Frameworks for School Improvement – An Overview of Selected Approaches to School Improvement

Paper for Consultation

2010
FRAMEWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

An Overview of Selected Approaches to School Improvement

INTRODUCTION

'School improvement' is a key buzz word in education policy and a focus for governments, both in Australia and internationally, academics and education leaders. School improvement is, in addition, increasingly becoming an industry in itself with a wide range of support services and programs available to assist schools with 'improving'. However, what is understood as 'school improvement', also sometimes referred to as 'continuous improvement', differs across the wide range of school improvement models and frameworks espoused by individual policy stakeholders.

In each approach to school improvement a range of underpinning assumptions can be identified about what is seen to lead to school improvement, how school improvement should be achieved and how it should be measured. For example, in many cases, government-directed strategies operate from a deficit model – a model which privileges external inspection, external regulation and external knowledge over school-based autonomy and school-based initiatives. In simple terms, within this model, school improvement is seen to be largely dependent on external intervention rather than a process which schools naturally undertake or embed of their own volition and importantly it is the external agency which has the power to define the elements of a good school.

This short paper starts from the premise that assumptions about what constitutes school improvement matter and, importantly, can have a direct impact on how improvement frameworks are implemented and embedded in schools and ultimately their long-term effectiveness. Hence, in implementing a 'school improvement' framework a key question for consideration is 'what is the purpose for implementing a school improvement framework'?

The paper provides a brief overview of a selection of key approaches to school improvement models. It should be noted that the approaches outlined in the paper are not exhaustive but rather have been chosen to provide a starting point for further discussion in the SA Independent school sector. The focus is on approaches in which there is some level of interaction with an external agency. It is of course recognised that many schools embed school improvement practices and procedures within their everyday operations.

Three case studies will be highlighted to illustrate the differences in the underpinning assumptions behind each model, the ways in which these assumptions affect the approach/es to school improvement, and the similarities in processes across the models/frameworks.

It should be noted from the outset that despite differences in underpinning assumptions, there are common themes and processes which can be identified among the main models. These include a focus on self assessment tools (undertaken by the school), the requirement for schools to invest a significant amount of time and energy in the process and view school improvement as a key part of a school's operation, the focus on clear outcomes and goals, the on-going monitoring of the school and its outcomes, and the use of some form of an external evaluation mechanism. Various approaches, however, can be seen to place different levels of emphasis on the importance of these themes and processes.
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The paper finishes by raising some of the key considerations in implementing a school improvement model or framework.

THREE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

While there is a significant range of overarching approaches to school improvement, this paper focuses on three common frameworks. These are:

- School improvement through inspection;
- School improvement through accreditation; and
- School improvement through a government-directed framework for improvement which gives significant power to individual schools.

The purpose is to elucidate some of the underpinning assumptions in each approach/framework. To assist in this process a case study, based on policy documents, has been chosen which demonstrates each framework in practice.

Framework 1:

Improvement through Inspection and Regulation – Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED), UK

‘[W]e regulate and inspect to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. We want to raise aspirations and contribute to the long term achievement of ambitious standards and better life chances for service users. Their educational, economic and social well-being will in turn promote England’s national success.’ (OFSTED website)

All schools in the United Kingdom must meet certain standards and are required under the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to undergo inspections. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) is established under the Act to undertake these inspections. OFSTED inspect a range of services including government schools and some Independent UK schools, with other Independent schools inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

The concept of ‘school improvement’ in this framework is couched within OFSTED’s two overarching roles – regulation and inspection. While as outlined below the OFSTED inspection process has an increasing focus on school improvement, its (OFSTED) primary role is to fulfil its legislative requirements as set out under the Act and schools must meet the required standards in order to maintain viability.

OFSTED’s primary functions, under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, in regard to school inspections is to report on:

- ‘the quality of the education provided in the school
- how far the education meets the needs of the range of pupils at the school
- the educational standards achieved in the school
the quality of the leadership in and management of the school, including whether the
financial resources made available to the school are managed effectively
the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils at the school
the contribution made by the school to the well-being1 of those pupils
the contribution made by the school to community cohesion (OFSTED 2010).’

OFSTED have recently revised its school inspection arrangements. From September 2009
inspectors give particular priority to:

- ‘promoting improvement: inspectors make specific recommendations based on their
diagnosis of the school’s strengths and weaknesses
- evaluating the achievement and wider well-being of pupils as a whole and of different
groups of pupils, and assessing the extent to which schools ensure that all pupils,
including those most at risk, succeed
- evaluating learning and teaching: inspectors spend a high proportion of their on-site
inspection time in the classroom
- assessing how well schools promote equality of opportunity, and how effectively they
tackle discrimination
- checking schools’ procedures for safeguarding – keeping children and young people
from harm
- fostering the engagement of headteachers, schools’ staff and governors in the
process of inspection so that they understand the judgements made
- gathering, analysing and taking into account the views of parents and pupils
- assessing how effectively schools work in partnership with other providers in order to
promote better outcomes for pupils (OFSTED 2010).’

Changes have also been made to the frequency with which inspections are undertaken,
which are now dependent ‘upon the results of...previous inspections and an annual
assessment of their subsequent performance’ including an ‘analysis of the school’s public
performance data’. For example, subject to meeting a range of conditions, schools which are
considered to be performing above average are inspected on a five yearly basis. Schools
judged to be satisfactory are inspected within three years. Hence, schools perceived to be
doing well are subject to less intervention.

However, it should be noted that Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector has the power to authorise
the inspection of any school at his/ her discretion. In addition, if there are concerns about
the safety or well-being of pupils in a school, the right to inspect a school without notice may
be exercised. A school normally receives two clear working days’ notice for inspection.

A key element to the OFSTED process is the school’s completion of the Self Evaluation Form
(SEF). OFSTED note that ‘self-evaluation is now a well-established activity in maintained
schools, providing the basis for their planning for development and improvement. Inspection
takes account of and contributes to a school’s self-evaluation.’ According to The Framework
for School Inspection (OFSTED 2010),

[t]he SEF is used by the lead inspector to plan the inspection. It is the basis
for discussion with the school’s senior team and, where possible, members of
its governing body. Inspectors evaluate the school’s self-evaluation and, by

1 The term ‘well-being’ is set out in the Children Act 2004 as relating to: pupils’ physical and mental
health and emotional well-being; protection from harm and neglect; education, training and
recreation; the contribution made by pupils to society; the [pupils’] social and economic well-being
(the five Every Child Matters outcomes).
doing so, contribute to its further improvement. The quality of self-evaluation is a good indicator of the calibre of the school’s leaders and managers and of the school’s capacity to improve.

Implicit in this is an assumption that schools are not seen to be able to undertake a self evaluation without the assistance and validation of an external agency.

In general inspections do not normally last longer than two days and the time is primarily spent gathering evidence. The size and characteristics of the school impact on the number of inspectors involved. Evidence is gathered through ‘discussions with pupils and scrutiny of their work; scrutiny of school records, documentation and parents’ questionnaires; and meetings with staff, governors and school partners where appropriate.’ Schools must make all information freely available. A significant proportion of time during the inspection is focused on ‘observing lessons, the quality of teaching and pupils’ learning.’

Schools are graded on the following scale:

- Grade 1: outstanding
- Grade 2: good
- Grade 3: satisfactory
- Grade 4: inadequate

A key element to the OFSTED process is that judgements regarding whether the standards are being achieved are made by ‘professionals’ external to individual schools. Implicit in the OFSTED framework is the notion that schools are unable – or unwilling – to implement models of school improvement or meet standards without external intervention. Significantly, school inspection reports are made publicly available on the OFSTED website. While this acts as a means by which parents and the community are provided with transparent information about individual school ‘quality’, a secondary effect is the further privileging of OFSTED’s role in determining what constitutes a high performing school.

A further result of the OFSTED process is the focus on meeting rather than exceeding requirements. This is of course not to suggest that OFSTED does not play an important role or that its processes do not lead to improvements in schools. Nor is it to suggest that there are not high performing schools in the UK that exceed requirements and embed school improvement into their processes. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the OFSTED process does not in itself encourage exceeding standards and incorporating school improvement processes.²

Framework 2:

**Improvement through Accreditation – Council of International Schools (CIS)**

[T]he accreditation process has long been recognized in the United States and in international school circles as a highly effective means of initiating and maintaining school

² Further information regarding the inspection process is contained in the publication *The framework for school inspection: The framework for school inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009* and the guide for *Conducting School Inspections* which is designed to provide assistance to inspectors. The Guide covers a range of areas including protocols for dealing with staff, record keeping, observing lessons as well as feedback and reporting.
Improvement and demonstrating adherence to a set of publicly stated standards. (Guide To School Evaluation And Accreditation Seventh Edition (7.02))

Membership of the Council of International Schools (CIS) embeds school improvement through meeting standards for accreditation. A number of South Australian schools including Independent schools are CIS member schools.

The Guide To School Evaluation And Accreditation Seventh Edition (7.02) identifies two overall aims of the School Evaluation and Accreditation Process:

- 'to encourage school improvement and to foster excellence through on-going self-study and peer review
- to award recognition to those schools that provide an educational programme of high quality which is based upon a clearly defined Philosophy and Objectives, suitable for their unique school population, and which meets the demanding standards drawn up by CIS.’

Attaining membership of the CIS is an extensive process with schools eligible to apply for membership if ‘they meet the three Membership Criteria and the twenty Membership Standards’. Schools are ‘evaluated against two basic ‘benchmarks’, these being:

- The School’s own Philosophy and Objectives
  
  Each school is required to have a clear statement of its Philosophy and Objectives and is evaluated in terms of how successful it is in meeting its own stated purposes.

- The Standards for Accreditation
  
  Each school is required to meet a set of written standards in each area of its operation.

  ‘The Standards are designed to reflect the characteristics of a high quality educational experience. However, they do not pre-suppose any specific model of excellence nor do they suggest comparing the characteristics of one school with those of another. The guiding principles of the accreditation programme are that a school will be evaluated against prescribed standards but in terms of its own Philosophy and Objectives and that the school’s programmes are appropriate to its unique demography.’

There are five essential stages in the accreditation process which are repeated on a routine ten-year cycle. These steps include:

- A Preliminary/Preparatory visit which usually takes two to three days and is hosted by the school.

- A Self-Study which lasts approximately two years and is, according to CIS, ‘the most important part of the entire evaluation and accreditation process, both in the commitment of time and effort involved and in the value to be derived.’

- The Team Visit which is conducted by a team of ‘suitably qualified administrators and teachers drawn from other schools that represent the accrediting association/s’ visits
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The school.’ Their primary function is ‘to assist the school by providing an objective assessment of the conclusions of the self-study.’ A detailed report written by the Visiting team, which addresses every part of the self study and an overall recommendation made regarding accreditation.

➢ The Decision on Accreditation. The Board reviews the Visiting Team Report and considers its recommendations. A recommendation is then made to the CIS Board of Trustees.

➢ Subsequent Procedures which encompass ‘The First Report on Progress and Planning, prepared by the school at a date to be specified by the CIS (typically no later than 18 months from the Team Visit), ‘A Five Year Report that shows how the school has addressed the Visiting Team’s recommendations following its own Action Plans’ and ‘Special Reports and/or Special Visits at any stage of the accreditation cycle if considered necessary’.

A key element to this approach is that while schools undertaking this process must meet rigorous standards determined by an external body, in order to achieve membership, it is a school-based decision to undertake this process. Schools must be prepared to undertake a rigorous process and commit significant time to the accreditation process. In simple terms, schools undertake the process to value add to what they already offer and through this participation signify a commitment to school improvement.³

Framework 3:

Improvement through Government Directed Framework – School Improvement Framework for achieving high standards in student learning, innovation and best practice in ACT government schools

In their desire for school excellence, schools focus their energy and desire for innovation into the classroom ensuring that school improvement strategies impact directly on learning and achievement – the essence of teachers’ business. (School Improvement Framework for achieving high standards in student learning, innovation and best practice in ACT government schools)

The ACT School Improvement Framework for achieving high standards in student learning, innovation and best practice in ACT government schools is the evaluative component of the ACT School Excellence Initiative.

The School Excellence Initiative argues that ‘teachers are at the heart of all student learning and the degree of teacher expertise impacts on the outcomes of their students.’ This initiative starts from the premise that:

ACT schools have always been committed to the delivery of excellence. The School Excellence Initiative continues the promotion of achievement. This striving for school excellence provides the context for the School Improvement Framework.

³ Further information is available in The Guide To School Evaluation And Accreditation Seventh Edition (7.02)
Hence, it is a model which is (publicly) positioned to build on what is already seen as high-quality practice. The ACT argue that rather than being content to accept high achievement, excellent schools ‘ask questions about student outcomes and about school practices that are impacting on the achievement levels.’ For example,

- ‘Have we established explicit, high standards for learning?
- What are our agreed parameters for determining high standards?
- What factors are affecting student achievement?
- Does the level of achievement meet with community expectations?
- What classroom pedagogical practices are clearly resulting in high student achievement?’

In essence the answers to the above questions are seen to ‘point to aspects of school policy and practice that, if modified, could reasonably be expected to further enhance learning. Schools that challenge themselves in this way are striving for best practice in an outcomes focused school environment.’

In this context the ACT School Improvement Framework is conceptualised as supporting schools and also providing a ‘quality assurance’ for the ACT Government in regard to its schools. In turn the community is seen to have an increasing expectation of schooling outcomes, leading to the need for further improvement. A key element to the framework is the assumption that successful schools include processes for ongoing monitoring.

In the ACT Framework student learning is seen to be supported in excellent and high performing schools ‘through best practice across a range of elements within the four domains of schooling’: Learning and Teaching; Student Environment, Leadership and Management; and Community Involvement.

The Framework is implemented over a three-year cycle with the following actions undertaken in each year:

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As is evident above a number of the same actions are to occur in each of the years.

An annual self assessment is undertaken by the school in each year of the cycle. The annual self assessment is undertaken in ‘order to identify priorities for their school plan’. The Framework provides a range of tools to assist in this process including the Tool for Self Assessment of School Domains, the Curriculum Self Assessment Tool and the system surveys. The plan is informed by:

- ‘data collected through the annual self assessment;
- understanding of the agreed learning outcomes for students of the school;
- contextual factors including school and community demographics;
- system priorities;
sound understanding of where students are at based on valid and reliable student achievement information that has been collected by the school; initiatives and issues that arise from monitoring the current plan; and changing community expectations.’

The plan notes that ‘School improvement is a continuous process and, in the main, the scheduling of school improvement processes is at the discretion of the school. However, there are particular requirements that must be adhered to (e.g. the administration and timing of the system surveys). The system surveys and the external validation will be administered centrally.’

The external validation which occurs in the third year provides the school with an objective assessment and also makes recommendations for the next three year cycle.

The implementation process places ownership of the framework within the school. The key elements are as follows:

- Schools establish a School Improvement Committee to oversee the school improvement process.
- Schools assess their performance across any or all four domains...
- School boards produce a plan that describes the school’s strategic intentions and evaluation measures based on the assessment of performance across the domains.
- School boards monitor and review school performance and report on it to the chief executive, parents of students at the school, and staff.
- An external panel validates judgements about school performance and school planning processes in the third year of the cycle.’

The use of quality information is seen to be a key factor to the Framework. In determining what data is to be collected and the judgements made about the data consideration is to be given to ‘a clear, shared understanding of what the school expects students to achieve and the practices that are most likely to facilitate high achievement’. The Framework identifies a range of potential data sources including national assessments, teacher judgements, annual reports and student self assessment.

As noted above the ACT Framework starts from a premise that it is building on excellence. While it is seen to act as a ‘quality assurance’ for the ACT government this is not positioned as its prime purpose. Significantly, the language of the ACT Framework locates the responsibility for overall implementation and monitoring at the school level thereby implicitly encouraging school ownership of the process.4

**COMMON THEMES**

As identified above each of the approaches to school improvement contain a number of similar elements, for example:

- a focus on self assessment tools (undertaken by the school);
- the requirement for schools to invest a significant amount of time and energy in the process and view school improvement as a key part of a school’s operation
- the focus on clear outcomes and goals;

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4 Further information is available in the *School Improvement Framework for achieving high standards in student learning, innovation and best practice in ACT government schools.*
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- the on-going monitoring of the school and its outcomes; and
- the use of some form of an external evaluation process which informs further action.

However, despite these common themes different frameworks place different emphasis on particular components. For example, external evaluation, through inspection, is the key component of the OFSTED process. By contrast the CIS framework places significant emphasis on the school’s self-evaluation process. The ACT framework starts from the premise that ACT government schools are already performing well and places the school at the centre of the school improvement process.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

What is the Purpose?

A key consideration in choosing an approach to school improvement is to determine the purpose for implementing the model/framework. In part this is reflected in the understanding of the terms ‘improvement’ and what is ‘school improvement’. For instance, is the overall aim to meet standards for accreditation to a particular body or to meet regulatory requirements determined by an external organisation? Or is the aim a desire to improve student achievement in particular geographical areas, class groups or types of schools? Or is the purpose to assist schools which may have viability issues? Alternatively is the purpose to encourage all schools to implement a continuous self-directed improvement framework/model in their schools? This latter reason should arguably be the aim of all school improvement frameworks.

If the aim is to assist schools that are struggling with issues that threaten their long or short-term viability then a more interventionist model/framework, which provides initial upfront assessment and recommendations for action may be the most appropriate. Harris (2009), for example, notes that successfully turning around a school is ‘rarely achieved without external support and impetus.’ A key factor for consideration in interventionist types of frameworks, is however, the tendency in many regulatory examples toward a ‘tick the box’ approach which does not place ownership for improvement at the school level.

If, on the other hand, the aim is to implement a process which outlines a higher standard of, or standards for, membership to a particular body then a process along the lines of that undertaken for membership of the Council of International Schools (CIS) may be more appropriate. Encouraging schools to implement programs of on-going improvement with the aim that this becomes an essential part of best practice in Independent schools may require a framework which privileges on-going support in the form of mentoring, advice and professional development over overly interventionist actions.

Evaluation is seen to be a key factor in school improvement processes. However, it is worth noting, as McBeath (1999: 4-5) does, that the process of evaluation is also underpinned by values and beliefs. Hence, it is necessary to consider the purpose of evaluation and what values and beliefs regarding school improvement those undertaking the evaluation bring to the evaluation process.

What Matters In Student Achievement?

Dinham (2008: 139) has identified ‘four broad and interdependent fundamentals underpinning student achievement and thus successful schools’. These are:
‘a central focus on student, both as learners and people
quality teaching
professional learning
educational leadership.’

Student outcomes are a key measurement by which schools are judged as to whether they are successful. John Hattie (2003) argues that the overarching factor in variance in student achievement, aside from the student themselves, is the teacher. Hattie (2003: 2) notes that New Zealand education policies have, however, focussed on school structures and home factors. Hattie (2003: 5), in conjunction with Dick Jaeger identifies five primary ‘dimensions of excellent teachers’. For Hattie and Jaeger, ‘expert teachers

can identify essential representations of their subject,
can guide learning through classroom interactions,
can monitor learning and provide feedback,
can attend to affective attributes, and
can influence student outcomes’

Hence, consideration needs to be given to the ways in which any school improvement framework will support and incorporate professional development for teachers and educational leadership.

The Importance of Educational Leadership

Dinham (2008) notes the importance of leadership in implementing a school improvement framework, particularly when this requires key changes both to the school culture and to school processes. Not all organisations, or people within organisations, respond to change in the same way, with some considering it a potential threat to their power and others reacting in a more positive manner (Dinham 2008: 120). Changing organisational cultures can be an important focus area for schools seeking to implement improvement frameworks and an area in which school leaders need support.

Of note, Dinham states that in his experience change of leadership is sometimes necessary in schools where substantial improvement is required. Alma Harris (2009) also notes that ‘[s]uccessful “turnaround” always necessitates some change in leadership.’ (emphasis in text) A key question for Harris is ‘what form(s) of school leadership transform organisational and student learning?’ (emphasis in text)

Hence, significant support for Principals and other school leaders may be necessary to assist them in implementing a school improvement framework, in particular when implementation occurs in what Dinham (2008: 120) terms ‘risk- and change-averse schools’. Dinham provides a range of strategies for implementing change and also identifies a range of qualities in successful leaders including their vision, communication skills, attitude and high professional standards. Consideration may need to be given to the types of professional development offered to school leaders in this context.

Timeframe

The majority of School Improvement frameworks acknowledge the need for time and careful planning in implementing school improvement processes. The undertaking of some sort of self evaluation is a key component of school improvement frameworks. In the CIS process undertaking the initial evaluation can take up to two years.
Cost

Embarking upon any form of school improvement process will result in additional costs for schools in both time and resources. For example, the self evaluation process is, in most frameworks, a particularly intensive process. In addition, there may be costs involved for schools in accessing additional professional development and support services, particularly for schools in regional and rural areas.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper has focussed on three frameworks which encompass school improvement strategies. Each of these approaches has some form of external direction. It argues that within each of the approaches there are key assumptions about school willingness and ability to incorporate school improvement.

The paper identifies a number of common themes across the frameworks including a focus on self assessment tools, the necessary investment of time, the focus on clear outcomes and goals, on-going monitoring, and processes of evaluation. However it notes that different frameworks place different levels of emphasis on these themes. Schools wishing to implement school improvement processes may find it useful to incorporate some of the strategies identified in this paper but suited to the needs of the school.

As noted in the introduction, however, there are a wide range of approaches and many schools incorporate models of school or continuous improvement into their strategic planning as a matter of good practice.

In regard to further work in the area of school improvement it is recommended that the AISSA consider:

- the implications of any approach to school improvement on the philosophy and autonomy of individual schools;
- the importance of independence in Independent schools;
- the way in which the concept of school improvement is presented to the school community to ensure that it is seen as a positive process by parents, teachers, students and the wider community;
- further research on school-based approaches to school improvement;
- further research on organisational culture to assist schools in organisational change.
REFERENCES


