

## Accelerating improvement in Queensland schools

Queensland's recent improvement trajectory began in 2008, following analysis of the first NAPLAN tests by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). We were provided with a compelling reason to consider how to better support Queensland students to prosper in an increasingly global community.

The system response to the ACER feedback was to address the structural differences in Queensland education from other states and territories and commit to a national agenda of curriculum renewal. We have now achieved a 'first place' in Year 3 reading and we have been successful in closing the gap in Year 12 attainment for Indigenous students. We have much to be proud of in these achievements.

We are now at a critical point where we need to shift from structural and resourcing solutions to a focus on adopting a collaborative inquiry approach to learning and improvement. To continue our improvement we need to know what is and what is not working, asking each other:

1. How are our students doing in their learning?
2. How do we know?
3. What are we doing to improve students learning?
4. How do we know it is working?

## Introducing the School Improvement Model

We introduced the School Improvement Model (SIM) in order to enable every student, every teacher and every school to lift performance (see Figure 1). The SIM brings together the [School Improvement Hierarchy](#) and the [Standards of Evidence](#) with a generic professional learning process known as the Inquiry Cycle. Leaders in schools, regions, and central office developed the SIM over a two-year period (2015-2016). They worked together with Ben Jensen and the *Learning First* team to develop a cohesive and evidence-informed approach to improving school performance for our students. The SIM is based on the belief that all students of all backgrounds can achieve success: the essence of the [Every Student Succeeding - State Schools Strategy](#).

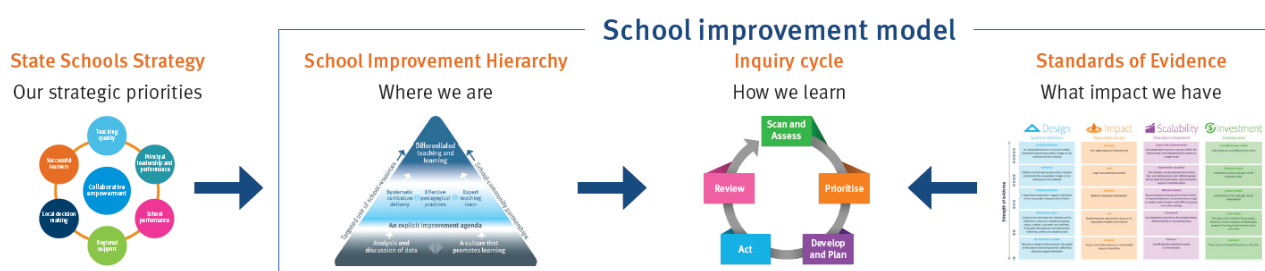


Figure 1. The School Improvement Model

The School Improvement Model is a research-based change implementation process designed to further lift teaching and learning across the system. It sets out what we need to do to continue to improve. It defines the roles and practices that all teachers and leaders develop as implementation progresses. It puts schools, leaders and teachers on a path of continuous improvement.

The School Improvement Model brings together key ideas from the school improvement, professional learning and educational leadership research base. The model clarifies our vision for whole-school learning organisations within statewide professional learning communities. All levels of the system support professional learning communities as they consider and scale what is working for which students under particular conditions. The School Improvement Model is based on the premise that improvement is enabled through establishing a shared understanding of the educational impact of initiatives on student learning. In addition, the model aligns system strategy with the diverse adaptations that educators make to meet the individual learning needs of students (Fullan and Quinn 2015; Hargreaves 2010; Hattie 2009, 2013; Jensen and Sonnemann 2014; Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull and Hunter 2016; Timperley, Halbert and Kaser 2014; Zbar 2013).

The model comprises three parts:

1. **Where we are.** The [School Improvement Hierarchy](#) shows schools teams where they are on their improvement journey and what they need to do next.
2. **How we learn.** The [Inquiry cycle](#) enables teachers and leaders to understand the steps required to improve teaching and learning, to plan and enact new practices, and to evaluate what happens.
3. **What impact we have.** The [Standards of Evidence](#) enable teachers, school and system leaders to evaluate the impact of new practices developed through the School Improvement Model.

## Where we are – The School Improvement Hierarchy

The [School Improvement Hierarchy](#) (SIH) provides a common language for determining the focus for school improvement, based what is happening in a school on a day-to-day basis (see Figure 2). The SIH is based on the *Teaching and Learning Audit Tool* (2010) which became to *National School Improvement Tool*. The SIH suggests that there is a logical order for approaching school improvement that is contextual, iterative and a shared responsibility of school communities. For example, it makes little sense to talk about differentiating teaching and learning if systematic curriculum delivery and effective pedagogical practices are not already in place in a school.

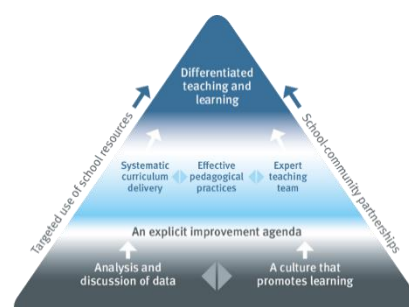


Figure 2. The School Improvement Hierarchy

The hierarchy highlights nine domains focusing on:

- a. identifying where we are in our improvement journey
- b. establishing what we need to focus on to improve teaching and student learning
- c. developing a shared understanding about what needs to happen to achieve improvement.

The central layer of the hierarchy is where high leverage problems of practice are situated. Prioritised and addressed, they potentially become processes which make the most difference to student learning. For example, a focus on reading may indeed be a problem of practice around teachers' level of understanding about reading across the Australian Curriculum. The SIH and [Actionable Playbooks](#) relevant to a specific improvement focus support scanning and assessing conversations designed to transform data into evidence and surface problems of practice worthy of an inquiry approach.

## How we learn – The Inquiry cycle



The Inquiry cycle enables school teams to organise their professional learning and work around a relentless focus on student learning. It empowers teachers to work with their colleagues to develop their expertise to strengthen student learning. In addition, it uses close analysis of what students do, say, make or write to ensure we know that students are learning.

None of these elements, on their own, are new. Applied together, and with fidelity to a sustained plan, the evidence from around the world is clear: they work. Singapore, British Columbia, Ontario and Hong Kong, while highly diverse school systems, have all dramatically lifted their performance using models similar to the Inquiry cycle (see Figure 3).

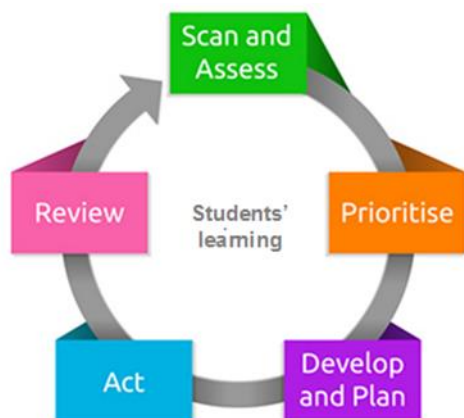


Figure 3. The Inquiry cycle

An inquiry cycle might proceed like this in a school. A professional learning team made up of teachers and school leaders examines a range of student assessments together to establish where each child is at in their learning. The team then identifies a problem of practice emerging from the evidence that the team will focus on. The team devises teaching strategies and seeks professional learning opportunities designed explicitly to address the problem of

practice. After a period implementing the strategies, the team reviews the evidence from student work to determine whether performance has improved.

The steps in the cycle need to be followed with precision. Queensland schools and students are highly diverse, and no single approach will meet all their needs. The inquiry cycle does not dictate where schools should start or the destination they should reach. Instead, it provides the navigation that is essential to stay on track.

Above all, the Inquiry cycle empowers principals and teachers to do what they do best. It provides a process for teachers to determine the impact they are having on their students, and gives them both a goal to believe in and the steps to reach it. Principals lead the school team on the journey toward global best practice, one that promises great professional and personal rewards for all educators in the school.

### *Inquiry cycle contexts*

The Inquiry cycle applies the key lessons from decades of research about effective professional learning. The research tells us that adults learn best when they work together on real challenges from their daily work, and when they have time and support to try out what they have learned, and to see for themselves what works.

The Inquiry cycle helps teams of teachers to choose and deeply examine a ‘live’ problem of practice over time (see Figure 4). Working in teams, they experience how their own learning helps students make measurable progress. Teachers see the impact they are having and are motivated to keep investigating and growing in their practice. They learn to reject long-tried but low-effect approaches and continually adapt what they do to make the greatest difference for their students.

Inquiry cycles can support the planning, implementation and review processes of evidence-informed school improvement. In addition, they can support strategic stakeholder conversations that could be

used to develop the plan, and identify the key impact measures and change-indicators for improvement. The [Guide to effective improvement planning](#) outlines a step-by-step process to whole school community annual improvement planning.

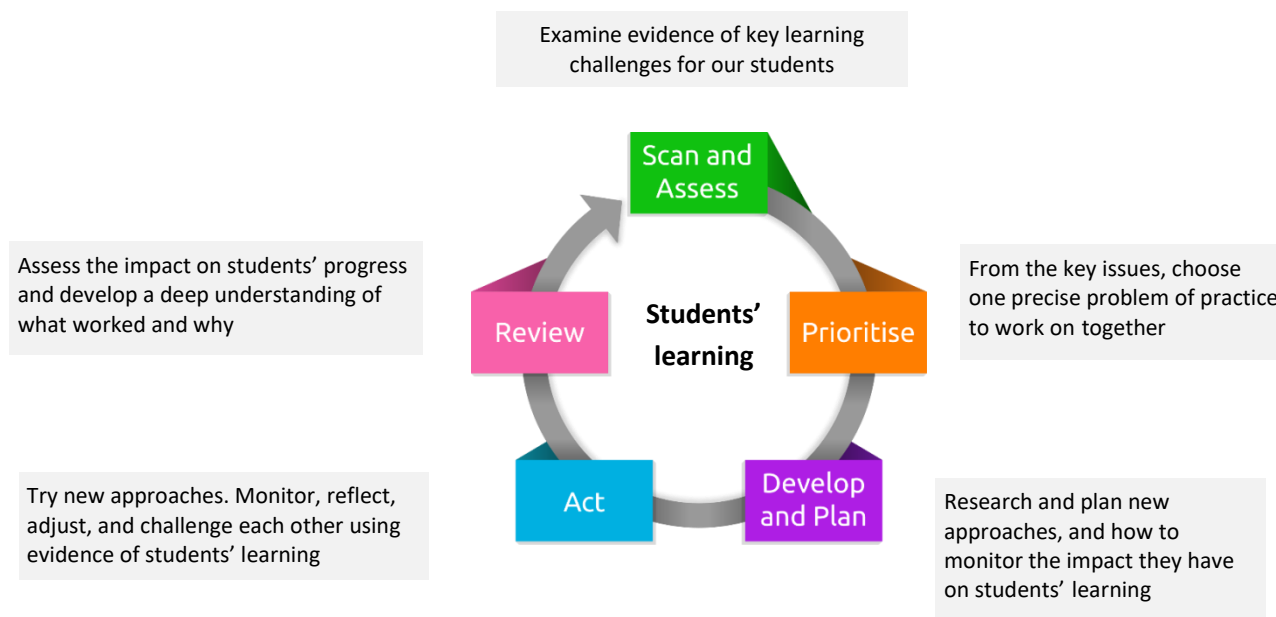


Figure 4. What teams of teachers do at each step of the Inquiry cycle

### *Inquiry cycle implementation*

Inquiry cycles are the most effective professional learning that teachers can do, because they lead to sustained improvements in teaching. Inquiry cycles are not easy to do well, but if they are not done well, students' learning will not improve as much as it could. Principals hold the key to teachers deeply understanding, embracing and applying the model.

The greatest impact that principals can have is to be leaders of learning with teachers (Robinson 2007). Principals promote, plan and take part in their professional development. They make sure that teachers maintain an unrelenting focus on the quality of instruction, and that they have the resources to do so.

The role of Assistant Regional Directors, regional teams and central office is to support principals every step of the way. They understand the cycle and what it takes to make it work. They can tell principals how other schools in the region are meeting a similar challenge. They learn with principals about what change feels like in practice, and will help connect principals to expertise and resources needed to tackle the learning challenges of students and teachers.

## What impact we have – The Standards of Evidence

The [Standards of Evidence](#) are designed to support better conversations and decisions about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The Standards incorporate four dimensions to consider when teachers, school or system leaders use and generate evidence. They articulate clearly a range of evidence in each dimension, provide a consistent way to assess the evidence we use and generate and provide a pathway for building and maturing our evidence base.



Figure 5. Dimensions of the Standards of Evidence (DET 2017)

The four dimensions of the Standards are design, impact, scalability and investment. They are independent and are not designed to provide an 'on balance' or overall judgment of an initiative. Each discrete dimension contains five descriptors that indicate the relative strength of evidence. The strength of evidence may differ across the dimensions. An initiative, for example, may have very high evidence of impact but the scalability may be unknown.

The impact dimension allows schools to better understand the link between planned activities and expected changes in student outcomes. Interim measures that provide an indication of progress towards improvements in student learning are increasingly discussed as part of planning with intent conversations. A *chain of evidence* consisting of interim indicators of progress provide a useful line of sight into classrooms for school, regional and system leaders to determine how professional learning changes teaching practices and student learning (Guskey 2002). Monitoring and measuring changes in teacher knowledge and understanding and changes in observable daily practice is critical to securing the improved student outcomes (see Figure 6).

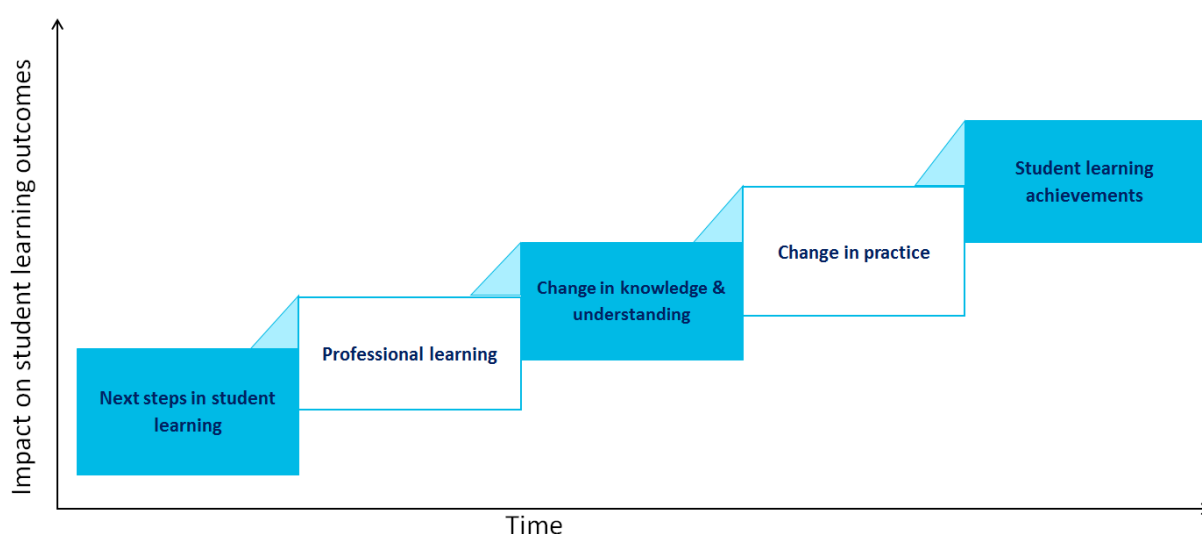
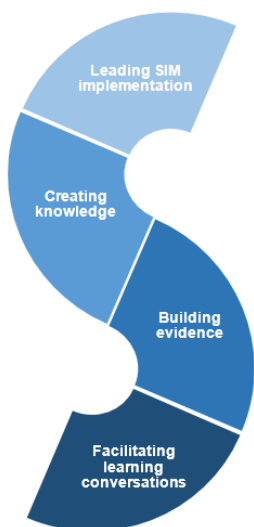


Figure 6. The Chain of Evidence



## Leadership and implementation approach

Adopting an inquiry mindset is a high leverage leadership practice that powers continuous learning and improvement. Working together across teams, regions and schools to use the School Improvement Model (SIM) as a change process for accelerating student achievement is an outcome we are working towards. Imagine whole-school learning teams within state-wide professional learning communities. All levels of the system supporting the work as professional learning communities plan, implement and review 'the right work' and scale what is working for which students under particular conditions. Our challenge is to highlight effective leadership actions and behaviours that deepen such implementation and create scalability of effective practices.



Our school improvement leadership development approach has four strands:

**1 – Leading SIM implementation**, including Principal Induction SIMposiums, SIM facilitator training and ARD SIM

**2 & 3 – Creating knowledge and building evidence**, including Data Literacy 2.0, Systematic curriculum delivery, effective pedagogical practices

**4 – Facilitating professional learning conversations**, including Regional and cluster Learning Fairs and peer conversations, ARD Moderation conversations and state-wide calibrations.

A tiered approach to implementation, based on the *Gradual release of responsibility model* (Sharratt and Planche 2016), is used to build capability across the system. We model how to use the School Improvement Model (SIM) in school improvement planning; guide and support regional and school leaders to facilitate school-based inquiry, and share the evidence of school improvement across the department.

SIM support materials are available via the department's [Evidence Hub](#), an online repository for evidence studies written by school teams for school teams. It includes information on how to generate better evidence and evaluate evidence claims as well as advice and guidance on the stages of the inquiry process.

## Work in progress

Every student has the best chance of succeeding when schools have effective and sustainable cultures of inquiry. Effectiveness depends on teachers and school leaders developing an agreed understanding of evidence of educational impact. Sustainability depends on staff capability to learn from what their students produce as evidence of their learning.

We have a School Improvement Model that has the potential to transform teaching and learning across Queensland for our students. We want to get it right; that means taking time and care to introduce it well. The SIM is an implementation model for use across all levels of the system to assist us to have conversations that are critical for continuous improvement. There is no one place to start or a destination to be reached. It is an exciting journey learning as we go.

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