Effective schools support smart classrooms

To achieve the vision of the Victorian government school reform agenda, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is focused on building an excellent government school system, rather than a system with some excellent government schools. An excellent school system is one that is made up of effective schools that are continuously improving.

The overarching objective of creating and sustaining effective schools underpins all Victorian government school reform strategies and initiatives. This provides Victorian government schools with a shared purpose. The reform agenda is a coherent strategy providing school leadership teams with a range of tools and frameworks to make their school effective.

The characteristics that help make a school effective are broadly outlined in the model adapted from the work of Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore (1995) (www.le.ac.uk/education/ESI/doc1f.html), shown in the following diagram and explained below.

Leadership is a critical component of an effective school. Principals have a direct influence on teachers and the effectiveness of the teaching–learning relationship. Professional leadership requires identifying a clear sense of purpose for the school. It entails the distribution of authority and responsibility across the school by providing teachers with genuine opportunities to participate directly in decisions about curriculum, professional learning priorities, school and resource management, and other policy decisions. Professional leadership requires keeping abreast of what is happening in classrooms, including what is being taught, pedagogical approaches and student progress.

Effective schools are focused primarily on teaching and learning. They carefully consider time spent on academic and non-academic learning. Effective schools deploy their resources strategically to enhance teaching and learning. Professional learning activities and programs are aimed at improving the teaching–learning relationship, paying particular attention to developing the subject and pedagogical knowledge of teachers.

Effective teachers know how students learn and build on the knowledge their students already have. Teachers have a strong grasp of the content of their discipline. They use teaching strategies matched to the learning styles and needs of their students to engage them with that content. Purposeful teachers contextualise their teaching practices. They centre their teaching on the experiences of their students, equipping them with knowledge and skills they can use in everyday life.
Effective schools demonstrate a clear and shared understanding of their goals. These goals are typically focused on student learning, sustained improvement and problem-solving. Effective schools create consensus among staff about the aims and values of the school and how they can be consistently and collaboratively put into practice. Steps are taken to ensure that the curriculum, teaching and learning and professional learning arrangements are consistent with the school’s vision and goals. Relationships between staff, students, parents and the wider community need also to reflect the school’s goals.

Effective schools and teachers expect that every student has the ability to learn – they endeavour to ensure that every learner is successful. To maximise opportunities for all students to succeed, teachers adapt their teaching to the individual needs of students, including both high-potential and under-performing students. The effort required to succeed should be made clear, with parents actively engaged in their children’s learning.

Effective schools establish rigorous systems of accountability by which school and student performance can be evaluated. Strong accountability systems use performance data to identify, support and monitor under-achieving students and plan professional learning activities for staff. They also allow identification of success in the system and form the basis for the celebration of that success. Strong accountability measures also allow school leadership teams to provide parents with meaningful information about their children’s progress.

Learning communities share common visions, values and objectives. They work collaboratively to enhance the curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment. Learning communities are comprised of individuals with diverse expertise and knowledge. This diversity is valued and, through collaboration, drawn out, shared and used to solve school-based problems. Learning communities foster openness, dialogue, inquiry, risk-taking and trust. In this environment, teachers feel they can make informed and responsible decisions about innovative teaching strategies.

The environment in which students work has an impact on their learning. Resources are allocated to maintaining classrooms that are conducive to quality teaching and learning. Effective schools establish consistent processes around classroom management. Staff members meet regularly to discuss classroom management and develop strategies for dealing with disruptive behaviours. Discipline policies are determined collaboratively and administered consistently.