Leading Teacher Learning

‘Professional learning and development is at the heart of an effective and continuously growing teaching profession’. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016)

Leading teacher learning in schools is one of the most important levers available to us to achieve our goal for all students to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions for life long learning. Teacher learning has the power to help us break the link between disadvantage and poor achievement. A focus on driving evidence informed, and consistent teacher practice through effective teacher learning will help us to develop professional learning communities across the Victorian system.

Many leadership teams in schools have already established high performance learning cultures. Leading teacher learning is always a pre-cursor to improving student outcomes as teachers work together, and place student learning needs at the centre of their practice. When teacher learning focuses on those practices that have the greatest impact on student learning outcomes, and teachers are supported to implement new practices and evaluate their impact, teacher knowledge is enhanced and school culture is transformed.

Effective teacher learning has the power to shift attitudes, behaviors, relationships and every day interactions. It contributes to changing mindsets and builds a collective drive to improve which is guided by clearly identified improvement priorities, internal accountability for professional behavior and impact on student outcomes.

Teacher learning builds practices that benefit children, young people, families and communities but it also brings the most significant benefits for teachers. Teachers are enriched by new personal and professional growth and opportunities to be innovative. They develop new knowledge, skills and behaviors which enhance individual and collective teacher efficacy and boost our ability to achieve the Education State targets.

Bruce Armstrong
Deputy Secretary, Regional Services Group

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*Adapted from the Learning Forward ‘point of view’ as presented at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Ottawa 2017

LEADING TEACHER LEARNING TO TRANSFORM STUDENT LEARNING

Teachers come to a profession that provides infinite opportunities for life-long learning. As they progress through their career, teachers master skills, build their knowledge and share and challenge professional practice. For many teachers this learning is personally stimulating and fulfilling and the impact on student learning will be evident. As education leaders we have a responsibility to nurture this passion for teaching and learning and ensure that the whole school community benefits from a high performance learning culture.

Effective professional learning is a catalyst to school improvement. Principals and leadership teams can lead a change to transform the way teachers learn, transform teacher practice and shift the trajectory for student learning.

FIGURE 1: LEADING TEACHER LEARNING

Creating and sustaining the conditions for this type of change requires cultivating both individual learning and what Fullan calls ‘collaborative professionalism’. This is an essential element to building teacher’s self-efficacy and cultivating commitment, resilience, moral/ethical purpose, and willingness to teach to one’s best. Under these conditions teachers become investigators of their own practice and work together to find evidence based solutions to problems of practice. We call this a high performance learning culture.
A school as a learning organisation has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision' (OECD Kools and Stoll, 2016).

As a system, our role in leading learning is to actively foster an environment where every individual contributes to collective learning and improvement. Over the past year we have laid the foundations to support the development of a self-improving system which uses the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) as an instrument of adaptive change and delivers high quality and consistent teacher practice.

The FISO provides guidance and resources to focus our efforts on what matters most. Leaders and teachers use the FISO Improvement Cycle to identify and address persistent challenges. They examine evidence, prioritise efforts, implement strategies and regularly monitor progress to achieve improvement goals.

The strategic planning process charts the way forward, starting with an assessment of data and student learning needs. It involves all the members of a school community and they participate as both leaders and learners. Everybody is engaged to contribute to the improvement effort, giving cohesion, consistency and focus to school-wide improvement.

Research tells us that, of a principal’s many roles, leading professional learning has the largest effect size on student outcomes (see figure 1). Creating a high performance learning culture is the key to generating self-sustaining school improvement and giving every member of the learning community an opportunity to grow with it.

A high performance learning culture, which is based on teacher learning and development, is a precondition for school improvement. It not only changes the way teachers do things, it also influences the beliefs, values, and aspirations of a whole school community.

To empower our colleagues to become the best they can be, leadership must come from all levels. ‘Principals and leadership teams must therefore enhance the role of teachers, individually and collectively, in learning to lead the development of practice’.

Agile leaders know that they must work through the school that they have, and take their people on a journey of long-term behavioral and cultural change. To do this, leaders have a great opportunity to model the application of the improvement cycle and the centrality of their own learning and development.
The essence of teaching is leading learning and ‘the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching’. Teaching is a clinical profession and, in the same way that a school uses an improvement cycle to drive whole-school improvement, teachers use an inquiry cycle as part of their daily practice. To ensure there is growth in student learning, teachers plan and implement deliberate interventions, investigate alternative pedagogical strategies and experiment with new practices. This is complex work which requires peer and leadership support, and it needs to be recognised and celebrated when it has a positive impact on student learning.

The FISO Improvement Cycle is designed to be used at all levels in a school and teachers who use it find that they are empowered by the inquiry process. It helps them understand and identify their own learning needs, trial and innovate, and ultimately achieve practice excellence. As such the Improvement Cycle recognises the centrality of teachers in driving school improvement.

The most powerful part of the learning comes from implementing, monitoring and evaluating the teaching, and from doing this work with peers. By deliberately using self-reflection and analysis we shift the focus from ‘implementation as delivery’ to ‘implementation as learning’. The more deliberate this effort is, the more powerful the learning becomes.

Leading this kind of learning requires a shared and disciplined way of identifying, addressing and solving problems. Leadership teams must also adopt an agile mindset as they trust that using the improvement cycle will help teachers to learn their way through teaching challenges and persistent problems of practice. In this kind of culture people are motivated to learn and improve and they want to see how improvements can make their students’ lives better and their job easier and more productive.

Collective engagement, knowledge sharing and peer learning have a powerful effect in magnifying and spreading the benefits of professional learning and add a new and valuable dimension to the learning undertaken by individuals. They connect teachers and leaders to their colleagues within and across schools and to external experts.

Many teachers are accustomed to working in professional learning teams and appreciate the advantages of planning together, and sharing resources and knowledge. The Professional Learning Communities (PLC) initiative, currently being implemented in 65 Victorian schools, provides the structures and tools to amplify the effectiveness of team work. Effective PLCs formalise roles, responsibilities and practices, ultimately providing clarity and focus to the community members. The Improvement Cycle is at the heart of PLC work, together teachers reflect on and evaluate the impact of their teaching on student learning, and determine what they can do to improve their professional practice. Under the guidance of an instructional leader, PLCs systematically select tools, such as moderation of assessment, feedback and case study discussions, to explore and resolve problems of practice. This is a powerful form of peer learning which builds professional trust and collective efficacy.

Principals model collective responsibility by making the strategic planning process inclusive, by transparently setting goals, by welcoming feedback and challenges from staff, and by establishing partnerships with other schools. Working in Communities of Practice (CoP), principals and leadership teams leverage the learning and expertise of the wider network and, using the FISO, they embed collective responsibility for driving improvement. The CoP model extends school based professional learning opportunities beyond the individual school, providing stimuli, experience and resources that would not be otherwise available locally.
Students taught by the most effective teachers learn in six months what those taught by the average teacher learn in a year. And even more importantly, effective teachers have a significant impact on the learning trajectory for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students experiencing disadvantage are likely to learn at the same rate as their peers under the instruction of an effective teacher.\(^\text{14}\)

What distinguishes effective teachers is a commitment to deliberate practice and the use of evidence of achievement to adapt what happens in classrooms to meet the needs of all students. They draw on evidence including student feedback, use pedagogies for deep learning including critical thinking, and activate student agency, making students the owners of their own learning.

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**HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN TEACHER LEARNING IS EFFECTIVE?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FROM</th>
<th>TO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>teacher learning is conceived as the acquisition of education knowledge (e.g. new theories, new policies and new research findings)</td>
<td>teacher learning is driven by student needs and focused on the implementation and mastery of new strategies (implementation as learning)</td>
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<tr>
<td>teacher learning is an isolated event triggered by the individual teacher</td>
<td>teacher learning is a routine practice within the school delivered through teacher teams using a disciplined inquiry process</td>
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<tr>
<td>teacher learning is conceived as attendance at workshops delivered by external experts</td>
<td>teacher experts work in classrooms with teams of teachers learning from each other</td>
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<tr>
<td>teacher performance and development plans (PDP) are private documents</td>
<td>PDPs are public documents which connect teachers with common goals or learning needs to enable peer learning</td>
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(Adapted from Cole, P, AITSL 2012)\(^\text{15}\)

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For further reading, please see:


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*Adapted from the Learning Forward ‘beliefs’ as presented at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Ottawa 2017*