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

Stimulus paper May 2009

Every child, every opportunity
Signposts: Research points to how Victorian government schools have improved student performance

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 paper outlines the findings and aims to stimulate discussion of those practices and behaviours among schools and the education community. Its purpose is to support the trajectory of school improvement in Victoria.

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 in this paper and develop them to a high level.

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

In the first phase of the research, a set of 28 practices and behaviours was identified in 26 Victorian schools (nine secondary, 17 primary) 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 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 One 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 were confirmed as important, when implemented consistently across a school.
Table 1: Practices and behaviours of selected Victorian schools that have improved student performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In order of increasing frequency</th>
<th>1. Using data</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise</td>
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<td>3. Raising staff expectations of students</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Establishing and aligning values, vision and goals</td>
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<td>5. Working in teams</td>
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<td>6. Aligning professional learning</td>
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<td>7. Raising students’ expectations</td>
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<td>8. Assigning staff to key priority areas</td>
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<td>9. Focusing on literacy and numeracy</td>
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<td>10. Establishing partnerships</td>
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<td>11. Personalising through individual learning plans</td>
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<td>12. Engaging students</td>
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<td>13. Articulating clear staff performance expectations</td>
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<td>14. Targeting resources to student needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Releasing staff for group learning, dialogue and planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Recognising staff and student achievement</td>
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</table>
How are these practices and behaviours transferable across schools in Victoria?

A list as in Table 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. The site visits and interviews fleshed out what schools were actually doing. In summary, the 16 key behaviours are:

Using data
Successful schools collect and use a wide range of data, not only that required by the Department, and share it widely with staff, developing 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 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 take place, and some schools mentor and support new teachers beyond Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) requirements.

Raising staff expectations of students
For most schools studied this has been an important factor and a major challenge. Issues include 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 the 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 allocated substantial resources to professional learning and used 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 was 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 in participating schools were allocated to areas such as attendance, homework clubs, wellbeing and English as a Second Language. Many schools expected teachers to move across year levels and responsibilities over time, to encourage professional learning and renewal.

**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 for 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 full report, Signposts: Research points to how Victorian government schools have improved student performance, 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 important areas to start and sustain improvement.
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 2 shows these characteristics.
Table 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.
Where to now?

This paper has outlined the results of recent research using a wide range of data to answer the first big question: which school practices and behaviours drive student success in Victorian schools, regardless of student characteristics? The findings show a number of behaviours that are interconnected, rather than isolated. 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 already recognise they are implementing several of the behaviours and practices listed in this paper, but the opportunities for improvement lie in greater breadth and intensity, and in linking and integration of more of the practices.

The final question this paper poses 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 foundations for change and sustaining improvement. 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.

Signposts Forum 5 June 2009

You can discuss the topics raised here and share your own experiences online. Join the Signposts Blog at [http://signposts.globalteacher.org.au/](http://signposts.globalteacher.org.au/)

Take the opportunity to hear from the schools that participated in this research, and contribute to the Signposts Forum on Friday 5 June 2009 from 9:00am to 3:30pm at the Sofitel Melbourne, 25 Collins Street. RSVP: Larissa Staszko, Tel: (03) 9947 1829. Email: staszko.larissa.c@edumail.vic.gov.au