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Lisa Black and Coralee Pratt

A roadmap to school improvement: The experience of Eastern Metropolitan Region, Victoria

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the school improvement philosophy and strategies employed by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR), in order to assist all schools within the region to examine, analyse and improve student performance.

The paper explores the beliefs that are central to the improvement process and describes how the Eastern Region identified, designed and implemented the range of interventions and projects that are integral to the EMR School Improvement Strategy, and how the Victorian School Accountability and Improvement Framework (SAIF), introduced in 2005, guided the development of this work.¹

Fullan et al (2001) argue that to bring about large-scale reform there must be on-going accountability and capacity building efforts, at three levels – the schools, the district, and the state. This multi-layered approach is termed ‘Tri-Level’ reform and this paper is an attempt to demonstrate how a region (or mid-level agent of reform) has been able to work, within a highly coherent system, in order to contribute to the reform process. All nine regions in Victoria have embarked on this process, collaboratively and in a varied range of contexts. This paper describes one region’s journey as a part of the systemic reform process.

Background

The concept of school improvement arguably has had a controversial history. There are numerous examples of strategies, developed by a range of educational systems, which aimed at short-term ‘quick fix’ remedies to improve school performance. Often such strategies have not proved to be sustainable and have resulted in alienated or disengaged teachers, and confused school communities. Hargreaves (2003) believes that

... transformation has to mean more than just continuing improvement if it is to be more than a rhetorical device for selling the latest educational initiative.

Accountability systems over the past decade have been designed primarily to measure and assess school performance. Driving school improvement initiatives has not always been a prime focus of this process. Simply distinguishing between schools that were improving and those that were not, does not provide the direction or a road map that leads to sustained improvement. Too often schools have felt threatened by a peripheral view of poor school performance data, and accountability processes that may have led to denial or simplification of the real, underlying issues associated with the results.

Since the release of the *Blueprint for Government Schools* in 2003, by the Victorian Government, which provided a coherent agenda for the transformation of public education, there has been a developing sense of unified purpose across the system, as all stakeholders have come to understand the imperatives driving the reforms. There is an emerging agreement that improving outcomes in schools is complex work that, in the past, has not been well understood, nor based on successful strategies. This historical perspective created an imperative for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to design a coherent and transferable school improvement process.

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In 2005, the DEECD School Accountability and Improvement Framework (SAIF) introduced an evidence-based approach to school improvement and increased the system-wide focus on students in three specific areas:

1. learning;
2. pathways and transition; and
3. engagement and wellbeing.

The SAIF highlighted the critical role that quality performance data has in planning and achieving improved student outcomes. During this period there has also been a heightened sense of collaboration between schools and networks of schools as leaders seek to share effective practice and understandings of what works.

If we accept the work of Rutter et al (1979), and many subsequent educationalists, that 'schools do make a difference' then there is a moral imperative in the public education system to reduce the disparity and ensure that we are continually improving outcomes for all

students. This message was reinforced in *School Improvement: A Theory of Action* (Fraser and Petch, 2007), which detailed the importance of accountability and performance at all levels (school, region and central) to ensure a coherent approach to system wide improvement.

The crucial role of regional offices in the school improvement process was acknowledged and regions have accepted the challenge of defining their core work, based on a clearer understanding of the school improvement process, greater knowledge of individual school performance and improved regional workforce capacity to undertake the task. It is the role of regions to create what Earl (2005) calls 'a culture of inquiry' – that is, decision-making based not only on student performance data but also on leadership capacity, comparisons to other schools and regional performance. Regions have an obligation to communicate what continuous school improvement means, what it looks like and how schools can make the necessary changes that will lead to better futures for their students.

While it is recognised that school transformation can take up to seven years to successfully embed (Fullan, 2003a and b), we are mindful that there is a cohort of students in our schools right now who face an unknown future in a rapidly changing world. In short, we know this work takes time but the time for action is now. As a recent (2008) advertisement for Hoyts Theatres says, 'We should plan like we will live forever but act like we only have today.' For government schools in Victoria this can be translated as engaging in long-term and specific strategies to ensure the development of lifelong learning for all, but with a degree of urgency, to guarantee that students in schools today are provided with the pre-requisite skills and dispositions to thrive.

About Eastern Metropolitan Region

In 2008 there are over 106,000 students attending 248 government schools in the

Eastern Metropolitan Region of Victoria. There are 186 Primary, 48 Secondary, 2 Primary/Secondary and 12 Specialist schools. The region is divided into eight school networks comprising approximately 30–40 schools, with each network loosely created around a Local Government Area. In the main, school enrolments include a significant proportion of students from middle to high socio-economic backgrounds, although many schools have diverse communities and some pockets of hardship exist across networks.

Since 1995 the Victorian DEECD has used a state-wide assessment and reporting program to provide feedback to teachers and parents on student achievements and to plan for their future learning needs. The introduction of the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) in 2000 provided a means of comparing schools to the other government school regions in Victoria, and nationally (VCAA, 2008). Generally, EMR schools perform well above the state average in relation to AIM in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Reading, Writing, Spelling and Number/Mathematics, and have done so consistently for the past 4 years.

Whilst annual school data demonstrates that EMR schools are generally providing a high standard of education, there is still considerable inconsistency between schools and a concentration of lower-than-average outcomes in particular Networks.

The region is also keen to ensure that there are none of what Fullan (2001) terms 'Cruising Schools', where achievement may relate more to the socio-economic status of the population, rather than the teaching quality. In 'cruising schools', average results could be improved significantly, since effectively they are often marking time rather than striving to prepare their students for the changing world into which they are heading.

The DEECD four-year cycle of accountability and improvement (SAIF, 2008) allows schools to participate in a differentiated model of school review, reflecting individual school performance

over time on a range of performance data, as well as contextual information. There are three categories of review; Negotiated, Continuous Improvement and Diagnostic Review. Negotiated reviews provide the high-performing schools with the flexibility to use a critical friend to examine specific areas for improvement, identified in the school self evaluation. The Continuous Improvement category allows for an external reviewer to examine school performance and make recommendations for improvement over the coming four years. The third category, Diagnostic, is used for schools where it has been determined centrally and supported regionally, that there is a need for urgent action.

The EMR approach to school improvement is straightforward and is encapsulated succinctly in the region's mission statement, which is 'Enabling schools to prepare all students for life'. This simply worded but highly complex statement provides clarity for all stakeholders, across the region, in relation to what the core business is and how we go about achieving it. Clearly the words '*enabling schools*' directly imply that, as a region, we must provide schools with assistance to help create and support the internal leadership in each school, in order for authentic improvement to occur and be sustained.

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Schools are tired of the top-down approach and the system producing policies that mandate externally driven change. The words 'prepare all students for life' provide clarity for everyone, about what the work is and where we should be targeting our resources and energies. 'All students' means developing flexibility within a school's curriculum, to identify the unique

needs and interests of each individual student, so as to become fully engaged and successful in their learning. In short, schools must wrap the curriculum around the student rather than expecting students to be wrapped around content that may be irrelevant to them or tasks that may be delivered with an inappropriate pedagogical approach.

All professionals require accurate information about a situation confronting them, to ensure that they make informed and appropriate decisions about what they are dealing with. The approach to school improvement in the EMR has taken on a strategic and process-driven methodology, which has some similarity to that of the medical profession. The metaphor for schools is one of patients presenting their symptoms to a doctor who, utilising specialised tools and techniques, collects information by analysing previous history and running a battery of tests, so as to construct an evidence base upon which a hypothesis for successful intervention can be created.

It is a fundamental first step to invest in building school leadership capacity to lead and drive the proposed reforms.

Remediation is planned and implemented with short-term and long-term indicators used as performance measures. If success or improvement is not evident after a reasonable period, rather than allowing the patient to continue to suffer and run the risk of perishing, additional information in the form of new knowledge and specialist expertise is sourced. Similarly the EMR school improvement process has identified the need for a deep evidence base that provides specific key indicators, which identify the cause of a problem accurately and treat it holistically, to ensure sustainable improvement rather than getting a 'quick fix' by only treating the observed or perceived symptoms.

Simple strategic initiatives or 'quick fixes' can lead to initial improvement in the early

stages of implementation, creating a sense of success and immediate positive reinforcement, reflecting Elmore's notion of 'low hanging fruit' (2003). However, for on-going improvement and sustainability there needs to be support, continued monitoring and targeting of particular schools, as the initial impetus often plateaus and, in some cases, may also be followed by a period of lower performance. It is therefore a fundamental first step to invest in building school leadership capacity to lead and drive the proposed reforms.

Leadership for School Improvement

The EMR School Improvement strategy is based on the theory that if we get the right leaders, and provide strategic support through a multi-faceted approach to address systematically all the factors that impact on student learning, then, over time, student outcomes will improve. Leadership is crucial, but it is in the classroom that the 'health and ultimate fate of the patient will be determined.'

A substantial body of evidence has accumulated from research, pointing to 'strong, positive leadership' as one of the most significant correlates of effective schools (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). In fact, a meta analysis of 69 research studies over 35 years, by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005), focusing on leadership, revealed that 'the leadership behaviour of the principal can have a profound effect on student achievement'.

Selecting the 'right people' and building leadership capacity have therefore been priorities in the EMR since the Blueprint was launched. The moral imperative for school leaders is to drive the improvement process within their school. Critical to school improvement is the ability to build authentic and positive relationships. A wide range of documented research on leadership, over the past five years, clearly indicates that unless the Principal is engaged with improving outcomes for students, no amount of money or resources

or professional development will make any difference to results (Hattie, 2005; Fullan, 2003). Unless we capture the hearts and minds of school leaders and inculcate the urgency for improvement, we run the risk of public education developing into a residual system. Leadership for improvement is paramount.

Evidence in lower-performing schools demonstrates that if school leaders are able to garner a collective responsibility for raising achievement, improved student outcomes can be achieved (Earl, 2008). In addition, once teachers recognise that their own pedagogical practice can influence the achievements of their students, in the main, they are prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure greater success. The challenge for leaders is to 'act urgently, but wait patiently for the results' (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

A challenge for the Eastern Region has been the need to develop a sense of urgency around school improvement. One of the ways in which we have addressed the need for action is to assist school leaders in their skills and understandings of available data. While schools may be 'awash with data' (Hattie, 2005) there has been little evidence of the ability of lower performing school leaders to analyse, interpret and develop evidence-based classroom strategies that will lead to the improvements that are needed to raise achievement.

A major focus of school improvement, therefore, has been to skill school leaders to be able to conduct robust, probing conversations about learning, focused on data analysis, and to develop a collective responsibility for doing something about it. Senior Education Officers (SEOs) have been instrumental in assisting Principals and school leaders to 'walk the talk' by making the links between data-driven decision-making and Strategic and Annual planning – by focusing on achievable goals that can be measured and by linking key improvement strategies to the classroom.

Over the past three years the EMR has provided a range of Professional Learning workshops for school leadership teams to develop their

collective skills and understandings in order to be able to interpret data. We know that in most cases teachers are not trained for this. They need to learn these skills and ask key questions such as:

- 'What is the purpose of the data?'
- 'What is it telling me?' and
- 'How can I help this student?' (Earl, 2005).

Building the capacity of school leaders to facilitate this understanding is essential for sustainable improvement.

Evidence in lower-performing schools demonstrates that if school leaders are able to garner a collective responsibility for raising achievement, improved student outcomes can be achieved

The need for improvement is identified, as Collins (2001) states, by 'facing the brutal facts'. As with our medical analogy described earlier, schools must begin their approach to improvement by creating a strong evidence base, against which future strategies can be referenced and measured. To provide this essential foundation, schools must create a comprehensive set of agreed performance indicators, which cover succinctly the core elements of the school's goals for its students. Each performance indicator must then be supported by relevant, comparable and responsive data sets, which are transparent and accessible by all stakeholders across the school including, in most cases, the students. Like a good medical doctor, school leadership teams, in conjunction with the staff, can then develop their hypothesis based on a thorough diagnosis of all available information.

Improvement strategies then need to include the building and enhancement of the leadership capacity and density, to be able to implement successfully the intervention strategy that is developed. The effectiveness of the strategy continues to be evaluated through demonstrated improvements in student learning outcomes.

EMR School Improvement Strategy

To enable school leaders to drive an improvement agenda, the EMR has adopted

Hargreaves and Fink's findings (2006), which note that it is

... critical for local authorities to be vigilant in developing early warning systems for detecting declining improvement

As a result, biannually, the Regional Leadership team undertakes an analysis of the performance of all 248 schools in the Region, and uses an evidence-based identification process for categorisation.

Evidence used to identify the 'lower performing' and 'higher performing' schools includes:

- the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, Reading and Mathematics;
- the VCE Allstudy, English and Mathematical Methods scores; and
- a range of data sets relating to our 11 Regional performance indicators.

The Staff, Student and Parent Opinion survey data are also considered strongly, along with enrolment trends, teacher and Principal performance data.

Change takes time, vision and direction. Engaging staff in the school improvement agenda is the key to success.

Where there may be concerns raised about school performance in a range of areas other than student achievement, a school may be categorised as a 'focus school' for specific attention. Categorising schools in this way enables the tailoring of resources to the areas of greatest need.

After the initial categorisation, schools are then identified for support. The Blueprint for

Government Schools (DET, 2003) is based around seven flagship strategies. Flagship Strategy Six, which is focused on School Improvement, provides additional funding to support Targeted School Improvement (TSI) initiatives. The allocation of this funding is distributed to 'lower performing' or 'focus schools' upon request from the Senior Education Officer after consultation with the school. Schools are required to demonstrate the alignment of resources to the key improvement strategies in their School Strategic Plan or Annual Implementation Plan and provide an end-of-semester progress report on the milestones and achievements.

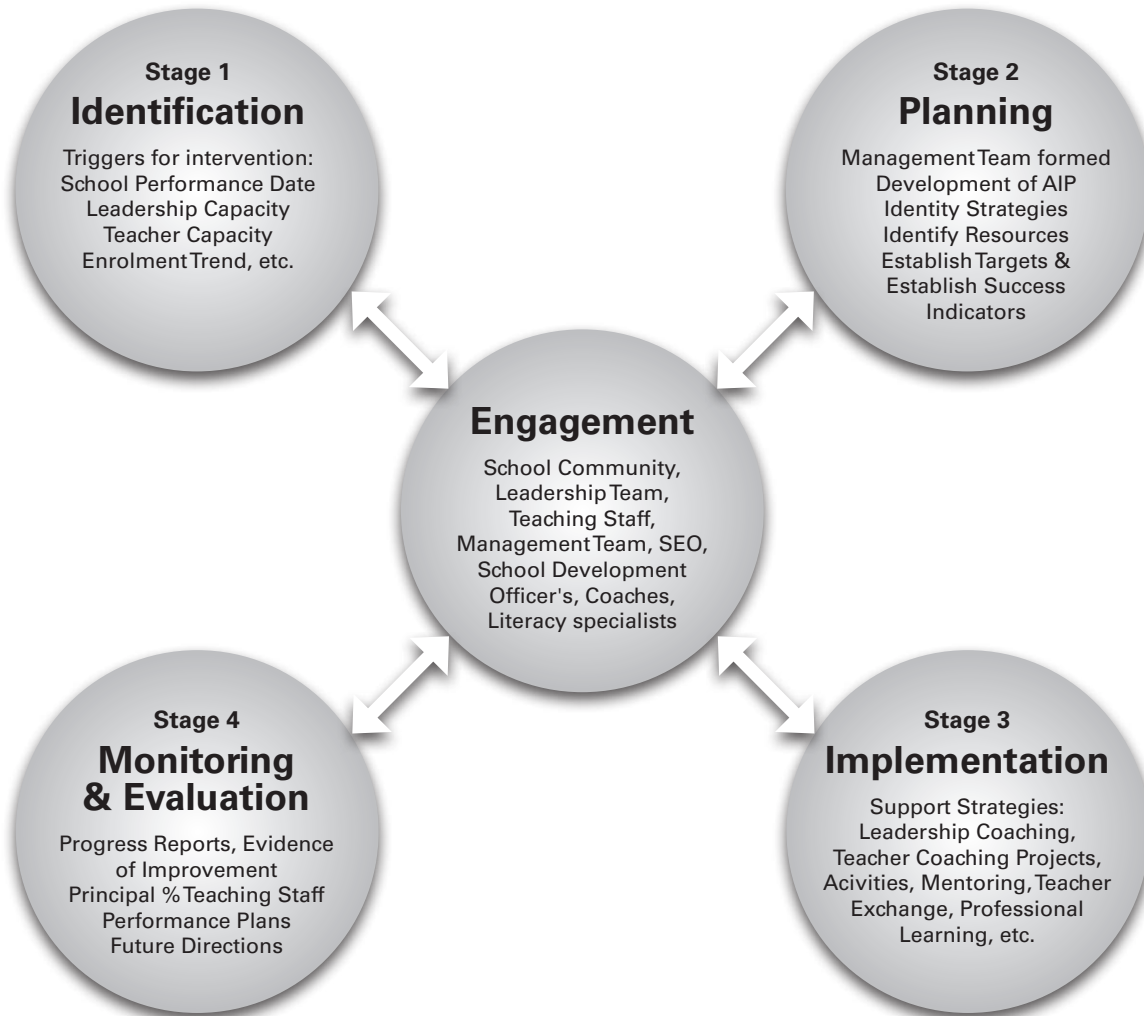
To assist with the provision of on-going support, the EMR has developed a four-stage process for TSI. The task of school leaders in this instance is to engage and mobilise the school community. While engagement is not a stage in itself, we recognise that it is the key that drives each stage of the school improvement process. The Principal must communicate effectively and consult widely to get 'buy in' from the staff and school community. This is not a simple process. And, as Hattie (2005) noted, it's

... not just the responsibility of a particular teacher at a particular time.

Principals need to acknowledge and promote the philosophies, theories and suggested actions agreed to by stakeholders. They must listen, collaborate and commit to assessing student data continually, and persist once a course of action has been determined. Change takes time, vision and direction. Engaging staff in the school improvement agenda is the key to success.

The overview of this process is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: EMR School Improvement Overview



Stage 1: Identification

Stage 1 of the school improvement process involves the rigorous analysis of available data by the regional leadership team, to identify low performance in Eastern Region schools. Trends in performance are factored into this analysis and discussions at a regional and school level are on-going. The region encourages schools in the collaborative analysis of achievement data, through on-going and constructive professional conversations. Too often, strategies for improvement have been based on misconceptions, with little ‘buy in’ or input from staff. Opportunities for professional learning at all levels, in data analysis and the use of evidence for improvement, are provided at network meetings, workshops and seminars and through close communication with the

SEO. It is evident that once teachers and school leaders are able to identify individual students in the data, a subtle shift in the acceptance and utilisation of this information follows. Action and mobilisation is made possible.

To assist schools in developing a common language and professional dialogue around school improvement, the EMR has designed a School Effectiveness Diagnostic Tool (EMR, 2007) based on the eight elements of the Effective Schools Model (adapted from the work of Sammons, Hillman and Mortimer, 1995). The purpose of the interactive Diagnostic Tool is to help leaders facilitate professional reflection and discussion on areas for school improvement, and to monitor school effectiveness.

Figure 2: School Effectiveness Diagnostic Tool

School Effectiveness Diagnostic Tool		School Name:	
1. Professional Leadership - Principal	<p>a) The Principal leads learning focusing on achievement, high expectations of staff, students & school improvement. There is total commitment to enable every learner to reach their potential.</p> <p>b) The Principal optimises the school's resources. Planning for improvement is evidence based. School structures, policies and processes support school improvement.</p> <p>c) The Principal develops constructive respectful relationships with staff, students and community. The Principal is open to feedback and demonstrates a willingness to develop self.</p> <p>d) The Principal leads the school promoting a clear vision and sense of purpose. Whole school approaches are developed to foster the commitment of the school community.</p>		
1.1 Professional Leadership - Leadership Team	<p>a) The Leadership Team is a united collegiate group.</p> <p>b) The Leadership Team leads learning, shapes pedagogy, promotes inquiry, reflection and teamwork.</p> <p>c) The Leadership Team develops a high degree of clarity and consistency about effective teaching practice.</p> <p>d) The Leadership Team manages change effectively and whole school programs reflect the vision.</p>		
2. Purposeful teaching/ Focus on Teaching & Learning	<p>a) There is a whole school model of curriculum planning that reflects knowledge of student needs and understanding of effective teaching and learning practices.</p> <p>b) Professional learning activities and programs are aimed at improving the teaching-learning relationship, paying particular attention to developing the subject and pedagogical knowledge of teachers.</p> <p>c) Quality teaching and learning is recognised and valued.</p> <p>d) Assessment practices are used to inform teaching and learning.</p>		
3. Shared vision and goals	<p>a) The learning environment demonstrates shared vision and goals.</p> <p>b) Teaching and learning practice reflects the school's vision and goals.</p> <p>c) Work is characterised by collegiality and collaboration. Genuine opportunities for participative decision-making are provided.</p> <p>d) The purpose of the school's vision and goals are clearly understood by the school community.</p>		
4. High expectations	<p>a) Student engagement and motivation to learn is evident.</p> <p>b) Teaching and Learning practices reflect that there is a developmental process differentiating the curriculum for individual needs.</p> <p>c) Student goals are clearly articulated by teachers.</p> <p>d) Student achievement and progression is informed by effective assessment practices.</p>		
5. Accountability	<p>a) Data is used widely to inform decision-making and planning.</p> <p>b) Relevant data is collected to make judgements about performance.</p> <p>c) Data is used to identify areas for improvement in student achievement.</p> <p>d) Teacher judgements about standards of achievement are reliable and valid.</p>		
6. A learning community	<p>a) Approaches to student centred learning are relevant, meaningful and purposeful. The learning environment is caring and supportive.</p> <p>b) Positive relationships are established between all members of the learning community.</p> <p>c) The school enjoys a positive community image.</p> <p>d) School council is a supportive and involved body which makes a meaningful contribution to the school and community.</p>		
7. Stimulating & Secure Learning Environment	<p>a) Resources are allocated to improving classrooms that are conducive to quality teaching and learning.</p> <p>b) Preventative wellbeing strategies and programs are embedded in the whole school curriculum.</p> <p>c) School structures support individual needs.</p> <p>d) A whole school approach to behaviour management and discipline is evident in the school.</p>		
Key: Green = Effective		Amber = Moderately Effective	
		Red = Ineffective	
		White = Don't Know	

1d) Evidence: Data
 Staff Opinion -Goal Congruence, Student Decision-making
 Parent Opinion-Parent Input, school improvement, learning focus
Evidence: School Context
 Performance plans are aligned with the SSP, AIP
 Common understandings of school goals are demonstrated
 Vision is articulated and embedded in school culture
Evidence: Leadership Capacity
 An ability to lead discussions about effective learning & teaching
 Model's important values and behaviours to the school community
 Actions are aligned with shared values
 Student leadership opportunities for participative decision-making

The Effective Schools Model was chosen as a base upon which to diagnose the level of school effectiveness. It provided a context for holistic school assessments to be made, highlighting the links between school data, school context, leadership capacity and school improvement. This enabled school leadership teams to self assess against the model using the traffic light approach, Red (Low), Amber (Medium), Green (High) and to rate the school's effectiveness. This visual representation provided a snapshot overview identifying areas for priority consideration. The model reflects the following statement from the Department.

Studies which focus on only one or two outcomes may give only a partial picture of effectiveness, both in terms of effects and the correlates of effectiveness.

DEECD, 2004

The EMR is encouraging the use of the tool as a strategy for leaders to facilitate conversations on school effectiveness, which can act as an internal monitor of continuous school improvement. Schools would normally make an initial assessment at the beginning of the school year and follow up with a second assessment towards the end of the year. The colour coding is a visually powerful summary assessment that in every case has led to powerful professional dialogue and reflection in schools.

Stage 2: Planning

Once a school has been identified for TSI support, the Principal forms a Management team to facilitate the on-going process. This team includes the SEO, key teachers and school leaders responsible for driving improvement. The team develops the Annual Implementation Plan identifying key improvement strategies. This plan includes resources required, timelines for the completion of tasks, targets, evaluation and monitoring. More importantly, the Management Team meets regularly to keep the school improvement agenda alive, by reflecting on progress and making adjustments where necessary. Skilful leaders must be goal-orientated and results-orientated but, at the

same time, they must be highly skilled in their people and communication orientation (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

The focus for school planning must be on improving teacher practice. Conversations in management team meetings, indeed at all school meetings, must be focused on what is and what is not quality teaching in the school. We believe that once there is school-based agreement about effective instructional practice, and professional learning is focused on productive classroom teaching, improvement will follow.

Research has shown that Instructional Leadership has three to four times greater impact on student outcomes than Transformational Leadership (Timperley and Parr, 2007). We also know that the single most important influence on student learning is the quality of individual teachers (McKinsey, 2007). Teachers need to identify and understand the needs of each individual learner and plan for progression (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000).

Stage 3: Implementation

School systems have always developed good plans and policies, but these live or die in the implementation. Once the goals, targets and key improvement strategies have been identified for improvement, it is the responsibility of the Principal and the School Leadership Team to lead and co-ordinate, effectively, the implementation of the Annual Implementation Plan.

The EMR is committed to supporting schools in the implementation by offering appropriate regional resource allocation, to enable schools to implement their plan successfully.

The range of strategies that have been employed to build school capacity, teacher capacity and leadership capacity, to enable schools to improve student outcomes, have included:

- pairing of higher-performing principals with lower-performing principals, with a focus on building leadership capacity and leadership development;

- secondment of high-performing leading teachers to work with school leadership teams to coach and model effective practices for classroom teaching and student wellbeing;
- coaching of principals in leadership development by peers and/or consultants;
- Teacher Collaborative Learning Project – to enable the school personnel to define their shared understanding of best practice and to develop their own theory of action for classroom-based observation;
- EMR Literacy Guarantee – the provision of a personalised education plan for every student who has not reached the benchmark in Year 3;
- EMR Youth Commitment – the provision of appropriate and effective career and transition support for young people in the age group 15 to 19 years; and
- Everyone Everyday – an EMR wellbeing initiative to connect all students with a supportive, caring adult, to promote the development of healthy relationships.

A current example of an additional strategy, provided to TSI and Focus schools in 2008, is the placement of thirty-two Teaching and Learning coaches in these schools. The role of the coaches is to work with teachers in classrooms, and in a variety of learning contexts, to develop improved pedagogical practices in teaching and learning. Teaching and Learning coaches also have a critical role in collecting data to inform their work further, within the school, and to evaluate the success of applied strategies.

Stage 4: Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation is conducted on an on-going basis at a regional and school level. Progress is reported against Achievement Milestones and Targets outlined in the Annual Implementation Plan. Progress is monitored through the on-going discussions with the Principal, Leadership team and the SEO. This can be complemented by the revisiting of the

School Effectiveness Diagnostic Tool where school improvement can also be documented. Once Monitoring and Evaluation is undertaken, the cycle of identification, planning and implementation is reconstituted, hence the notion of continuous school improvement.

Whilst the school principal establishes the preconditions (direction, commitment and capacity) and is responsible for the interventions that improve teaching and learning in the school, the EMR provides strategic support in relation to improved knowledge and appropriate response. Judgements are also formed about the leadership capacity within the school, through the Principal Performance and Development Plan review cycle, which is monitored by the SEO. The Region documents, on a data base, all regional, systemic and external assistance provided to each school, in order to maintain coherence and accountability in relation to the improvement process.

Summary

Transcending the status quo of being a ‘good’ or ‘cruising’ school, and moving to a culture that is committed to continuous improvement and high performance, requires responsive and strategic support from central and regional offices. The following ten principles have formed the basis of the EMR School Improvement process.

1. Engage all stakeholders in schools, by providing a compelling narrative around why there is a need for improvement, and how the change process can be beneficial to students.
2. Build a rigorous, relevant and transparent evidence base, and clear performance indicators upon which future improvements can be targeted and evaluated.
3. Confront the brutal facts and identify the specific areas where improvement is required.
4. Ensure that the school has the internal leadership capacity to lead the change process.

5. Support and empower the school to 'own' the planning and implementation processes.
6. Attract and deploy the necessary resources required to bring about the change.
7. Where possible, utilise available 'outside' expertise to ensure objectivity, and ensure that quality feedback is provided on an ongoing basis.
8. Avoid the 'Christmas Tree' approach, where the school latches on to every new program and innovation available (hence the allusion to flashing lights and decorations), so as to ensure that selected strategies are clear, coherent and focused on success.
9. Build internal accountability through a collaborative approach to data analysis and interpretation.
10. Keep fingers on the 'pulse', in order to monitor the 'health of the patient', as success can only be related to sustained student outcomes.

Future direction: Staying the course

Critical to the sustainability of successful government schools in the EMR is the transformation to high performance. To maintain and build the trust that parents and key community stakeholders have in government schools, an improvement agenda focused on enhancing outcomes for students must be adopted and maintained over time. This process must be fully supported, resourced and driven by school leaders, and implemented collaboratively by all stakeholders.

The EMR is determined to support and encourage schools on their journey of continuous improvement. It is arguable that previous intervention strategies have not gone far and deep enough. To make a difference requires courage and conviction, sometimes resulting in challenging intervention strategies. It is also demanding in terms of efforts and time but, as noted by Garmston and Wellman (1999),

(if) any group is too busy to reflect on the process of how they are working, it is too busy to work on improving.

It is arguable that previous intervention strategies have not gone far and deep enough. To make a difference requires courage and conviction, sometimes resulting in challenging intervention strategies.

We need leaders to be impatient and to act early when warning signs first appear, such as declining enrolments, poor student attendance, high teacher absence and low performance data. The ultimate aim is for schools to take control of their own continuous improvement agenda – and to ensure that it is embedded within the school culture and therefore sustainable.

Over the last forty years, school systems world-wide have grappled with the concept of school improvement. With the introduction of the Blueprint for Government Schools (DET, 2003) and now with the Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform (DEECD, 2008), the Victorian system has endeavoured to provide a holistic long-term view of school system reform, and to eliminate the notion of short-term 'quick fixes' as a solution to underperformance. This long-term view acknowledges the complexity of challenges facing schools and school leaders if they are to bridge the widening gulf that exists between higher-performing and lower-performing schools.

We argue that at no previous stage of our history has it been more important to improve the effectiveness of our schools. By 'enabling' schools, regions are ensuring that every student in every school can achieve to her/his full potential. To do this, we must 'stay the course' and create sustainable schools, where high achievement is not only expected but is ensured, through intervention strategies that guarantee success.

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Endnote

- 1 For details see <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standards/account/frame.htm>, accessed 11 April, 2008.

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Both authors work in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Lisa Black is Manager, School Improvement for the Region, and has over 20 years experience as an educator in a variety of leadership roles. Coralee Pratt is Assistant Regional Director and previously was Manager, School Leadership and Development, a Senior Education Officer and a school principal.

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This paper provides an overview of how the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) in Victoria has worked to implement the school improvement philosophy and strategies developed by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), in order to assist all schools within the region to examine, analyse and improve student performance. The authors explore the beliefs that are central to the improvement process and describe how the Region identified, designed and implemented the range of interventions and projects that are integral to its School Improvement Strategy. They explain how the DEECD School Accountability and Improvement Framework has guided the development of this work, and describe how diagnostic tools have been developed to meet the Region's needs. Given their experience thus far, they conclude that it is now crucial to 'stay the course' and create sustainable schools, where high achievement is not only expected but is ensured, through intervention strategies that guarantee success.

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