

Adding Value while Building Capacity: The Development of a Process for Cyclical School Reviews

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Abstract

There is a growing expectation that schools should develop an organisational culture in which data-driven planning and robust evaluation is the norm. In NSW government schools school leaders are required to analyse student-performance data, undertake evaluations of key curriculum and management areas, and set improvement targets accordingly. Although there is a statewide process to review underperforming schools or programs within schools, there has been no centrally supported mechanism for schools to participate in an evaluation of their whole-school operation or to develop their own evaluation capacity. This paper examines how one school region in NSW is developing a process for school evaluation that is aimed not only at providing a robust and useful evaluation of school performance and governance for the school being reviewed but also at providing a sustainable regional framework for such evaluations, building the evaluation capacity of school and regional support staff, and contributing to evaluation utilisation for each of member of the evaluation team. The paper describes the evaluation instruments—exemplary practice statements, questionnaire, desk audit, interview framework—that have been specifically developed to support the process; a new procedure—PODS (pocket PCs for organising data and sorting)—that has made the process manageable within cost and time constraints; and the role of an experienced evaluator as ‘coach’. The paper highlights that it is the combination of these factors that is ensuring the process is not only robust but also acceptable to all stakeholders.

Introduction

During the 1990s, following implementation of a Quality Assurance process, a new model, School Accountability and Improvement, was developed and implemented in NSW government schools. There were four components of this model:

- annual school self-evaluation
- annual school reporting
- school reviews
- systemic monitoring and reporting.

The third component, school reviews, operated under the School Development Policy, which provided for three forms of intervention designed to foster school development—education support teams, school program reviews and school management reviews—and is still the cornerstone of the Department’s school accountability initiatives.

During a school review, a team comprising both internal and external school staff and regional personnel, led by a senior regional officer with expertise in review methodology, examines agreed areas of school practice with a view to recommending future directions that will lead to improved school performance. These areas could include school management and governance practices, curriculum planning and delivery, and student welfare practices.

Following a major restructure of the NSW Department in 2003, the model was redeveloped as a Framework for School Development Accountability and an additional component, cyclical reviews, was added to the framework, although no work was done to develop this component. The premise on which this component was added, was that schools would benefit from a regular review schedule, rather than a one-off review when an area of need was recognised.

Western Sydney Region included in its Strategic Plan for 2006–2008 that a major initiative would be undertaken, ‘to strengthen school development support and community confidence through a regional cyclical review process for schools’.

A framework for such reviews, based on sound evaluation methodology needed to be developed. The School Cyclical Review Framework is the result of this work.

Because of the complex nature of this process, phase one comprises the development of the framework and its pilot in nine schools. This phase is now completed with the framework and pilot proving successful. Phase two, which has now commenced involves the establishment of a Steering Committee to oversee and roll out the process across the region.

The School Cyclical Review Framework

The regional School Cyclical Review Framework has been, from the outset, a framework developed in partnership with major stakeholders and in particular the regional senior executive and school principals. It conforms fully with the *School Development Policy* (2004) and sound evaluation methodology is the cornerstone of its operation.

The brief for the framework was to develop a process that would:

1. Develop an evaluation partnership between the region and school principals
2. Build the ‘evaluation capacity’ of principals, school staff, regional consultants
3. Recognise exemplary practice in schools (leading to possible future accreditation)
4. Establish a robust accountability process for school operations and performance in six domains
5. Develop more effective school operations and improved performance.

A team comprising the regional School Development Officers (senior regional personnel, trained in evaluation methodology) and a group of regional principals was formed to develop the framework and pilot the resulting process.

The first and longest stage in 2006 was to develop draft *Exemplary Practice Statements* that would underpin the reviews in the following six domains:

- School Purpose and Performance
- Student Learning
- Teaching
- Curriculum
- Professional Practice and Responsibilities
- Management, Organisation and Quality Systems.

Following acceptance of these statements, work progressed to develop the operational features to guide effective implementation as follows:

- As reviews will operate under the School Development Policy (2004), data gathering and analysis will include document analysis (including survey), interviews and observation.
- The six domains defined in the Exemplary Practice Statements will form the terms of reference for each review.
- To collect enough valid and reliable data without overloading review teams and schools being reviewed, the following will be used by all schools:
 - A survey for staff, parents and students (approximately 24 items for each) covering all six domains, administered by the school prior to the review.
 - A predetermined ‘desk audit’ of documents covering all six domains, collected by the school in the week prior to the review and ready for the review team’s arrival
 - A small set of open-ended interview questions relating to the terms of reference.
 - A suggested list of classes and other activities to be observed on an optional basis and after negotiation between team leader, principal and staff.

- The home school will also prepare a brief context statement as background for the review team.
- In general, the documents and observations will be chosen by schools to present their best practices in areas relevant to the terms of reference.
- Efficiency in recording data and reporting will be maximised. All data will be recorded using PDAs, then collated into a spreadsheet database using the team's laptop computers. Each data point initially will be coded against one of the six domains and whether it represents an achievement or a future direction. These codes and key words for more in-depth analysis will be determined by the Pilot Group.
- Teams will need at least three laptops. These would normally be available from equipment pools of their schools, the home school or regional office.
- The team will collaborate with appropriate school staff members in analysing the data and developing areas of recommendation and strategies for implementation.

Pilot Group Role

- A Pilot Group (approximately 9 principals and the SDOs) will finalise the data required and the approaches for the reviews and take part in the initial round of reviews in 2007. Sub-groups led by an SDO will:
 - Develop a Likert scale survey instrument
 - Develop a required list of documents for the desk audit
 - Develop a set of interview questions
 - Develop a suggested observation list
 - Develop codes and key words for recording and analysing data

Review Process

- Principals will lead the reviews, coached and supported by a SDO
- School staff within and beyond the school and a regional consultant will be on each review team. The review team will comprise 5 to 6 members:
 - Principal from another school (team leader)
 - SDO as coach to the Principal (team leader)
 - Staff member (or executive) from home school
 - Staff members from another school x 2 (of which one can be an executive)
 - Regional Consultant
 - Another team member if required, e.g. for a large school, special interest group member

This process was critical to ensure that principals believed that the process would be manageable, that it aligned with school and regional priorities, and that they drove the development of all instruments that were to be used in the collection and analysis of data.

The next stage and possibly the most critical to the success of the process was the development of critical path analyses for a) a timeline for the implementation and b) the conduct of the reviews (appendices 1 and 2).

As a result, pilot group of principals worked with the School Development Officers throughout 2007 in developing, trialling, evaluating and modifying the process and the materials to support it. This required the group to develop a survey instrument, interview and prompt sheet, class and school observation list, timetable, and checklist for principals, desk audit list, coding key words and report template.

The plan required a more streamlined approach to gathering and analysing data and a new procedure—PODS (pocket PCs for organising data and sorting) was proposed and developed for this purpose. Team members use PDAs to record findings which

can then be transferred electronically to excel spreadsheets for sorting, analysis and report writing. The benefit of this technology is threefold:

1. Time saving—data is entered once only; each iteration can be managed electronically, data can be grouped and sorted in multiple ways; debriefing sessions are up to date.
2. Accuracy—data is entered exactly as provided from each and every source and can be validated instantly with interviewees; report writing can flow directly from the original source.
3. Richness of data—data can be grouped, sorted, and validated in multiple ways.

The implementation plan requires the School Development Officers to work as coaches to the principals leading the review. This is preferred to a train-the-trainer model as it is more likely to provide consistency and robustness in review methodology and enhance the evaluation capacity of principals and school staff. This role matches that of the Optional Senior Officer as described in the School Development Policy: *School Review Resources* (2006), ‘where the team leader is relatively inexperienced in leading reviews’.

To undertake this role more effectively the School Development Officers completed coaching skills training.

In addition, School Development Officers provided an initial training program for principals as team leaders and for all prospective team members in school review policy processes and practices as well as conducting training in the use PDAs to collect and analyse data.

Qualities and Effectiveness

- The Cyclical Review Framework uses the NSW Department of Education and Training’s *School Development Policy* methodology as the basis for its development. As such, it is grounded in sound evaluation methodology and is based on the scrupulous application of an ethical code of practice.
- All members of the cyclical review team undertake extensive training in ethical practice and sign agreements before undertaking a review.
- Evidence is based on the careful triangulation of evidence and training is provided on how this must be done.
- The *Exemplary Practice Statements* have been developed based on extensive research on school effectiveness literature and current NSW policy. Key documents in developing these statements include:
 - DET SchoolMap Best Practice Statements (extensively researched and validated in the 1990s)
 - DET Quality Teaching framework
 - DET School Leadership Capability framework
 - DET school planning documents
 - DET Professional learning policy for schools
 - NSW Institute of Teachers Framework of professional teaching standards
 - In addition an investigation of review practices in USA, Canada and the UK was undertaken and ideas from this were incorporated into the statements, e.g. the British Columbia Saanich District’s school review process.
- The process has broken new ground in how data is collected and analysed. There are a number of computer-assisted packages available for analysing qualitative data, e.g. Nudist, Leximancer. However, they require extensive training and expertise on the part of the user and software that requires licences to use it. While these other processes have the ability to capture all the information, this new process streamlines data collection, reduces the time required to collect extensive amounts of data, focuses the reviewer on the key concepts being evaluated and ensures that all relevant data is captured in a reliable and valid fashion.
- The approach using PODS (pocket PCs for organising data and sorting) has been developed so that all members of the review team can collect and analyse data with only a small amount of training and practice, using software with which they are already familiar—excel and Word. The principle behind PODS is simple. Each domain in the *Exemplary Practice*

Statements comprises 10 or 11 descriptors. The domains are given a code and key words from the descriptors are used to categorise the information that is collected from interviews, documents analysis and observation.

- The Schools Cyclical Review Framework refines school review methodology and practice. The greatest contribution to knowledge has been professional learning across the region in developing evaluation capacity.
- The process builds evaluation capacity and the development of school learning communities through the principal leadership and membership of each other's reviews, and by providing greater in-depth understanding to all regional personnel in the work of the particular schools that they work with.

Conclusion

The Cyclical Review Framework allows all members of a school community to be involved in the evaluation of their school through:

- the survey which is completed by all students, parents, and staff
- randomly selected parents, students and all staff in the interview process
- observation of a range of all classes and other school routines and areas
- documentary analysis of documents that highlight areas outlined in the Exemplary Practice Statements
- membership of the review team
- access to debriefing and feedback on each day of the review.

The Cyclical Review Framework has been specifically designed to provide a sustainable evaluation procedure for all schools. In addition it has begun to build the evaluation capacity of review team members so that they can apply sound principles and methods to other areas of school improvement and development.

Principals have acknowledged an increased trust in the work of regional support personnel who have been a part of the review teams.