Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership
What works? Learning from the experience of NSW schools

The Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership uses evidence-based approaches to lift the performance of students in literacy and numeracy, particularly for students who are falling behind and require extra support.

The Partnership builds on the most successful strategies implemented in the previous National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy, recognising the importance of:

- a whole-school approach to quality teaching
- inspirational leadership towards a culture of continuous school improvement
- using evidence and data to identify and address students' needs, using the most effective resources
- building capacity through professional learning
- collaboration and shared responsibility.

A new online resource will soon be available to schools, providing real examples of successful initiatives implemented in schools across NSW through the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership.

The main themes are presented here as a summary of the strategies that NSW schools have shown to be most effective.

The literacy and numeracy practices are most effective when guided by strong instructional leadership and implemented as a suite of whole-school initiatives.
Evidence of the most effective strategies for improving literacy and numeracy

The new National Partnership on Improving Literacy and Numeracy (ILN NP) takes a whole-school approach, with participating schools implementing a broad range of quality teaching practices.

A recent independent evaluation of the previous National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy in NSW - by Erebus International - distils national and international research evidence and provides examples of effective practice from NSW schools. Its findings support the complementary elements of the Improving Literacy and Numeracy Partnership:

- a whole-school reform agenda, focused on literacy and numeracy
- effective instructional leadership
- building capacity of school leaders and teachers through professional learning
- effective use of data to inform school planning and to improve student outcomes
- collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility across staff for student outcomes.

An online resource, to be made available to schools later this term, will illustrate research and evaluation findings with authentic examples from NSW schools in the government, Catholic and independent sectors.

Themes for effective practice

No single initiative can be isolated as the single success factor to address the very complex set of issues faced by schools in their efforts to improve - there is no panacea to address the problem of underperformance in literacy and numeracy.

The Erebus evaluation found that the common factor of effective schools in the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership was the implementation of a coordinated suite of initiatives. Each initiative, or theme of effective practice, has been identified as one of a set of levers to successfully manage change, working best as part of a broader agenda of school improvement.

The priority given to each at individual school level will of course take into account the contextual and cultural characteristics of individual school communities.

The following summary focuses on what the most effective literacy and numeracy improvement strategies look like, assisting schools to reflect on their current practice and consider how change might be implemented in their school.
An agreed whole school reform agenda

A clear and effective whole school reform agenda has explicit and clear targets and is aligned with local, national and system-wide priorities.

In the most effective schools, core learning priorities guide the school improvement agenda, with targets that are related to specific improvements in student outcomes, and which have defined timelines.

There is a common understanding and a comprehensive analysis of a broad range of factors across the school, such as existing levels of student achievement, factors influencing student outcomes, teacher skills, community aspirations and existing approaches to pedagogy. Key measures are understood across the school so that progress can be recognised and celebrated.

The principal is highly focused on establishing a whole school reform agenda.

The entire leadership team ensures that commitment and ownership are built collaboratively with all members of the school community.

Aspirations for school improvement are embraced by confident and competent classroom practitioners when they have a collegial approach and the skills to change their own classroom practice.

An effective whole school approach is supported by early decisions about the allocation of resources to support human resource needs, the physical environment and the use of technology. Decisions about the use of resources prioritise impacts on student learning, and will reflect the priorities that have been agreed by stakeholders and established through the school planning process.

NSW schools in the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership demonstrated that investing in human resources is beneficial in implementing change. Early investment is important for developing and sharing the diverse skills that staff need if they are to effectively implement intervention programs and use new resources.

Investment in skills and leadership development is particularly valuable in the longer term, to help sustain changed practices that can only continue by building teacher capacity and long-term organisational change.

With an agreed whole school reform agenda, there are effective strategies in place relating to the sequence of learning, alternative strategies, selection of texts where appropriate, and a range of other learning possibilities within a deliberate framework.

Effective strategies across the school include setting up well-resourced classroom environments which:

- provide bright, vibrant learning spaces with good lines of vision for all students
- offer flexibility to suit a range of different lesson delivery approaches
- display student work to celebrate effort, improvement and achievement, to demonstrate what professional high quality work looks like and to encourage students to set high expectations for themselves.

Inspirational instructional leadership

Leadership, particularly effective instructional leadership, inspires whole school community commitment towards an agreed vision for enhanced student learning and quality teaching.

Principals who most effectively lead change in their schools are highly-skilled and dedicated ‘instructional’ leaders. In practice, this means principals and executive teams are focused on implementing approaches known to make a difference to student outcomes. Effective principals understand the background and ability of their students, their current and past levels of achievement and key local factors impacting on the school environment.

Robinson (2007) noted that inspirational instructional leadership involves:

- participating and supporting quality teaching
- establishing and communicating school goals for student learning
- internal program coherence for sustainable improvement.

Inspirational leaders develop collective responsibility among staff for the outcomes of student learning, are focused on developing leadership teams from within their staff, and they support those teams to achieve a shared vision.
Effective principals model best teaching practices and lead the development of a common commitment to evidence-based practice across the school.

The powerful effects of ‘instructional leadership’ are described by John Hattie (2009):

“It is school leaders who promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support the teachers to reach these goals together that have most effect on student outcomes. School leaders who focus on student achievement and instructional strategies are the most effective. It is the leaders who place more attention on teaching and focused achievement domains who have the higher effects.”

Targeted professional support

Professional support must recognise and be tailored to the skill gaps of individual staff members and must be clearly related to the goal of improved student learning outcomes.

Successful leaders in the previous Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership acknowledged that they too needed new knowledge and skills.

At the same time, leaders had to ensure that professional support was provided for teachers, many of whom needed to adapt or modify their classroom practice.

However, professional learning experiences must be tailored to align with not only current, but emerging responsibilities.

Opportunities for development include not only participation in courses and seminars, but also a variety of planned in-school interactions such as peer observation, sharing reflections and collaborative planning.

Some teachers are likely to need more support in learning how to effectively respond to student data or how to implement new and different classroom methodologies. Peer observation and mentoring may be useful for some teachers, whereas others may quickly develop leadership capacities.

Developing schools into truly effective ‘learning communities’ means that there is collective responsibility for supporting positive change.

Professional learning is an ‘everyday’ and ongoing activity through which knowledge and skills are constantly refreshed and refined.

Effective use of data for school planning and improvement of student outcomes

Effective use of data is the basis for planning at the whole school, classroom and individual student level.

Data about student performance can be augmented by relevant research findings about pedagogy, evidence about programs and effective teaching approaches, knowledge of the school context, and understanding of individual student backgrounds and learning needs.

At the whole school level, systematic data on student outcomes - academic, attendance and behavioural - includes:

- outcomes for students from identified priority groups, including evidence of changes in performance over time
- performances in comparison with similar schools
- data from tests, such as NAPLAN and local school assessments, that measure growth over time.

Effective school leaders ensure that all members of staff understand the protocols for gathering this data and are able to understand, analyse and interpret the data for the teaching and learning experiences for every student.

Teachers who effectively engage in responsive teaching approaches take the time to assess individual students and develop a thorough understanding of each child’s learning needs. They regularly refer to student data as a tool for both planning student learning experiences and monitoring student learning over time.

Case studies of effective NSW schools have shown leaders and teaching staff need to focus on:

- understanding what motivates students and their needs
- effective analysis to determine student learning needs
- getting the right data to undertake analysis
- setting the best format for data to enable clear analysis
- determining the best type of data management and reporting systems to collate, store, analyse and report on the data in the classroom, whole year and whole school levels.
Teaching staff need to be provided with a suite of tools to help them step through these processes. School leaders may also need to schedule regular data-review meetings with teaching staff, to review different aspects of students' performance data and develop strategies to address specific learning gaps or needs over defined periods.

Adapting to individual needs includes familiarity with literacy and numeracy learning continua, explicit teaching of key concepts and skills, the use of innovative communication technologies and other teaching resources that support individual or small group learning.

**Principals have a key role in ensuring that the effective use of student data and knowledge of the research base informs responsive teaching practices in all classrooms.**

Robust evidence provides the crucial basis for selecting and using the most appropriate resources and programs and in implementing a differentiated approach to identified, individual learning needs in the classroom.

Responsive teaching involves setting high expectations for students, managing classroom environments that are conducive to learning, building responsibility in students for effort and success, and providing timely feedback so that students understand what is needed to make further progress. Differentiated and responsive teaching strategies facilitate an optimal ‘no excuses’ learning environment for all students.

**Collaboration and shared responsibility for student outcomes**

**All members of an effective school community, including staff, families and the wider community, actively participate in and are committed to the common purpose of improving student literacy and numeracy.**

Commitment is expressed through engaging in professional dialogue, collaborative planning and the systematic exchange of resources, programs and ideas.

**School leaders have a key role in modelling a collaborative approach and in achieving the commitment of their staff to the concept of shared responsibility for student outcomes.**

Whalan (2012) in a study of NSW schools, notes that there is a clear link between the accountability of teachers (for student outcomes) and collective responsibility for those outcomes, "derived from a common commitment to deliver the best outcomes for students and achieving this through collaborative structures in place in a school where teachers explicitly focus on improving the quality of teaching."

This means that school leaders and teachers work together across the whole school in a coordinated, collaborative effort to address school improvement. There is a common understanding of partnerships in the teaching process – between staff, with families and with the wider community all understanding their responsibilities.

Whalan also notes that this common set of expectations and strategies "owned and identified by the whole staff" supports program coherence, with teacher learning most effective when it is focused on what students need to know, understand and do across learning stages.

In the most effective schools there is a shared belief that every student is capable of learning.

Student well-being is the lynchpin for facilitating student learning. A collaborative whole-school culture is inclusive of all students, irrespective of factors that may potentially inhibit their learning.

Important steps for developing a collaborative school culture include:

- developing organisational structures that allow teachers to form teams and work together
- agreeing on expectations and standards that enable teams to work effectively
- defining a vision for the school, based on what students should know and be able to do
- setting clear goals to achieve the vision.

This ‘no blame’ approach of shared responsibility implies that teachers cannot make excuses for children not learning based on a student’s background or previous learning ability.

Students learn when they receive timely and meaningful feedback about their performance.

**Building on experience**

Experience from NSW schools participating in the previous Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership demonstrated success at the local level to be more strongly related to these themes or principles than to the implementation of any one strategy or program.

The key to improving literacy and numeracy is to adopt a whole-school approach, to provide effective instructional leadership, and coordinate the implementation of a broad suite of inter-related strategies.

Schools participating in the Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership are encouraged to seek further information about the themes presented here, through Issue 2 of the CESE publication Learning Curve and through the online resource which is scheduled for release later in Term 2 through the CESE website www.cese.nsw.gov.au.

Additional evidence from NSW schools on how to build quality teaching practices to improve student outcomes is presented in the Final Report of Phase One of the Erebus evaluation and through the Phase Two report, to be published soon on the CESE website.
References and further reading


Erebus International (2012). *Evaluation of the take-up and sustainability of new literacy and numeracy practices in NSW schools – Final Report for Phase 1*, undertaken on behalf of the NSW Minister for Education.

Erebus International (2013). *Evaluation of the take-up and sustainability of new literacy and numeracy practices in NSW schools – Final Report for Phase 2*, undertaken on behalf of the NSW Minister for Education.


Improving Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership website www.ilnnp.nsw.edu.au


