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

Welcome

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. I encourage you to share your ideas and contributions by providing feedback to: <research@edumail.vic.gov.au>.

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

Signposts Forum

Take the opportunity to hear from the schools that participated in the research featured in this eLert, and contribute your experiences, at the Signposts Forum to be held on Friday 5 June 2009 from 9:00am to 3:30pm at the Sofitel Melbourne, 25 Collins Street.

You can get involved before the forum by discussing the research online at the Signposts Blog: http://signposts.globalteacher.org.au/


RSVP: Larissa Staszko, (03) 9947 1829 or staszko.larissa.c@edumail.vic.gov.au by 29 May.

Feature article

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

Research by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2008 provided greater knowledge of the practices of Victorian schools that lead to consistent gains in student achievement over a sustained period of time, irrespective of the
background of the students. This paper aims to stimulate discussion of those practices and behaviours among schools and networks. Its purpose is to support the trajectory of school improvement in Victoria.

The report is available at:


Related research

Twelve outstanding secondary schools: excelling against the odds
Office of Standards in Education, UK (2009)

This report investigates how some UK schools succeed brilliantly against the odds while others in more favourable circumstances struggle. It draws from the practice, experience and ambition of 12 consistently outstanding schools to identify how they achieve, sustain and share excellence. The case study schools have been judged outstanding by inspectors, they serve disadvantaged communities, and they have exceptionally good results. The report is intended as a discussion document for leaders in secondary schools, and to demonstrate that the obstacles to success are not insuperable. It challenges school leaders to be curious about the schools featured here, but also to give their own practice and approaches more reflective consideration and critical analysis.

More information on the report can be found at:
http://ofstednews.ofsted.gov.uk/article/432

Nine characteristics of high-performing schools

Improvement specialists reviewed more than 20 studies focused on state schools with students who achieved at higher levels than their demographic characteristics would predict. Nine inter-related characteristics were frequently found: (1) a clear and shared focus; (2) high standards and expectations for all students; (3) effective school leadership; (4) high levels of collaboration and communication; (5) curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards; (6) frequent monitoring of learning and teaching; (7) focused professional development; (8) a supportive learning environment; (9) high levels of family and community involvement. The research found that sustained improvement requires a continuous cycle of action that systematically attends to all nine traits and takes years of school commitment, affecting values, attitudes, beliefs, and instructional practices.

Available at:
http://www.k12.wa.us/research/

Characteristics of effective schools

Based on research and consultations with parents, the Council has identified nine characteristics of effective schools: (1) a cohesive leadership team led by a caring and inclusive principal; (2) teachers with a variety of skills and experiences; (3) clear positive philosophy; (4) environment supportive of learning; (5) easily accessible student support; (6) effective school organisational framework; (7) broad, balanced curriculum; (8) meaningful assessment and reporting on student progress; (9) active parent and community participation. For each characteristic, the Council has prepared a broad description and examples of possible indicators. The report is primarily aimed at parents, and may be used to support parental choice, participation, and involvement school improvement initiatives.

Available at:
http://www.schoolparents.canberra.net.au/Publications.html

School turnarounds: actions & results
US Center on Innovation & Improvement, Department of Education (2007)

A report by the Center in 2007 identified fourteen leader actions associated with successful turnarounds in the business, non-profit, government, and education sectors. While School Turnarounds provided a useful conceptual framework of leader actions, education leaders also sought compelling examples of how those actions have played out in actual school turnarounds. As a result, the current report provides descriptive, real-world vignettes that illustrate the actions that successful school leaders have taken to turn around low-performing schools in the US.

Available at: http://www.centerii.org/

Improving schools facing challenging circumstances: perspectives from leading thinkers

This report explores the practical issues affecting the leadership of failing schools in challenging circumstances, particularly in overcoming barriers to high quality education.

It identifies strategies for an initial phase of improvement to restore functionality of schools experiencing serious weaknesses. These strategies focus on practical leadership, expertise, and change management techniques. Further strategies are proposed for a longer phase of sustaining good performance. There was strong support from the interviewees for building leadership capacity and external support, federation and collaboration between schools, succession planning and incentives to attract and retain leaders and teachers to schools facing challenging circumstances.

Available from the Publications section at: http://ncsl.org.uk/
Raising the bar: what do successful secondary subject leaders leading large teams do to raise attainment in their curriculum areas?

Peter Wright, National College of School Leadership, Nottingham (2006)

This UK study is based on the views of over 40 secondary subject leaders of English, Maths and Science, each of whom have led departments that have initiated and sustained improvement in academic standards over three to five years. The report identifies common themes for good practice including: (1) creating stable teams that work and learn together (learning communities); (2) involving colleagues in decision making; (3) understanding the reality of the situation and changing practice if necessary; (4) developing the skills of the team through the sharing of good practice.

Available from the Publications section at: http://ncsl.org.uk/

What's good about leading schools in challenging circumstances?


This study arose from a seminar that gathered delegates' stories of what makes working in schools with challenging circumstances so rewarding, and how the leaders of such schools are supported in their work. The interviews focused on: (1) What energises leaders, i.e. what is good about leading such a school? (2) What drives them, i.e. what is their values base and how did it develop? (3) What sustains such leaders, i.e. what are personal sustainability and corporate support strategies and how effective are they when tested by critical incidents? (4) What characterises these leaders, i.e. what are their specific professional characteristics? (5) What can be learnt from these leaders, i.e. what main messages can be transmitted to leadership teams and new and aspirant heads of such schools and those with a concern for their professional development?

Available from the Publications section at: http://ncsl.org.uk/

Change theory: a force for school improvement

Michael Fullan, Centre for Strategic Education, Victoria (2006)

In this article, Fullan discusses how change knowledge might be used more fully, and identifies possible barriers to overcome. He identifies key features of district-wide reform: (1) a clearly articulated vision and commitment to a system of literacy for all students; (2) using data to inform instruction and determine resources; (3) building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students; (4) establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system.

Available for purchase from: http://www.cse.edu.au/

The leadership challenge: improving learning in schools


This review aims to demonstrate that a great deal of a school's success depends on which areas of school life the educational leader chooses to spend time and attention. It focuses on new, shared models of leadership, what it means to be a successful leader and issues of leader recruitment and retention. It examines evolving organisational models such as communities of professional learners and the forces that are currently pressing on schools. The review provides a range of recommendations and the challenge to school leaders that they move beyond mere technical competence and be contextually literate, organisationally savvy and leadership smart.

Available at: http://research.acer.edu.au/aer/2/

Upcoming events

Below is a list of upcoming conferences which may be of interest. For a comprehensive list of conferences, workshops and events, visit the Education Network Australia site at: http://www.edna.edu.au/edna/go

ICT for Tomorrow’s Learning

ICT in Education Victoria (ICTEV) 2009 State Conference, Melbourne Grammar School, 30 May


Crossing Divides

Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia (MERGA) 32nd Annual Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, 5–9 July

http://www.eenz.com/merga32/

The 3 Rs of Leadership: Revolutions, Revelations and Reality

Griffith University: Professional Development Network Leadership Conference 2009, Broadbeach, QLD, 6–7 August


Assessment and student learning: Collecting, Interpreting and using data to inform teaching

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 14th Annual Research Conference, Perth, WA, 16–18 August

Assessment for a Creative World
International Association for Educational Assessment (IAEA) 35th Annual Conference, Brisbane, QLD, 13–18 September
http://www.iaea2009.com/

Curriculum: A national conversation
Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) 2009 Biennial Conference, Canberra, ACT, 2–4 October

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