

Introduction

Background

The Victorian education system has a history of being responsive to the changing needs of learners and the community. Continuous school improvement has long been a focus. Teachers and school leaders have engaged in lively discussion and debate with others in education and the broader community about what is required to bring this about. As the demands on our education system change, these discussions continue to be critical.

In September 2008, the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Bronwyn Pike, released the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*, which presents Priorities, Goals, Strategies and Actions for further improving student outcomes over the next five years.

The priorities of the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* include strengthening public confidence in a world class school education system with a strong and vibrant government school sector at its core. One of the key strategies to achieve these priorities includes System Improvement, from which a key focus is 'Excellent School Education'.

Contributing to this strategy is the e5 Instructional Model, The e5 Instructional Model is a catalyst for schools to develop a shared understanding and a common language about what constitutes high quality classroom instruction. It will assist teachers to reflect on their current practice and determine a focus for their professional learning.

The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* builds on the 2003 Blueprint reform agenda, which identified seven 'Flagship' strategies, the first of which was Student Learning, comprising the following five complementary elements:

- *Victorian Essential Learning Standards*
- *Curriculum Planning Guidelines*
- *Assessment and Reporting Advice*
- *Knowledge Bank*
- *Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12*

School improvement efforts in Victoria are directed to ensuring that all students experience educational success, achieve their potential and are fully equipped with the knowledge, skills and personal qualities needed for further education and life. The Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12 should be considered in conjunction with other initiatives within Flagship Strategy 1 as schools focus on the reform of curriculum practices relating to what students learn, how teaching facilitates learning, how learning is assessed, how student achievements are reported to parents and the documentation of exemplary practice.

Pedagogy

The most powerful lever for school reform is the transformation of teachers' practice. Teachers' understanding and capacity are pivotal to this task. Teachers, as professionals, continually improve their knowledge and understanding of the craft of teaching and translate that knowledge into practice as they work to assist students to move to a higher level of functioning. Teachers learn in a variety of ways, including focused discussion on quality teaching practice, embedded in a program of shared innovation.

The Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12 initiative (PoLT) supports the implementation of pedagogical change in Years P–12. It offers a means by which schools can examine their teaching practices, identify key areas for improvement and develop a plan to initiate improvement and monitor change. Six key principles that provide a basis for effective pedagogy are described, along with a change model that reflects contemporary understandings of teacher development and school improvement. The change model is designed to be implemented over a three-year period.

The PoLT initiative builds on the following initiatives; School Innovation in Science (SIS), Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD), Later Years Pedagogy and Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development (MYPRAD) but encompasses all stages of schooling and domains of the Essential Learning Standards.

The PoLT program assists professional learning teams in each school to identify and capitalise on their strengths and experience. The Leading Change manual is designed to assist school leaders in initiating improvement and supporting and monitoring change in schools.

Overview of the PoLT initiative

Vision

- Improvement in pedagogical practice in Victorian schools will encourage engagement of students in learning and thinking, and in the process of schooling in general, to increase students' commitment to lifelong learning.
- Students in P–12 will experience a curriculum attuned to their needs and a connectedness with the ethos and practices of their school.
- All schools will recognise the importance of 'learning to learn' in each student's education.
- All students will have opportunities to develop an interest in, and enthusiasm for, learning, and to recognise its importance in daily life and for their future wellbeing.
- Teachers will be increasingly enthusiastic and committed to their teaching across all year levels and domains.

- Teachers will continue to develop their understanding of pedagogies and become more effective in supporting student learning and conveying the richness and relevance of the ideas expressed in the curriculum.
- Classrooms will be innovative and active places, with strong links to the community and with a clear focus on supporting students to become autonomous thinkers and learners within a stimulating environment.
- Teachers will work together to develop a shared vision and program for their students that will focus on deep understandings of learning and teaching.

Aims

To support the development of this vision, the PoLT initiative aims to:

- describe effective learning and teaching, so that schools can use these descriptions to review their own practice
- provide processes for each school to assess the effectiveness of its existing P–12 programs
- provide the challenge, ideas and support for teachers to actively improve their current practice
- respect and value teacher knowledge and commitment as keys to improvement
- respect the local conditions in which schools operate.

Schools

Schools with a focus on improving their pedagogy are well placed to undertake PoLT implementation. However, consideration must be given to the need for an adequately resourced PoLT Coordinator within the school, and the means to access further ‘critical friend’ support as required.

How will the PoLT program support schools?

The PoLT program provides support for improving learning and teaching in schools, including:

- support in developing successful professional learning teams and strategies for developing a shared vision for change, and in increasing the level of collaboration in planning
- tools to facilitate reflection on teacher practice and to monitor change
- tools to map student perceptions and learning preferences across all learning areas
- advice on data collection and analysis to assist in planning and monitoring the change process in each school
- access to modular and online professional learning resources designed to be undertaken within schools by professional learning teams.

These tools and processes will assist schools in creating a Performance and Development Culture (see Appendix 1, page 69).

Implementing the PoLT program in schools

In each school, a PoLT coordinator should be appointed and provided with time release to work with teachers in reflecting on their practice, plan change strategies, develop ideas and manage and monitor the change process. Time release should be provided for teachers to participate in auditing, planning and implementing initiatives. The PoLT Coordinator will also be trained to deliver the PoLT Professional Development Program to teachers in their school.

The support of the leadership team in each school is crucial to the success of the program. The implementation of the PoLT program is dependent on time and resources being allocated to the PoLT Coordinators in each school. The commitment of teachers to the program will be strengthened if it is promoted by the leadership team. The leadership team may also be required to endorse and facilitate significant change, for example in the organisation of the school to accommodate the change agenda resulting from involvement in the program.

PoLT professional learning teams will be responsible for developing recommendations related to PoLT within each school. In primary schools, depending on size, there will probably be two teams: one consisting of teachers at Years Prep–3/4 and one of teachers in Years 4/5 and 6. However, in a secondary school, the professional learning teams may be constituted differently, depending on variables such as the history of practice in the school, the size of the school, relationships among staff, organisational structures, etc. The constitution of professional learning teams may also change, depending on the task at hand.

Some of the ways in which PoLT professional learning teams might be constituted are:

- groupings of teachers particularly interested in pursuing pedagogical change, conceived of as developmental teams that generate ideas and practices that are then incorporated in the wider setting
- groupings of teachers in particular learning areas who agree to work together to explore forms of curriculum integration
- a 'core' team of teachers, nominated and recognised for their interest and experience, who drive the initiative and the dissemination to staff in general
- year level teams that may, for instance, focus on particular issues at that level, such as transition arrangements from primary school to secondary school.

In constituting these professional learning teams, it is important to recognise that, over time, all teachers should understand and be involved in improvement. This requirement should be made explicit in action plans.

The PoLT initiative research base

Effective professional learning

If learning and teaching are to be transformed, professional development needs to focus on fundamental aspects of teacher beliefs and practice embedded in contemporary notions of professionalism and schooling.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has identified seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning (see PoLT Resources page). The Principles make explicit the key characteristics of highly effective professional learning and provide a common language for describing

good practice. The Principles guide the design of effective system-level and school-based professional learning opportunities for teachers.

A number of system-initiated projects in Australia have approached the problem in just this way, embedding teacher professional development in a school context and paying attention to a range of elements required for curriculum reform:

- In Victoria, the Hill and Crevola design elements (Hill & Crevola, 1997) were used in the Early Years Literacy Research Project, and the Middle Years Research and Development Project, as a basis for driving whole-school change processes. The SIS Project and the MYPRAD project used a similar model to implement a whole-school change strategy.
- The New Basics/Productive Pedagogies initiative in Queensland (see the PoLT Resources page) brought together a number of elements (the teacher and the classroom, leadership, assessment) in the change process (Luke et al., 2003).
- The Essential Learnings project in Tasmania (see the PoLT Resources page) similarly has a broad focus in terms of both pedagogy and change. Many writers (e.g. Hargreaves 1994, Hall & Hord 2001) have emphasised that change requires teachers to ground new ideas in their own personal experience. Joyce and Showers (1995), drawing on research from a large number of studies, argue strongly for the need for school-based professional development. They discuss the need for cultural change, and the need for social support as teachers practise strategies that are new to their repertoire or implement the difficult areas of a curriculum change. Contemporary large-scale reform projects in a number of countries have tended to incorporate similar findings (e.g. Beeth et al., 2003). The implication from the research on these contemporary large-scale reform projects is that improvement in learning and teaching in schools is best supported by a model that is:
 - based on an explicit vision of effective learning and teaching, and the wider purposes of schooling
 - grounded in a coherent view of teacher learning and teacher professionalism
 - sensitive to the structures within which teachers and schools work.

In the current context of educational reform in Victoria the professional learning of teachers is recognised as a key component of building the capacity of teachers that will result in improvement in student outcomes. Implementation of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, aligned with refined approaches to assessment and reporting and underpinned by the Principles of Learning and Teaching creates new expectations for teacher practice and student performance.

Development of the Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12

The Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12 have been developed, effectively over five years, drawing on the expertise of teachers and consultants from a range of learning areas. The process has been organic, drawing heavily on research in previous and parallel projects and resulting in successive refinement of the Principles. It has also involved:

- a review of the literature on effective teaching in different curriculum areas, and on student learning, carried out by academics with particular expertise in pedagogy – in particular Middle Years pedagogy – in Science, Mathematics and Technology Education

- strong alignment of the Principles with the findings of contemporary research into learning and student engagement with schooling
- interviews with teachers identified as effective in science as part of the SIS initiative, and more recently in mathematics and technology
- focus group discussions with Middle Years consultants and consultations with coordinators from a number of learning areas as part of the MYRAD project
- a study of effective Later Years pedagogy, whereby a range of consultants and teachers with expertise in this area were interviewed, and focus group discussions held, to identify the nature of effective learning and teaching in the later years of schooling
- the collection of comments from teachers and Cluster Coordinators during the evaluation of MYPRAD.
- the trialling of the Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12 in 2004, involving 44 schools from seven clusters.
- The 2005 PoLT training delivered to 811 participants from 535 schools.

Throughout an extensive consultation process, the Principles were enthusiastically accepted by teachers in many different contexts. While any representation of such a complex enterprise as teaching cannot be said to be definitive, the Principles and their precursors have been successful in provoking significant discussion and reflective review of practice for many teachers and schools, and many teachers have reported significant changes to their practice as a result of this program.

NB: The PoLT Online Professional Learning Resource, developed in 2005, contains further information about the theory underpinning each of the Principles.

Successfully implementing the PoLT program

Schools involved in PoLT and related programs have indicated factors that contribute to the success of whole school change initiatives. These factors are listed below, together with a comment on related difficulties which work against success.

The factors that influence success

The factors that influence success are listed below, together with a comment on factors that work against success.

The PoLT Coordinator

- Commitment and organisational ability.
- Leadership qualities, particularly the ability to bring people together and forge a common ethos.
- Standing of the coordinator in the school.

Coordinators need to provide not only ideas or resources but also leadership to ensure an appropriate level of commitment from teachers, and to generate an expectation that the Principles will be embedded in classroom practices and curriculum development. Coordinators need to ensure they don't have too many other competing commitments.

The role of the leadership team in each school in supporting the PoLT Coordinator is crucial.

The PoLT professional learning teams

- Ability and willingness to work as a team.
- Willingness to try new ways of teaching.
- Commitment to sharing ideas and openness to critical discussion of learning and teaching issues.

The presence on the staff of influential teachers who are reluctant to change, either through comfort with current practice or lack of interest can prove challenging. If more than one PoLT team is established teams should try to arrange some common meeting times. The PoLT teams may have a specific focus that may differ from other professional learning teams already established in the school.

The school leadership team

- Commitment to and support for the innovation by the school leadership in a range of practical ways.
- Incorporation of the innovation into the school's strategic plan and annual implementation plan as part of a key improvement strategy.
- Recognition of and support for the underlying pedagogical principles and the strategic approaches of the program.
- Leadership qualities of the principal.

Principals, with the rest of the school leadership team, need to provide support in terms of sufficient encouragement and advice, acting to resolve issues, working to establish the conditions for teacher commitment, and understanding that the innovation requires consistent support. Schools can sometimes experience administrative blockers such as timetable inflexibility or lack of resources such as computers, and in such cases, it is critical that coordinators work to maintain supportive arrangements with curriculum coordinators and timetablers. Low priority can be accorded to an innovation due to the existence of competing projects and priorities in the school. The Annual Implementation Plan (see PoLT Resources page) will assist leadership teams within schools to make decisions and develop strategies to ensure efficient allocation of resources to the program.

The school community

- A commitment to the need for improvement in pedagogy.
- Openness within the school and parent community to new ideas.

A history of stress or friction among staff, associated with entrenched resentment against committee attendance or overwork or disruptions to teachers' conditions can have a significant impact on the initiative's momentum. In rural schools, in particular, locating replacement teachers, and consequently arranging time for teachers to plan together needs to be considered.

Critical features of the PoLT program

- **Time**

This is a key issue for all schools – for PoLT Coordinators to exercise support, plan and reflect and for teachers to plan and develop professionally. The success of the program will depend on the PoLT Coordinator using time strategically.

- **Shared direction**

An essential condition for significant change is for teachers to develop a shared understanding of the Principles and be committed to their implementation. Where this understanding and commitment are mainly in the hands of the coordinator, change can be expected to occur only at a surface level. School-based initiatives should relate to the Principles through the team action planning process.

- **Support**

The existence of a support structure for advice and input of ideas, documentation – including audit materials, workshops, consultant support, and Professional Development – is essential. PoLT Coordinators in each school will need support to engage with ideas at a deeper level and maintaining a deep understanding of the nature of the Principles will be an important predictor of future success.

School commitment

Schools undertaking PoLT will need to commit to an audit process consisting of:

- Component Mapping of participating teachers and collation of the data
- administration and collation of the Student Perceptions Survey in the classes of participating teachers (where appropriate)
- administration and collation of the Student Learning Survey

Schools might also like to use the following audit tools to augment the implementation process where appropriate:

- completion of the Effective Team Practices Questionnaire
- completion of a Curriculum Audit Questionnaire
- gathering of other relevant school data, for example Retention to VCE, student surveys, student pathways, attendance etc.

Schools will then use the data to inform the development of a school action plan to improve learning and teaching in the school.