

# School Improvement at Scale

How a poorly performing region in Victoria turned its schools around

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **About the publication**

This case study was commissioned to contribute to an OECD international study into education system level reform. It also serves as a stimulus for debate and reflection among the 142 Victorian schools involved in networks and engaged in the reform agenda and for other schools developing a self-improvement agenda.

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## Executive Summary

Large scale school improvement is the goal of education systems around the world. System reform has been well documented and the key building blocks have been identified. Nevertheless, many systems still fail to bring about the improvements they are seeking. Improvement across a large system, as shown in this case study, requires not only policies that reflect best practice but consistent leadership, networks for innovation and collaboration and, crucially, the commitment at all levels to take the long run implementation task seriously. This case study is an account of system improvement that was highly successful.

From 2008 to 2012, the Western Metropolitan Region (WMR) region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (DEECD)<sup>1</sup> with 142 schools and 77,500 students, embarked on a reform agenda that resulted in significant improvement at scale. This was achieved through collaborative system change in a policy context where schools have a high degree of autonomy.

The region's story of improvement is impressive. In 2007 and for decades prior, it was the worst performing of the state's nine regions on every measure. The region has the highest proportion of schools with concentrated disadvantage, with some locations having the greatest concentration of poverty in the state, and the lowest levels of student outcomes.

In 2008, the region's schools collectively posed the question, 'What will it take to become the most rapidly improving region in Victoria?' Performance measures from 2008 to 2012 show the goal of being the most rapidly improving region have been achieved.

## Impressive gains

Using 2008 NAPLAN<sup>2</sup> as a base year, compared to all regions, the region's student data between 2008 and 2012 show the second highest relative gain in literacy and numeracy; the highest growth in student learning (effect size); and the biggest gains compared to the state mean in absolute data.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, the high rate of student learning growth, with schools' performance well above expectations in adding value to their students' learning, is the key to the region's improvement.

Importantly, the region made significant gains in secondary school learning against the national trend. The region's Year 5 cohort in 2008 was worst in reading and numeracy out of nine regions in Victoria. By 2012, this cohort, then in Year 9, was third in the state on all NAPLAN measures, and was close to the state mean in reading and numeracy.

While the region is still below the state mean on most measures, it has demonstrated that significant improvement can be achieved for low SES students and in schools of concentrated poverty. It has also successfully changed the 'mindset' of principals and

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<sup>1</sup> Western Metropolitan Region was renamed in 2012 as South Western Victoria Region with a total of 399 schools.

<sup>2</sup> Every year, all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. This is referred to as NAPLAN - the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy.

<sup>3</sup> 'Relative gain' refers to the growth in learning comparing student progress over a specified period of time with students who had same starting scale score. 'Growth' in student learning or 'effect size' refers to student progress over a specified period of time. 'Absolute data' refers to student performance measured against the NAPLAN scale score.

teachers towards achieving improvement. In doing so, the region has collectively demonstrated the capacity to bring good performance to scale at a system level.

## **A collaborative systems strategy**

Victorian education policy has for a number of years been built on school autonomy, networks, quality leadership and teaching, partnerships and an accountability framework for student learning outcomes. But improvement in some schools was not necessarily replicated in others; improvement was not at scale and not always sustainable.

The five year improvement strategy for this region drew on key administrative levers such as leadership development, quality teaching, comparative data and accountability, but the strategy went further into what Levin (2010) and the OECD (2009) have described as the complex dynamics of mobilising improvement in large people-dominated systems. They placed building professional capability as the central feature and tackled the implementation task as a serious and long-term commitment.

Four principles for building wide-spread professional capacity guided the strategy.

- *Collective efficacy* – all teachers collectively believing all students can achieve.
- *Layered learning* – everyone learns together about quality instruction; all principals, teachers, schools, networks, coaches, experts and all regional officers.
- *Gradual release of responsibility* – a technique that progressively shifts from directed instruction to independent practice; this was seen to apply equally to classrooms and teachers' professional learning.
- *Focus on the instructional core* – the central place to improve student outcomes is in the classroom.

The strategy progressed through four broad interlocked stages.

- Setting the challenge and building the shared purpose (2008).
- Early implementation: establishing role clarity and a tight web of reciprocal responsibilities among the layers in the system (2009).
- Relentless implementation: changing what schools do, particularly their instructional practices for literacy and numeracy, and providing the necessary support to achieve improvement (2010).
- Collective efficacy: enabling innovation and network learning (2011-2012).

## **Focus on implementation**

International accounts of equivalent system led school improvement strategies attribute success to features such as a strong vision, intensive staff development on instructional practice, consistent accountability systems and collegiality (e.g. Fullan 2007; Elmore 2004). These were all apparent in this strategy.

The additional ingredient and the 'secret' to success was the collective and intense focus on implementation. Central to their success was the tight web of roles and responsibilities in delivery, additional coaches and experts as a support infrastructure, and the collective unwavering confidence that they had the 'right solutions'.

In a survey of principals in 2012, a high 80-90 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with these factors in the region's success. Principals placed particular value on the contribution of coaches to their success; not only did coaches and other experts provide advice on improving practices, they also provided tangible in-school and in-classroom support.

## **Sustaining professionalism**

The collaborative systems approach to school improvement adopted in WMR was designed to enable all schools to break out of the downward spiral of underachievement and low expectations. An intense focus on escalating the skills of professionals was core to this.

The WMR strategy was successful through designing a tight set of specifications, ensuring collaboration, building capability and then focusing relentlessly on implementation, including providing detailed and tailored support for individual schools and networks.

The next phase should be where the benefits of 'collective efficacy' become evident in thriving and supportive networks, innovation and continuous improvement in student outcomes.

The education sector is not alone in facing the challenges of ensuring universal high quality delivery of a core human service. Like education, other sectors such as health, have large professional workforces, localised governance, networks of providers and face mounting community expectations for better outcomes as well as meeting resource challenges.

Emergent system models such as the approach developed in this education region in Victoria make an important contribution to better understanding how to drive large scale system improvement. The case study provides insight into designing system strategies that balance school-based, network, and whole system levers.

## Introduction

In 2007 and for decades prior to this, the Western Metropolitan Region (WMR) of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (DEECD)<sup>4</sup> was the worst performing of the state's nine regions. In rankings of socio-economic status, this region has the highest proportion of schools with concentrated disadvantage (or high Student Family Occupation [SFO] index of disadvantage<sup>5</sup>), with some locations having the greatest concentration of poverty in the state, and historically, the lowest levels of student outcomes on performance measures.

The regions' schools generally have had deeply entrenched cultural and organisational limitations like low morale, low expectations, a narrow curriculum and difficulty in attracting high quality teachers. These limitations have severely impacted on schools' capacity to break out of the spiral of underachievement (Elmore 2007).

In 2008, the region posed the question, 'What will it take to become the most rapidly improving region in Victoria?' and put in place a reform strategy that sought to reposition the region as the most rapidly improving region in the state.

In 2012, following four years of reform, the region topped the state in terms of 'value adding' to students' learning. It turned itself around.

This paper tells the story of the region's turn-around. It is a story of a staged improvement process driven by a collaborative systems strategy that was co-designed by regional and schools leaders and delivered with the support of internationally recognised experts in school improvement, literacy and numeracy.

It is more than a story about how a handful of schools turned around their performance against the odds; it is an account of improvement at scale. The WMR turnaround was built on improvement in 125 of the region's 142 schools<sup>6</sup> over the period 2008 to 2012. It is an inspiring story of how broad scale school improvement running in parallel with regional improvement was achieved in the state's poorest and least successful region.

## What gains were made?

Every year, all students in Australia in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. This is referred to as NAPLAN - the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy. Data sets are analysed by the system and are provided to schools so they can compare their performance with that of schools with a similar student profile and with average performance at the state level.

Based on these data:

- WMR had the highest learning growth of all the regions in Reading and Numeracy between Year 3 in 2008 and Year 7 in 2012.

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<sup>4</sup>In 2012, the region consisted of 142 schools and 77,500 students. Following a regional restructure it will be included in a larger region, the South Western Victoria Region, with a total of 399 schools.

<sup>5</sup>Various occupational categories and their weightings are used in the calculation of the SFO Index which is primarily used to target additional funding for those students whose readiness to learn is affected by a range of circumstances, including prior educational experiences and family or other personal circumstances.

<sup>6</sup>Appendix 1 provides a description of the factors contributing to the lack of improvement in 17 schools across the region.

- WMR had the highest effect size across the regions for NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy at Years 3 in 2008 and Year 7 in 2012. (See Table 1 below.)
- WMR had the highest learning growth of all the regions in Reading and Numeracy between Year 5 in 2008 and Year 9 in 2012. (See Table 2 below.)
- WMR had the highest effect size across the regions for Reading and had the second highest effect size in Numeracy between Year 5 in 2008 and Year 9 in 2012.

**Table 1: WMR ranking in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy between years 3 and 7**

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Numeracy	Grammar
Year 3 2008	8 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Year 7 2012	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>

Source: WMR documentation

**Table 2: WMR ranking in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy between years 5 and 9**

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Numeracy	Grammar
Year 5 2008	9 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Year 9 2012	3 <sup>rd</sup>				

Source: WMR documentation

The significant gains in secondary school learning are important as it goes against the national trend. The Year 5 cohort in 2008 was worst in reading and numeracy out of nine regions in Victoria. By 2012, this cohort, then in Year 9, was third in the state on all NAPLAN measures, and was close to the state mean in reading and numeracy.

In school terms, in each of the periods 2008-10, 2009-11 and 2010-12 approximately 50 per cent of secondary schools in WMR had 25 per cent or more of Year 9 students in the Relative High Gain category. That is, 25 per cent or more Year 9 students in these schools improved

on their Year 7 performance by a margin equal to the highest rate of improvement state-wide.

High rates of improvement were also evident in about a quarter of the lowest performing schools in the region and although these schools did not achieve mean scores equal to the mean for all government secondary schools, they made higher gain levels than the state average.

That the schools were able to break the historical pattern of underachievement in the WMR is highly significant. Victorian students are on average performing well by national and international standards. However, this 'on average' performance masks the significant underperformance of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In Australia, socio-economic disadvantage remains linked to low levels of academic achievement; Australia is fourth out of thirty-four countries in the OECD where the impact of socio-economic disadvantage has the strongest links to performance outcome (DEEWR 2011).

While the region is still below the state mean on most measures, it has demonstrated that significant improvement can be achieved for low SES students and in schools of concentrated poverty. It has also successfully changed the 'mindset' of principals and teachers towards achieving improvement. In doing so, the region has collectively demonstrated the capacity to bring good performance to scale at a system level.

### **What do we know about system-led reform?**

The region's improvement strategy is best discussed from the perspective of system led reform. A systems approach explicitly focuses on key leverage points that are available to a system – be that a nation, state, region or local administration or network – that will result in collective school improvement that is at scale and is sustainable.

A system reform not only guides changed practices in schools, it also changes how a central or district administration does its work. Schools were not only challenged and supported; the region also re-designed its structure and day-to-day interaction with schools over a five year period.

A systems approach to steering school improvement in this way is a relatively recent development (Hopkins 2011; Harris and Chrispeels 2008). The international literature shows us that the characteristics of an effective school and the improvement strategies for schools to become more effective were generally agreed by the 1990s (Barber 2009). The wider adoption of the teaching, learning and organisational practices of successful individual schools was however not assured, despite compelling empirical evidence, multiple improvement models, and policies aimed at replicating the features of an effective school.

From 2000, OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has progressively calibrated countries' educational performance and made possible extensive international performance benchmarking and the identification of those systemic levers that improve education outcomes. Varying success has been achieved through using systemic levers such as accountability, performance standards, leadership development, greater autonomy, teacher incentives and curriculum re-design (Fullan 2011). But again, replicating the application of these administrative levers has not necessarily led to system wide improvement.

Levin (2010) described Ontario Canada's successful systems approach as being one that recognised the dynamic and complex nature of change in individual schools and so they established the framework and infrastructure to steer and support large scale school improvement around key goals and values over a period of time. They recognised that schools are nested in complex 'systems' that can either assist or inhibit scaling up of successful practices. To be successful, changes need to occur in the administrative structure consistent with the changes needed in schools.

However, knowledge of how to do this most effectively is evolving. The significant system wide success in Ontario Canada has drawn attention to the dynamics of large systems comprised of people – their history, values, skills, capabilities, and community expectations – and the need for context specific levers to drive large scale change.

Successful reform in the people-dominated human services sectors like education and health largely centres on carefully designed long-term processes that mobilise and build the capacity of a large workforce at the 'front line' (OECD 2009). An implication is that finding the right scale for system reform in education is a critical factor – large enough to have networking, collaboration and 'systems learning' opportunities but small enough to be context specific.

The region rose to this challenge and designed and implemented a systemic reform strategy that was successful in turning around schooling outcomes within a region where under-performance was entrenched and seen as intractable.

### **What distinguishes this strategy?**

In one respect, the regional strategy appears unremarkable. The state of Victoria had been energetically engaged in school improvement efforts for many years. Literacy and numeracy strategies, strengthened school accountability, extensive professional learning for leaders and teachers and targeted funding for school-based initiatives had been pursued for at least fifteen years. So what was new?

This strategy is distinguished by a combination of factors. A compelling case for change was mounted by the Regional Director and school leaders accepted the call for reform and committed to leading necessary change in their schools. Experts in literacy and numeracy teaching and learning were engaged to design and deliver a program of professional learning – mainly based on in-classroom coaching – that skilled teachers in the use of evidence-based classroom techniques; and the region ensured that the various elements of the literacy and numeracy strategy were systematically and rigorously implemented across all schools in the region. Whilst the reform was initiated by the region, it needed the endorsement of the schools, particularly the principals, and their commitment to the reform agenda to succeed.

The region's success and impressive outcomes have shown that region or system wide improvement in student achievement in disadvantaged regions is possible, that improvements can occur at scale in a relatively short time and can be sustained. The practices underpinning the gains centred on changing the 'mindset' of schools to aspire to major improvement, changing the instructional practices of the school leaders and teachers and the system providing intense and step-by-step support.

## How was the reform agenda determined?

In 2008, the region determined that the pattern of entrenched educational underperformance over several decades needed to be decisively broken. Consequently, they initiated a reform agenda designed to promote region wide improvement – and their approach was to do this through consensus and a process of 'co-design' and mutual commitment between the region and all schools.

This process enabled the region and its schools to establish powerful overarching goals, a common language, and an interlocking set of mutual expectations and actions. It also galvanised a collective effort to lift low performance. Because the core feature was building professional capability and effective networking, the reform also supported average and high achieving schools to improve.

The region developed its strategy from the perspective of a system's collective potential to sharpen the focus on reform and boost the capacity of all school to improve student achievement.<sup>7</sup> The model of improvement was based on intense and collaborative professional capacity building, referred to as 'layered learning'<sup>8</sup>, and guided by the notion of 'gradual release of responsibility'<sup>9</sup> where capability is progressively built from learning under guidance to autonomy as mastery of knowledge and skills is achieved. These principles applied from the classroom to executive leadership.

The reform strategy aimed to improve the learning outcomes and wellbeing of all government school students in the region by developing the instructional knowledge and practice of teachers, school leaders, and regional staff. The focus was the 'instructional core' of the classroom with initial attention primarily on literacy and numeracy and was later extended to other areas of the curriculum.

The approach they chose for literacy improvement was also a proven model (with reading as the core), and had an excellent track record in the effective use of coaches to continuously build teacher capability.

## What were the reform stages?

The strategy progressed through four broad interlocked stages.

- Setting the challenge and building the shared purpose (2008).
- Early implementation: establishing role clarity and a tight web of reciprocal responsibilities among the layers in the system (2009).
- Relentless implementation: changing what schools do, particularly their instructional practices for literacy and numeracy, and providing the necessary support to achieve improvement (2010).
- Collective efficacy: enabling innovation and network learning (2011-2012).

The phases did not necessarily follow a neat chronology and were more dynamic than this typology might suggest. While some schools and networks were well ahead and others

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<sup>7</sup> Collective efficacy (Goddard et al 2004) resonated with leaders and has remained as one of the core concepts underpinning their motivation. It is a cognitive construct that refers to how well group members relate to one another while working toward common goals. Collective efficacy has a fairly strong positive relationship to organisational effectiveness.

<sup>8</sup> 'Layered learning' was a term coined by the region to describe the interdependent learning model that underpinned their professional learning program.

<sup>9</sup> Gradual Release of Responsibility is a term for literacy improvement which is derived from the theory of Lev Vygotsky. WMR also chose to apply the concept to their approach for professional learning.

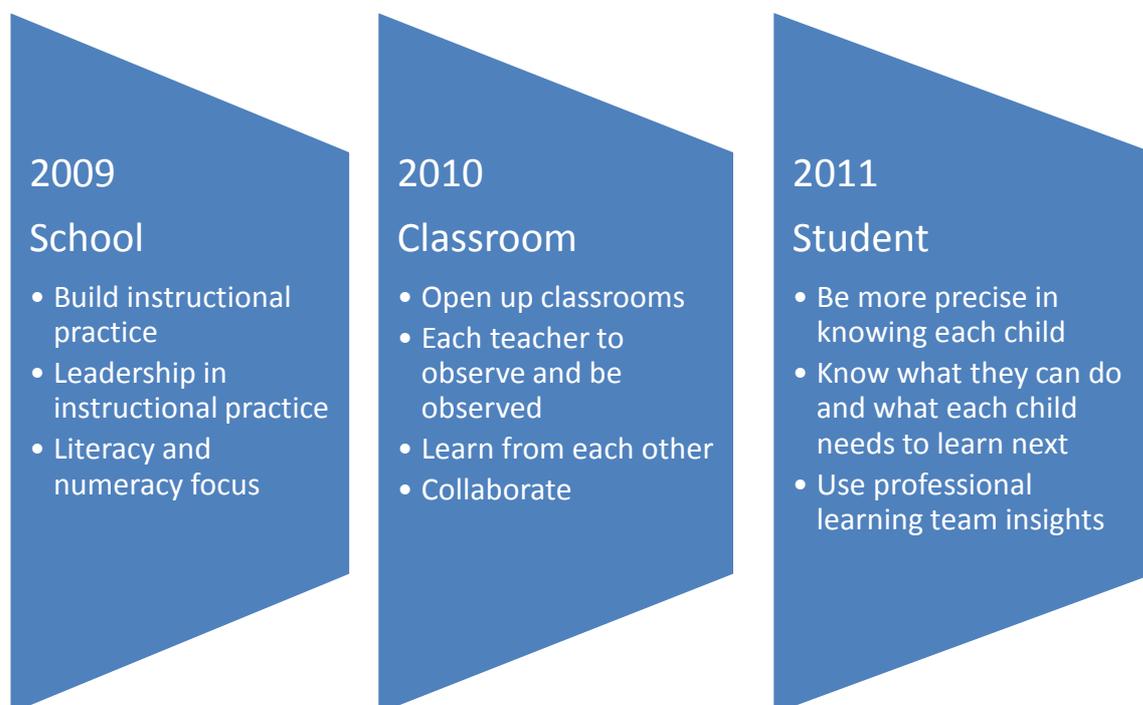
slower, the phases do show the dynamics of the system's developmental approach to leading and supporting schools through their improvement process.

Progress through these stages was steered by regional leadership though a balanced process of top-down direction and guidance and bottom-up engagement and implementation. The 'gradual release of responsibility' model builds teacher and school capability by progressing from tight direction and guidance to the exercise of professional judgment and autonomy. The journey from commencement and the initial agreement to co-design an explicit pedagogical framework, to an environment with network sharing and professional mutual support took five years.

Each year a challenge was set. This was a means of providing a simple and unifying message from regional leadership to schools. The messages were derived from empirically based progressive steps in the reform process. They were particularly designed to engage principals and teachers in dialogue and planning their responses to the system wide strategy.

The initial message in 2009 emphasised the importance of building instructional leadership and literacy and numeracy instructional expertise at the school level. The message for the next phase was the need for deepening teacher understanding and expertise by collaborating and sharing learning – a classroom focus. The 2011 message emphasised the importance of teachers gaining precise knowledge of each student so the best way to improve their learning can be determined.

This progression of messages clarified the common objective and, as the reform gathered momentum, the focus for action systematically shifted from the school in the initial reform period to the classroom and then finally to the individual student.



The messages urged the establishment of a professional learning community in the school, the de-privatisation of teaching and sought to normalise collaboration. They highlighted the

need to reduce variation between classes, increase understanding of individual students and their learning needs and devise differentiated responses to address different learning needs.

### **What are the lessons for reform?**

The account that follows describes the four phases in the development and implementation of the strategy to improve the performance of all Government schools in the region. It shows the key steps and decisions that were made between 2008 and 2012 as the system moved from directing, guiding and then supporting the reforms that schools were making. This is as much a story about an approach to sustaining implementation as it is about the design of a strategy.

What emerges from this discussion is the comprehensive nature of the actions that were taken to promote region and school improvement, the level of detailed planning that went into these actions and the intensity of the implementation process. It describes how the region orchestrated all of the change levers at its disposal to ensure that best evidence literacy and numeracy teaching became embedded in classrooms across the region.

Reading the descriptions of what was done at each phase of the reform one cannot help but be impressed with the clarity of the reform vision and the precision with which it was implemented. Indeed, after reading the account one is not surprised that in the space of four years the region was able to leap from perennially being the worst region in terms of learning 'value add' to being the region that was delivering the highest value add to students' learning.

## The four-phase reform strategy

### Phase 1: Initiation. Setting the challenge and building the shared purpose (2008)

Principals describe the origins of the Improvement strategy in 2008 as stemming from the region presenting a 'compelling case' of the need for a major performance turnaround. The challenge to improve was articulated across the region and crucially, school leaders were asked to commit to the common purpose of a region-wide improvement strategy for the three years ahead. The intent of the development phase was to agree on a common strategic direction – adopt a common purpose, common language, set priorities and, hence, establish the direction and the momentum for change.

A critical first step for the region was gaining region-wide endorsement of literacy and numeracy as the specific areas for improvement and agreement that improvement had to be at scale across the region, not just evident in pilot or volunteer locations.

While the importance of securing the support and commitment of schools in any change process is self-evident, their engagement was not taken for granted. As Levin (2010:81) explains, real change in schools calls for 'will and skill, capacity and understanding and commitment', and that developing widespread motivation and engagement at the outset requires careful design.

#### Evidence and challenge

To arrive at consensus for a new direction, the WMR reform drew on the body of evidence concerning the complex dynamics of educational change in disadvantaged locations and on the record of success of interventions in similar contexts.

Senior leadership from the region led an initial series of forums that set the challenge of breaking the historical pattern of underperformance within the region. Everyone, whether in schools or the regional office, was invited to engage with this challenge. The guiding question posed in these forums was:

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*What will it take to be the most rapidly improving region in student learning outcomes in Victoria?*

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This was a purposefully provocative question. As has been indicated, the region had historically been the worst performing region in terms of student outcomes and had the highest density of students from families with socio-economic disadvantage. Many schools had more-or-less accepted that the region would never be able to significantly turn around performance.

#### Big-picture thinking

A series of focus groups and workshops was conducted by the region's leadership, for all regional educators at every level from graduate teachers through to regional leadership. The collaborative discussion and 'big picture thinking' fed into a representative regional conference in August 2008 that was attended by a cross section of school and regional staff and experts. The workshops and the pivotal conference were structured around collectively answering the guiding question. The culmination of these discussions was a blueprint for reform that was owned by the schools and the region.

As one principal said:

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*The process of creating the blueprint was huge. It involved network meetings, several principal forums and other occasions. We gathered in focus groups- a vertical slice of people from teaching aides, classroom teachers, principals... Then we had a conference in August 2008, with international speakers like Roger Goddard<sup>10</sup> whose focus is collective efficacy. Out of that we built the blueprint. When we signed up it was absolutely unarguable that it was built by everyone.*

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An open and honest deliberation on the region's data on student outcomes and school climate established the case for action and the conviction that the level of student outcomes could be changed.

### **Capacity building**

The answer to the question, what would it take to lift student outcomes and show measureable gain, was that all schools would need to significantly improve student achievements in literacy and numeracy as these are the essential building blocks for accessing learning in all areas of the curriculum. It was also agreed that the main lever to achieve this performance lift would be an expert led intensive and tightly sequenced program of capacity building at all levels in the region.

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*We decided to focus on capacity building.*

*Our aim became: building capacity of our leaders and teachers to use effective instructional practices in an engaging and orderly learning environment.*

WMR principal

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The program of capacity building was for principals, other leaders and teachers and it was focussed on developing specific teaching techniques for improving literacy and numeracy that were to be adopted in all classrooms.

A 'theory of action' for a systems approach to school improvement was generated – that is, an explicit set of assumptions about how specific actions will work so as to produce positive outcomes. The theory was that if each of these pre-conditions was in place, then all schools will be assisted to significantly improve.

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<sup>10</sup> Goddard, et al (2004)

**Box 1: Eight theories of action for steering school improvement across the region**

<b>If...</b>	<b>Then...</b>
If a shared and common language in professional dialogue is used	this will build the notion of 'collective efficacy' across the region
If teaching practice is made public by opening classroom doors	this will result in a better articulation and sharing of practice among leaders, teachers and schools
If research, evidence and school performance data is used to monitor school improvement	this will be a catalyst for change
If individual student work and data are used to track the learning of every student	this will inform the action that needs to be taken
If a strong and flexible accountability system is adopted	this will provide clarity, focus, and direction for all Western Metropolitan Region schools and allow for differential support and intervention
If networks and schools are appropriately resourced	this will ensure that the focus areas for school improvement will be targeted
school networks are built to collectively support all schools	this will help to improve schools and achieve better outcomes for students in the network
If an intelligent evaluation framework is designed and implemented	this will help to monitor and measure progress towards the achievement of the Western Metropolitan Region goals

Source: WMR documentation

**Co-designed priorities**

The final aspect of this development phase was about region wide agreement on the priorities for action and the goals or outcomes that all would commit to. An intensive consultative process resulted in four focus areas and three improvement strategies.

The four focus areas were:

- Literacy P-12;
- Numeracy P-12
- Secondary years 7-10 and post compulsory.
- The learning environment (student wellbeing and engagement).

The three Improvement strategies were:

- Improvement in leadership instructional practice
- Improvement in teacher instructional practice
- Using data at every level (region, school and classroom).

The reasoning for these critical drivers was derived from global evidence but also from local experience in leading a challenging region. Schools had been funded for many different initiatives over the past decades to improve outcomes, without significant widespread gains. Moreover, after over two decades of devolved decision making, the schools, as in other in regions, have a highly developed sense of autonomy. Many would resist implementing reforms that were imposed on them.

Co-designing the priorities and improvement strategies was essential as this enabled the region and its schools to establish overarching goals, a common language and mutual expectations and actions.

### **Non-negotiables**

Region-wide endorsement of the region's proposed literacy and numeracy reform agenda was signified by all principals designing and then agreeing to 'sign-up' to the following set of 'non-negotiables'. Principals agreed to:

- literacy and numeracy improvement as the focal points
- become an instructional leader
- personally engage in intensive professional learning, along with selected staff, on the instructional models for improving literacy and numeracy
- engage in the region wide actions for improving literacy and numeracy (e.g. appoint school-based coaches and establish a professional learning team)
- implement a common coaching model in 'instructional practices' for literacy and numeracy
- engage openly with other schools in a network (e.g. share data and take part in 'learning walks' and 'instructional rounds' as a means for establishing a culture of collaborative enquiry across a network into effective teaching practices)

Regional leadership and officers also agreed to adopt this strategy as their core focus.

An implication of the 'non-negotiables' and the relative clarity and simplicity of the priorities and strategies was that principals would limit their reform efforts to these priorities and actions.

The assumption underpinning this regional approach is that striking the right balance between a mandated and top-down direction for achievement and instruction and local level autonomy will deliver large scale district or regional outcomes. Marzano and Waters (2010), taking evidence from over two and a half thousand districts, identified the key ingredients for leading large scale school improvement as collaborative goal setting, followed by agreement on which goals are non-negotiable, allocating resources accordingly and then monitoring achievement of the goals.

Principals committed to this plan from the outset. Those who were initially more reserved in their endorsement had become fully supportive after two years of implementation.

Major outcome arising from this first phase of reform was a common language for driving improvement and region-wide endorsement of and commitment to implementing the literacy and numeracy reform agenda.

## Phase 2: Early implementation. Role clarity and reciprocal responsibilities (2009)

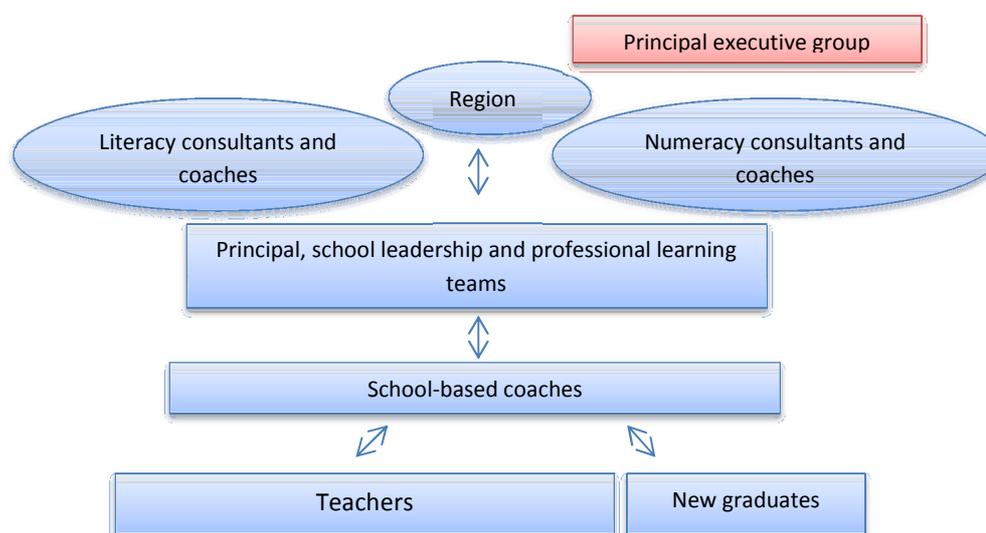
This phase was unambiguously about the 'how' of implementation – setting the expectations and adopting the precise structures, behaviours and the instructional techniques that would yield the best results. Schools had not only bought into a vision and priorities but also into collectively adopting a specific delivery model for literacy and numeracy improvement.

A distinctive feature of the WMR strategy was the intensity of implementation and the clear specification of the roles and responsibilities of all the levels of regional and school personnel implementing the strategy. The system 'infrastructure' was comprehensive and coherent and it was also tight. It redefined responsibilities for existing roles and established additional roles.

### Implementation structure: leadership and support

The layers of roles and responsibilities cascaded from regional leadership to networks and schools and the intermediary layers of experts and coaches. The distinctive features of this structure are the clarity in role definition, including how the roles relate and in the judicious use of around eighty experts and coaches in literacy and numeracy external to schools' staff to continuously build a cross regional culture of collaboration and continuity in improving instructional practices.

The diagram below is a representation of the roles and responsibilities that are discussed in the following section.



**Regional network leaders** were each assigned roles fully dedicated to delivering the strategy in their networks, and asked to focus on instructional improvement rather than administrative oversight. They had the responsibility of sustaining the common language, allocating the resources, building collaborative arrangements and achieving milestones. In practice, they were in the schools advising and supporting principals to design and monitor the change in instructional practice.

**Expert consultants in literacy and numeracy** were expert practitioners who supported regional officers in leading the professional learning program.<sup>11</sup> By 2011, there were 48 consultants. They had the capability to diagnose a school's performance and implement a plan to rapidly escalate a school's capacity for designing and managing change. A consultant typically worked with three to four schools. Consultants were accountable to the principals and provided regular and detailed reports to principals and regional officers.

**Principals** became instructional leaders. They were to encourage open-door classrooms, extensive data use, plan and facilitate the activity of consultants and coaches, ensure positive learning environments, and engage in network learning. Principals included their commitments in their performance plans and were willing to be held accountable for their contribution to their school's and the region's improvement agenda.

**School improvement teams (SITs)** were formed in each school as a group to lead school planning for professional learning. The SIT comprised members of the leadership team, the curriculum co-ordinator, coaches and teachers at various levels. They led planning for the curriculum and professional learning – essentially the on-the-ground implementation.

**Professional learning teams (PLTs)** of teachers focused on student work and student data to identify student learning needs. They established how to improve teaching to meet the identified learning needs of students.

**Regional coaches** were assigned to at least two schools in a network to improve the quality of teaching in literacy and numeracy. They provided a range of tailored learning opportunities for selected members of the school staff, including the principal and leadership team; professional learning for all staff; and closely interacted with school based coaches. They used frequent demonstrations of best practice, conducted workshops to build teaching practice knowledge, and consistently drew on analysis of student work and strategies to improve student learning.

**School based coaches** were in every school. Every school identified one or two school based coaches to assist leadership teams to implement improved instructional practices in literacy and numeracy. The school-based coach had a key instructional leadership role and was part of the leadership team

The model for coaching for regional and school based coaches was built on identical beliefs and practices. Coaches were required to establish a mutually agreed and documented plan of work for supporting teachers. The coaching process was based on the 'gradual release of responsibility model' that starts with demonstration and ends in independent practice. The steps in using this model are as follows:

- The consultant/coach identifies through observation and discussion where changes in practice would be beneficial
- Goals are set collaboratively to implement new practices
- Coach/consultant demonstrates those practices; others observe, document, de-brief.
- Coach/consultant then partners in adopting new practices

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<sup>11</sup> Consultants in literacy were mostly drawn from those familiar with the evidence based school improvement practice and strategies supported by Diane Snowball who is internationally recognised as a literacy expert and for steering improvement gains in other systems.

- When appropriate the roles are reversed and consultant/coach observes and gives feedback.
- Independent practice is achieved.

**Graduate teacher development.** Due to growth patterns in the region, along with the existing number of graduate teachers, it was seen as important to conduct a specific induction program to prepare graduate teachers for the requirements of the improvement strategy and clarify their role in that. A five day professional learning program was established prior to the start of the school year. It covered themes such as literacy and numeracy instructional techniques, general classroom practices, data use and roles and responsibilities. The program was backed up by on-going mentoring and professional learning.

The outcomes arising from this phase were the development of detailed implementation models to guide network coaching, school-based professional learning and classroom coaching, with each specifying mechanisms for collaborative planning, managing, accountability, documenting milestones and evaluating.

### **Phase 3: Relentless implementation. Fundamentally changing instructional practices in schools (2009-2010)**

This third phase consolidated the enduring focus on implementation – delivery of the explicit teaching models and professional learning practices collectively agreed in the region. The key emphasis was on everyone learning together to improve instructional practices with agreement that collaboration was essential to sustain the momentum.

#### **Sequenced and intensive professional learning**

Implementation was supported by a sequenced professional learning curriculum for all involved in the reform. The sequenced programs were tailored to meet the needs of *all* principals, leadership teams, teachers, and coaches engaged in the reform. They built a common understanding of key instructional concepts and demonstrated precise techniques for effective literacy and numeracy teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools.

The time allocation was significant. For example, in 2009, principals committed to sixteen days professional learning; secondary and primary leadership teams twice a term; regional literacy coaches twelve days; teachers (grade/year level specific) literacy and numeracy for ten sessions; and five days for graduate teachers.

The professional learning program for literacy and numeracy for primary and secondary schools was planned as a three year program. The rationale for the content of the programs revolves around assembling the best evidence on teaching and learning for literacy and numeracy and using that to construct instructional models to inform teaching practice.

This is best summed up in the following quotation by Diane Snowball, an internationally recognised literacy expert who led the region's literacy reforms.

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*A major influence on literacy teaching is how well teachers know their students' strengths and needs and how they use this knowledge to plan their teaching. This means that teachers need to fully understand the components of a literacy curriculum, how to continually assess them and how to teach their students in the most effective ways. School leadership plays a major role in this work, with leaders knowing enough to properly guide their school curriculum and ensure their teachers are doing the best possible work to achieve success for all students.*

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A reading of the region's professional learning program plans for 2009 and 2010 reveals the comprehensiveness of these plans. For example, in 2009 the region delivered close to two-hundred literacy professional learning sessions, most of which ran for 4 or 6 hours. Teachers and principals were also able to access the expertise of literacy and numeracy coaches and to use their networks to share and gain advice about how to ensure changed practices were being embedded into the school's operations and into classroom routines.

Some of the common topics of the literacy professional learning program administered by the region in 2009 were the following.

- Assessment practices that engage students in becoming more reflective and engaged learners
- Teaching the six major comprehension strategies
- Integrating comprehension strategies through routines such as Reciprocal Reaching, Students Achieving Independent Learning (SAIL) and Survey, Question, Read, Retell, Review (SQ3R)
- Teaching vocabulary, fluency and decoding
- Developing common understandings about and planning for Read Aloud, Shared Reading, Guided Reading and Independent Reading
- Developing an orderly learning environment
- Creating literacy-enriched classrooms
- Developing a whole school approach to teaching reading comprehension
- Differentiated instruction
- Accelerating learning
- Using the gradual release of responsibility model for teaching and learning
- Planning the teaching of reading at the yearly, term, monthly, weekly and daily levels
- Planning for the teaching of reading in various contexts such as the literacy block, integrated units, genre studies, author studies, etc.
- Learning about the usefulness and weaknesses of published tests
- Identifying the need for and using intervention processes
- An effective lesson structure.

The literacy professional learning topics in 2010 reinforced the need for all classrooms to have libraries and deepened the emphasis on improving students' reading and writing skills. Topics were differentiated according to teaching year levels. Some of the common topics of the literacy professional learning program administered by the region in 2010 were the following.

- The effective use of a classroom library
- Identifying students' needs and forming flexible teaching groups
- Establishing a classroom environment that issues invitations to listen, speak, read, write and view

- High quality literacy teaching practices
- Teaching comprehension
- Implementing a balanced reading program
- Developing oral language and vocabulary
- Thinking about reading and writing connections
- Implementing a balanced writing program
- Providing effective instruction to meet the literacy needs of all learners
- Using authentic literacy assessments in the classroom to inform teaching and monitor progress
- Planning, implementing and interpreting literacy assessments, including English online
- Effective teaching – questioning techniques, think time, providing immediate feedback, classroom set up and celebrating achievements.

Sessions generally featured a range of activities and experiences that teachers could readily use in their classes and key practices were reinforced by the coaches.

In addition, an in-depth Prep literacy professional learning program of 10 sessions was developed to ensure all students received the highest quality literacy teaching to maximise their early success with literacy and reduce the need for intervention in Year 1. This program was extensively used by schools from 2010-2012.

Leadership development was provided to ensure a consistent approach to instructional leadership and school improvement throughout the region. A seven day program based on the research of Robert Marzano and the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) organisation provided school leaders with the knowledge and skills required to balance the three key components of effective school leadership: focus, community of purpose and change management.

The Bastow Institute of Leadership (Victoria) provided leadership development programs, including, induction programs for new principals and, in addition, principals engaged in 'instructional rounds' to observe and give feedback on classroom practices (City et al: 2009).

Data training was provided to support every school and every teacher to use individual student data to track progress and directly inform actions that need to be taken to ensure on-going growth in learning.

The training for principals equipped them to engage with their staff on regional, network, school and individual students' data. Everyone was also provided with training in the use of the Student Performer Analyser (SPA) data tool for example.

### **Techniques for achieving consistency**

Each of the roles and practices that were key drivers of the reform were clarified so that their function and purpose was clear to all. Three examples of this precision are provided below.

Box 2 describes the behaviour expectations for principals, coaches and teachers with respect to coaching. It demonstrates the interconnectedness of the coach's role with that of the principal and teachers. A key aspect of this model is that the coaching activity is visible, tied in with the schools professional learning and built on reciprocal relationships. Importantly, coaches must be highly skilled and valued by colleagues.

## **BOX 2: Working with coaches**

<b>Working with coaching – a shared endeavour</b>	
Role of Principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a team for professional learning</li> <li>• Be the instructional leader - data use, focus on school improvement</li> <li>• Demonstrate value of coaches by personally tapping their expertise</li> <li>• Establish schedule for PI with the coach; select and engage teachers</li> <li>• Regularly meet with coaches; be involved with their work</li> <li>• Build time for coaching demonstrations, multiple teachers, prior planning, demonstration, discussion, goal setting</li> </ul>	
Role of Coach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work collaboratively with administrators to formulate professional development plan</li> <li>• Establish long and short goals; document</li> <li>• For teachers, offer a range of methods and strategies</li> <li>• Help teachers set goals</li> <li>• Frequent demonstration opportunities – follow-up. decisions made and recorded for next demonstration</li> <li>• Assist teachers, analyse student needs plan, monitor</li> <li>• Daily logs and in depth reports</li> </ul>	
Role of Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show willingness to continue learning</li> <li>• Be keen to receive feedback</li> <li>• Share good practice</li> <li>• Visit classrooms</li> <li>• Document, review and pose questions.</li> </ul>	

Source: WMR documentation

Box 3 shows the type of documentation that tied the coaching activity to planning and actions. A rigorous system of documentation and sign-off by a second or third party ensured the structure of coaching facilitated reflection and provided a valuable record of progress. Coaches modelled lessons, held coaching conversations with teachers, observed lessons and provided feedback, and worked alongside teachers in a co-teaching role.

## **BOX 3: A numeracy coach's weekly activity report**

<b>An activity report for a numeracy coach</b>			
<b>Target audience</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Teacher actions</b>	<b>Coach's next steps</b>
<b>Prep teacher</b>	Coaching conversation – students vocab use- chance and data; examined skills for reports	Introduce new unit on time; conduct assessment of student understanding	Model lesson and moderate student work
<b>Grade 4/5</b>	Model lesson – focus on differentiation and using specific strategies from problem solving display	Encourage students to select problem solving strategy independently	Share the lesson- focussing on learning intent.
<b>Prep class</b>	Modelled warm- up and reflection Observed class teacher introducing learning activity	Discuss student achievement and check plan is progressing	Coaching conversation- examines test data and discuss.

Source: WMR documentation

Box 4 shows the 'observable instructional indicators' for improvement in numeracy in a secondary setting. It serves as a guide for classroom practice and a self or peer assessment tool for 'what we need to see in every classroom'.

**BOX 4: Planning Instructional improvement - secondary numeracy**

Secondary numeracy			
Planning area	Observable criteria : what we need to see in every classroom		
<b>Curriculum</b>	Word wall with key words and phases	Concrete material and ICTs to support students	Explanation of current concepts and processes displayed
<b>Assessment</b>	Qualitative and qualitative assessment data: differentiates instruction  Diagnostic prior to each unit	Exemplary work displayed  Students self-assess – capacity matrix	Teacher builds portfolio of assessments
<b>Instruction</b>	Lesson has listening , doing and sharing  Plans explicitly linked to standards and mathematics is articulated in lesson plan  Learning targets used to sequence lessons	Lesson is rigorous, engaging and challenging  Student reflection/ sharing time available  Key strategies to enable differentiation	Students grouped purposefully for - open task; peer coaching  Challenging questioning- extend mathematical thinking  Scaffolding questioning- build learning

Source: WMR documentation

Box 5 shows the layers of implementation that underpinned the WMR strategy and that the schools co-constructed with the region. It shows the implementation process from the perspective of a primary school. The cascading of action from the region, to school networks, to schools, to classrooms and within classrooms to each individual child is illustrated in this school's summation of its engagement with implementing regional reform actions.

**BOX 5: Implementation at all levels**

Implementation layers: progress in a primary school
<p><b>As a region we established:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a theory of action for improvement</li> <li>• a focus on literacy and numeracy;</li> <li>• a coaching model and professional learning model to drive improvement</li> </ul> <p><b>As a network we:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• worked with experts</li> <li>• developed our skills in analysing data, applied tools</li> <li>• opened our doors to each other around these priorities</li> <li>• shared and visited and co-planned with collegiate group of literacy coaches</li> <li>• developed a secondary numeracy project</li> <li>• ensured numeracy coaches also collaborated in their work</li> </ul> <p><b>As a school we:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• privileged team planning and professional learning on a weekly basis- staff meetings were replaced by planning and professional learning meetings</li> <li>• mirrored regional and network meetings – same messages</li> <li>• focused on instructional practice</li> <li>• (principals) participated in learning walks, feedback, and professional learning alongside staff</li> </ul>

- redesigned the timetable to allow coaching conversations
- replicated the advisory lesson structure and strengthened formative assessment
- focused on data – names and targets based on cohorts
- shared student data, conference notes, reading goals etc. 3 times a year

**At the classroom level we:**

- embedded the WMR lesson structure in every classroom for every literacy and numeracy class
- ensured purposeful activity was evident in every classroom
- employed the gradual release of responsibility model which massively improved teachers' content knowledge and pedagogy
- transformed practice in classrooms through coaching conversations
- set goals for every child

Source: WMR documentation

The main outcome of this third phase was significant improvement in the use of evidence-based instructional techniques in classrooms across the region. This outcome was due to the region's deep commitment to ongoing and deliberately sequenced professional learning, primarily delivered by in-school coaches. Through being coached, teachers built their competency in the use of those teaching practices that have proven to be highly effective in improving students' literacy and numeracy achievements.

## **Phase 4: Deepening learning. Collective efficacy, innovation and network learning (2011-2012+)**

This fourth and current phase in the strategy is extending the place of networking, shared responsibility, innovation and purposeful professional learning to sustain the improvement trajectory.

With government policy increasing school autonomy and building professional trust, schools have the opportunity to extend the mutually supportive role of networks that has underpinned much of the earlier success with this strategy.

This phase is more nuanced and practices are differentiated among networks and address schools' specific needs.

*As school leaders, we know our communities and we know how to effect positive change in our schools, and we know the importance of local knowledge and decision making processes. With these important conditions in place, we take responsibility to drive change and determine and implement the approaches that will achieve excellence for our students both locally and system wide.*

*Western Metropolitan Region: A Learning Community 2012-2014. DEECD, 2012.*

A collective view of the aspirations for the next three years 2012-2014 is around two guiding questions.

- How will we achieve more than one year's learning growth for each student annually?
- How will we achieve this across every classroom?

Success would be seen in the following key outcomes.

- Further significant measurable growth in student learning – more than one year's growth
- Reduced in-school variation i.e. greater consistency and learning outcomes between classes
- Significant measurable increases in school completion rates and successful pathways for all students.

The new questions open the door to new research and practices. They signal the need to deepen the use of data to differentiate learning, and to attend more closely to the challenge of improving teaching and learning in secondary schools.

Seven focus areas were agreed across the region and each layer of the system (networks, schools and leaders, and regional support structures) committed to a set of actions.

The seven new focus areas were the following.

- **Professional learning teams** – building a collaborative environment that supports all teachers to acquire the diagnostic and pedagogical skills needed for them to differentiate instruction and achieve on-going growth in learning for all students.
- **Curriculum and instruction** – adopting high impact classroom instructional strategies and models for all areas of the curriculum and documenting the scope and sequencing of content, knowledge and skills across the curriculum for all levels to ensure a viable curriculum within the school.
- **Learning environment** – adopting practices to ensure every classroom is stimulating and reflects high quality teaching and learning and students learn in safe and orderly environments
- **Literacy and numeracy** – achieving region wide commitment to an agreed evidence-based approach to literacy and numeracy and to deepening those practices in all classrooms. All classrooms would adopt differentiated instruction and timely interventions.
- **Rich curriculum** – developing and implementing curriculum and instruction applicable to a rapidly changing globalised environment that requires capabilities for thriving in an internationalised and highly interconnected world.
- **Transitions** – developing research-based effective partnerships between levels of 0-18 year olds instruction, to ensure smooth and informed transitions that enable high levels of learning growth to continue.
- **Post-compulsory course- VCE, VCAL and VET** – ensuring all students have access to the full range of pathways and that schools employ the most effective instructional approaches to this level of learning.

Box 5 below provides an illustration of a collaborative focus on improvement in secondary schools that grew out of a network concern. Importantly, it draws on the same principles that have guided earlier literacy and numeracy strategies – instruction, data, collaboration, openness and collective improvement.

### **BOX 5: Secondary classrooms: high yield instructional strategies**

<b>Instructional practice in secondary classrooms</b>
<p>The challenge to secondary schools has been to raise the level of achievement of all their students. What are the high yield instructional practices that would achieve this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A group of principals adopted a shared and coherent researched based approach to instruction- appropriate for all learning areas; break down subject silos</li><li>• Intensive in-school professional learning as phase one</li><li>• Leading researchers were engaged as 'professional developer in residence' as phase two</li><li>• Teams of teachers from all network secondary schools engaged in jointly planned professional learning program.</li><li>• Program has influenced region wide focus on senior curriculum and instruction for 2012-14.</li></ul>

Source: WMR documentation

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The Box 6 shows the progressive transformation of numeracy instruction through a planned collaboration initiated by principals in 17 secondary schools. It was conducted in three phases, used consultants and coaches for numeracy capacity building, and established an in-school and between-school professional learning strategy.

It describes the various actions that two school networks agreed to focus on and implement within their networks, schools and classrooms. The schools in these networks are now planning to pool their resources to ensure that external support is effectively used and that their improvement is sustainable.

### **BOX 6: Numeracy improvement in secondary schools**

<b>Snapshot: numeracy in secondary schools</b>
<p>As two networks we agreed to focus on years 7-9 numeracy; includes 20 secondary schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• (Internationally recognised) consultant developed an improvement model.</li><li>• Included: strategic planning; graduated areas of focus; six monthly indicators of success.</li><li>• Engaged in lesson video analysis; regular conferencing of five from each school to share and set next level of work.</li></ul> <p>As schools we committed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• for 3 years to work with the numeracy model;</li><li>• to work in teams; and with support of coaches; and</li><li>• to make intense use of student data to diagnose needs and monitor progress.</li></ul> <p>At the classroom level we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• accepted advice and guidance; used data; welcomed consultants and coaches;</li><li>• were open and shared data, analysis of progress and insights.</li></ul>

Source: WMR documentation

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The main outcomes of this fourth phase have been the formation of confident networks that are 'de-privatising' the work of schools, establishing collective priorities more closely tailored to needs, and developing high expectations for professionalism at all levels in schools and networks.

## Explaining success

The system's capability to succeed depended on a number of key features. The 'theory of action' directed the general approach that was adopted by the region and expert input and co-design with schools shaped the specific actions.

All aspects of the strategy have a sound educational basis but they also are a reflection of new directions in public policy and administration more generally. Many now see that establishing a strategic direction and targeting resources is an important foundation for successful change but unless there is wide engagement and mobilisation of those who will implement and a sustained focus on 'the how' of implementation, success is elusive.

Of course, gains have not been consistent and pockets of under-performance remain (see Appendix 1). All systems with performance success stories, like the countries that make gains in PISA rankings, also experience this phenomenon. It is still early days in understanding a region's capability to provide differentiated support for struggling schools and knowing when to intervene in a more hands-on way. However, the region's approach to systemic improvement has demonstrated that it is possible to promote large scale school improvement through a combination of common and differentiated support. Their action was guided by the principle that most schools improve when the next level of work is clearly identified and intense support is provided.

The key features of this successful strategy can be summarised as:

- motivating and mobilising all players in the region by finding a common language and telling a new story to build momentum;
- setting a clear and simple set of goals for the future;
- establishing a tight focus on literacy and numeracy which has opened the door to other areas of the curriculum;
- allocating resources to build a new layer of coaching support for schools and teachers in classrooms;
- building educational professionalism in all its aspects, especially leadership, instructional capability, and mutual accountability;
- adopting a relentless focus on implementation and delivery; precision in new practices, opportunities to learn and review practices that work; and
- encouraging innovation as a logical next step from improved capability and higher levels of professionalism.

## Components of successful system reform

Fullan (2007) has analysed how many systemic efforts to improve schooling outcomes have failed to achieve the desired effect. He argues it takes capacity to build capacity: the whole system focussed on getting 'important things done collectively and continuously - ever learning' (Fullan 2008).

In a similar vein, Levin (2010) concludes that most studies of system change have pessimistic findings in that the changes did not really develop, did not last or did not bring about the intended effects for students. The way to success is about making the right changes in the right way - daily teaching and learning changes need to occur across most classrooms; programs and resource allocation need to address equity issues; building positive morale and deep competency requires the direct involvement of all who are required to make the

changes; teachers need the time and opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement the changes; and high levels of public confidence require communication between schools and their local communities. Having the right innovation is not enough; it needs to be implemented widely and consistently over a long period of time.

Hopkins et al (2011) explain that successful system strategies manage to balance top-down and bottom-up change in achieving system-wide student improvement. Top-down includes factors like a policy focus on student achievement, teacher quality, system-wide professional learning, data availability and system networks. Bottom-up factors include leadership at the school level, focus on classrooms and improving the quality of teaching; and early intervention practices for underachieving students.

Marzano and Waters' (2010) framework for system improvement is a balance between school-based capacity to make key decisions about the functioning of a school and the district or system's capacity to be influential in how schools operate.

They argue that an effective system leading change has two system tasks as the centrepiece – establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; and monitor achievement of those goals. These are accomplished through collaborative goal setting, the allocation of resources to support the reform and alignment of stakeholder views.

Their empirically based system model, drawn from successful district reforms, is conceptually similar to the approach that has been discussed here. It comprises the following.

- Ensuring collaborative goal setting.
- Establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction.
- Creating (school board) alignment with and support of district goals.
- Monitoring achievement and instruction goals.
- Allocating resources to support the goals of achievement and instruction.

The key objective of this process is to achieve, in the terms used by McKinsey (2007), high instructional quality with low variability among teachers, as the hallmarks of a high performing system.

## **Principals' perspective on the strategy – how and why it worked**

In a survey of principals in 2012,<sup>12</sup> a high proportion agreed that the regional strategy improved literacy and numeracy, that the drive for role clarity and a negotiated role for principals as instructional leaders were highly effective, and that changing classroom instructional practice has had a major positive impact. Moreover, they also conveyed the idea that the strategies' core features (e.g. instructional leadership, coaching, de-privatised classrooms, self-generating networks, using school and student data, and professional learning teams), have become established as the right way to proceed in the future.

### **Strong Endorsement**

Principals' assessment of the key features of the strategy shows a high proportion attribute significant improvement in literacy and numeracy in their schools to the improvement strategy and that the system approach by the region was central to this.

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<sup>12</sup> WMR principal survey was completed in September 2012 and the response rate was 61 per cent (N=86) It comprised a 5 point Likert scale for 10 questions and 4 open ended questions. Around 770 comments were received in response to 4 open ended questions.

- 86 per cent of principals 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the WMR strategy led to significant improvement in literacy in their schools; and 78 per cent agreed the same for numeracy improvement.

Slightly more 'strongly agree' with regards literacy improvement than with numeracy with comments in focus groups around the greater familiarity and more material for literacy solutions, and the challenges some teacher face with regards to numeracy.

- 86 per cent of principals also 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the region's role and leadership significantly helped schools improve outcomes, 84 per cent valued the role of networks and 78 per cent saw that the 'role clarity', non-negotiables, and mutual obligations set up by the region (e.g. the region will..., the school will...) were crucial to making changes in their school.

This combination of factors points to very strong endorsement of the guiding and supporting role of the regional administration, particularly in terms of facilitating access to networks, and clarifying roles. Principals see this as a beneficial combination of a structured and collaborative system model.

The substantive focus of the strategy on improving instructional practices delivered impressive outcomes according to the principals. There is almost universal endorsement that the strategy improved instructional practices in classrooms and has had a major impact in schools.

- Over 95 per cent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the strategy improved instructional practices in their schools.
- 86 per cent agreed that the strategy helped to reduce variability in teacher capacity- with more 'agreeing' than strongly agreeing'.

Variation in teacher capability is seen to be relatively high in Victoria and Australia and this result would seem to indicate that while reducing variability is a challenging task, significant progress can be made. Comments in the survey pointed to reducing variability as a major goal that most explicitly pursued.

The strategy explicitly sought to turnaround the role of principals from a focus on administrative or general educational leadership to instructional leadership. The strategy collaboratively defined the expectations of this role and extensive professional learning was made available to support principals to become effective instructional leaders. This was a key to the strategy's success, particularly in the Victorian environment where decision-making is highly devolved to the school level.

- 87 per cent of principals indicated that their knowledge base as an instructional leader was improved and 88 per cent agreed that their effectiveness as a leader was strengthened.

Comments show that while the majority gained significantly, there were others who felt that the instructional leadership focus and the professional learning did not sufficiently differentiate among types of schools or between experienced and less experienced principals.

## The region's role in assisting schools

To better understand the role of the system in guiding and supporting school improvement, principals were asked to nominate three main features or actions by regional leadership that assisted their school to improve. The comments cluster around eight features.

The priority regional actions (sorted by frequency) are in the domains of direction setting and implementation – how the region supported, funded and guided the delivery of the reform to systematically change classroom practices. Actions providing direct and tangible support to schools were the most favoured.

In order of priority the most important actions by the region that assisted their schools were the following.

- The development and resourcing of highly effective literacy and numeracy coaching models.
  - Particular emphasis was placed on the additional resources to make high quality consultants and coaches available to schools and networks; that the approaches to be adopted by coaches were expertly developed and prescribed; and that all coaches including school-based coaches were supported to access on-going training.
- The extensive provision of professional learning.
  - Intensive and systematic professional learning for principals and teachers was highly valued, especially that principals, leadership teams, coaches and many teachers were given access to expert professional learning providers, and the sessions focussed on what mattered most.
- The emphasis on building commonalities in instructional practices – especially literacy and numeracy.
  - The focus was on understanding and delivering Instructional practices that worked; they were built on compelling methodologies; and importantly, they set up commonalities so professional exchange was meaningful and constructive; the commonalities opened the door to a new level of collegiality.
- The region collectively developed a clear and unifying strategic vision
  - There were consistent messages; an agreed but mandated direction; the priorities were uncomplicated; there was role clarity and the resources to back it up were made available.
- The introduction of specific capabilities for instructional leadership.
  - This was a highly valued direction and it provided an unambiguous focus; it also provided high expectations and was backed up by systematic capability building. In particular the opportunity for participation in instructional rounds was outstanding.
- The guidance by regional leadership was outstanding.
  - Regional leadership was highly visible and convincing; multi-dimensional support was available throughout the reform period; and the level of access to critical friends, experts and consultants was especially important.
- The emphasis on collegial networks.
  - Belonging to a network brought mutual high expectations, opportunities for sharing and support, and many anticipate that the collegial structure should endure

- The tangible support that was provided for the expansion of data literacy.
  - The reform initiative successfully highlighted the importance of data analysis, and established training and processes to further deepen data literacy at all levels in schools.

### **Principals' own actions for school improvement**

Principals were asked to reflect on the actions they took as leaders that most assisted their schools to improve. The priority actions are clustered in the domains of building staff capability, setting directions and modelling good professional practices. While being an instructional leader is one discrete priority, it is also intrinsic to the other actions and perceived as the driver of the changes that have occurred.

Principals' actions included the following in priority order.

- Explicit commitment was given to coaching as a lever in improvement.
  - Coaching was strongly endorsed so that school resources in addition to regional resources, plus time and effort were allocated to ensuring that all the forms of regional, network and school based coaching operated smoothly.
- Professional learning teams were established that built a professional learning culture.
  - A singular focus was placed on student learning; adoption was disciplined; new techniques were enthusiastically adopted such as learning walks and instructional rounds; schools were encouraged to construct their own programs; younger staff became more involved.
- The whole school strategy was tied to the regional improvement strategy.
  - The school's annual improvement plan and school improvement team's activities were tied to the regional improvement strategy; extraneous elements were removed; the whole school focused in the one direction; and this approach was also followed by those with special cohorts.
- The school developed and was explicit about an instructional model.
  - The initial focus was on adopting literacy and numeracy instructional models and other subjects followed in some locations; this required adopting consistent professional practices across the school; success also depended on having a viable curriculum, which relies on curriculum being documented.
- Greater emphasis was placed on data use and being clearer about the capabilities required to use data effectively.
  - The school had to move to greater data use, including collective analysis, monitoring achievements, placing value on transparency and actively promoting open dialogue about performance.
- An explicit instructional leadership role was adopted and openly discussed.
  - It became routine for the principal to lead a more intense focus on student achievement; have a greater presence in classrooms; and in all activities ensured instructional responsibilities were explicit.
- 'My own' professional growth became more important.
  - Many took up the principal learning opportunities, welcomed access to international expertise – and want to sustain that access – and welcomed the invitation that the region offered to be involved in developing the strategy.

### **Practices that need to be continued**

Principals were asked to propose those features and actions in the regional strategy and their own practices they would strive to sustain. The priorities are clustered around sustaining

the focus on student achievement, strong support for sustaining the coaching model and valuing the professional learning and reflective culture that coaches bring to a school, and the principal's role as an instructional leader.

Principals indicated they would strive to maintain the following.

- A focus on instructional practice - using achievement data and differentiating practices accordingly.
  - This would include: improving instructional practices; building lesson structure models suitable for primary and others for secondary; understanding how to use data to differentiate according to student achievement levels; and documenting curriculum,
- The coaching model.
  - Quality consultants and coaches in schools are indispensable; resources need to be found; coaching has made the enormous difference to teacher capability and the appetite continues to grow for more guidance on instructional practices.
- Professional learning, especially with collaborative structures.
  - Sustain Professional Learning Teams and Professional Learning Communities; support data and research guiding professional practice dialogue; expand classroom observation and methods for sharing practice.
- The literacy and numeracy improvement strategies.
  - Continue commitment to common practices and the accumulation of expertise.
- Their role as instructional leader.
  - Continue activity in classrooms; ensure succession planning; focus on building highly effective teams; continue to learn.
- An explicit accountability for growth in student achievement; reduced variation in outcomes
  - Maintain higher expectations of students; consolidate accountability for staff to pursue consistency in expectations and practices across the school.
- A whole school improvement focus.
  - Continue to set clear whole school goals.

## Issues for the future

Principals also raised a number of issues that future planning will need to take into account.

- The need to address primary and secondary school differences: each has a different depth of focus on literacy and numeracy; often more complex campus structures and leadership responsibilities exist in secondary schools; and secondary schools have different challenges that need to be tackled such as post compulsory curriculum and participation.
- The need to address different principal experience levels: a one-size fits all approach to professional learning may need to be adapted to differentiate according to experience and responsibilities.
- Consultants and coaches are highly valued – if they are excellent. In the future a quality assurance process may be required.
- Networks and collegiality are vital to future success; schools cannot be allowed to revert to isolation; schools must collectively sustain momentum and ensure more open sharing and mutual professional growth.

The principal survey responses revealed not only acknowledgment of the improvement in student learning outcomes and endorsement of the values and professionalism of the region-wide strategy, but also that the core features of the WMR reform have become established as the right way to proceed in the future.

## Conclusion

This story of improvement in student outcomes in an economically and socially diverse metropolitan region in Victoria is impressive. From 2008 to 2012 the region of 142 schools with near to 78,000 students, achieved gains in all measure of literacy and numeracy for years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

The region is still performing below or just below the state mean on most measures but the strategy broke the historical pattern for this region of being the poorest and hence the lowest performing region out of nine. In 2008 they set the challenge to be the most rapidly improving region over the four years to 2012 and they succeeded.

The four year improvement process has been a collaborative systems strategy, co-designed at the region level with schools. It drew on a wide range of experts in literacy and numeracy, leadership and school change and made the decision to focus only on this strategy – a rare collective decision in a state where schools have over two decades' experience with autonomy and self-management.

The box below is a summary of the key features of the system reform strategy.

### **BOX 7: Snapshot – WMR as a successful system reform strategy**

#### **Reform strategy- snapshot**

##### **Key goals**

- To demonstrate measureable significant gains in literacy, numeracy and school completion.
- To demonstrate more than one year's growth for each student each year.
- To reduce in-school variation in learning outcomes.

##### **Core beliefs**

###### *For students*

- All children can learn; work hard and get smart; failure is not an option.

###### *For principals and teaches*

- Everyone learns together; use of evidence/data; embraces reciprocity; shared focus and mutual accountability.

##### **Main strategies**

- All schools challenged to improve; established a common language.
- Co-designed priorities: literacy P-12, numeracy P-12, post-compulsory outcomes and the learning environment.
- Centred on precise improvement techniques: instructional leadership; teacher instructional practices; de-privatised classrooms and collaborative practice; use of evidence and data; school based coaching.
- Agreed roles for all: from network leaders to school based coaches.
- Intense professional learning for all.
- New resources at regional and schools levels.

##### **Main outcomes**

- Impressive– from worst out of 9 regions in 2008 to most improving in 2012; and a significant impact on learning improvement at the secondary level.
- High level endorsement from principals for quality and direction of regional leadership.
- Self-generating and sustainable networks.
- A strong trajectory for future improvement based on professionalism.

School improvement and regional improvement ran in parallel. This was a system reform that used levers for change based on evidence of large scale school improvement that were backed up by a highly detailed implementation strategy that ensured improvement was achieved at scale and was sustainable.

The relentless focus on implementation, including providing detailed and tailored support and resources for individual schools and networks, is the highly significant feature. As the Victorian system moves into a new phase and the focus in governance shifts to networks, the challenge for schools and networks will be to transfer the lessons from this reform into the new context.

It is anticipated that over the next four years the benefits of 'collective efficacy' will be evident in thriving and supportive networks, innovation and continuous improvement in student outcomes across the region.

The principals' perspective for the future is instructive. The principals have signalled a continued trajectory for future development away from isolated or 'privatised' classrooms and practices towards greater professional collaboration and growth in schools and in networks. The further development of instructional models and the capability for rigorous use of data and actions to differentiate learning are a core part of this.

Whilst the achievements over the 2008 to 2012 period have been significant in changing the culture of the region and its schools, the big winners in this story are the children and young people attending government schools in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. If the region's improvement trajectory is sustained, and all evidence indicates that it will, the vast majority of the region's students will be given every opportunity to become engaged and successful learners. Such a claim could not have been made prior to this reform.

## Appendix 1: Underperforming schools

The region has analysed the characteristics of the small number of schools that did not show growth over the period covered by the reform. Seventeen of the region's 142 schools regressed in their performance: 12 primary schools and five secondary schools.<sup>13</sup>

Common characteristics of these schools were that they:

- had Inconsistent leadership or a lack of capability at the principal level that was not adequately addressed;
- had a history of low staff well-being, poor school climate and low staff morale;
- were engaged in too many reform initiatives and so were unable to focus on a core improvement strategy;
- were insular and did not seek external support and so they missed out on opportunities for mentoring by more experienced leaders and on gaining support from high performing schools; and
- had declining student numbers that threatened the viability of the curriculum on offer and compounded difficult management issues through the lack of flexibility in staffing.

In hindsight, the region believes that improvement could have been achieved in these schools with more timely intervention measures such as the following.

- More precise analysis of school climate and performance data; and early examination of lead indicators so as to identify the need for intervention.
- Making an early judgment on evidence about the capacity of the leadership to take the school forward (including with support); and, If necessary, moving as quickly as possible to initiate leadership change.
- More intensive coaching and support programs for the principal and leadership teams.
- Having a poorly performing school establish a collaborative partnership with a school which was showing improvement.

The analysis of these schools consistently revealed that school leadership was the most influential factor in preventing the school from improving student results. Getting the timing right was key to successful intervention. It is evident that, in several cases, the region should have facilitated a change of leadership in a much shorter time.

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<sup>13</sup> A closer examination of the early indicators of poor progress is currently being conducted so as to enable system intervention at an earlier stage.

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