everyone presents over the course of the year which, according to one school leader, 'helps contribute to a feeling of worth, since we all have something to offer'.

This coordinated professional development approach is supplemented by a 'staff expertise list' completed by all members of staff. Comprising what one leader referred to as 'a basic list of strengths' which are discussed between teachers and a member of the principal class, it helps inform the allocation of responsibilities in the school and guides individual teachers who are looking for support.

Using and developing local expertise

The school attaches great importance to both knowing and using the range of expertise it already has. This, together with the rostered Monday professional development sessions, has helped to strengthen role clarity in the school. Some years ago, it was suggested, the school found that 'too few were doing too much'. It therefore sought to ensure

that every job was documented and all expertise was known, so the leaders could target particular teachers to take on defined, negotiated roles, while others went to volunteers. The result was, as one leader explained, 'that everything evened out, which improved staff morale, and there was greater clarity in the school as well'.

The sense of order that now prevails in the school also is credited with helping to sustain 'high quality planning in the classroom', which has been strengthened by the recent introduction of the Naming It approach. Staff are able to focus on what matters most, rather than worrying about the sorts of student management issues that used to occupy them in the past.

Teachers are not only willing to change as needed, but actively seek change themselves. Recently, concern has arisen from teachers' own evaluations regarding vocabulary performance in the school, leading them to look at programs to raise the level of spelling.

ICT is an area the school has specifically targeted for developing teacher expertise. Having recruited staff who can help in this regard, it has rostered one expert teacher for the first half hour of each day to resolve any technical difficulties that emerge.

'If we relieve teachers of the feeling they have to be technical experts, they can concentrate more on teaching and learning and how ICT can be used for that.'

Thus, everyone in the school now is doing professional development on the use of interactive whiteboards so they know 'how to use them as intended rather than just as another form of overheads'. Teachers are being mentored on using ICT, and all the documents that arise from their planning individually and in teams are starting to be stored on the school's intranet so the culture of sharing is reinforced.

3.12. International comparisons

While substantial research has been undertaken into the qualities and characteristics of effective schools, rather less has focused on those schools with low socio-economic intakes that perform better than schools with which they reasonably can be compared. However, two studies of secondary schools, one from the UK and another from the US, are worth considering.

The US study looked at five urban Californian high schools that have 'beaten the odds in supporting the success of low income students of colour' (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2007). Each of these schools is non-selective in its admission, yet still has graduation and college-entry rates significantly higher than the state average. All of them send 80 to 100 per cent of their students to higher education, which is a rate more than twice the state average for the kind of students they serve.

While each of the five schools is unique and operates in quite different ways, all have three design features in common, which resonate with the findings from the eight Victorian schools and are summarised as:

Personalisation

This includes measures such as constructing small learning environments; fostering continuous, long-term relationships between adults and students; and creating advisory systems that systematically organise counselling, academic supports and family connections. Teachers also teach fewer students for longer blocks of time, so they know their students better and are more able to tailor activities to their needs, strengths, experiences and interests.

Rigorous and relevant instruction

Each of the five US schools has designed a rigorous, coherent instructional program that enables all students to overcome barriers often associated with race, poverty, language, or initially low academic skill. All of the schools set high expectations, link performance assessments to clear standards, and teach intellectual and research skills in the context of rigorous coursework that has been made relevant through its application to 'real-world' problems. Most of the schools require portfolios for graduation which typically include students' exemplary work across domains and they often present their research to a 'jury' of teachers, parents, peers, and reviewers from outside the school.

Professional learning and collaboration

All five US schools allocate considerable time for teachers to collaborate, design curriculum and instruction and learn from one another. This includes extensive summer learning opportunities and retreats to consider evidence of student learning and to plan and organise instruction, advisory practices and student supports. Research and data are important. Teachers meet regularly in year level teams, and the schools have venues for examining student progress, creating a more coherent curriculum, and enabling teachers to learn from each other.

These three common features are underpinned by the presence of well-prepared principals who are strong instructional leaders.

In the UK, 12 schools were chosen to exemplify how some schools, serving very disadvantaged communities, have managed to raise the

hopes and aspirations, as well as the achievements, of their young people (Ofsted, 2009). The report is in three sections: achieving excellence, sustaining excellence and sharing excellence, and the findings are summarised below. In many ways, the conclusions reflect the findings of the DEECD research, and point to current developments in Victoria.

Achieving excellence

Having vision, values and high expectations
Attracting, recruiting and developing staff
Establishing disciplined learning and consistent staff behaviour
Assuring the quality of teaching and learning
Leading, and building leadership capacity
Providing a relevant and attractive curriculum
Assessment, progress-tracking and target-setting
Inclusion: student as individuals

Sustaining excellence

Continuity of leadership
Maintaining a strong team culture
Continually developing teaching and learning
Developing leaders
Enriching the curriculum
Improving literacy
Building relationships with students, parents and the community
No student left behind

Sharing excellence

System leadership
Partnering another school facing difficulties and improving it
Acting as community leader to broker relationships across other schools
Developing and leading a successful school, improvement partnership
Working as a change agent or expert leader: National Leaders of Education
(Ofsted, 2009, p. 9)

4. Conclusions

The reports published here, based on recent empirical research in Victorian government schools, describe the most frequently observed and reported behaviours of improving and high-performing schools. Some of these are achieving great success in spite of the socio-economic disadvantage of many of their students. They consistently report that effective leadership underpins all other behaviours and strategies that account for their success. While answering the first big question: – which behaviours drive success? – they also show that the behaviours described in these reports must be considered in relation to each other, rather than as separate.

Transferability, the focus of the second big question, occurs when other schools can implement similar behaviours successfully. The behaviours described here are familiar, and certainly not out of reach for Victorian government schools. It is the selection, combination and then intense, quality implementation of improvement strategies and how they are attended to, day in and day out, that has delivered improvement in Victorian government schools.

The third question concerns where to start. The research indicates that a whole-school approach, supported by structures of leadership and organisation, is likely to result in school improvement and school effectiveness. While the focus may be on different behaviours at different times, school leaders see the connections and report that improving particular practices is likely to have a positive effect on other practices.

An important aspect of school improvement is collaboration within and between schools, so it will be important to share knowledge between schools and across networks. In particular, the evidence that sharing excellence is associated with high performance in the UK (Ofsted, 2009), supports the expectations of the regional network model, where schools cooperate to improve both themselves and each other. In this way, Victorian schools can look forward to continuing improvement in a supportive environment.

Appendix: How the schools were selected

How the schools in these reports were selected

This program of research commenced with Phase 1, which included seventeen Victorian primary and nine Victorian secondary schools that had demonstrated sustained improvement in student outcomes from 1996 to 2006. In the case of primary schools, improvement was defined as an increase in mean Year 5 Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) test scores for reading, writing, spelling and numeracy. In the case of secondary schools, it was improvement in the mean VCE study scores, taking into account any changes in real retention.

Primary and secondary school improvement was also assessed taking some account of Student Family Occupation (SFO) index and the proportion of students receiving the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to ensure that improvement in student test scores was not due to changing student demographics in school feeder areas. Primary schools included in the study sample were also required to have consistent high AIM participation, to eliminate schools that had elevated results by selectively discouraging weaker students from participating in AIM tests.

In Phases 2 and 3, (reported in section 2 of this publication) the research team considered a range of data to select participating schools.

One set of analyses focused on the sample of secondary schools and several student outcomes including retention to Year 12, VCE achievement, Year 9 AIM and student absences. Student retention is a measure of 'real retention' (rather than 'apparent retention') from Year 7 to Year 12, based on annual census data. VCE achievement is based on the mean study scores for VCE students across all units of study. The data on VCE achievement, retention and absences were based on results over a four-year period (2004–07) as well as for the final year (2007). The data on Year 9 AIM were for 2006 and 2007.

The analyses were undertaken using regression models in which various intake and other attributes were included to permit analyses of residual variance, after controlling for school population differences. They examine the extent to which a school's achievement is better than predicted based on the background characteristics of its students. This identified schools that can be considered to be producing gains, or adding value. Standardised residuals were generated and saved to identify schools performing above, below or at predicted performance levels given their intake.

The control variables included in each regression were:

- mean Year 7 AIM achievement (for all analyses apart from VCE achievement)
- mean SES (SFO)
- school size (enrolments)
- percentage of students at the school receiving PSD (disability) funds
- region: rural or urban location.

Another set of analyses was conducted with the sample of primary schools and examined Year 5 AIM, Year 3 AIM, VELS and absences.

The data on achievement were based on results over a four-year period (2004–07) as well as separately for the final year (2007). The results were derived from regression models in which various intake and other attributes were included to help identify schools that are doing better than expected.

The control variables included in each regression were:

- Year 3 Aim achievement (for the Year 5 AIM analyses)
- mean SES (SFO)
- school size (enrolments)
- percentage of students at the school receiving PSD (disability) funds
- region: rural or urban location.

Phase 2 was a control study that compared improving, stable and declining schools. This study confirmed that 16 behaviours were important in schools that were both high performing and improving.

Phase 3 included a sample containing seventeen schools — nine primary and eight secondary — identified as both high performing in terms of their intake, and improving. Site visits and interviews were undertaken in these schools to confirm the behaviours and describe them more fully.

In the case of the eight schools described in the second report, schools were selected because, despite their high SFO index, the schools have positive staff views of student motivation and behaviour and positive AIM outcomes relative to what could be expected given their SFO status. This accords with previous findings that, aside from socio economic status (SFO):

- staff perceptions of student behaviour and motivation have a high correlation with learning outcomes; and
- sustained high performance is anchored in an effective organisational climate, backed by a supportive leadership culture and ultimately underpinned by quality principal leadership.

Each school was visited to observe activity, interview staff and collect documents and school-generated data. These make up the basis of this report.

References

- Audas, R. & Willms, J.D. 2001, 'Engagement and Dropping Out of School: A Life-Course Perspective'. Paper published by Human Resources Development Canada. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsd/prc/publications/research/2001-000175/SP-483-01-02E.pdf>
- Barth, P., Haycock, K., Jackson, H., Mora, K., Ruiz, P., Robinsons, S. & Wilkins, A. 1999, *Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations*. Washington, D.C.: Education Trust. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/77/61.pdf
- Bryk, A., Thum, Y.M., Easton, J. & Luppescu, S. 1998, 'Assessing School Academic Productivity: The Case of Chicago School Reform', *Social Psychology of Education*, vol 2, pp 103–142. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from <https://www.msu.edu/~thum/Papers/BrykThumSPOE1998.pdf>
- Clemson-Ingram, R. & Fessler, R. 1997, 'Innovative Programs for Teacher Leadership', *Action in Teacher Education*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 95–106.
- Costa, A.L. & Kallick, B. 2000, *Discovering and Exploring: Habits of Mind*. Alexandria: ASCD.
- Covey, S. 1989, *The seven habits of highly successful people*. Rockefeller Center, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster.
- Darling-Hammond, L. 1997, *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching*. N.Y.: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.nctaf.org/documents/DoingWhatMattersMost.pdf
- 2000, 'Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence', *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 8, no. 1, Retrieved 20 April 2009 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1/>
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Friedlaender, D. 2007, *High Schools for Equity: Policy Supports for Student Learning in Communities of Color* Stanford, CA: School Redesign Network at Stanford University. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from http://srnleads.org/resources/publications/pdf/hsfe/hsfe_report.pdf
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., Penlington, C., Mehta, P. & Kington, A. 2007, *The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes. Interim Report*. Research Report No DCSF-RRO18. Nottingham, National College for School Leadership, Department for Children, Schools and Families. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=15339&resultspage=1
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008a, *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, Melbourne, Victoria: DEECD. www.education.vic.gov.au
- 2008b, *New School Ties: Networks for Success*. Paper No. 15, Office for Policy, Research and Innovation, Melbourne, Victoria: DEECD. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/new-school-ties-report.pdf

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008, *Family School Partnerships Framework*, Canberra: DEEWR. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/Family_School_Partnerships_Framework.htm
- Dickinson, D. & Neuman, S. 2006, *Handbook of early literacy research*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Dolejs, C. 2006, *Report on Key Practices and Policies of Consistently Higher Performing High Schools*. NHSC, Washington. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.betterhighschools.org/docs/ReportOfKeyPracticesandPolicies_10-31-06.pdf
- DuFour, R. & Burnette, B. 2002, 'Pull out negativity by its roots', *Journal of Staff Development*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 27–30. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.nsd.org/news/jsd/burnette233.cfm
- Elmore, R. 2000, *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/building.pdf
- Emmerson, K.F., Paterson, Southworth, G., & West-Burnham, J. 2004, *Making a difference. A study of effective middle leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances*. Nottingham, National College of School Leadership. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.ncsl.org.uk/media-7ab-8a-research-mad-exec-summary.pdf
- Epstein, J.L. & Sheldon, S.B. 2002, 'Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement', *The Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 95, no. 5.
- Field, S., Kuczera, M. & Pont, B. 2007, *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*. Paris: OECD.
- Fraser, D. & Petch, J. 2003, *School Improvement: A Theory of Action*. Melbourne, Victoria: Department of Education.
- Gehrke, N. 1991 'Developing Teacher Leadership Skills', *ERIC*. www.eduref.org
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A. 2002, *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.
- Goodlad, J., Mantle-Bromley, C. & Goodlad, S. 2004, *Education for everyone: Agenda for education in democracy*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Gutman, L. & Akerman, R. 2008, *Determinants of aspirations*. Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No 27. London, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.learningbenefits.net/Publications/ResReps/ResRep27.pdf
- Harris, A., Chapman, C., Muijs, D., Russ, J. & Stoll, L. 2006, 'Improving schools in challenging contexts: Exploring the possible', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 409–424.
- Hattie, J. 2003, 'Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?', Presentation to the Australian Council of Educational Research's annual research conference, ACER, Melbourne. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.acer.edu.au/documents/Hattie_TeachersMakeADifference.pdf

- Henchey, N. 2001, *Schools that Make a Difference: Final Report*. Kelowna, British Columbia: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. ERIC document 467 058. Retrieved 20 April 2009 from www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED467058
- Hopkins, D. 2001, *School Improvement for Real*. London: Falmer Press.
- Jeynes, H. 2007, 'The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis', *Urban Education*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 82–110.
- Kjaer, W.P., Abrahamson, P., et al. 2003, *Local partnerships in Europe. An action research project*. Copenhagen: The Copenhagen Centre. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.copenhagencentre.org/localintro.pdf
- Kirkup, C., Sizmur, J., Sturman, L. & Lewis, K. 2005, *Schools' use of data in teaching and learning*. DfES Research Report no. 671. London: DfES. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR671.pdf
- Lamb, S. 2007, *Student Resource Package Three Year Rolling Benchmark Review — Victorian Government Schools*. Report prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
- Lein, L., Johnson, J.F. & Ragland, M. 1996, *Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs: Research Study Results*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, The Charles A. Dana Center. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.utdanacenter.org/downloads/products/successfulreport.pdf
- Little, J.W. 1982, 'Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success', *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 325–340.
- Locke, E. 1996, 'Motivation through conscious goal setting', *Applied & Preventive Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 117–124.
- Marzano, R.J. 2003, *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Montgomery, A., Rossi, R., Legters, N., McDill, E., McPartland, J. & Stringfield, S. 1993, *Educational Reforms and Students Placed At Risk: A Review of the Current State of the Art*. Washington: US Department of Education, OERI. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.ed.gov/pubs/EdReformStudies/EdReforms/index.html
- Muijs, D. & Harris, A. 2003, 'Teacher Leadership: improvement through empowerment? An overview of research.', *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 437–448.
- Muijs, D., Harris, A., Chapman, C., Stoll, L. & Russ, J. 2004, 'Improving schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas – a review of research evidence', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 149–175.
- National Research Council & the Institute of Medicine 2004, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation To Learn. Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn*. Board on Children, Youth, and Families,

- Division of Behavioral and Social Science and Education.
Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Neild, R. & Farley-Ripple, E. 2008, 'Within-School Variation in Teacher Quality: The Case of Ninth Grade', *American Journal of Education*, vol. 114, no. 3, pp. 271–305. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/5/2/8/pages105284/p105284-2.php
- OECD 2001, *Local Partnerships for Better Governance*, Paris, OECD.
—2008, *Improving School Leadership*, Paris, OECD.
- Ofsted 2008, *Sustaining Improvement: The Journey from Special Measures*, London: Ofsted. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from [www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/1321/9657/file/Sustainingper cent20improvementper cent20theper cent20journeyper cent20fromper cent20specialper cent20measuresper cent20PDFper cent20format\).pdf](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/content/download/1321/9657/file/Sustainingper cent20improvementper cent20theper cent20journeyper cent20fromper cent20specialper cent20measuresper cent20PDFper cent20format).pdf)
- 2009, *Twelve outstanding secondary schools - Excelling against the odds*, London: Ofsted. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Twelve-outstanding-secondary-schools-Excelling-against-the-odds>
- Petzko, V.N. 1991, 'School characteristics and attendance rates: What is their relationship?', *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 4.
- Pritchard, I. 1999, 'Reducing Class Size: What Do We Know?' National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum and Assessment, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.ed.gov/pubs/ReducingClass/Class_size.html
- Reynolds, D., Harris, A. & Clarke, P. 2004, 'Challenging the Challenged: Improving Schools in Extremely Challenging Circumstances'. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego California. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.highreliability.co.uk/Downloads/Download.aspx?dID={7D9F70B0-00F9-4C27-9517-FB2AF759B069}
- Rivkin, S.G., Hanushek, E.A. & Kain, J.F. 2005, 'Teachers, schools, and academic achievement', *Econometrica*, vol. 73, no. 2, pp. 417–458.
- Robinson, L. & Keating, J. 2005a, *Networks and governance: the case of LLENs in Victoria*. ARC Linkage Project Occasional Paper no. 3, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/cpell/documents/ARCPaper3.pdf
- 2005b, *Regional education and training networks: lessons from Victoria's LLENs*. ARC Linkage Project Occasional Paper no. 4, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/cpell/projects/ARCPaper4.pdf
- Russell, J., Ainley, M. & Frydenberg, E. 2005, 'Student motivation and engagement', *Schooling Issues Digest*. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/schooling_issues_digest/schooling_issues_digest_motivation_engagement.htm

- Sammons, P., Hillman, L. & Mortimore, P. 1995, *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A Review of School Effectiveness Research*. London: Institute of Education. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/14/49/79.pdf
- Seddon, T. & Billett, S. 2004, *Social partnerships in vocational education: Building community capacity*. Leabrook, NCVER. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr2002.pdf
- Townsend, T. (ed.) 2007, *International Handbook of School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Willms, D. 2003, *Student engagement at school: a sense of belonging and participation*. OECD: Paris. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/42/35/33689437.pdf
- Wright, S.P., Horn, S.P. & Sanders, W.L. 1997, 'Teacher and classroom context effects on student achievement: Implications for teacher evaluation', *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, pp. 57–67.
- Zbar, V., Kimber, R. & Marshall, G. 2009, *Schools that achieve extraordinary success: How some disadvantaged Victorian schools punch above their weight*. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education, Occasional Paper 109.

Glossary

ACER	Australian Council of Educational Research – an independent, non-profit research organisation which creates and disseminates knowledge and tools, to improve learning. www.acer.edu.au
Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM)	Statewide English and mathematics tests for students in Victorian Schools in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. www.vcaa.vic.edu.au
Annual Implementation Plan	As an element of the School Accountability and Improvement Framework, Annual Implementation Plans describe how the key improvement strategies in the school strategic plan and other significant projects will be put into operation in each of the four years of the strategic plan. www.education.vic.gov.au
Beacon Foundation	The Beacon Foundation is a not-for-profit charitable trust established in 1988. Its single focus is to address the issue of youth unemployment through developing and implementing original and innovative projects. www.beaconfoundation.net
Building Futures Program	Building Futures is the framework that guides all capital investment in government school infrastructure in Victoria. Building Futures ensures that the educational needs of every student inform the planning and development of school infrastructure. School design must: promote individualised learning; create settings for innovative teaching; incorporate new technology; be environmentally sustainable; and support community involvement. www.education.vic.gov.au
Catalyst	The latest phase of the Microsoft Partners in Learning (PIL) Program with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. www.education.vic.gov.au
Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)	The Education Maintenance Allowance provides assistance to low-income families by helping with the costs associated with the education of their children.
Family-School Partnerships Framework	(Commonwealth Government, 2008) The Australian Government and the Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations has a range of action research projects and pilot programs which underline the benefits for families, schools and communities of developing sustainable partnerships, and show how to go about establishing and sustaining such positive partnerships in practice. www.dest.gov.au
Group Training	GTOs place and manage apprentices and trainees in a range of small and large host businesses

Organisations	which provide on the job training.
International Students Program	A DEECD program where International Students live in home-stay accommodation and study in Victorian Schools. www.education.vic.gov.au
'it's not OK to be away'	A statewide DEECD program which encourages student attendance in Victorian schools. www.education.vic.gov.au
Leading Schools Fund	The Leading Schools Fund, a school transformation and renewal initiative, is a flagship strategy of the Blueprint for Government Schools designed to achieve innovation and transformation at the school level and the transfer of knowledge and new practices laterally across the school system. www.education.vic.gov.au
MIPs	In Victoria, the Managed Individual Pathways initiative ensures that all students 15 years and over in government schools are provided with individual pathway plans with associated support as a means to continued education, training or full-time employment. http://www.education.vic.gov.au
NAPLAN	The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy assesses the literacy and numeracy learning of students in all Australian schools at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. NAPLAN is designed to provide information on student performance across a number of levels of achievement. www.naplan.edu.au
PAT	Progressive Achievement Tests in Mathematics (PAT Mathematics) is designed for use in Australian schools to provide objective, norm-referenced information to teachers about the level of achievement attained by their students in the skills and understanding of mathematics. http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/group/PME
Performance and Development Culture	A DEECD accreditation for schools that recognises that the school culture supports the personal professional growth of staff and contributes to the capacity of the school to continuously improve student learning outcomes. An accredited school has very good processes for developing and managing staff. The school culture is open to personal growth, continuous improvement and the use of data. www.education.vic.gov.au
Primary Years Program (PYP)	The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (PYP) is designed for students aged 3 to 12. www.ibo.org/pyp
Principles of Learning and Teaching	A DEECD framework that articulate six principles that can be used by schools, teams of teachers and individuals to reflect on practice and support professional dialogue to strengthen pedagogical practices. www.education.vic.gov.au
Record of Oral	This book provides a simple means of observing

Language test	and recording a child's level of language performance, measuring progress, and isolating areas of difficulty. http://books.heinemann.com/products/E01292.aspx
Reading Recovery	Research-based early intervention to reduce reading and writing failure for students in Year 1, their second year of school. It was developed in New Zealand by educator and developmental child psychologist, Dame Marie Clay. www.readingrecovery.org
SFO (Student Family Occupation) index	The SFO density is built utilising parental occupational categories that are weighted from the neediest 'unemployed' to least needy 'senior management in large organisations'. It is calculated at a point in time (using previous year's data) <i>i.e. the 2009 SFO index is based on August 2008 census data</i> . The SFO index is also ranked from most needy (index closest to 1) to least needy to assist determining school's socio economic status. There is a number of funding components within the Student Resource Package (see below) that reflect this index for funding allocations, including: IT Grants for Computers, Language Support programs, Student Family Occupation, Middle Years Equity, Secondary Equity, English as a Second Language.
Sound Waves	Sound Waves is a whole-school phonemic approach to spelling. http://www.fireflypress.com.au/swaves_concept.html
Student Resource Package (SRP)	The SRP funding model was introduced in Victorian government schools in 2005 as part of a strategy outlined in the Blueprint for Government Schools to bring about improvement in learning outcomes for students. An indicative SRP is allocated to schools in September based on projected enrolments for the forthcoming year. A confirmed SRP is allocated to schools at the beginning of term 2 each year based on February census enrolments. www.education.vic.gov.au
Student Attitudes to School Survey	An annual DEECD survey instrument which collects students' attitudes to their school and schooling experience. www.education.vic.gov.au
Teaching for Understanding	The Teaching for Understanding project was a five-year research program designed to develop and test a pedagogy of understanding. The project targeted the middle and high school years and focused on teaching and learning in four subjects (English, history, math, and science) and interdisciplinary studies. Since the project's inception, researchers and practitioners have collaborated to develop, refine, and test the pedagogy.

	http://www.pz.harvard.edu/research/TfU.htm
TORCH	Tests of Reading Comprehension is a reading assessment that has been thoroughly pilot tested in Australian schools. It assists teachers to interpret performance in reading comprehension skills and provides the opportunity to compare student performance with an Australia-wide sample of over 7000 students from Years 3 to 10. http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/group/FT
Transforming Learning instrument	Transforming Learning is a web-based tool that gathers confidential feedback to measure climate: the perceptions from pupils of how it feels to be in their class, or from staff of how it feels to be in their team. www.transforminglearning.co.uk
VELS	The Victorian Essential Learning Standards describe what is essential for Victorian students to achieve from Prep to Year 10. They provide a whole school curriculum planning framework that sets out learning standards for schools to use to plan their teaching and learning programs, including assessment and reporting of student achievement and progress. www.vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au
VCE	The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is a certificate that recognises the successful completion of secondary education in Victoria. It is a qualification that is recognised around the world. The VCE provides pathways to further study at university, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and to the world of work. It is even possible to undertake a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship within the VCE. www.vcaa.vic.edu.au
The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)	The VCAA develops courses that enable VCE students to acquire skills and knowledge in a wide range of studies. It is responsible for ensuring the quality of the school-assessed component of the VCE, the external examinations and the delivery of all VCE results to students across the state every year. www.vcaa.vic.edu.au
VET	In schools vocational education and training is included as VET in Schools if it is undertaken as part of a senior secondary certificate (VCE) and its completion by the student provides credit towards a recognised VET qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework. www.dest.gov.au
VCAL	The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. The VCAL gives students practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work. Like the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE),

VCAL is an accredited secondary certificate.
www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vcal

You Can Do It

A framework for schools that aims to build the social, emotional and motivational capacity of young people.

Acknowledgements

Compiled by:

Elizabeth Hartnell-Young

Based on research undertaken by:

Jim Spinks and David Finnerty

Stephen Lamb, Suzanne Rice, Lyn Robinson and Anne Thomas of the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at The University of Melbourne, assisted by Dick Cotter, Graeme Jane, Chris Kotur and Graeme Marshall

Zbar Consulting: Vic Zbar, Ross Kimber and Graeme Marshall

Elvira Vacirca, Chantal Arulanandam, Louise Dressing and Nicole Ellis, Office for Policy, Research and Innovation

The following Victorian schools participated in this research project and their cooperation is warmly acknowledged.

Behaviours of improving and high-performing schools:

Bellfield Primary School

Benalla College

Brimbank College

Carrum Primary School

Chandler Secondary College

Copperfield College

Doncaster Gardens Primary School

Epping Secondary College

Kurnai College

Maffra Secondary College

Moorabbin Primary School

Noble Park Primary School

Oberon High School

Preston North East Primary School

Preston Primary School

Reservoir Primary School

Seabrook Primary School

How eight of Victoria's best-performing schools are adding value:

Albion North Primary School

Braybrook College

Coomoora Primary School

Dandenong North Primary School

Kings Park Primary School

St. Albans Meadows Primary School

St. Albans Secondary College

Springvale South Primary School