

THE SYSTEM AND POWERFUL LEARNING

DAVID HOPKINS AND WAYNE CRAIG

THE POWERFUL LEARNING SERIES

The Powerful Learning manuals are designed for teachers and for school and system leaders who are embarked on a school improvement journey. The manuals describe how schools can lift student learning. The steps are drawn from practical experience, tested and refined in schools over time.

Three manuals are at the core of the series – *The System and Powerful Learning*, *Curiosity and Powerful Learning*, and *Leadership for Powerful Learning*. Together they explain how powerful learning is made real for our students through purposeful, specific changes in whole school culture, classroom culture, leadership, and teaching practice.

The series includes *Curiouser and Curiouser* and *Models of Practice* manuals which concentrate on precision in teaching practice. They stand as references for improving, planning, and monitoring professional practice, assisting us to get to the heart of the learning enterprise.

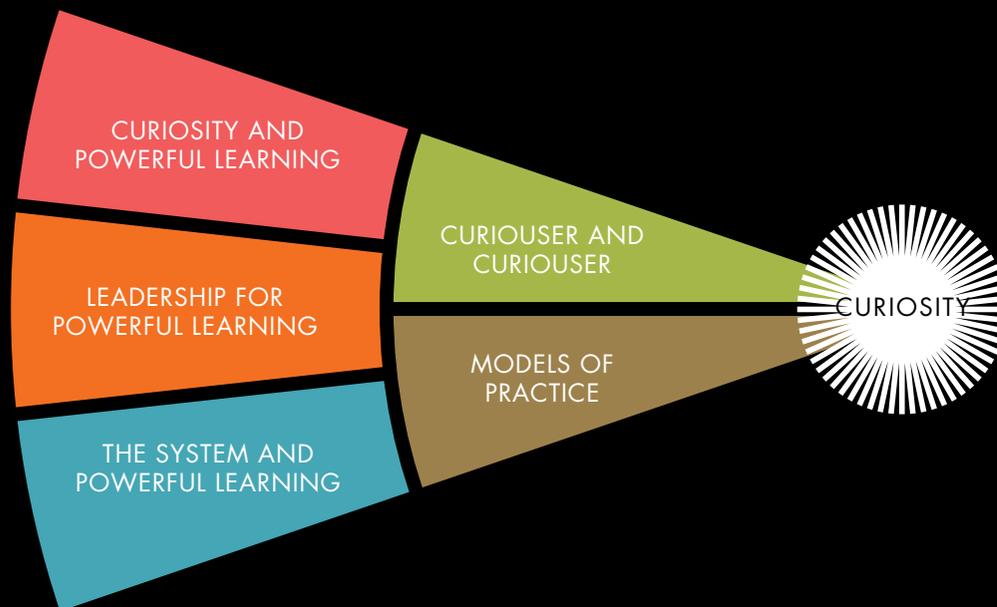
The manuals recognise that schools differ, and must differ in responding to their communities. Diversity among schools is cause for celebration, as is consistently high student learning outcomes in all schools. Each manual emphasises the collective endeavour essential to achieving curiosity driven powerful learning. Teachers work together, students become more adept at using curiosity as a learning resource, leaders communicate purpose and direction. We all monitor outcomes and adapt as we go. We are all professional learners.

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THE SYSTEM AND POWERFUL LEARNING

The scope of the core manuals in the Powerful Learning series becomes progressively more specific. *The System and Powerful Learning* takes a wide-angled view of school improvement. It investigates the strategic context for schools and systems, and draws lessons from the evidence about how to shape the context so that the greatest benefits are won for our students.

Leadership for Powerful Learning centres attention on leadership context and practice at the school level. School leadership has an instrumental impact on improving student learning and achievement. The manual examines the constraints, opportunities, options, and expectations that school leaders work with. The influence of school leaders is sometimes overlooked because it is indirect – it shapes the environment in which teachers and students in classrooms can extract the great potential of inquiry based learning.

The third core manual, *Curiosity and Powerful Learning*, takes a close look at excellent teaching and learning practice in classrooms. The manual specifies whole school orientations to learning and teaching that are necessary preconditions for powerful learning to prosper in every classroom.

The later manuals in the series – *Curiouser and Curiouser* and the *Models of Practice* manuals – describe precise teaching practices known to improve student learning outcomes.

The progressively tighter focus in the Powerful Learning manuals is a direct acknowledgement that the purpose of all our school improvement work is to bring about substantive change in classrooms. System reform, structural change, leadership development are not ends in themselves. They are only useful if they create change in classrooms through broadening teachers' professional expertise, enriching teaching repertoire, and fuelling student learning and achievement.

The System and Powerful Learning looks at the work the school system must do if learning in classrooms is to flourish. School improvement is demanding – it is unlikely that any school, be it adequate or excellent, will have all the wisdom, know-how and resources it needs for a successful school improvement journey. A successful journey is partly dependent on schools having the confidence that they can tap into resources and support available from other schools and a responsive system that seeks sustainable change. In return, animated by moral

purpose, schools share their growing expertise through their local school networks and the wider system.

In seeing change at the classroom level from a system perspective this manual accentuates shared goals, values, language, and ways of working. What we hold in common decisively influences our practice as leaders and teachers. What we do together enlarges our capacity to improve learning outcomes for every student across the entire system and in the classrooms in our own schools. This manual affirms the critical role that school and system leaders play in joining individual schools to the depth of ideas and skilled resources that the wider system offers. We also underscore how important it is for schools to modify their own organisation and management arrangements so that the school's resources are aligned with and reinforce school improvement priorities.

The wide-angled focus of *The System and Powerful Learning* is strategic. But that does not mean it is abstract and disconnected from the vital day-to-day work of students and teachers. Our purpose is to demonstrate how strategy at the system and school level is indispensable in making school improvement tangible and transformational.



David Hopkins



Wayne Craig

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OUR GOAL

The goal of the Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy is that:

all our students will be literate, numerate, and curious.

All means all. As far back as the 1970s, Ron Edmonds, the renowned American educator who helped shape our thinking about effective schools, put the challenge succinctly in three stark statements.

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us.

We already know more than we need to do that.

Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

Today we know even more. The challenge remains.

We can make the challenge more concrete and our goal more tangible when we invest them with a clear set of values that inform what we do every day, in every school, and every classroom.

OUR VALUES

The Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy is inspired by educational values that provide consistent reference points for all that we do in our schools.

WE BELIEVE THAT:

- student achievement and student wellbeing are the *fundamental* pursuits of schools
- every student can succeed *regardless* of personal circumstances
- it is our *responsibility* to act in ways that make individual success a reality
- the *harder* you work the *smarter* you get
- given *sufficient challenge and support*, all students can learn and achieve at high levels
- *learning is a social activity* and all students can learn from each other
- all schools must consciously choose to be on a *journey to excellence*
- schools which are *open to all* and which *celebrate diversity* offer rich learning resources that benefit all students
- our School Improvement Strategy, and each action flowing from it, must be open to scrutiny – we are *accountable* for implementing the Strategy and each associated action.

OUR DEFINITION OF POWERFUL LEARNING

We define Powerful Learning by reference to three primary purposes of education. We intend to help our students:

- acquire useful and important bodies of knowledge
- become powerful learners by expanding and making articulate their repertoire of learning strategies
- become fine, caring, and principled citizens.

Powerful learning is the ability of learners to respond successfully to the tasks they are set, and the tasks they set themselves. This ability comprises the capacities to:

- integrate prior and new knowledge
- acquire and apply a range of learning skills
- solve problems individually and in groups
- think carefully about their successes and failures, and learn from both
- evaluate conflicting evidence and to think critically
- accept that learning involves uncertainty and difficulty.

Deploying a range of learning strategies is called metacognition – that is, the learner's ability to take control over their own learning processes. We recognise that curiosity drives the acquisition and application of metacognitive skills and dispositions.

OUR PRINCIPLES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

We have adopted ten principles that characterise reform efforts in high performing schools and school systems. The principles are comprehensive and backed by the best international research. Each principle has a high degree of operational practicality and is expressed as a Theory of Action.

Several principles emphasise that success relies on both individual schools and school systems actively pursuing reform.

PRINCIPLE 1	WHEN schools and systems are driven by moral purpose THEN all students are more likely to fulfil their potential.
Elaboration	We ensure that the achievement and learning of students is at the centre of all that teachers do. This is our moral purpose. Enacting it requires a focus on those strategies that have a track record of accelerating student achievement, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – building student learning capability – personalising learning and the curriculum – assessment for learning – giving students a voice in their own learning.

PRINCIPLE 2	WHEN the focus of policy is on the quality of teaching THEN student achievement will increase.
Elaboration	The central theme of any improvement strategy is to enhance the quality of teaching, rather than to be distracted by structural change. The quality of teaching is necessarily related to system goals and targeted support. Initially, system goals and targeted support are likely to emphasise: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – teaching of literacy and numeracy – developing curiosity.

PRINCIPLE 3	WHEN schools and teachers are of high quality THEN relative disadvantage no longer determines educational success.
Elaboration	High levels of student learning and achievement are partially achieved by teacher selection policies that ensure only the very best people become educators and educational leaders. Almost by definition, high quality teachers create a positive school work culture and invest energy in achieving high levels of professional practice.

PRINCIPLE 4	WHEN the focus is on powerful learning THEN students attain more, and develop their cognitive and social skills.
Elaboration	Professional practice that prizes powerful learning develops, and is sustained, within a school system that delivers increasing clarity about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – standards implied by the goals set for student achievement – the most appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies for meeting and exceeding those standards.

PRINCIPLE 5	WHEN teachers constantly acquire a richer repertoire of pedagogic practice THEN students' learning constantly deepens.
Elaboration	Appropriate, ongoing, and sustained professional learning opportunities are put in place. Such opportunities help develop a common 'practice' of teaching and learning. They are characterised by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a conscious blending of theory, evidence and action – collaborative forms of inquiry.

PRINCIPLE

6

WHEN data is used to monitor, provide feedback about, and enhance student performance

THEN students' progress accelerates more quickly.

Elaboration

Reliable, revealing data facilitates improvements in learning and teaching.

It is essential to establish procedures that provide formative, ongoing, and transparent data on the performance of the student, school and system. This is particularly important for assessment data and evidence from school reviews.

Data of this kind enables, informs, and focuses high value professional learning.

PRINCIPLE

7

WHEN teachers and schools, in their search for improvement, reflect deeply on school and student performance and act on evidence about learning

THEN the student learning experience deepens and outcomes improve.

Elaboration

Student and school performance is enhanced when teachers and school leaders:

- undertake diagnosis that seeks to establish the links between performance and a range of differential learning strategies
- use the outcomes of diagnosis to go deeper and intervene early
- set targets for implementing strategies designed to improve performance.

PRINCIPLE

8

WHEN leadership is instructionally focused and widely distributed

THEN both teachers and students can capitalise fully on their capacity to learn and achieve.

Elaboration

This kind of leadership capability and practice relies on constantly developing professional practice, frequent and thoughtful reflection on data, and delivering early intervention using differential strategies. These characteristics are present in schools where the leadership:

- reinforces very high expectations for both teachers and students
- adopts an unrelenting focus on quality learning and teaching
- creates structures that ensure an orderly learning environment
- creates structures that empower and generate professional responsibility and accountability
- develops a work culture that takes pride in sharing excellence
- displays a high degree of trust and reciprocity
- when appropriate, supports leadership development across neighbouring schools.

PRINCIPLE

9

WHEN teachers and leaders employ more precise strategies for teaching learning and improvement

THEN the whole system benefits.

Elaboration

Inequities in student performance are addressed through:

- good early education
- direct classroom support for those falling behind
- high levels of targeted resourcing
- using differential strategies at the school level.

PRINCIPLE

10

WHEN the system as a whole takes student learning seriously

THEN moral purpose is achieved.

Elaboration

System level structures are established that reflect the processes described in principles 1-9.

The structures link the various levels of the system including the school and classroom. Effective structures support capacity development by:

- balancing professional autonomy and accountability
- promoting disciplined innovation as a consequence of networking.

These activities combine to produce a work culture that at its core:

- exerts strong pressure to improve
- takes seriously its responsibility to act on and change the context
- embodies a commitment to focus, flexibility, and collaboration.

THE POWERFUL LEARNING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

The strategy outlined in this manual was progressively refined in our school improvement work with schools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Its features and benefits are explored in greater detail in a book we edited with our colleague John Munro, *Powerful Learning: A strategy for systemic educational improvement*.

The Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy describes a process of deliberate reform that is centred on the goal and enacts the values we introduced on page 3.

It is a process that requires careful attention to staging a series of reinforcing actions. The Strategy integrates evidence from both research and practical experience about the actions and behaviours that produce significant and sustainable improvements in student wellbeing and student learning.

THEORIES OF ACTION

We developed ten Theories of Action to focus implementation of the School Improvement Strategy in the classroom, the school, and the system. The ten Theories of Action are shown in summary form below. Four Whole School Theories of Action establish the enabling environment for six Theories of Action for Teachers. Each of these Theories of Action is described in *Curiosity and Powerful Learning*, one of the manuals in this series.

Our Principles of School Improvement are also presented as Theories of Action.

A Theory of Action proposes a link between cause and effect – the link is always one that is grounded in evidence about what works in school improvement. Our Theories of Action take this form:

WHEN we take a particular action

THEN we expect that action to have specific effects.

A Theory of Action is a guide for identifying, designing, implementing, and evaluating effective responses to the challenges of school improvement.

We are always learning. The validity of a Theory of Action must be tested and retested by gathering evidence about the effects of the action we take. We must evaluate the evidence, and then we must make a judgement about whether the Theory of Action is sound or needs adjustment.

Importantly, a Theory of Action must be stated before it can be shared. It must stand as a common reference point by providing for all members of the school community a common language about the purpose, direction, and content of change.

A Theory of Action connects the actions of teachers and school leaders with consequences – the effects their actions have on quality and performance in their schools. A Theory of Action emphasises accountability by implementing a planned process for collecting and monitoring data that measures the impact of the actions taken.

Theories of Action are encountered again when we describe the School Improvement Model.

OUR OVERARCHING THEORY OF ACTION

We adopt an overarching Theory of Action for the Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy:

WHEN all the distinct yet interrelated parts of the School Improvement Model – the rings, and each element of each ring – are aligned and working together

THEN all schools will improve.



OUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MODEL

The Powerful Learning School Improvement Model brings together in a coherent way all the elements for the Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy.

The School Improvement Model comprises:

- the Core – Curiosity and Powerful Learning
- an Inner Ring of four elements
- a Middle Ring of six elements
- an Outer Ring of four elements.

Each of the rings in the School Improvement Model is accompanied by a Theory of Action. What we do – our practice as teachers and school leaders – is guided by Theories of Action.

On the following pages we examine each ring and its elements, and we describe how all the elements are mutually reinforcing. School improvement is achieved through establishing effective practice in each component *and* actively managing interactions between the components.

THE MODEL MOVES

The School Improvement Model is more than a description of working parts. Its immediate and practical purpose is to serve as a guide for putting school improvement in motion – it puts strategy into action.

The Model assists schools to:

- identify specific domains of school activity that require an active response
- plan the best response
- act.

INSIDE-OUT CHANGE

Most school reform assumes that change comes from the 'outside-in'. However, the successful school improvement journey for most schools is an 'inside-out' journey. They start from from the centre of the School Improvement Model – with student learning – and move outwards. They survey the range of policy initiatives confronting the school to see which they can most usefully mould to their own improvement plans. They also appear to be the schools that are most effective at interpreting centralised school reform agendas.

This is what we call working from the inside-out. This approach is captured in the following pages in which the direction of our journey through the School Improvement Model starts at the core and moves to the Outer Ring.

We return to the idea of working inside-out (page 18) as a key framework for thinking about how to implement school improvement strategies.

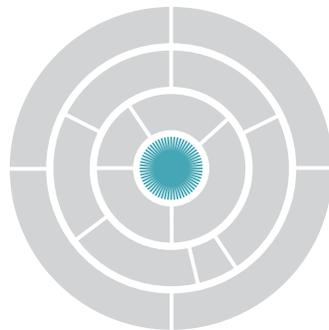


SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

On pages 8-12 we move progressively through each ring of the School Improvement Model, starting at the core. For each ring we identify specific school improvement actions that align with the stated Theory of Action.

The Model is constructed with a determined emphasis on securing sustainable school reform. We are with Ron Edmonds, whom we quoted on page 3, in believing that we already know enough about what needs to be done in schools to teach all children successfully. The Model organises that knowledge into an actionable approach to school improvement that delivers enduring change.

The school improvement actions advanced in the following pages are grounded in the Principles of School Improvement presented on pages 4-5. The School Improvement Model recognises that it is in the school and the classroom that enduring change must be made, and where the weight of effort and expectation must be concentrated. It is of critical importance that schools and school systems adopt an orientation to inside-out working and are organised to directly support teachers and school leaders in securing productive changes that have lasting influence on professional practice and student learning.



THE CORE – POWERFUL LEARNING AND CURIOSITY

POWERFUL LEARNING AND CURIOSITY – OUR THEORY OF ACTION

The most direct way to improve student learning is to improve teachers' instructional practice.

WHEN we support all teachers to improve their practice

THEN we create the conditions for powerful learning which allow all our students to achieve at high levels.

POWERFUL LEARNING

Part of the definition for powerful learning we offered on page 4 refers to the three primary purposes of education. It is important to keep them in mind as we work through the three rings of the School Improvement Model.

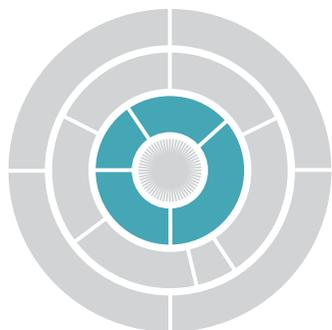
Our purposes are to help our students:

- acquire useful and important bodies of knowledge
- become powerful learners by expanding and making articulate their repertoire of learning strategies
- become fine, caring, and principled citizens.

CURIOSITY

We also noted on page 4 that in this series of Powerful Learning manuals we recognise how effectively curiosity drives the acquisition and application of metacognitive skills and dispositions. Curiosity serves teachers and students as a constantly renewable resource for teaching practice and powerful learning.

Our task as educators is to advance the design of schooling and curriculum so that we promote the acquisition of 21st century learning skills which apply curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.



THE INNER RING – POWERFUL CLASSROOM PRACTICE

POWERFUL CLASSROOM PRACTICE – OUR THEORY OF ACTION

There are four essential characteristics of classroom practice that put powerful learning in the reach of every student.

FOUR COMPONENTS OF POWERFUL CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Curriculum frameworks	Pedagogic knowledge	Assessment for learning	Student voice
Curriculum is organised using frameworks & standards	The teacher's repertoire of teaching & learning strategies	Assessment designs that inform teaching practice & support personalised learning	Involving students in their learning & in the organisation of the school

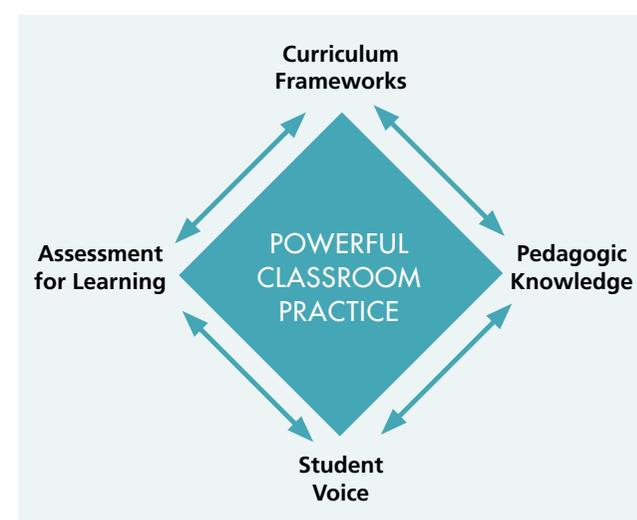
WHEN we increase teacher knowledge about high quality instruction and generate a shared view of effective practice

THEN we will improve teacher capacity to translate that knowledge into effective practice for every student in every classroom.

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF POWERFUL CLASSROOM PRACTICE ARE INTERRELATED

The four components of high quality classroom practice are profoundly interrelated. The figure below emphasises several features of these interconnections:

- we cannot change one component without impacting directly on the other three
- we must regard the four components as a whole if significant change leading to powerful learning is to occur – success is unlikely if we focus on three or fewer components
- powerful classroom practice results from the quality of the *relationship* between the teacher, the student, the content, and the feedback from assessment – such practice cannot emerge from any one component alone, no matter how strong its individual qualities.



CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

On page 12 of *Curiosity and Powerful Learning*, one of the manuals in this series, we introduce our approach to curriculum frameworks, drawing on the use of fertile questions.

A fertile question frames the curriculum as a proposition, a problem to be solved, and a question to answer. Fertile questions develop student metacognition by constantly providing opportunities for reflection and discussion about the 'how' as well as the 'what'.

PEDAGOGIC KNOWLEDGE

The Powerful Learning approach to teaching is based on six Teacher Theories of Action described in *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (pages 18-29):

- Harness Learning Intentions, Narrative & Pace
- Set Challenging Learning Tasks
- Frame Higher Order Questions
- Connect Feedback to Data
- Commit to Assessment for Learning
- Implement Cooperative Groups.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Assessment for learning is described in detail in *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (pages 26-27).

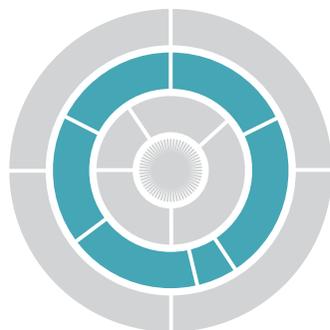
Its underpinning principles are that we:

- collect clear evidence that informs us about how to lift individual attainment
- offer clear feedback to, and seek clear feedback from, our students
- ensure our students know what grades/levels they are working at
- provide transparent criteria that enables peer coaching
- make evidence-based links between student learning and lesson planning.

STUDENT VOICE

Student voice is about students playing an active role in their education and schooling. The impacts of encouraging and attending to student voice include:

- developing student capacity to reflect on learning
- making our students feel respected and listened to
- developing student capacity to take up more demanding roles and responsibilities
- giving students a sense of belonging
- students seeing teachers positively.



THE MIDDLE RING – ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY – OUR THEORY OF ACTION

Six factors produce well developed organisational capacity:

- collaborative planning that focuses on student outcomes
- professional learning that improves classroom practice
- regular use of data, enquiry and self-evaluation to improve teaching
- recruiting teachers with high quality teaching skills, and deploying the whole school workforce in ways that contribute to school improvement
- maintaining a strong School Improvement Team that provides research and development capacity for the school
- redesigning a school so that it effectively promotes learning.

WHEN we increase organisational capacity so that high performance teaching and learning is supported

THEN student learning will improve.

ORGANISATIONAL MAINTENANCE AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Schools that are organisationally healthy or have great capacity can:

- maintain their existing organisational functions to a high degree, and
- develop and change.

The distinction between ‘maintenance’ and ‘development’ is critical for us to understand.

The school maintenance structure	The school development structure
Comprises relatively permanent systems and processes necessary for the school to do its work efficiently.	Purposefully develops new ways of working that, over time, add value to the school.

Ideally this distinction is preserved so that the school can simultaneously stay open for business *and* introduce change through school improvement activity. What usually happens, though, is that a school overburdens its maintenance system by asking it to take on development roles for which it was never designed.

Separating maintenance activities from development work is essential for continual school improvement. Maintenance and development need separate infrastructures – separate organisational and management arrangements – because they need to work in different ways.

For example, the development structure is inclusive and fluid. Teams and partnerships are assembled to design, implement and embed specified school improvement priorities. The composition of the teams will change depending on what tasks need doing and what skills are required to do them well. It is not a structure of permanent committees and fixed roles. Yet permanent committees and fixed roles are essential for efficient school maintenance.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT FUNCTIONS

The diagram below charts the distinctions between organisational and management arrangements for both maintenance and development work.

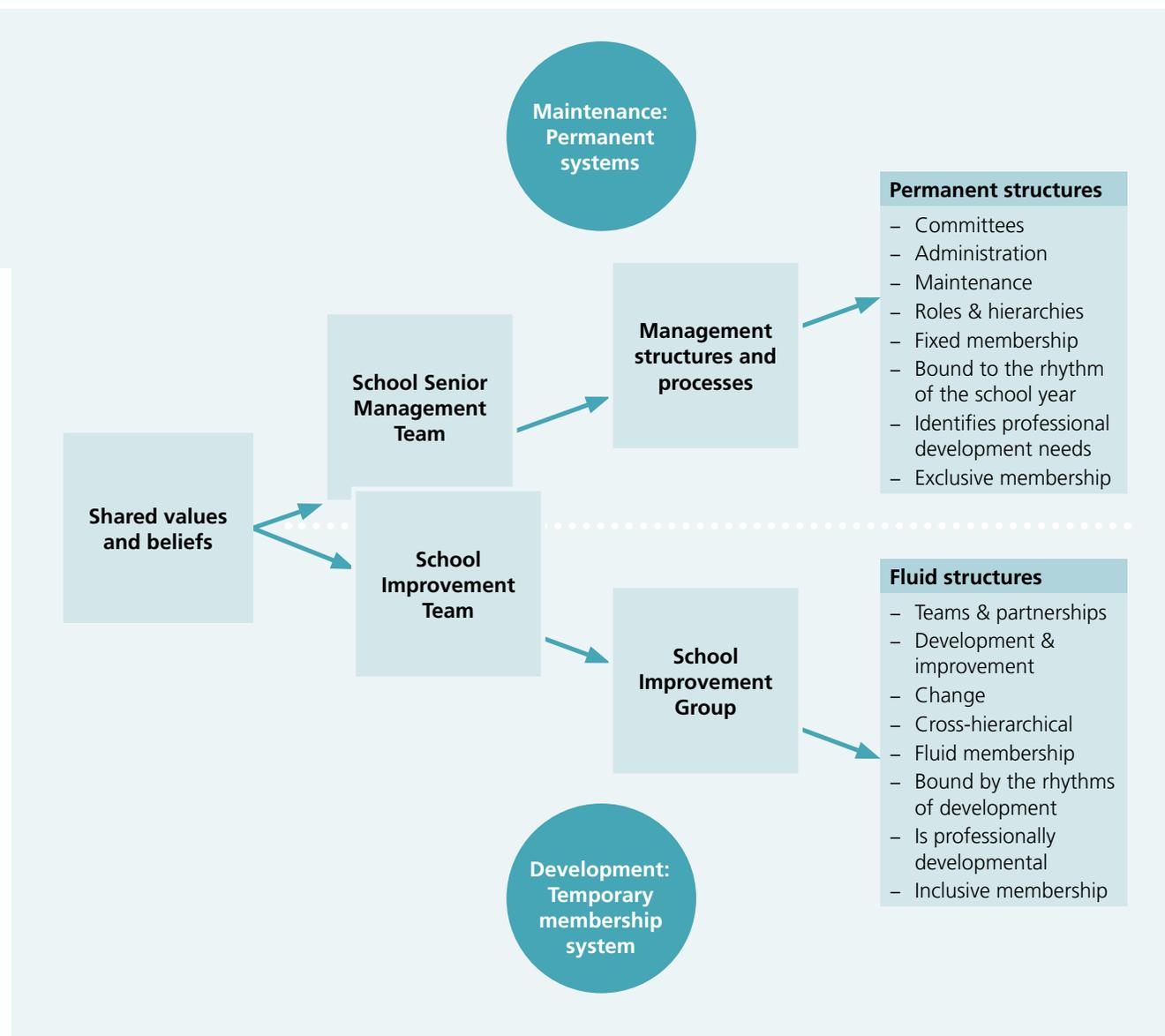
THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM'S DEVELOPMENT ROLE

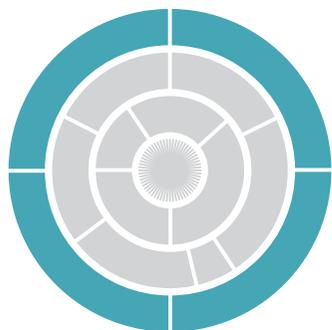
The School Improvement Team provides the organisational framework for resolving the tensions caused by the conflicting demands of maintenance and development. An effective School Improvement Team creates development capacity whereas the existing maintenance structures provide organisational stability and efficiency.

Typically, the School Improvement Team is cross-hierarchical. It could have three to six members in small schools, and between six and ten members in large schools. The principal is likely to be a member. It is important that other team members are genuinely representative of the range of perspectives and ideas available in the school. Team members should not come together in any already existing group within the school.

The School Improvement Team is responsible for managing school improvement efforts on a day-to-day basis. It is supported through:

- a core training program
- networking with School Improvement Teams from other schools
- external consultancy support and facilitation.





THE OUTER RING – SYSTEMIC CONTEXT

SYSTEMIC CONTEXT – OUR THEORY OF ACTION

Four elements form the systemic context:

- schools network with other schools, sharing good practice and engaging in disciplined innovation
- positive responses are evident to the needs and aspirations of parents/carers, stakeholders, and communities
- system leadership is demonstrated as principals accept a range of roles in supporting other principals and schools
- school, system, and middle tier leaders, and policy makers, are aware that school improvement and system improvement processes need differential diagnosis, intervention, and support.

WHEN we take collective responsibility for the learning and progress of all students

THEN schools will collaborate with each other to share effective practice.

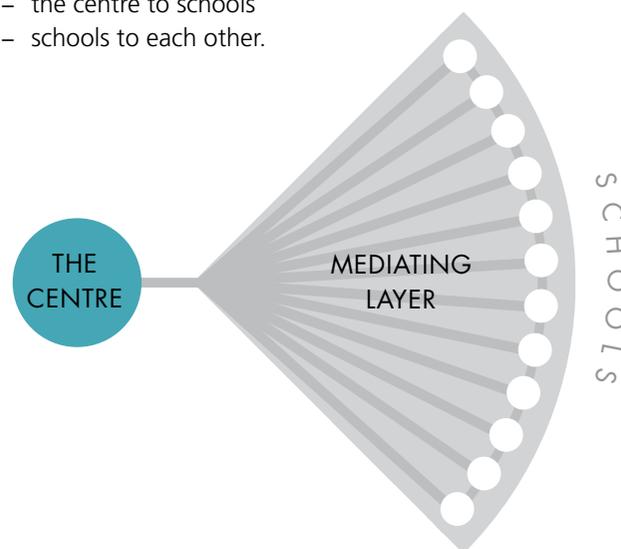
NETWORKED AUTONOMY

There are strong calls in many school systems for a policy of ‘school autonomy’. This policy choice is based on the belief that there is a need to unleash the power of the teaching profession. School autonomy advocates argue that too much top-down, systemic control has kept this power hobbled for too long.

However, a school autonomy policy may not work on its own because it dismantles existing system structures and gives unfettered freedoms to schools. International benchmarking studies of school performance provide solid evidence that decentralisation, or autonomy, can increase variation between schools and reduce overall system performance. These are not worthy outcomes.

The evidence leads in another direction, towards the need for a ‘mediating layer’ within the system that makes and maintains two sets of connections. The mediating layer links:

- the centre to schools
- schools to each other.



The task of the mediating layer (which we return to on page 19) is to build an education delivery system founded on what is known about the best performing school systems, as discussed in *Leadership for Powerful Learning*, one of the Powerful Learning manuals. Taking a lead from the evidence, our approach favours a system based on ‘networked autonomy’.

The distinctive characteristics of networked autonomy make robust contributions to creating school environments and cultures that advance significant and sustainable improvements in student wellbeing and student learning. The impact of networked autonomy works like this.

Distinctive characteristics of schools in a networked autonomy model	
They put in place substantive collaborative arrangements.	They support and accept significantly enhanced funding for students most at risk.
They understand they are as strong as the weakest link. Failing or underperforming schools can expect unconditional support from all network schools, and from commissioned external agencies.	They operate within a rationalised system of national, state, and local agency functions and roles. This diverse context supports a high degree of coordination between parts of the system.
Networked autonomy encourages and supports schools to work in these ways	
Express more fully their moral purpose of enabling every student to reach their potential.	Explore the full potential of inside-out school development strategy
Ensure time is maximised for every teacher to teach and to develop their professional competence	Enable leadership to work more effectively with the system, both within and outside the school, and to generate sustainable networks that deepen student learning impact
Maximise resource allocation to ensure teacher time is maximised for teaching and professional development	Move from external to professional forms of accountability

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

Stories help us make sense of where we are and to remember where we are headed.

Next time you are in an audience listening to a speech larded with statistics and facts, try to recall them afterwards. One or two may stick, but most are lost to us. Yet when speakers tell us stories we are more likely to remember the story and the speaker.

Story, projection and parable do work for us; they make everyday life possible; they are the root of human thought; they are not primarily – or even importantly – entertainment.

– Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: the Origins of Thought and Language*.

Steering a school improvement strategy is easier when everyone who must contribute to it – leaders, teachers, support staff, our students, and the wider school community – shares a common story about:

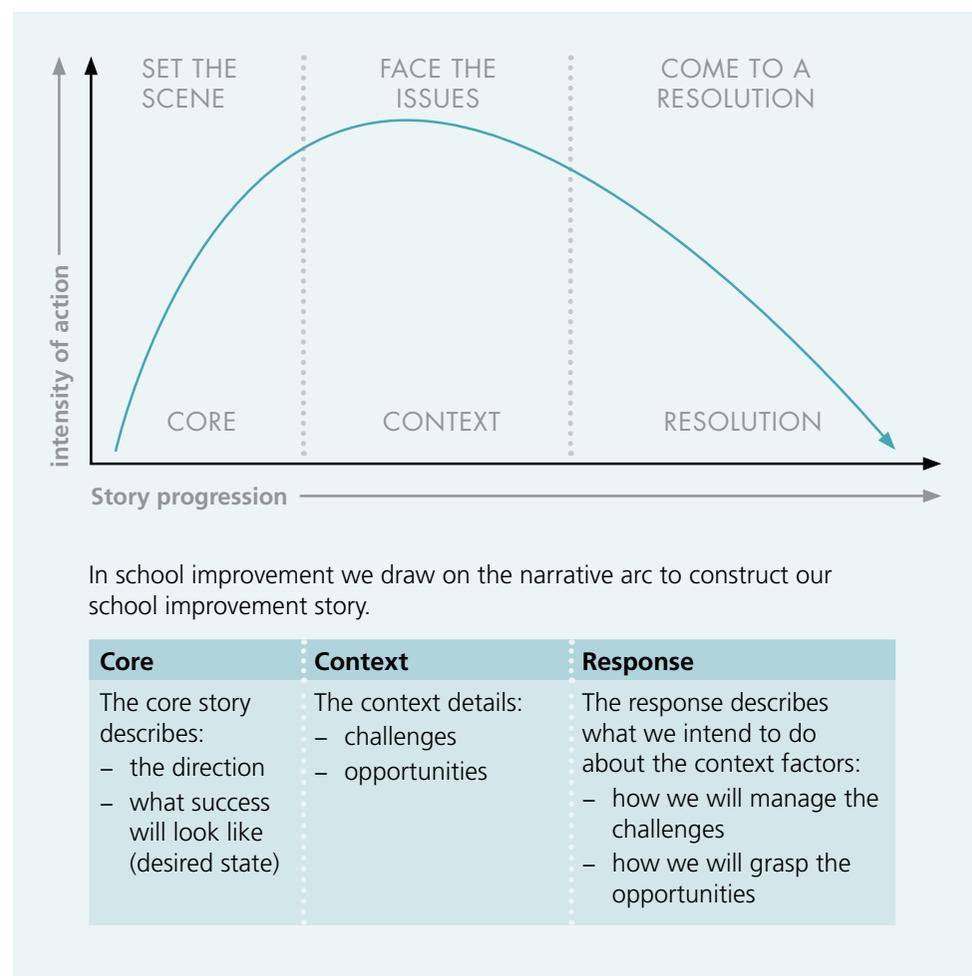
- where our school is now (and what will happen if we stay on the same course)
- where our school is headed as we take the course mapped out in our school improvement strategy
- why we should commit to the new direction.

Another way of thinking about these points is offered by Chip and Dan Heath in *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*.

The Switch idea	The school improvement perspective
A credible idea makes people believe	Our theories of action
An emotional idea makes people care	Our moral purpose
The right story makes people act	Our collaborative action influences every classroom, the whole school, the system

Deep in our minds we give stories a privileged place. They are a currency for conversation, for exchanging ideas. A story is a medium for understanding in concrete ways how things are and how we can improve them. A story is a flight simulator for the mind – we can chart a new direction and vividly see where it takes us.

It's this vividness that schools and system leaders can summon through stories. It is a vividness about both seeing the path ahead, and about taking that path – it is about acting with clarity. Good stories follow a familiar narrative arc.



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

In *Leadership for Powerful Learning*, one of the manuals in this series, we examine a school improvement planning and reporting framework. We note here that planning and reporting are activities driven by narrative.

Good planning begins with an honest diagnosis of school performance – where we are now. Taking full account of where we are now, the plan itself is clear about what success will look like, and what steps we will take to achieve our desired state.

Reporting assesses how well our actions we moving us towards our desired state. What's working? What needs adjustment? School improvement is a continuing journey not destination. The narrative core is likely to be stable over time. But we will frequently review and renew our narrative about context and response. This is where the action is. It is the part of the narrative that keeps our attention, prodding our curiosity. It is the part of the narrative that exercises the minds of school leaders who are always asking: what happens next?

MODIFYING SCHOOL ORGANISATION ARRANGEMENTS

Phase 2 of the Five Phase Implementation Framework – detailed in *Leadership for Powerful Learning* – asks schools to specify Priorities for Development. Those priorities must be rooted in evidence about student progress and achievement. With that evidence to hand a school can begin generating a plan that encompasses:

- specific targeted improvements in student outcomes
- changes in teaching practices that arise from the Theories of Action examined in *Curiosity and Powerful Learning*
- modifications to whole school organisation and management arrangements that will underpin improvements in the classroom.

It's the last of these dot points we need to dwell on. If we are to make changes in each classroom to improve student outcomes, we must also modify the operations of the whole school and the system to ensure those changes are successful and sustainable.

On page 11 we underscored the importance of maintaining clear distinctions between your school's organisational and management arrangements for both maintenance and development work. The right modifications ensure maintenance and development functions are fit for purpose. There is practical, symbolic, and strategic value in implementing arrangements that align with the Priorities for Development set out in your School Improvement Plan.

At first glance, making such modifications can appear complex. It is true that school improvement is a jigsaw, but it is not an impossible puzzle. When it comes to modifying whole school organisation and management arrangements we should recognise that the number of pieces is not infinite. We have a good idea of what they are.

The diagram below describes the interface between classroom practice and whole school priorities for development.

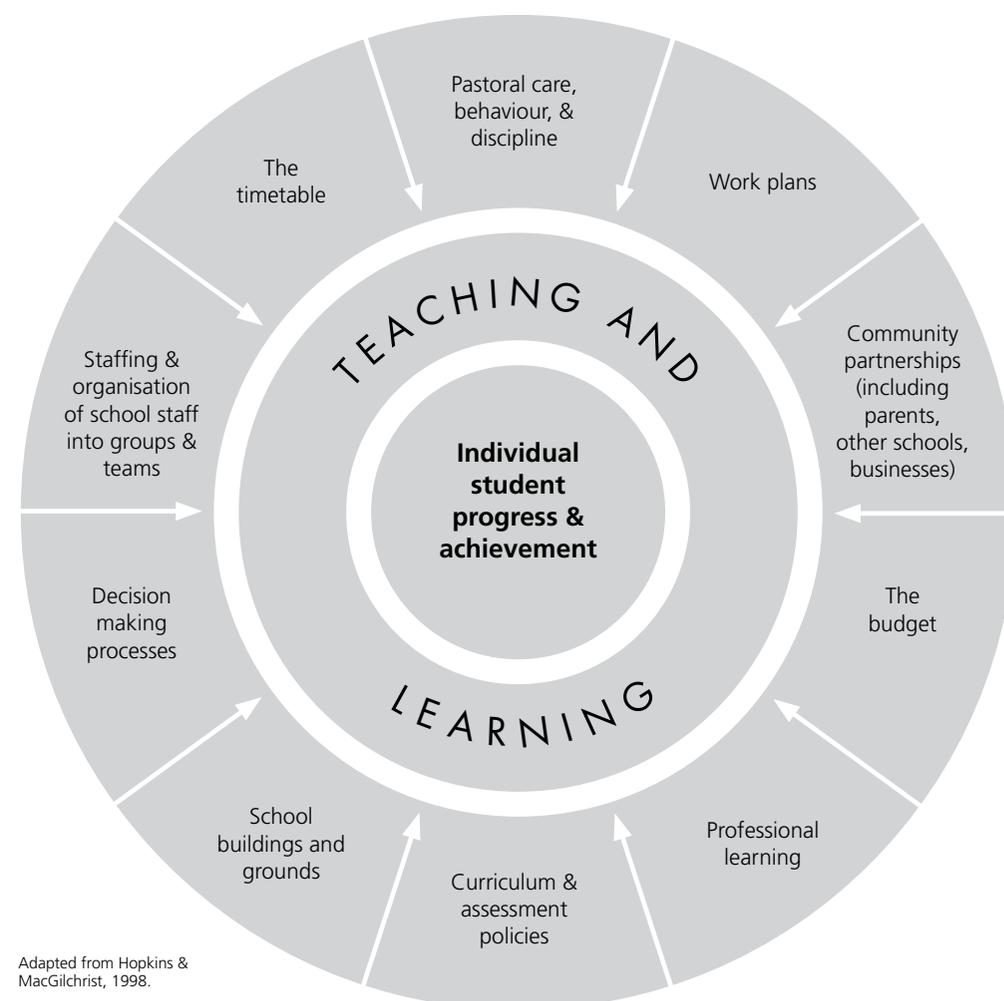
There are ten items in the outer ring of this diagram. School leaders must modify some or all of these items in ways that:

- maximise the impact of action taken on the school's priorities for development
- reduce the attraction or availability of old ways of doing things.

Securing sustainable changes in student outcomes and teacher practices is only possible when whole school organisation and management arrangements back them up. Traditional arrangements are deeply embedded in how schools operate, if only because they have been with us for a long time.

System leadership can play an important role in sharing expertise about:

- diagnosing the impediments that existing arrangements put in the way of making rapid progress on the school's Priorities for Development
- designing new whole school organisation and management arrangements that facilitate progress
- transitioning from old whole school arrangements.



GATHERING YOUR THOUGHTS



If you are commencing your school improvement journey, the eight questions below can help you to grasp the strategic scope of the work ahead. The questions are foundational to strategy development. You can use them to begin sketching what your school improvement narrative might be about, what your school's Priorities for Development might be, and what

modifications to whole school organisation and management you might need to consider. You can use the questions as prompts in conversations with colleagues about school improvement.

You can return to these questions as your school improvement journey unfolds. They provide a strategic reference point as you prepare for an annual renewal of your School Improvement Plan.

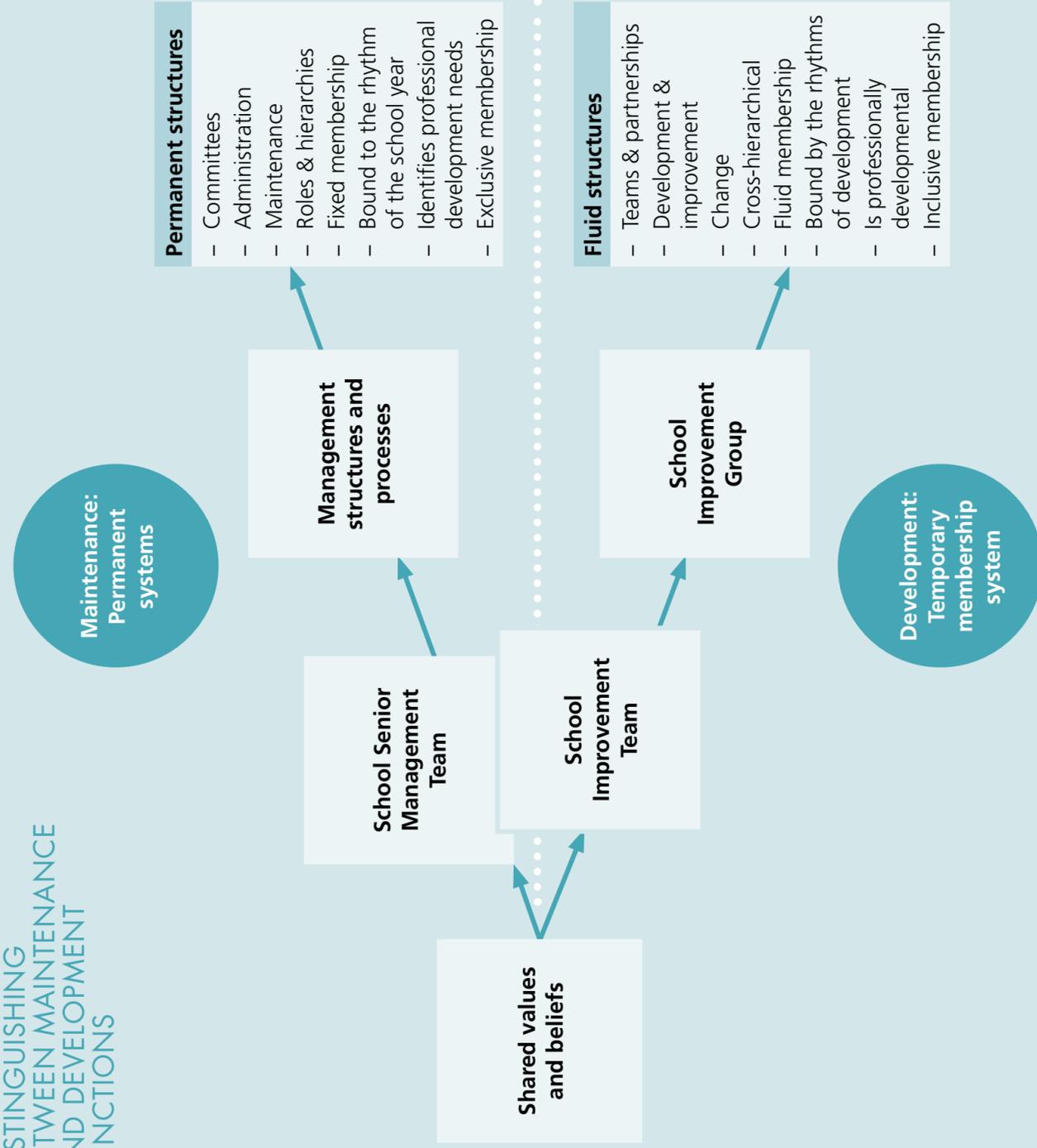
Questions 4 & 5 refer to *Theories of Action* described in *Curiosity & Powerful Learning*, one of the manuals in the *Powerful Learning* series.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AND REVIEWING OUR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Consideration	What is involved?	What organisation & management modifications are necessary?	How much will it cost? (Consider staff time, professional learning, and other resources)	What support & resources in the school network & school system can help us here?
1. What specific, near term, unambiguous targets will we set for student learning, progress & achievement?				
2. What evidence will we collect so that we can assess our progress in achieving our targets?				
3. How should we sequence the targets? How much time will it take to meet each target?				
4. What teaching & learning strategies related to the Theories of Action will ensure we deliver on our targets?				
5. What kinds of professional learning will develop teacher behaviours that enact the Theories of Action?				
6. What immediate tasks must we complete to move towards our targets? Who is responsible for the tasks?				
7. How will we evaluate over time the impact of our school improvement plan on student learning?				
8. Who is responsible for monitoring progress on our School Improvement Plan & Priorities for Development?				

HEADING TO GO HERE

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT FUNCTIONS



OUR PRINCIPLES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

- PRINCIPLE 1**

WHEN schools and systems are driven by moral purpose
THEN all students are more likely to fulfil their potential.
- PRINCIPLE 2**

WHEN the focus of policy is on the quality of teaching
THEN student achievement will increase.
- PRINCIPLE 3**

WHEN schools and teachers are of high quality
THEN relative disadvantage no longer determines educational success.
- PRINCIPLE 4**

WHEN the focus is on powerful learning
THEN students attain more, and develop their cognitive and social skills.
- PRINCIPLE 5**

WHEN teachers constantly acquire a richer repertoire of pedagogic practice
THEN students' learning constantly deepens.
- PRINCIPLE 6**

WHEN data is used to monitor, provide feedback about, and enhance student performance
THEN students' progress accelerates more quickly.
- PRINCIPLE 7**

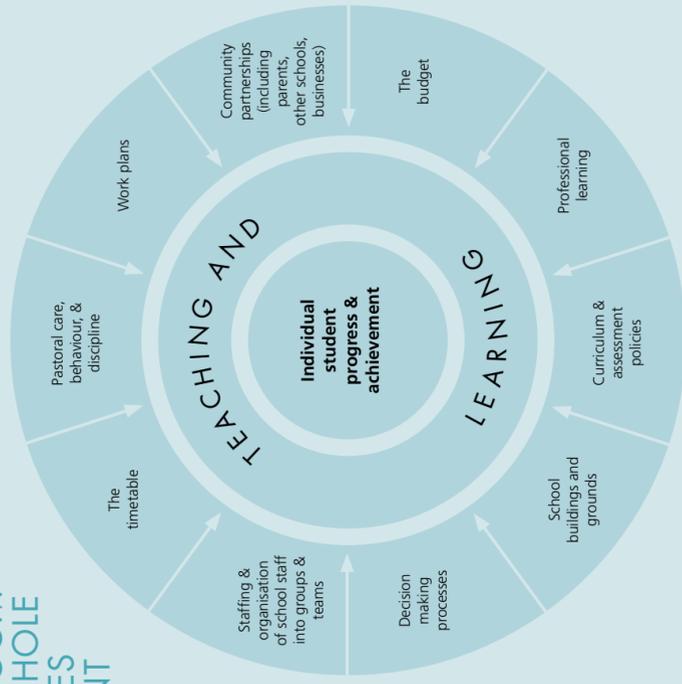
WHEN teachers and schools, in their search for improvement, reflect deeply on school and student performance and act on evidence about learning
THEN the student learning experience deepens and outcomes improve.
- PRINCIPLE 8**

WHEN leadership is instructionally focused and widely distributed
THEN both teachers and students can capitalise fully on their capacity to learn and achieve.
- PRINCIPLE 9**

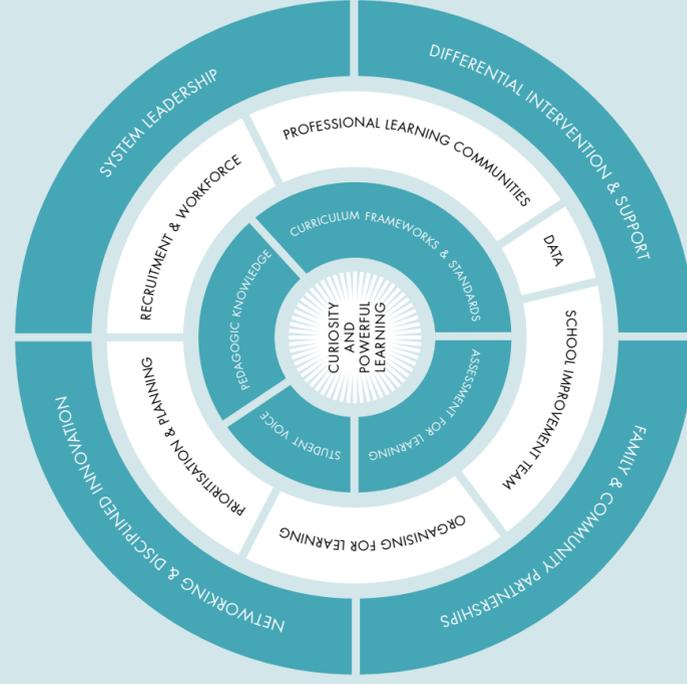
WHEN teachers and leaders employ more precise strategies for teaching learning and improvement
THEN the whole system benefits.
- PRINCIPLE 10**

WHEN the system as a whole takes student learning seriously
THEN moral purpose is achieved.

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN CLASSROOM PRACTICE AND WHOLE SCHOOL PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT



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FRAMEWORKS FOR THINKING ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION

FRAMEWORK 1 – THE NATURE OF SYSTEM REFORM

A key to managing system reform is strategically rebalancing top-down and bottom-up change over time. In virtually every large-scale reform initiative early success is followed by a levelling off in progress and a subsequent lack of commitment to the reform program. This implementation dip is foreseeable and it usually occurs because our planning prior to starting the reform process is incomplete – two crucial components are often missing:

- a strategy for building capacity for sustained improvement
- a strategy for managing the transition between national prescription and schools leading reform.

These components are fundamental to securing enduring change. Without these components in our planning framework we can expect top-down reform plans to proceed along these lines:

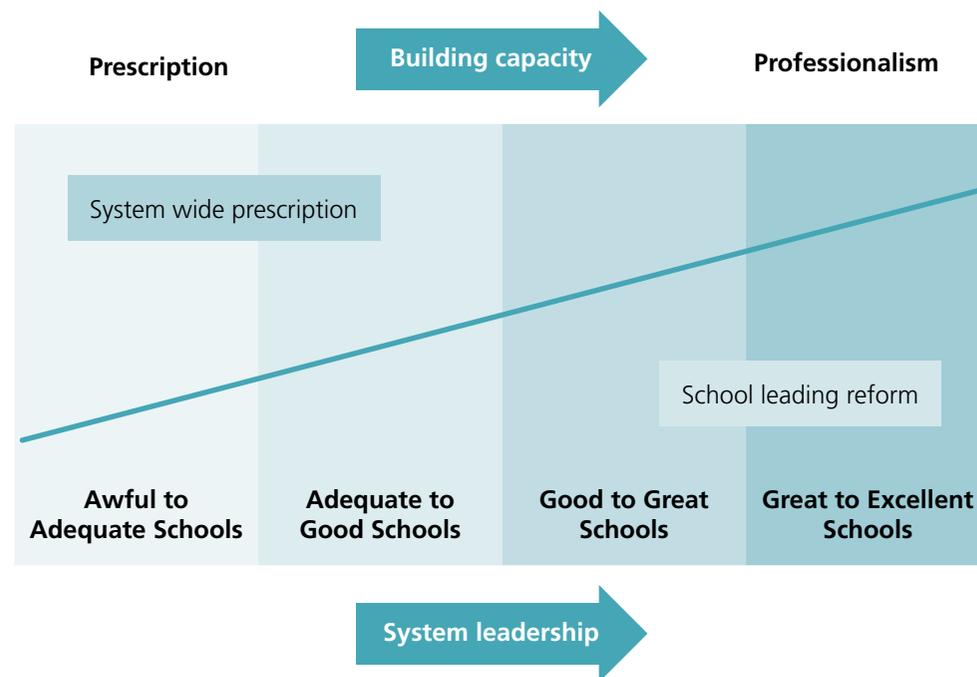
- When standards are too low and too varied, some form of direct, top-down intervention is necessary.
- The impact of this top-down approach is usually to raise standards, but only in the short term.
- Progress inevitably plateaus – a bit more might be squeezed out in some schools, and perhaps a lot in underperforming schools.

This is not the best strategy for sustained reform. It is episodic and reactive.

There is a growing recognition if every student is to reach their potential, it is schools that need to lead the next phase of reform. The implication is that a transition is needed from prescription to professionalism, in which the balance between shifts significantly from system wide, top-down prescription to schools that have the capability to lead reform.

This rebalancing is illustrated below. (The continuum from 'awful to adequate schools' through to 'great to excellent schools' is based on the School Improvement Pathway which we examine in *Leadership for Powerful Learning*.)

TOWARD SYSTEM WIDE, SUSTAINABLE REFORM



THINKING THROUGH THE PATH TO SYSTEM WIDE, SUSTAINABLE REFORM

Five points in particular underpin the thinking behind the diagram on the opposite page.

First, there is no argument against top-down change. Neither top-down nor bottom-up change works in isolation. They have to be in balance, in a creative tension. At any one time, the balance will depend on context.

Second, when standards are too low or variable, more central direction is needed initially. This is acknowledged in the emphasis on national prescription at the left of the diagram. Over time, the policy agenda and school practice move towards the right of the diagram. That movement accounts for the continuing rise in standards that follows the period of levelling off.

Third, we have gained specific knowledge about the combination of strategies needed to move a school and a system along the continuum from 'awful to adequate' to 'great to excellent'. When systems and schools use this knowledge strategically they make significant and rapid progress.

Fourth, it should be clear that this analysis applies both to schools and systems.

Finally, it is no surprise that the right-hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from those we are familiar with. It can be difficult to imagine this landscape when our thinking is constrained by our experiences within the power structure and norms of the left-hand segment of the diagram.

FRAMEWORK 2 – THE NEED FOR ‘INSIDE-OUT’ WORKING

We touched on working inside-out on page 3. Let’s take this idea a little further.

Working inside-out is in some ways an extension of Framework 1. Instead of using the metaphors of top-down and bottom-up as contrasting change strategies, we prefer to talk about ‘outside-in’ and inside-out’ ways of working. This is best illustrated by reference to School Improvement Model described earlier.

The Model expresses the context and process of school improvement through the image of a series of concentric rings. The Model is built and activated, consciously and deliberately, from the inside-out:

- at the core is personalised powerful learning, which is at the heart of the school’s moral purpose
- the Inner Ring comprises the essential ingredients of effective classroom practice that focus on the instructional core so necessary for effective learning
- such classroom practice is found in schools with organisational capacity that supports high performance teaching and learning – these elements are clustered in the Middle Ring
- no school is an island – they exist within a broader systemic context, represented in the Model’s Outer Ring.

When schools work inside-out their starting point is student learning. It is as if they ask, ‘What changes in student learning and performance do we wish to see this year?’

They decide on priorities for change and select the teaching strategies that will most effectively bring them about. They also pinpoint the modifications required to the school’s organisation to support these developments.

Schools that adopt an inside-out way of working embed within their school improvement plans those policy initiatives that have the best fit with the school’s vision, values and goals for enhancing student achievement. And as it happens, schools that work inside-out appear to be the most effective at interpreting and activating system wide reform agendas.



BUILDING CAPACITY IN THE SYSTEM

System leadership entails a responsibility for student achievement, and for community empowerment beyond the school. To make a real difference to student learning and achievement, system leaders balance outside-in and inside-out change. System leaders are active across a system, in districts and regions, in small and large networks of schools.

In this section of the *The System and Powerful Learning* we turn first to questioning the emphasis on school autonomy – an idea that has little evidence to back it up.

We then turn to how system leadership can contribute to building capacity in the system through developing and maintaining the ‘mediating layer’.

THE MYTH OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY

The myth of autonomy in school reform is reflected in the inclination of some policy makers to embrace the idea of devolving or decentralising school management. The rhetoric is that schools will flourish if we free them from bureaucratic control and if we encourage independence, self-governance, and local decision making.

It sounds attractive, but it is a myth. There is a more grounded story to tell and it has compelling lessons for us.

The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found no evidence of a correlation between decentralisation and student achievement. The evidence from PISA points in other directions, finding that the world’s best performing educational systems sustain improvement by:

- establishing collaborative teaching and learning practices
- developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre
- nurturing tomorrow’s leadership.

McKinsey’s report on *Capturing the leadership premium* (2010, p. 8) is unequivocal:

... differences in what leaders do are not directly related to the level of autonomy they are given. Internationally, there is no relationship between the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a school principal and their relative focus on administrative or instructional leadership.

This evidence undermines the myth of school autonomy. Simply giving schools ‘freedoms’ is not the equivalent of a valid plan for improving student achievement. The school autonomy debate adopts a misleading concentration on structures like regions, districts, local authorities, multi-academy and charter school trusts. The evidence tells us that structure is a second order priority, as long as the structure is flexible enough to reflect and support local needs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ‘MEDIATING LAYER’

The evidence leads to a different model for building capacity in schools. It encourages us to embrace the concept of ‘networked autonomy’ described on page 12. Networked autonomy relies on a mediating layer, or middle tier, that links the centre to schools, and schools with each other. We believe our students are best served by concentrating on the functions that the mediating layer performs to support systemic improvement that touches all classrooms in all schools.

The work of middle tier leaders is informed by the ten principles for school improvement set out on pages 4-5. *Capturing the leadership premium* (pp. 23-24) stresses the importance of the mediating layer, or middle tier, to system reform. It identifies five practices, grounded in evidence, that explain the potential for middle tier leadership to support and drive improvement in schools and classrooms.

FIVE MIDDLE TIER LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

What middle tier leaders do	What this looks like in practice
<p>1. Support weaker school leaders by improving and supplementing their leadership</p>	<p>This support raises the overall effectiveness of leadership and school management.</p> <p>In the words of one Canadian system leader: ‘Many principals cannot be successful without the best possible district leadership.’</p>
<p>2. Identify principals’ development needs and provide appropriate development support</p>	<p>This is vital work. There is no single approach to effective school leadership, and no standardised prescription for it.</p> <p>Middle tier leaders provide a sounding board for their colleagues about leadership practice. They call on deep practice wisdom to assist their colleagues to shape targeted personal and professional development plans, and to implement those plans.</p>
<p>3. Manage clusters or networks of schools, and promote lateral learning</p>	<p>In Victoria, Australia, regional network leaders took responsibility for promoting and managing learning within their networks.</p> <p>They took responsibility for assisting principals in their networks to design development plans with specific goals intended for implementation across a school network.</p>
<p>4. Usually play a crucial role in helping identify and develop leadership capacity</p>	<p>Frequently this means ensuring that school leaders identify talent in their schools and develop succession plans.</p> <p>In some systems middle tier leaders work directly with aspiring leaders.</p>
<p>5. Strengthen and moderate accountability</p>	<p>Effective middle tier leaders are heavily involved in principal reviews, often working with varying performance evaluation systems that have differing consequences.</p> <p>They support other principals to achieve their school improvement goals and assist them to monitor progress.</p>

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

On page 13 we highlighted the important role narrative can play in school improvement, noting that the right story stimulates people act. In a strategic sense we need to tell several stories – there is a story that resonates for an individual school, one for school networks, one for the system, and one for the wider group of stakeholders.

The challenge for school leaders is to relate these stories so that they are consistent, relevant to each audience, and galvanise people to act.

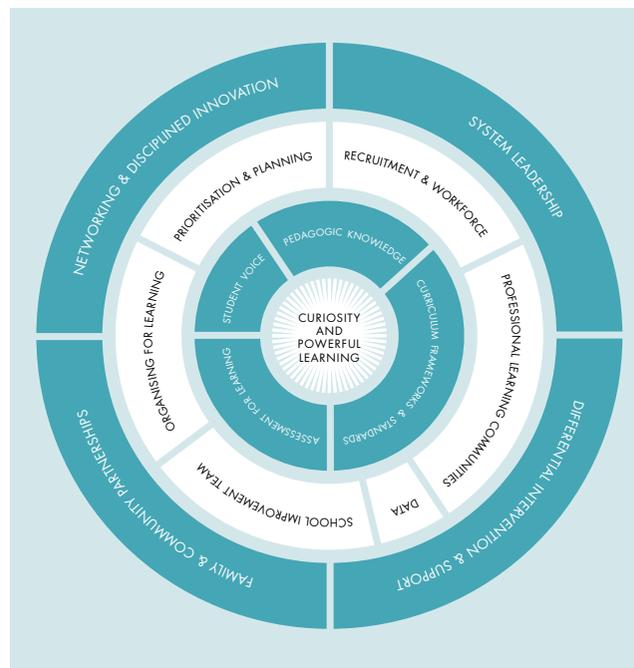
Our moral purpose may vary little between schools from one end of the nation to the other. The elements of our school improvement strategy may not vary greatly across systems or between schools. In three companion manuals – *The System and Powerful Learning*, *Leadership for Powerful Learning*, and *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* – we methodically set out the elements that school leaders need to assemble.

What will vary is how the elements of school improvement are organised into a plan for each school. Local context is telling: where we stand now will directly influence which steps we take next, and what path we follow so that our moral purpose is better enacted. This manual is a step towards understanding how school improvement represents work for both individual schools and the wider school system. It stresses the significance of ensuring that resources that can support a school improvement journey are situated within the school and beyond the school – sustainable change draws on those resources best positioned to secure change.

The School Improvement Model we describe on pages 8-12 is an inside-out model. It recognises that powerful classroom practice is best realised when we empower teachers and students to put it in place. School and system resources are managed with that empowerment in mind.

School leaders facilitate access to system resources *and* organise and manage all the school's resources so that they make an active contribution to the school improvement plan. When organising school resources, we have stressed the importance (pages 10-11) of maintaining a distinction between the development and maintenance functions – they contribute in different ways to the successful implementation of the school improvement plan.

In this manual we have looked at the wider environment within which school improvement occurs, and examined some tools for thinking and acting that are valuable in any improvement journey. It is time now to focus attention on the work of school leaders in conditioning the school environment so that it is ready to pursue the changes that are necessary. That is the territory explored in the next manual in this series, *Leadership for Powerful Learning*.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Professor David Hopkins

Among many educational roles David has served as Chief Adviser to the UK Secretary of State on School Standards, Dean of Education at the University of Nottingham, an Outward Bound Instructor and an International Mountain Guide. With Wayne Craig, David led the Powerful Learning school improvement initiative in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. David is Emeritus Professor at London's Institute of Education, and founded the Adventure Learning Schools Charity. In 2013 he completed his school improvement trilogy with the publication of *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (ACER Press).



Wayne Craig

A renowned systems improvement expert and author of *Powerful Learning: A Strategy for Systemic Educational Improvement*, Wayne guides McREL's Melbourne-based team of consultants and researchers to deliver services and solutions across Australia and Asia. In addition, he is integrating elements of Powerful Learning with McREL resources to create a systems-wide approach to developing curious, engaged, and successful learners and educators. Previously, Wayne was a regional director at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria, where he led a largescale effort across the Northern Metropolitan Region to raise achievement and produce better outcomes for students.



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