Schools as learning organisations

School improvement occurs when schools learn how to improve. More specifically, improvement occurs when schools identify and implement changes to practice that result in improved student outcomes.

An essential requirement for learning how to improve as a school is a belief that improvement is possible. This requirement might be described as a ‘growth mindset for schools’ – a belief that, no matter how well or poorly a school is performing, improvements in current practices (and thus student outcomes) are always possible. The opposite – a ‘fixed mindset’ – is a belief that external factors such as students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, available school resources or current levels of achievement limit what is possible and make further improvement unlikely.

School improvement is most likely when an entire school has a shared improvement agenda and is committed to learning how to improve. In a learning organisation, members commit to learning together and to sharing what is learned throughout the organisation. In schools, this means collaborating to find ways to improve current school and classroom practices.

Much learning in schools occurs in informal and unplanned ways as teachers and school leaders introduce new initiatives, try new approaches and learn from experience. But organisational learning can be accelerated when schools adopt a systematic approach to learning how to improve.

In my paper Schools as Learning Organisations (https://www.acer.org/files/Schools-as-learning-organisations.pdf), I describe a collaborative methodology for investigating ways to improve current school practices. It’s not rocket science. It’s a plan for improvement that involves five steps, the central step being the design and implementation of specific improvement strategies.

Current school improvement plans often do little more than identify desired improvements (for example, improve Year 5 literacy and numeracy results, reduce behaviour problems or improve Year 12 results) or identify actions that a school intends to take (for example, employ a literacy specialist, introduce a new health
and wellbeing program, or partner with a local industry). The kind of plan I describe is a systematic plan for designing, implementing, evaluating and learning from individual improvement efforts. It’s a plan for learning as a school.

The five steps in the methodology can be thought of as elements of a potentially ongoing improvement cycle:

1. **Knowing where you are as a school (current situation)**

A plan to improve depends first on a good understanding of existing school practices and student outcomes, particularly current levels of student attainment. These are the starting points for any improvement effort and the baselines against which a school’s improvement efforts are evaluated.
Information about current student outcomes and prevailing school practices must be collected systematically and reliably. It is not possible to draw meaningful conclusions about improvements in outcomes or practices if this initial information is unreliable. Data need to be collected objectively and dispassionately, and reflect the realities of the school’s current performance – not somebody’s intentions or beliefs about what is happening in the school.

2. Specifying desired outcome improvements

A school improvement plan specifies what improvements in outcomes a school wishes to see. Desired improvements may include, but are not limited to, improvements in student achievement, school attendance, post-school destinations, and student attitudes and engagement.

This step usually involves answering questions such as:

- Which student outcomes do we most want to improve?
- What level of improvement should we be aiming for?
- On what timeline?

A school improvement plan recognises the need to prioritise, set realistic expectations, and provide the time required for meaningful and sustainable improvement.

3. Designing and implementing an improvement strategy

Once a school has decided the outcomes it wishes to improve, the next step is to decide how those improvements will be achieved, that is, the strategy or strategies the school intends to implement. The National School Improvement Tool ([https://www.acer.edu.au/school-improvement/improvement-tool](https://www.acer.edu.au/school-improvement/improvement-tool)) can be helpful in designing improvement strategies.

In general, better student outcomes are achieved through more effective, evidence-based school and classroom practices. A school improvement plan makes explicit the changes in practice a school intends to make. The plan also identifies what will be required to implement the strategy, for example, changes in culture, staff professional development, staff redeployment or the physical resources required for effective implementation.

4. Measuring and monitoring improvements in outcomes

The fourth step is to decide how improvements in outcomes will be measured and
confirmed.

Questions include:

- Was there a measurable improvement in the outcomes the school was trying to improve?
- What is the evidence?
- How confident can we be that an apparent improvement was real?

Conclusions about improvements require measures that can be compared over time and possibly across different instruments. Changes must also be large enough to indicate meaningful improvements rather than chance fluctuations. And conclusions about improvements can be made with more confidence when there is evidence of a trend in outcome measures over an extended period.

5. Reflecting on what has been learned

Finally, a school improvement plan should include a plan for reflecting on, and learning from, the improvement effort. The goal should be to review the implementation of the improvement strategy and evaluate its impact on the targeted outcomes.

Questions include:

- What, if any, difficulties were encountered in implementing the planned improvement strategy?
- Did school practices change as intended?
- Was the strategy itself responsible for observed improvements in student outcomes?
- How sustainable are the improvements?
- If there was no improvement, what lessons can be learned?
- Answers to such questions guide the school’s future improvement efforts.

‘This is not about ‘revolutionary’ change, but rather about ‘evolutionary’ change – starting from where you are, experimenting, adapting and learning by doing – with all changes based on evaluated evidence.’ [1]

The implementation of this five-step methodology provides a systematic way of exploring the impact of changed school and classroom practices on improved
student outcomes. As such, it contributes to a continuous improvement culture underpinned by:

- a belief that continual improvement is possible
- a shared commitment to an explicit improvement agenda
- an understanding that improvement depends on learning how to improve as a school community
- an understanding that professional learning is accelerated by the disciplined study of individual improvement efforts.