

Improvement and how to get it

Advice from The University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership.

We can make a prediction based on our research, our work in schools over the last three years, and the research of many others; schools that improve are more focused on their achievement problems and coherent in their approach to improvement than others.

There are no silver bullets – particularly if you are looking for them in your professional learning. It appears in both New Zealand and Australia that government agencies and schools have possibly leapt to the belief that evidence of a high effect size for professional learning and development (PLD) of teachers in a meta-analysis (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) means more PLD in schools is a good thing. This is not how that effect size should be interpreted. Our observations in schools lead us to believe that PLD is frequently part of the problem in schools, not part of the solution. Further, the system level agencies are a part of that problem because they have a 'glad bag of PLD' that they contract in for schools, in the belief that it will be good for them. Indeed, the PLD they choose to contract may well be able to add value, but what we tend to observe, particularly in the secondary school environment but not limited to those schools, is that schools have multiple PLD contracts that have negative effects because middle leaders and staff are simply overwhelmed with the number of meetings and agendas that are being pushed on them in any given year.

Schools do not improve by having more PLD. Schools improve when they are absolutely clear on the achievement problem they are trying to solve, and they focus on that with laser-like precision. The implication of that is that problem analysis and strength analysis should lead to a few (one or two) clear achievement focused goals that everyone in the school buys into, and then – and only then, the school plans its PLD to support its efforts towards those goals.

If schools did this, they would almost never have multiple contracts for PLD in their schools. Multiple PLD foci overwhelm people with more meetings, more tasks, more frustration – and bizarrely, those forces mean that the PLD is a barrier to the school improving because staff members are not focused on their improvement goal, they are focused on surviving the never-ending stream of PLD meetings and associated tasks.

School meetings are important vehicles for school improvement. Effective PLD is not an 'add-on'. Examining the results of students on an on-going basis, theorising about causation, testing theories, putting in strategies to improve outcomes based on the agreed theories, and then checking that you are getting results is the day-to-day work of improvement (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007) – and it is done in those every day meetings. Our advice is, if, as part of that process, you agree that external help (PLD) is required, then get it. But be discerning and very, very, focused on the goal you are trying to achieve, how the PLD links to that goal, and then monitor your progress towards it.

Teachers must experience coherence and clarity if they are to work collectively on improving outcomes. That means not only getting the PLD right, but also getting the systems right that align to your goals, and listening to what students, teachers and middle leaders tell you are school-based barriers to improvement and doing something about them. Student-centred leadership is the everyday business of keeping a focus on where you are going, and being prepared to shift and change to get better results if your theory for improvement isn't proving to be effective. Effective schools do less better.

Annual Planning

It is pleasing to see some schools have taken up our offer of a free, down-loadable planning template for this year's annual plan. In response to feedback we have made the Word template friendlier to use. We have also put up Dyer St (Wellington) Primary's plan on the website as an example of a school that has used it – and used it well. This template may help some of you to refine your focus! Go to: [DyerStreet Charter 2015.pdf](#)

References:

Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 44, 635-674.

Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Best Evidence Synthesis: Teacher Professional Learning and Development*. New Zealand, Wellington: Ministry of Education.