

A personal and collective commitment to a focus on school improvement

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Mr. Mark Campling leads educational reform across 1283 Education Queensland schools as Assistant Director-General, State Schooling Implementation. He has almost three decades of principal and executive management experience in a diverse range of Queensland schools and regions. Mr Campling is currently leading several major initiatives including the *Curriculum into the classroom* project, an Australian-first set of digital planning materials to support Education Queensland teachers implementing the Australian Curriculum. He has also established innovative Teaching and Learning audits to foster a collaborative and self-reflective approach to school performance improvement. His contribution to leadership and professional development in education has been recognised with life membership of the Queensland Association of State School Principals.

Stephen Savvakis

Department of Education and Training Queensland

Mr. Stephen Savvakis is currently Principal of Trinity Bay State High School in the City of Cairns, Far North Queensland. Previously he was the principal of Emerald State High School in Central Queensland and deputy principal in the South Burnett area and on the Gold Coast.

During 2011 Mr Savvakis conducted teaching and learning audits across the state, providing feedback to secondary schools. In addition, he provided presentations to school teams on how to use the audit instrument to bring about school improvement.

Mr Savvakis has been an active member of the Queensland Secondary Principals' Association (QSPA). In 2006 he received a Leadership Award from QSPA for his work in the organisation and his support of principal professional development in the Far North of Queensland.

Now that he has returned to his school, Mr. Savvakis' focus is to influence teaching and learning in every classroom to bring about better learning outcomes for students.

Jane Sedgman

Department of Education and Training Queensland

Ms. Jane Sedgman is Principal at Ascot State School Brisbane and has worked in state primary schools for 35 years. Her professional interests are differentiation, gifted education and school leadership.

Ms Sedgman's current roles include:

- Principal Coach, Metropolitan Region, which involves coaching five principals
- Principal Facilitator for Queensland Educational Leadership Institute (QELI) Future Leader Program, which involves facilitating the leadership work of ten teachers
- Co-Chair Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP) Standing Committee Teaching/Learning, Literacy/Numeracy, which involves representing the views of Queensland primary school educators.

Abstract

To support schools in their journey towards improvement, Education Queensland has introduced a raft of innovative strategies to make a difference to student learning outcomes across a large and diverse state. One of these strategies is the Teaching and Learning Audit. This audit allows schools to look beyond student performance and explore their strategies, programs and practices against world-class standards in curriculum, assessment teaching and learning. The instrument was developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research in consultation with education personnel and a wide range of stakeholders. The audit is conducted in schools by high-performing, highly trained and independent Queensland principals who gather data from a range of areas. This data is collected using several techniques to review school planning documents, school and classroom practices and individual student work. Judgements are made about school practices against defined criteria that are categorised as eight dimensions. Schools are given a detailed report that clearly outlines commendations, recommendations and affirmations, which are used to inform their planning processes. The results are also used by Education Queensland to inform whole-of-state strategic planning processes. Already schools have shown significant improvement in teaching and learning processes with the vast majority showing positive change from one year to the next. Principals are reporting high levels of satisfaction with this intensive process of collaborative self-reflection, with satisfaction ratings consistently exceeding 90 per cent. This paper describes the audit instrument, outlines the process and reflection tools, and details progress in two Queensland state schools.

Introduction

Education Queensland has ambitious expectations for world-class curriculum teaching, learning and assessment practices and is auditing every school against these expectations. The Teaching and Learning

Audit is an Australian first that provides school leaders with useful, independent perspectives on how they are performing. Most importantly, the audit process facilitates conversations throughout the system around the nature of excellent school practice. The first audits were conducted in 2010 and there is already evidence of improvement. Director-General Julie Grantham observes that the audit is ‘proving to be a powerful tool in examining and understanding what quality world-class teaching and learning looks like’. Overall, many schools are making better use of school audit data to shape change, from the office to the classroom, that enhances the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was commissioned to develop a Teaching and Learning audit instrument in 2009, based on international research on school improvement. The audit instrument was also based on Education Queensland’s *Roadmap for P–10 curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting* (DET, 2010) as well as the findings and recommendations from the report (Masters, 2009). The consistent and evidence-based audit process was developed in collaboration with a stakeholder reference group that included representatives of the Queensland Teachers’ Union, the Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens’ Associations and principals’ associations.

To further support schools with the audit process, a Teaching and Learning Audit Reflection Tool provides examples of outstanding school improvement practices, reflective questions and suggested professional readings. The tool assists principals and school leaders in further analysing and understanding outstanding school improvement practices. In addition, the tool can be used to show how schools have committed to an improvement agenda across a diverse range of situations, including rural, special and low socio-economic schools with Indigenous enrolments.

The audit instrument

The audit instrument outlines critical aspects of curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, categorised as eight dimensions (see Table 1). Considered as leadership practices, the dimensions are directly related to achieving school-wide improvements in teaching and learning (Masters, 2012). Each dimension is described in the audit instrument along with examples of how the dimension may be evidenced in schools. In addition, each dimension has four stages of development to provide all schools with a frame of reference for setting challenging improvement targets and monitoring long-term progress.

The four stages of development – Low, Medium, High and Outstanding – extend from commonly observed levels of practice (Low and Medium) to rarely observed but aspirational levels (High and Outstanding). Medium represents a solid level of practice; High, an excellent level; and Outstanding, a level that is only likely to be seen in a handful of schools in most education systems internationally. Some Queensland schools are already demonstrating outstanding practice in one or more areas of their work.

Table 1. Teaching and Learning Audit dimensions

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| 1 | An Explicit Improvement Agenda |
| 2 | Analysis and Discussion of Data |
| 3 | A Culture that Promotes Learning |
| 4 | Targeted Use of School Resources |
| 5 | An Expert Teaching Team |
| 6 | Systematic Curriculum Delivery |
| 7 | Tailored Classroom Learning |
| 8 | Evidence-based Teaching |

The audit process

The audit process involves an independent and experienced school principal visiting the school and talking with staff, students, the Parents and Citizens President, other key personnel and community groups over one to two days. This auditor gathers a range of perspectives from the school community on strategies, programs and practices. In addition, the auditor reviews teaching and learning documents such as whole-of-school curriculum planning, the school's English, Mathematics and Science programs, units of work, pieces of assessment and other relevant school data.

Evidence is collected about each dimension of the audit instrument (see Table 1) to determine a school's level of development. A report is prepared detailing key findings, including commendations (for exemplary practice), affirmations (for areas of effective practice) and recommendations (indicating areas for development). Following the presentation of the report to the Principal, development plans are initiated to improve practices. All staff, Parents and Citizens committees and parents are involved in the improvement plans and processes.

Feedback from principals

Feedback from principals indicates the audit instrument is an efficient and a highly effective way to improve school practices. To Principal of Cavendish Road State High School Sharyn Donald the instrument quickly provides the information needed to develop an explicit improvement agenda with staff. Similarly, to Principal of Rochedale State School Liam Smith, the audit 'strips the school bare of its pretensions and airs and drills down into what the school is really doing for and to students'. Further

insight from Principal of Aspley State School Andrew Duncan suggests the audit provides ‘clear guidance on what is required to improve student performance’.

As Ormiston State School Principal Anthony Palmer suggests the feedback can be confronting but is useful in providing information and direction for improvement. At Cavendish Road State High School, the feedback was well received by the executive leadership team who indicated that the audit team had developed a realistic overview of the position of the school. At Pacific Pines State High School, feedback from the audit was immediately shared with the school community and became the basis of the school’s improvement agenda. For Ascot State School Principal Jane Sedgman, the report recommendations led to a coaching program to better examine and improve teaching pedagogy. In other cases, principals found the audit report validated and enhanced the school’s current practices and performance.

An unexpected benefit of the audits is the way they develop a sense of awareness about the impact of school practices and policy. Principal Liam Smith reports the process, the quality of the questions and the ‘ah ha moments’ provides the stimulus for growth. Similarly, Pacific Pines State High School Principal Bob Coupland advocates that for the audits to be valuable, a climate of ‘absolute trust and shared understanding that the ultimate goal is improved outcomes for students’ needs to be fostered by principals so that teachers openly share reflections with auditors.

Trinity Bay State High School

Trinity Bay State High School in Cairns provides a secondary education for boys and girls from Years 8 to 12. The school’s student population has steadily increased over the last decade to 1420 students in 2012. Approximately 35 per cent of students identify as Indigenous and a small number of students attend the school as a result of migrant settlement programs. Approximately 38 per cent of students identify as from families where English is spoken as a second language. The school caters to students in mainstream classrooms and students with visual hearing and speech or language impairments.

With a team of committed teachers and specialist programs and learning initiatives in place, Principal Stephen Savvakis wanted to explore further improvements to teaching and learning. The outcome of the audits provided him with the information he sought:

‘The audits highlighted the need to place students and their outcomes at school at the centre of our teaching and learning practices. It was clear that we had to have explicit targets for school improvement and more importantly for teachers to use data to inform their teaching. It was time to have an explicit school-wide pedagogy and agreed standards of teaching practice within the school.’ (May 2012)

Stephen Savvakis also drew on the audit instrument data showing the importance of strong leadership in driving a school-wide focus on teaching and learning. He noted:

‘It is essential to have clear expectations for professional practice and for school leaders to deliver this message in a consistent fashion so that it becomes part of the culture of teaching and learning in the school.’
(May, 2012)

Using the audit instrument report findings, Stephen Savvakis has begun working to positively change the school’s teaching and learning culture. He has observed changes in practices at the school. For example, teachers are developing a shared commitment to improving practice and routinely using data to inform their work. In addition, he has noticed that teachers are tailoring lessons according to student needs and sharing practices with their colleagues. A consistent teaching methodology is now understood and applied in every classroom.

Driving change based on research and improving outcomes for students has assisted in creating a culture of common acceptance and understanding of good teaching practice. In addition, the number of staff meetings has been reduced and the number of faculty meetings increased to support teachers to develop collaborative practices. This has enabled middle managers to have the professional conversations needed to drive change and model best practice for teachers. These school-wide mechanisms have helped teachers analyse data and provide feedback to students about their learning. In doing this, students are taking responsibility for their own learning, much the way that teachers review the effectiveness of their teaching.

Ascot State School

Ascot State School has an enrolment of approximately 750 students from Prep to Year 7. The school achieved an audit rating of ‘outstanding’ in the three dimensions of *Targeted use of school resources*, *Systematic curriculum delivery* and *Tailored classroom learning* (see Table 1).

Teachers at the school regularly collect data on the achievements, progress, strengths and weaknesses of individual students to make professional judgements about individual needs. With this data, teachers are able to tailor teaching and learning activities. As part of this, the student support committee meets fortnightly to oversee support services for individual students. The school also has a differentiation specialist teacher who provides coaching and resources to teachers in the area of practice. To Principal, Jane Sedgman, while the audit confirmed the school’s strong performance across the audit instrument’s dimensions, it provided vital feedback to further refine and improve many processes. She recalled that:

‘It was clear we needed to focus on how we deliver teaching and learning. We had strong data collection procedures, but in response to the audit report we reduced the timeframe from ten to five weeks to gather evidence of student achievement in English and mathematics. We now assess tasks, moderate student results, collate data and look at student progress within that timeframe.’ (May 2012)

Practices affirmed by the auditors are year level team meetings with administrators to discuss the standards of work being taught to students. These meetings provide the school leadership team with a thorough understanding of the work being taught and the standards being achieved. Consistency in the implementation of the curriculum is considered important at the school as well as the standards applied to teaching and learning of students' work. The process has enabled teachers to develop a clear understanding of student progression.

The audit outcomes have also had a positive impact on differentiation of student learning. Jane Sedgman reported that:

'We have magnified our focus on student achievement, so where we always differentiated year, unit and lesson plans, now every student has individual reading, spelling, number and social targets. We further support the differentiation process with coaching for teachers in these targeted areas.' (May 2012)

Feedback provided by the auditor across the eight dimensions has led to whole-school improvement. Jane Sedgman believes that she now has a greater realisation of what school improvement is all about, commenting that 'you can understand it from books but it's the process of self-reflection and review that makes you clearly comprehend it'.

Conclusion

The audits are supporting schools to review teaching and learning practices that drive improvement through clear expectations, focused resourcing and consistent and common language. The audits extend beyond student performance data and drive deep into practices, from the office to the classroom and into student work. The system is also benefiting from having a better understanding of how best to support school leaders in their work. The audit instrument also provides a particularly promising framework for leadership development. It potentially focuses school leaders on the very practices that improve teaching and learning.

This world-class, Queensland-led initiative has garnered great interest from other educational jurisdictions. By employing this uniquely reflective framework for improvement, Queensland state schools can move from strength to strength to improve outcomes in all school communities.

The audit instrument will continue to be used as a way to drive school improvement in 2012.

References

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