



Department of Education and
Early Childhood Development

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AT SCALE

A Victorian success story

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Victoria, Australia

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Introduction

From 2008 to 2012, the Western Metropolitan Region (WMR) of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (DEECD) encompassing 142 schools with 77,500 students achieved significant gains in student outcomes.

This story of improvement in student outcomes in an economically and socially diverse metropolitan region in Victoria is impressive. The WMR student population has the lowest socio-economic status (SES) in the state and the region has the highest concentration of low SES schools.

In 2008, the region examined the 2007 data on student learning outcomes which revealed that on every measure WMR was the lowest performing region on absolute measures of the nine regions in the state. In 2008, the region posed the question: 'What will it take to become the most rapidly improving region in Victoria?'

Based on a range of measures the goal of being the most rapidly improving region has been achieved.

Using 2008 NAPLAN¹ as a base year, compared to all regions, the region's student data in literacy and numeracy show the second highest relative gain between 2008 and 2012; the highest growth in student learning (effect size) between 2008 and 2012; and the biggest gains compared to the state mean in absolute data.²

Importantly, the region has made significant gains in secondary school learning against the national trend. The Year 5 cohort in 2008 was worst in reading and numeracy out of nine regions in Victoria. By 2012, this cohort, now in Year 9, was third in the state on all NAPLAN measures, and was close to the state mean in reading and numeracy.

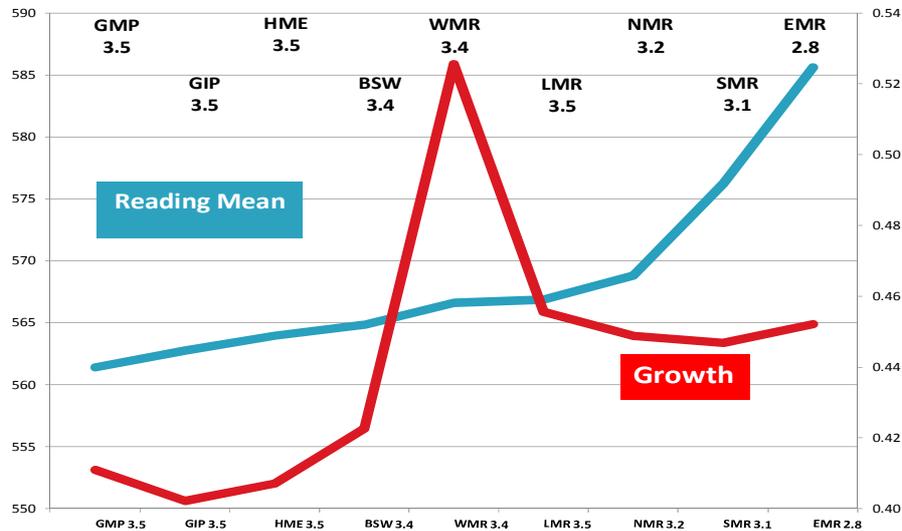
Key to the region's improvement has been the high rates of student learning growth. For example, Figure 1 below compares regions' growth (effect size) and regions' mean reading scores and their SES status for secondary years 7 to 9 between 2008 and 2010. It shows that the WMR performance is well above expectations in adding value to their students"³.

¹ Every year, all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. This is referred to as NAPLAN - the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy. Data sets are analysed by the system and are provided to schools so they can compare their performance with that of schools with a similar student profile and with average performance at the state level.

² 'Relative gain' refers to the growth in learning comparing student progress over a specified period of time with for students who had same starting scale score. 'Growth' in student learning or 'effect size' refers to student progress over a specified period of time. 'Absolute data' refers to student performance measured against the NAPLAN scale score.

³ This observation was made by Prof. John Hattie, University of Melbourne, who analysed the WMR student data. He also prepared Figure 1.

Figure 1: Regions' growth (effect size) and mean reading scores for secondary years 7 to 9 between 2008 and 2010.



A further indicator of the improvement experienced across the region is provided by comparing the ranking in regional performance order of WMR in literacy and numeracy in 2008 with its ranking in 2012. While an improved relative position may be a result of other regions' declining performance as well as outright improvement by WMR, major improvement in the rank order position is an important achievement for the lowest SES region that has historically been last.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate WMR's improved ranked order.

Table 1: WMR ranking in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy between years 3 and 7

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Numeracy	Grammar
Year 3 2008	8 th	7 th	4 th	9 th	7 th
Year 7 2012	6 th	3 rd	2 nd	3 rd	4 th

Source: WMR documentation

Table 2: WMR ranking in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy between years 5 and 9

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Numeracy	Grammar
Year 5 2008	9th	5th	4th	9th	7th
Year 9 2012	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd

Source: WMR documentation

Senior secondary performance has been mixed. In students' final year of study (Year 12), the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) median study score improved in 16 out of 30 schools, with 7 remaining steady and 6 regressing. However, from 2008 to 2011, the number of Year 12 students going on to university increased from 35.9 per cent in 2008 to 43.9 per cent in 2011.

While the region is still below the state mean on most measures, it has shown that significant improvement can be achieved for low SES students and in schools of concentrated poverty. In doing so, the region has collectively demonstrated the capacity to bring good performance to scale at a system level. The region's unmistakable improvement is more than an account of some schools that turned around their performance against the odds; it is an account of improvement at scale and where school improvement and regional or system improvement ran in parallel.

This impressive improvement was the result of a five year collaborative systems strategy – co-designed by regional and schools leaders, with extensive support from internationally recognised experts in literacy and numeracy, and implemented through intense professional learning in instructional practice.

To break the historical pattern of underachievement in the WMR is highly significant. Victorian students are on average performing well by national and international standards. However, this 'on average' performance masks the significant underperformance of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In Australia, socio-economic disadvantage remains linked to low levels of academic achievement; Australia is fourth out of thirty-four countries in the OECD where the impact of socio-economic disadvantage has the strongest links to performance outcome (DEEWR 2011).

The WMR improvement strategy has shown that region or system wide improvement in student achievement in disadvantaged regions is possible, that improvements can occur at scale in a relatively short time and that improvements can be sustained. The practices underpinning the gains centred on changing the 'mindset' of schools to aspire to major improvement, changing the instructional practices of the school leaders and teachers and the system providing intense and step-by-step support.

Reform outcomes: impressive gains and a changed mindset

The region has a complex and challenging profile. WMR is the most socially and economically disadvantaged education region in Victoria and is also culturally and linguistically diverse with very rapid population growth in some areas.

The region has the highest proportion of schools (around 60 per cent), at a very significant level of disadvantage (on the state's disadvantage index) compared to 35 per cent in the total metropolitan area. Compared with other regions, WMR has the highest proportion of students (around 40 per cent), from a non-English speaking background which includes a significant proportion of new arrivals and refugees. Assessments also show that children entering school are generally more developmentally at risk in WMR than in Victoria as a whole.

The region's population grew by 24 per cent from 2001 to 2008 compared with 11 per cent across Victoria. The student population is expected to continue to have strong growth to reach near to 93,000 over the next fifteen years with the prospect of substantial growth in school size and numbers.

These compelling data show that the region has a unique mix of social, economic and demographic challenges stemming from localities that are the most disadvantaged in the state and culturally diverse. Some of these localities have growing school populations and steady demand for the establishment of new schools.

Many of the region's schools had deeply entrenched cultural and organisational limitations like low morale, low expectations, a narrow curriculum and difficulty in attracting high quality teachers. These limitations have over many years severely impacted on the capacity of region's schools to break out of the spiral of underachievement.

At the outset of the WMR school improvement strategy in 2008, the region asked what will it take to become the most rapidly improving region in student learning outcomes in the state. In answering that question, the region set itself the goal of achieving measurable, significant gains in student learning in literacy, numeracy and school completion rates.

Student achievement data from 2008 to 2012, now show that goal has been achieved. WMR was among most rapidly improving regions on most measures of learning outcomes.

Changed regional 'mindset'

Gains are also seen in the changed 'mindset' of the schools' leaders and teachers. A series of focus groups and a survey of principals⁴ revealed the factors contributing to their strong endorsement of the guiding and supporting role of the regional administration.

There is almost universal endorsement that the strategy improved teachers' instructional practices and has had a major positive impact in how schools function day-to-day (e.g. a sharper focus on improving student learning and a relentless focus on classroom practices). Over 95 per cent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the strategy improved instructional practices in their schools.

⁴ Survey: WMR principal survey was completed in September 2012 and the response rate was 64 per cent (N=86). It comprised a 5 point Likert scale for 10 questions and 4 open-ended questions that received around 770 comments.

The strategy explicitly sought to turnaround the role and 'mindset' of principals from on administrative or general educational leadership role to instructional leadership. The strategy collaboratively defined the expectations of this role and extensive professional learning was made available to support principals to become effective instructional leaders. In the survey, 87 per cent of principals indicated that their knowledge base as an instructional leader was improved and 88 per cent agreed that their effectiveness as a leader was strengthened.

Policy context in Victoria: authorising environment for reform

The history of policies for school improvement in Victoria is similar to that of many other OECD countries. Through the 1980s, earlier than in most countries, many curriculum, governance and staffing decisions were devolved to the school and the school council. In the 1990s, schools gained greater decision making authority through the creation of 'self-managing' schools. The authority of school councils and principals was significantly boosted so that decisions on the key determinants of a school's performance - such as staffing, curriculum and assessment and professional learning – could be made by those most directly responsible for improving schooling outcomes. This degree of devolved decision-making assumed schools had high levels of professionalism and extensive knowledge about effective schools and how to enable schools to improve. However, the capability to lead in this highly autonomous environment varied significantly.

In the early 2000s, large scale capacity building programs were implemented by the system to ensure that schools developed the levels of professional capability to benefit from the greater school level autonomy, such as early year's literacy, middle years' learning, curriculum and assessment, and improving leadership. School capacity was also monitored by an accountability process based on comprehensive performance and organisational data.

Results showed, however, that only a minority of schools steadily improved. Furthermore, the state-wide regional patterns of performance remained unchanged over this period. The lowest performing regions remained in that position and the gap between high and low performing regions was not reduced.

The WMR strategy was generated in 2008 to break out of this pattern. The Victorian education policy framework had adopted a stronger focus on system-led reform within the context of school autonomy, networks, quality leadership and teaching, partnerships and an accountability framework for student learning outcomes. Supported by additional resources, including targeted Federal Government funds to redress the effects of socio-economic disadvantage, the region established powerful overarching goals, a common language, mutual expectations in a network environment, and a highly specific and well-resourced action plan.

The policy lessons are now highly relevant. The new directions announced by the Victorian Government in *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community* (DEECD 2012) signal that the next improvement phase will be underpinned by school autonomy, a renewed focus on professional practice, high quality curriculum and streamlined accountability for outcomes. The importance of local networks to support all schools will be a major structural feature.

Reform approach: a collaborative systems strategy

The WMR reform was a systemic intervention strategy, designed to galvanise a collective effort to lift performance. The strategy aimed to improve the learning outcomes and wellbeing of all government school students in the region (including those performing well) by developing the instructional knowledge and practices of teachers, school leaders, and regional staff. The focus was primarily improvement in literacy and numeracy as the 'building blocks for access to a rich curriculum and successful transition pathways', and was subsequently extended to others areas of the curriculum.

The region had divided its schools into seven networks. Each network comprised around twenty schools and those schools and the associated regional support infrastructure were the organisational centre points for the region's strategy.

The approach to system-wide improvement was generated through a process of 'co-design' and mutual commitment between the region and all schools. This process enabled the region and its schools to establish powerful overarching goals, a common language, and an interlocking set of mutual expectations and actions.

The model they chose for literacy and numeracy improvement was a proven instructional model that had an excellent track record in the effective uses of expert consultants and coaches to continuously build teacher capacity. That methodology was extended to other areas of the curriculum as the strategy progressed.

Four important principles guided the improvement strategy.

- 'Collective efficacy'⁵ – this occurs when teachers collectively believe all students can learn and achieve. It is a lead indicator of the potential for growth in student learning.
- Focus on the 'instructional core' – the only place to improve student outcomes is in the classroom; that requires focussing on the 'instructional core' or the relationship between student, teacher and content.
- 'Layered learning' – this is about continuous capacity building that emphasises that everyone learns together about the same things. This included all principals, teachers, schools, networks, coaches, experts and all regional officers learning about the same elements of quality instruction, using data and the value of collaboration.
- 'Gradual release of responsibility' – this is a theory of learning that moves the learner from teacher-directed instruction to student centred collaboration and independent practice. It is applicable to all learning including students in the classroom and professional learning for teachers and principals.⁶

These principles were underpinned by what the region called 'de-privatised' classrooms; where professional practices are developed and refined through openness and collaboration.

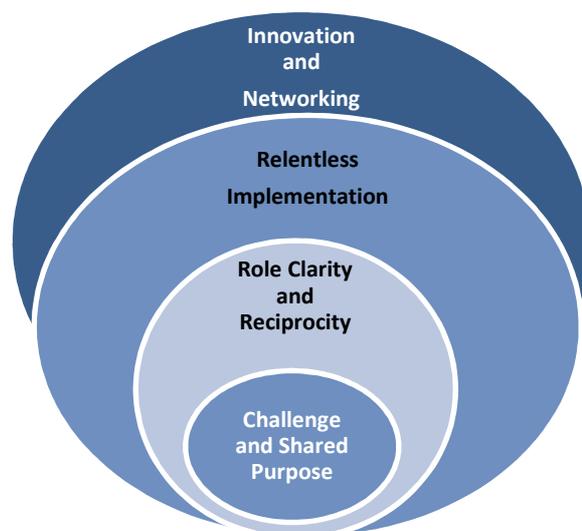
⁵ Collective efficacy (Goddard et al 2004) resonated with leaders and has remained as one of the core concepts underpinning their motivation. It is a cognitive construct that refers to how well group members relate to one another while working toward common goals. Collective efficacy has a fairly strong positive relationship to organisational effectiveness.

⁶ Gradual Release of Responsibility is a term for literacy improvement which is derived from the theory of Lev Vygotsky. WMR also chose to apply the concept to their approach for professional learning.

Strategy structure: intense focus on building professionalism and instructional practice

The strategy progressed through four broad interlocking stages.

- Setting the challenge and building the shared purpose. (2008.)
- Early implementation; establishing role clarity and tight web of reciprocal responsibilities among the layers in the system. (2009.)
- Relentless implementation: changing what schools do, particularly instructional practices for literacy and numeracy. (2010.)
- Emerging collective efficacy: flourishing innovation and network learning. (2011-2012.)



The phases did not necessarily follow a neat chronology and were more dynamic than this typology might suggest. While some schools and networks were well ahead and others slower, the phases do show the dynamics of the system's developmental approach to leading and supporting schools through their improvement process.

The account below outlines the stages in the development and implementation of the strategy to improve the performance of all Government schools in the region. It shows the key steps and decisions that were made between 2008 and 2012 as the system moved from directing, guiding and then supporting the reforms that schools were making. This is as much a story about an approach to implementation as it is about the design of a strategy.

Phase 1: Initiation. Setting the challenge and building the shared purpose (2008)

Principals describe the origins of the WMR improvement strategy in 2008 as stemming from the region's leadership presenting a 'compelling case' that galvanised broad commitment to achieving a major performance turnaround. The regional director articulated the challenge to improve and asked school leaders to commit to the common purpose of a region wide improvement strategy for the three years ahead.

The intent of the development phase was to agree on a common strategic direction – adopt a common purpose and common language, set priorities and build the momentum for change.

While the importance of securing the support of schools in any change process is self-evident, their engagement was not taken for granted. As Levin (2010) explains in analysing significant success in Ontario, Canada, real change in schools calls not only for understanding and capacity but deep commitment; securing widespread motivation and the engagement of schools at the outset requires a carefully designed change strategy.

Phase 1: Initiation

Compelling case: galvanising focus

Built on evidence: expert input/data

Principal consensus

System 'theory of action'

To arrive at consensus for a new direction, the WMR reform drew on the body of evidence concerning the complex dynamics of educational change in disadvantaged locations and on the record of success of interventions in similar contexts.

Big picture thinking

Senior leadership from the region led an initial series of forums that set the challenge of breaking the historical pattern of underperformance within the region. Everyone, whether in schools or the

regional office was invited to engage with this challenge. The guiding question posed in these forums was:

What will it take to be the most rapidly improving region in student learning outcomes in Victoria?

A series of focus groups and workshops was conducted by the region's leadership for all regional educators at every level from graduate teachers through to regional leadership. The collaborative discussion and 'big picture thinking' fed into a representative regional conference that was attended by a cross section of school and regional staff and experts. The workshops and the pivotal conference were structured around collectively answering the guiding question. The culmination of these discussions was a blueprint for reform that was owned by the schools and the region.

As one principal said:

The process of creating the strategy was huge. It involved network meetings, several principal forums and other occasions. We gathered in focus groups- a vertical slice of people from teaching aides, classroom teachers, principals... Then we had a conference in August 2008, with international speakers like Roger Goddard whose focus is collective efficacy. Out of that we built the strategy. When we signed up it was absolutely unarguable that it was built by everyone.

An open and honest deliberation on the region's data on student outcomes and school climate established the case for action and the conviction that the level of student outcomes could be changed.

The answer to the question what would it take to lift student outcomes and show measureable gain, was that all schools would need to significantly improve student

achievements in literacy and numeracy as these are the essential building blocks for accessing learning in all areas of the curriculum.

The WMR strategy is distinguished by the combination of rigorous performance analysis, a unified leadership focused on building commitment and capacity, training and practice in evidence-based classroom techniques, and the provision of additional resources and support. There was region wide agreement that improvement had to be at scale across the region, not just evident in pilot or volunteer locations.

This required certain significant changes.

- All schools needed to be involved and the regional leadership and officers needed to have this strategy as their core focus.
- Principals needed to become the instructional leaders. Leadership of implementation – both at the high level and the specific – was firmly located with school principals and their leadership teams.
- Schools needed to agree that their data would be analysed and openly shared within and among schools.
- Schools and regional staff agreed to participate in an intense and region-wide program for professional learning and implementation of a common coaching model in 'instructional practices' for literacy and numeracy.

As one principal said 'we established clarity of purpose and a unique combination of will and can, and that was for all across the region.'

Phase 2: Early implementation. Role clarity and reciprocal responsibilities (2009)

This phase was unambiguously about the 'how' of implementation – setting the expectations and adopting the precise structures, behaviours and the instructional techniques that would yield the best results. Schools had not only bought into a vision and priorities but also collectively adopted a specific delivery model for literacy and numeracy improvement.

Non-negotiables

Implementation depended on principals' acceptance of 'non-negotiables'. These called for all principals to 'sign-up' to the following as the key means to achieve the goals.

Phase 2: Early implementation

Building collective efficacy

Roles, responsibilities and reciprocity

Non-negotiables

Use of experts, consultants, coaches

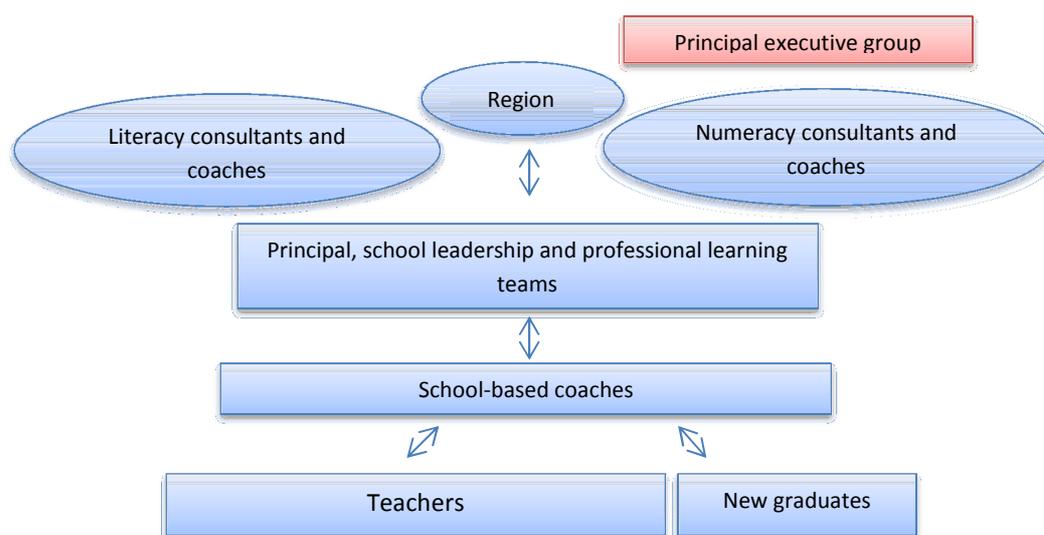
- The key focus to be literacy and numeracy improvement in their school – that is, focus explicit reform activity in these two areas.
 - As principals, become the instructional leader – at the outset, personally engage in intensive professional learning along with selected staff on the instructional models for improving literacy and numeracy.
 - Engage in the region wide actions for improving literacy and numeracy – e.g. appoint school-based coaches and establish a professional learning team.
- Engage openly with other schools in a network – e.g. share data, take part in 'learning walks', and 'instructional rounds' that establish a culture of collaborative enquiry across a network into effective teaching practices (City et al: 2009).

The assumption underpinning this regional approach is that striking the right balance between a mandated and top-down direction for achievement and instruction and local level autonomy will deliver large scale district or regional outcomes. WMR principals committed to this plan from the outset. Those who were initially more reserved in their endorsement had become fully supportive after two years of implementation.

Implementation structure: leadership and support

The layers of roles and responsibilities cascaded from regional leadership to networks and schools and the intermediary layers of experts and coaches.

The diagram below is a representation of the roles and responsibilities.



Regional network leaders were each assigned roles fully dedicated to delivering the strategy in their networks, and asked to focus on instructional improvement rather than administrative oversight. They had the responsibility of sustaining the common language, allocating the resources, building collaborative arrangements and achieving milestones.

Expert consultants in literacy and numeracy were expert practitioners who supported regional officers in leading the professional learning program.⁷ By 2011, there were 48 consultants. They had the capability to diagnose a school's performance and implement a plan to rapidly escalate a school's capacity for designing and managing change. A consultant typically worked with three to four schools. Consultants were accountable to the principals and provided regular and detailed reports to principals and regional officers.

Principals became instructional leaders. They were to encourage open-door classrooms, extensive data use, plan and facilitate the activity of consultants and coaches, ensure positive learning environments, and engage in network learning. Principals included their commitments in their performance plans and were willing to be held accountable for their contribution to their school's and the region's improvement agenda.

⁷ Consultants in literacy were mostly drawn from those familiar with the evidence based school improvement practice and strategies supported by Diane Snowball.

School improvement teams (SITs) were formed in each school as a group to lead school planning for professional learning. The SIT comprised members of the leadership team, the curriculum co-ordinator, coaches and teachers at various levels. They led the curriculum planning and the plan for professional learning – essentially the on-the-ground strategy implementation.

Professional learning teams (PLTs) of teachers focused on student work and student data to identify student learning needs. They established how to improve teaching to meet the identified learning needs of students.

Regional coaches were assigned to at least two schools in a network to improve the quality of teaching in literacy and numeracy. They provided a range of tailored learning opportunities for selected members of the school staff, including the principal and leadership team; professional learning for all staff; and closely interacted with school based coaches. They used frequent demonstrations of best practice, conducted workshops to build teaching practice knowledge, and consistently drew on analysis of student work and strategies to improve student learning.

School based coaches were in every school. Every school identified one or two school based coaches to assist leadership teams to implement improved instructional practices in literacy and numeracy. The school-based coach had a key instructional leadership role and was part of the leadership team

The model for coaching for regional and school based coaches was built on identical beliefs and practices. The key qualities for successful coaches and for successful coaching are summarised below.

BOX 1: The coaching role

Factors in the success of coaching
<p>Successful coaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequently demonstrate outstanding instructional practices and can engage in substantive conversations: they foster reflective professional relationships • Make extensive use of data and evidence in coaching • Have a respected place in the leadership team of a school • Continue to develop their knowledge and skills <p>Successful coaching practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mutually agreed and documented plan of work for supporting all or targeted teachers: goals, participants, milestones outcomes • Models of support explicitly explained and applied – demonstration to independence underpinned by feedback

Source: WMR documentation, source Diane Snowball

Phase 3: Relentless implementation (2010)

This phase focused on fundamentally changing what schools do, particularly their instructional practices for literacy and numeracy, use of evidence and data, and transparency and sharing in networks.

Quality Instructional practice was a region wide professional learning curriculum for improving literacy and numeracy instruction. The sequenced programs were tailored to meet the needs of *all* principals, leadership teams, teachers, and coaches engaged in the reform.

Phase 3: Relentless implementation

Intensive professional learning

An instructional focus: build teacher skills; open up classrooms; know each child

Extensive use of data and evidence

They built a common understanding of key instructional concepts and demonstrated precise techniques for effective literacy and numeracy teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools.

The time allocation was significant. For example, in 2009, principals committed to sixteen days professional learning; secondary and primary leadership teams twice a term; regional literacy coaches twelve days; teachers (grade/year level specific) literacy and numeracy for ten sessions; and five days for graduate teachers.

The professional learning program for literacy and numeracy for primary and secondary schools was planned as a three year program. The rationale for the content of the programs revolves around assembling the best evidence on teaching and learning for literacy and numeracy and using that to construct instructional models to inform teaching practice.

This is best summed up in the following quotation by Diane Snowball, who led the region's literacy reforms.

A major influence on literacy teaching is how well teachers know their students' strengths and needs and how they use this knowledge to plan their teaching. This means that teachers need to fully understand the components of a literacy curriculum, how to continually assess them and how to teach their students in the most effective ways. School leadership plays a major role in this work, with leaders knowing enough to properly guide their school curriculum and ensure their teachers are doing the best possible work to achieve success for all students.

A reading of the region's professional learning program plans for 2009 and 2010 reveals the comprehensiveness of these plans. For example, in 2009 the region delivered close to two hundred literacy professional learning sessions, most of which ran for 4 or 6 hours. Teachers and principals were also able to access the expertise of literacy and numeracy coaches and to use their networks to share and gain advice about how to ensure changed practices were being embedded into the school's operations and into classroom routines.

Leadership development was provided to ensure consistency in instructional leadership and school improvement throughout the region. Balanced Leadership is a seven day program based on the research of Robert Marzano and the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) organisation. Principals were also supported to engage in instructional rounds⁸ (City et al: 2009) to observe and give feedback on classroom practices in other schools as well as their own. This was a particularly valuable process for those not already active in networks. The Bastow Institute of Leadership (Victoria) also provided leadership development programs, including, for new principals.

⁸ Instructional rounds were facilitated by Thomas Fowler-Finn, who was previously the Superintendent of the Cambridge school district in Massachusetts, USA.

Data training was provided to support every school and every teacher to use individual student data to track progress and directly inform actions that need to be taken to ensure on-going growth in learning.

The training for principals equipped them to engage with their staff on regional, network, school and individual students' data. Everyone was also provided with training in the use of customised data analysis and planning tools.

Techniques for achieving consistency in practices were implemented so that role functions and purposes were clear to all. Box 2 describes the behaviour expectations for principals, coaches and teachers with respect to coaching. It demonstrates the interconnectedness of the coach's role with that of the principal and teachers. A key aspect of this model was that the coaching activity was visible, tied in with the schools professional learning and built on reciprocal relationships. Importantly, coaches needed to be highly skilled and valued by colleagues.

BOX 2: Role clarity: working with coaches

Working with coaching – a shared endeavour

Roles of all participants in school-based professional learning (PL) need to be clarified.

Principals

- Establish a team for professional learning
- Become instructional leaders - data use, focus on school improvement
- Demonstrate the value of coaches by personally tapping their expertise
- Establish a schedule for PL with the coach; select and engage teachers
- Regularly meet with coaches and become involved with their work
- Build time for coaching demonstrations, planning, discussion and goal setting

Coaches

- Work collaboratively with administrators on professional development plans
- Establish and document long and short-term goals
- Offer a range of methods and strategies for teachers
- Help teachers to set goals
- Provide frequent demonstrations and ensure follow-up by recording decisions made to guide next demonstration
- Assist teachers to analyse student needs, plan and monitor
- Maintain daily logs and produce in-depth reports

Teachers

- Show willingness to continue learning and receive feedback
- Share good practice
- Visit classrooms
- Document, review and pose questions.

Source: WMR documentation developed by Diane Snowball

Phase 4: Deepening learning. Emerging collective efficacy, flourishing innovation and network learning (2011-2012)

The current phase in the WMR strategy is extending the place of networking, more shared responsibility, innovation and purposeful professional learning in sustaining the improvement trajectory.

This period has seen a number of self-generated networks emerging within the wider regional framework. These were initiated by principals who have engaged with their colleagues to

work collectively on clearly articulated areas of mutual concern. For example, in 2010 three schools initiated a numeracy improvement strategy and this is now being implemented in seventeen schools across the region in clusters of 3 to 5 schools. This self-generated approach is now flourishing and being applied to areas such as Secondary Science, 'High Yield' teaching strategies and Professional Learning Communities.

Phase 4: Deepening learning

Confident networks – de-privatising practice

Shared regional priorities

Tailored more closely to need

Intensified expectations of professionalism

With government policy increasing school autonomy and building professional trust, schools have the opportunity to extend the mutually supportive role of networks

that has underpinned much of the earlier success with this strategy. This phase is more nuanced and practices are differentiated among networks and address schools' specific needs.

As school leaders, we know our communities and we know how to effect positive change in our schools, and we know the importance of local knowledge and decision making processes. With these important conditions in place, we take responsibility to drive change and determine and implement the approaches that will achieve excellence for our students both locally and system wide.

Western Metropolitan Region: A Learning Community 2012-2014. DEECD, 2012.

A collective view of WMR aspirations for the next three years 2012-2014 is around two guiding questions

- How will we achieve more than one year's learning growth for each student annually?
- How will we achieve this across every classroom?

Success would be seen in the following key outcomes.

- Further significant measurable growth in student learning – more than one year's growth.
- Reduced in-school variation i.e. greater consistency and learning outcomes between classes.
- Significant measurable increases in school completion rates and successful pathways for all students.

The new questions open the door to new research and practices. They signal the need to deepen the use of data to differentiate learning, and to attend more closely to the challenge of improving teaching and learning in secondary schools.

Priority next steps to continue a systems approach to improvement in all schools include the following.

- Further enhance networks to build professional trust and mutual accountability.
- Sustain a disciplined focus on building professional capability at all levels through professional learning.
- Extend the specification of an evidence-based instructional model for literacy and numeracy to all areas of the curriculum.
- Provide collegial support for under-performing schools so as to support the weaker members of a locality or network.
- Build quality assurance systems for experts, coaches, tools, data systems and materials so that networks can reliably share and expand capability.

Explaining success

The core features of the WMR improvement strategy are summarised in the Box 3 below.

BOX 3: Snapshot – WMR as a successful system reform strategy

Reform strategy- snapshot

Key goals

- To demonstrate measureable significant gains in literacy, numeracy and school completion
- To demonstrate more than one year's growth for each student each year
- To reduce in-school variation in learning outcomes.

Core beliefs

For students

- All children can learn; work hard and get smart; failure is not an option.

For principals and teachers

- Everyone learns together; uses evidence/data; embraces reciprocity, shared focus and mutual accountability.

Main strategies

- All schools challenged to improve; established a common language
- Co-designed priorities: literacy P-12, numeracy P-12, post-compulsory outcomes and the learning environment
- Precise improvement techniques: instructional leadership; teacher instructional practices; de-privatised classrooms and collaborative practice; use of evidence and data; school based coaching
- Agreed roles for all: from network leaders to school based coaches.
- Intense professional learning for all
- New resources at regional and schools levels

Main outcomes

- Impressive– from lowest out of 9 regions in 2008 to most improving in 2012
- Endorsement from principals for quality and direction of regional leadership
- Self-generating and sustainable networks
- A strong trajectory for future improvement based on professionalism

Source: WMR documentation

International accounts of equivalent system led school improvement strategies attribute success to features such as, a strong vision, intensive staff development on instructional practice, consistent accountability systems and collegiality (e.g. Fullan 2007; Elmore 2004). These were all apparent in the WMR strategy.

In addition, WMR was exacting in their expectations, confident about how to make the greatest impact and detailed in their planning of improvement processes. The 'secret' to the success of the WMR reform was the collective and intense focus on implementation, the tight web of roles and responsibilities in delivery, including an additional 'coaching' layer in staffing and experts as a support infrastructure; and the collective unwavering confidence that they had the 'right solutions'. 'Gradual release of responsibility', applied to professional growth, enabled a dynamic approach to the mix of top-down and bottom-up strategies needed as time progressed (Hopkins et al 2011). Focus, precision, collaboration, deliberate actions and collective efficacy are key words used by the educators that took part in this process.

Strong principal endorsement

In a survey of principals in 2012, a high 80-90 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the regional strategy improved literacy and numeracy, that the drive for role clarity and a negotiated role for principals as instructional leaders were highly effective, and that changing classroom instructional practice has had a major positive impact. Moreover, they also conveyed the idea that the strategies' core features (e.g. instructional leadership, coaching, de-privatised classrooms, self-generating networks, using school and student data, and professional learning teams), have become established as the right way to proceed in the future.

Principals' assessment of their most important actions that contributed to success in their schools included the following in priority order.

- Explicit commitment was given to coaching as a lever in improvement.
- The whole school strategy was tied to the regional improvement strategy..
- The school developed an instructional model.
- Greater emphasis was placed on data use and being clearer about the capabilities required for using data effectively.
- An explicit instructional leadership role was adopted and openly discussed.
- Principals own professional growth became more important.
- Professional learning teams were established that built a professional learning culture.

Pockets of underperformance

Of course, gains have not been universal and pockets of under-performance remain. All systems with performance success stories, like the countries that make gains in PISA rankings, also experience this phenomenon. It is still early days in understanding a region's capability to provide differentiated support for struggling schools and knowing when to intervene in a more hands-on way. However, the WMR approach to systemic improvement has demonstrated that it is possible to promote large scale school improvement through a combination of common and differentiated support. Their action was guided by the principle that most schools improve when the next level of work is clearly identified and intense support is provided to move forward.

The region has undertaken a preliminary analysis of schools that did not show growth over the period covered by the reform. Seventeen of the region's 142 schools regressed in their performance: 12 primary schools and five secondary schools.

Common characteristics of these schools were the following:

- Consistently poor data on measures of staff well-being, school climate and supportive leadership.
- Inconsistent leadership or lack of capability at the principal level that was not adequately addressed.
- Too many reform initiatives being undertaken by the school that led to the lack of purposeful focus on a core improvement strategy.
- No evidence of significant engagement in a network for mentoring by more experienced leaders or support from high performing schools; and not seeking external support
- Declining student numbers that threatened the curriculum on offer and compounded difficult management issues through the lack of flexibility in staffing.

In hindsight, the region believes that improvement could have been achieved in these schools with more timely intervention measures such as the following.

- Earlier and more precise analysis of lead indicators of performance and climate so as to identify the need for intervention.
- Making an early judgment on evidence about the capacity of the current leadership to take the school forward and, if necessary, moving quickly to initiate leadership change.
- More intensive coaching and support programs for the principal and leadership teams.
- Having a poorly performing school establish a collaborative partnership with a school which was showing improvement.

The analysis of these schools consistently revealed that school leadership was the most influential factor in preventing the school from improving student results. Getting the timing right was key to successful intervention.

Conclusion: sustaining professionalism, focus and improvement

The collaborative systems approach to school improvement adopted in WMR was designed to enable all schools to break out of the downward spiral of underachievement and low expectations. An intense focus on escalating the skills of professionals was core to this. Highly skilled professionals with deep experience of success can then move on to support others also make significant gains, tailor improvement strategies and innovate. WMR schools now need to advance to the next level of system improvement.

The WMR strategy was successful through designing a tight set of specifications, building instructional capability and then focusing relentlessly on implementation, including providing detailed and tailored support for individual schools and networks. As the Victorian system moves into a new phase and the focus shifts from regions to interest based networks or clusters, the challenge will be to transfer the lessons from the WMR reform into the new context.

The system improvement model had the following features.

- Strong system leadership setting the collective challenge
- Universal buy-in; co-design emphasis.
- Role clarity, tight web of responsibilities and reciprocity
- Relentless implementation focus – instructional leadership, literacy and numeracy instructional models, use of evidence and data; and transparency and sharing in networks.
- Resource allocation for new 'infrastructure'– new staffing layer for coaching and advising.
- Innovation following growth in capability – collaboration, deeper practices and differentiation.

The next phase will be where the benefits of 'collective efficacy' become evident in thriving and supportive networks, innovation and continuous improvement in student outcomes.

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