



NETWORKS AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

The vision of the Education State is to build an education system that fosters excellence and improves outcomes for every child and young person in every community, regardless of background, circumstances or postcode. The Education State is an aspiration that should motivate and inspire us, and galvanise our collective effort at every level of the system.

Last year the Education State road shows outlined the key elements of this vision, including ambitious targets for student achievement, wellbeing and engagement over the next five and 10 years; a substantial investment in needs-based funding; and the implementation of the Victorian curriculum and new support for schools.

This year, Area Executive Directors and Senior Education Improvement Leaders (SEILs) commenced work and are contacting principals and networks. We continue to appoint people to regional positions that will form the multidisciplinary area-based teams to strengthen support to schools. Further advice about the operation of the new regional structure will be provided over the coming month.

Central to this new way of working is forming strong partnerships with families and communities through other departments and agencies, local government and business to create a highly networked system. This approach requires a focussed effort to strengthen the transitions at each stage of the learning journey, through early childhood, schools and post schooling pathways, to create an inclusive system.

Over the past few years, our experiences of networks have varied. We know that some principals have been engaged in vibrant learning networks and we want that spirit and endeavour to continue and to spread. We want all principals and school leaders to have this same opportunity.

We know that the best education systems in the world are highly networked.¹ The purpose of this communication is to describe how we can work together to embed a networked system of schools to powerfully lift the performance and achievement of all students.

¹Farrar, M. (2015). Learning together: The power of cluster-based school improvement, Centre for Strategic Education Paper 246; Hargreaves A, Halasz G, & Pont, B. (2007). School leadership for systemic improvement in Finland, OECD Study Report; Hargreaves, A. (2011 Leading a self-improving school system.) National College for School Leadership.

Together we can create such a system for Victoria. This will happen as school principals within a geographic network come together and adopt a Communities of Practice (CoP) approach, using the *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes* (FISO) to drive improvement.

Each network will have, at its core, an unrelenting focus on improving student outcomes. They will engage in relevant, purposeful and sustained learning and action, informed by evidence, with the aim of achieving excellence and equity.

As leaders, we have the opportunity to model the types of professional practices that we want to see in our schools:

- collaboration and collective responsibility for all learners
- use of data and evidence to select the most effective improvement strategies
- evaluation of the impact on student learning
- professional learning to improve expertise
- reducing variability of performance within and between schools.

The following pages begin to give structure and substance to this. This year will be about implementing our improvement efforts with depth and precision, innovation and creativity, and through the evaluation of our impact on student outcomes. I look forward to working with you, as we share expertise and learn from each other. Together we can build a world-class networked system that reflects collective responsibility, passionate enquiry and high performance.

“When you enlarge your world laterally within your own level of the system, and vertically across levels, you gain ideas and perspective. When many people do this, you literally change the very context (for the better) within which you work. Networks get you out of your own narrow world.” (Fullan, 2005)



Bruce Armstrong
A/Deputy Secretary, RSG

COLLABORATION IN THE EDUCATION STATE

This document focuses on how we will work together to embrace school-to-school collaboration, and foster the opportunity for every principal to belong to a dynamic local network and engage in a community of practice. Each network will focus on examining evidence that will lead to improvements in professional practice and, ultimately, enriched outcomes for all students, regardless of background, circumstances or where they live.

NETWORKS: IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE APPROACH

Successful systems support their principals, school leaders and teachers to be well connected with their peers through active partnerships and productive learning focussed networks of schools.

Through geographic networks operating as **Communities of Practice (CoP)**, we will create highly effective, system-wide professional learning that will:

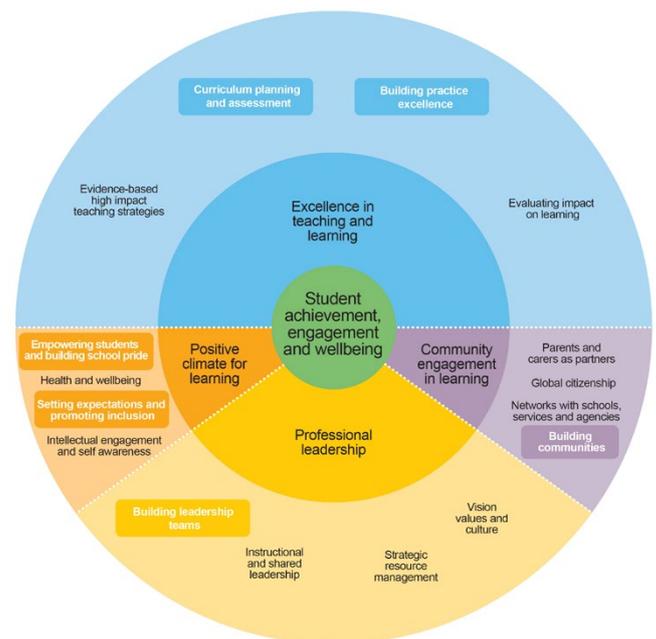
- promote the moral purpose to ensure that within our schools, all young people become creative, adaptable, self-directed learners who achieve their potential
- enrich educational leadership and collaboration so all education professionals develop progressively to
- develop higher levels of expertise to improve student outcomes
- sustain and value professional learning for all education professionals
- be built on collaborative, enquiry-based practice where data is shared and evidence drives learning and action
- focus on the priorities and initiatives in the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO), and engage in relevant, meaningful, purposeful and sustained learning and action, informed by evidence to achieve excellence in student outcomes.

Networks will engage in the shared work of learning by:

- sharing their collective expertise and evidence based practice
- committing to effective and challenging peer review to drive the improvement in each other's schools
- learning through inquiry into the impact of selected interventions
- developing a sharp focus for improvement efforts through joint project work on the 6 initiatives.

Principals will also use the network activity and experience to embed practices that will reach into their schools and communities. Collaboration will be used systematically to accelerate improvement across their network by mobilising teachers, students, parents and community partners. Collaboration across schools will not be limited to the traditional leadership positions — it will occur across all levels to improve student outcomes.

The *Framework for Improving Student Outcomes*

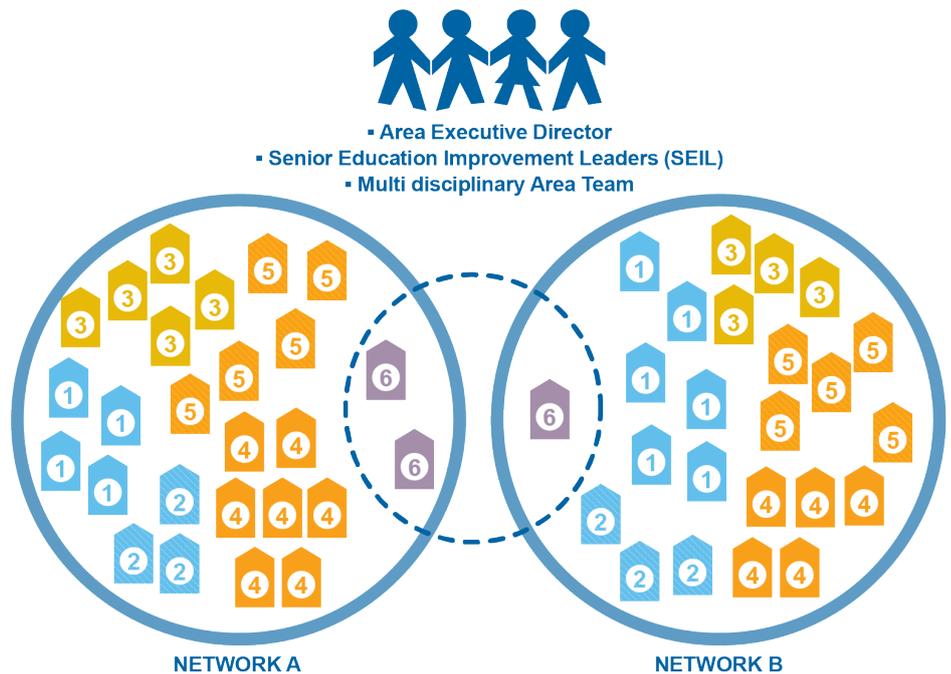


provides four priorities for improvement:

1. Excellence in Teaching and Learning
2. Professional Leadership
3. Creating a Positive Climate for Learning
4. Community Engagement in Learning

These priorities were established to create coherence and focus to our reform efforts over time. We should not lose sight of them. Nor should we lose sight of the six initiatives highlighted to drive improvement across the system to help reach the targets. I ask that you bring these priorities, and the initiatives that you have identified, into your Annual Implementation Plan to the attention of your whole-school community, staff, students and parents.

FISO INITIATIVES



Most principals will find schools to collaborate with on their selected FISO initiatives within a geographic network. However, SEILs and Area Executive Directors will support principals and school leaders to collaborate across networks or area boundaries should that be necessary to support and strengthen their improvement strategies. Scaling and differentiation of evidence informed practice and excellence across our system is a major challenge that can be addressed through disciplined collaboration.

Principals and school leaders need to support each other to reduce classroom variability by creating collaborative professional practices with each other's school, sharing data and evidence and strengthening our collective effort for improvement.

While some geographic networks are active and already using many aspects of the CoP approach, all networks will be expected to have elected a network chair by early in Term 2, 2016. During Term 2, networks will be supported by SEILs and resources from Bastow to evaluate their current network activity using the resources provided, and to strengthen those elements of practice to align to the CoP approach. Adopting a CoP approach within your network will enrich the shared learning

experience and keep the focus on evidence for continuous improvement. SEILs and network chairs will be trained in how to develop a CoP approach and will work with their networks to embed the approach.

It is expected that networks will meet at least once a term to facilitate continuous learning and improvement. These meetings may incorporate time for smaller learning groups based on FISO initiatives to meet to support improvement in their schools. These groups will determine whether other school leaders and teachers need to meet, and the frequency of meetings to drive improvement. Networks will be able to request administrative support from their area team through their SEIL if needed.

Networks adopting the CoP approach will create a compelling space for principals and school leaders to learn together, focus collectively on investing in evidence-based strategies to implement the FISO, and share best practice to drive improved learning outcomes for students across Victoria.

Networks will be closely supported by the area multi-disciplinary team, which will be available to respond to the needs of principals, such as supplying relevant information or resources to support collaborative practice and knowledge sharing.

NETWORK CHAIRS: ROLE, APPOINTMENT AND SUPPORT

As part of reinvigorating networks as a key component of the Education State reforms, we are seeking to acknowledge the system leadership role of the network chair through investment in training, support and the role of Principal Reference Groups (PRGs) in regions.

A principal class member from within the network will chair each geographic network. The role of the network chair will be to:

- provide leadership for the network, playing a lead role in setting the network's agenda and vision, in collaboration with the network SEIL/s
- drive a CoP approach to network activity that has a central focus on the FISO, through shared data and accountability, collective responsibility and rigorous evaluation of the impact of improvement strategies on student outcomes
- provide opportunities for the network to discuss the implementation of other DET student-related policy and practice e.g. transitions, wellbeing, etc., and shared operational matters such as OHS, facilities and staffing issues as required
- facilitate opportunities for the network to engage with the broader school and local communities and key partners across the government, business and community sectors to improve student outcomes
- collaborate with SEILs and other area-based multi-disciplinary team members on behalf of the network as required, facilitating two-way communication, consultation and feedback between the Department and network schools
- represent the network as a member of the region's Principal Reference Group (PRG)
- undertake succession planning for the network chair position in collaboration with the network SEIL/s.

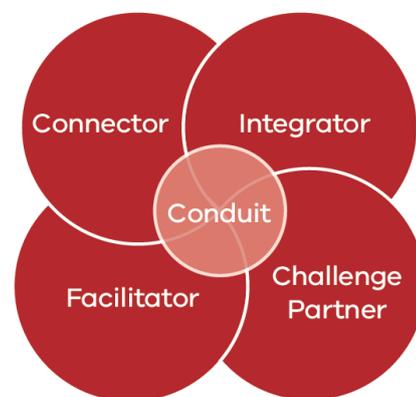
The appointment of the network chair will be managed through the network itself, supported by the network SEIL/s. The selection process will be open and transparent, with expressions of interest sought. Guidance for this process will be made available to networks through SEILs. Networks that have already elected network chairs, and network chairs themselves, will decide whether they wish the current appointment to continue, based on this new advice regarding networks operating as CoP.

It is recognised that the role of network chair requires additional time and commitment from principals. The Department is investing in capacity building opportunities for network chairs to ensure the strongest possible school network contribution to improvement efforts.

Bastow will provide a range of CoP support material and resources, as well as the Education State leadership initiative *Expert Leaders of Education* course. The initiative will include professional development, support and incentives for principals to take on the role of network chair, and to implement the CoP approach.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT LEADERS IN NETWORKS

SEILs will be a conduit for geographic networks operating as CoP and have an important role to play in facilitating, connecting, integrating and challenging to ensure effective network practice.



They will assist networks to adopt an effective CoP approach and ensure the network sufficiently focuses on FISO implementation.

SEILs will also provide similar support to smaller initiative-specific networks where required. They will be well placed, for instance, to identify smaller networks beyond the geographic network or area boundary that can be joined up to learn from and work with each other.



SEILs will act as a bridge between networks and the rest of the Department. Their role will include:

- **connector** - brokering relationships between schools, and key experts to help networks nurture their strengths, bridge areas of development and pursue greater opportunities
- **integrator** - maintaining information-sharing relationships within networks and with other networks, ensuring clarity and broader sharing of practice
- **facilitator** - focussing on enabling thriving conversations between and among your network's members and stimulating interest within networks to ensure member engagement
- **challenge partner** - engaging networks in challenging conversations about evidence, exemplary practice, accountability and transparency, information sharing, and a focus on FISO delivery.

As we develop and implement the new regional operating model and improve our collaborative engagement, we will need a generosity of spirit that acknowledges our different roles, at every level of our system, which needs to work in complementary and supportive ways to focus on the learning and development needs of all children and young people in our schools. We have a unique opportunity to build on our strengths and rise to our challenges by demonstrating adaptive leadership and that we are 'working smarter together than harder alone'.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Central and regional support and collaboration

<i>Detailed FISO advice and resources released to help principals and teachers implement the improvement cycle</i>	<i>February 2016</i>
<i>Communities of Practice resources released</i>	<i>March 2016</i>
<i>New region and area model formally commences, including multi-disciplinary team-based approach</i>	<i>From 1 March 2016</i>
<i>Bastow twilights sessions to support CoP</i>	<i>From Term 2 2016</i>
<i>Training in the CoP approach for SEILs</i>	<i>April - May 2016</i>

Network implementation

<i>Principals and SEILs talk about network formation and CoP and how they will be supported to establish good practice</i>	<i>February - April 2016</i>
<i>Engage in or transition to networks and adopt a CoP approach</i>	<i>February 2016 onwards</i>
<i>Training provided for network chairs through the Bastow Wise Program</i>	<i>Commences July 2016</i>
<i>Meeting of statewide network chairs – annual conference</i>	<i>October 2016</i>