Supporting independent schools in implementing change for authentic school improvement

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the processes used and outcomes of a large-scale effort to initiate and sustain improvement in independent schools in NSW, Australia. The independent sector is a significant provider of school education in NSW, and embraces schools and students from across the socio-economic spectrum. The Association of Independent Schools in NSW (AISNSW) has provided high level leadership in initiating a number of school improvement projects. Funded by the Australian Government's Students' First program (now Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes program), the AIS established a suite of projects including two with a specific school improvement focus, Schools Leading Learning and Embedding Excellence, involving 134 participating schools.

The AISNSW initiatives were designed to:

- engage school communities in a systematic process of self-renewal, through a comprehensive and collaborative approach towards self-evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative data and
- develop and implement a clearly defined school plan focused on building leader and teacher capacity and enhancing student learning outcomes.

Key strategies used in both projects include provision of customised consultancy support and a funding allowance to enable schools to purchase release time for staff and school leaders. This form of consultancy support differs somewhat from the kinds of support offered in the past, and calls for particular skill-sets on the part of the consultants in developing credible, long-lasting relationships with school leaders, executives and teachers. A key underpinning of both projects has been development of the capacity of schools to gather and analyse data and engage in self-evaluation, understanding the relationship between school policies and practices and student outcomes, and in the process strengthening evidence based practice.

Both projects were subject to formal evaluations (Erebus International, 2017a; b). Data from these evaluations is used in this paper to illustrate the significant benefits that have been produced by the projects, including embedding evaluative thinking as part of the normal repertoire of decision making at school and classroom levels, strengthening pedagogy and student support processes, as well as some improvements in student learning outcomes. An unexpected benefit of the projects has been stronger networking between schools and a reduction in the sense of isolation felt by many independent schools. The paper concludes with a discussion of the lessons learned from the experience and their applicability to other school systems.

The paper, and the projects discussed, is important in that few previous studies have examined large scale reform initiatives in the independent school sector, and how strong and consistent leadership is required to gain acceptance for improvement frameworks and processes in ways that respect the individual characteristics and founding ideologies of very disparate independent schools.
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Introduction

This paper reports on the processes used and outcomes of a large-scale effort to initiate and sustain improvement in independent schools in NSW, Australia. The independent sector is a significant provider of school education in NSW, and embraces schools and students from across the socio-economic spectrum. The Association of Independent Schools in New South Wales (AISNSW) has provided high level leadership in initiating a number of school improvement projects. Funded by the Australian Government's Students' First reform agenda (now Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes reform agenda), AISNSW established a suite of projects including Schools Leading Learning and Embedding Excellence to support schools, which together involved 134 schools.

The AISNSW's initiatives were designed to:

- engage the whole school community in a systematic process of self-renewal, through a comprehensive and collaborative approach towards self-evaluation, using both quantitative and qualitative data and
- develop and implement a clearly defined school plan focused on building leader and teacher capacity and enhancing student learning outcomes.

Background and Context

The AISNSW is the peak body representing the independent schools sector in NSW - representing more than 478 schools and campuses, enrolling more than 195,000 students and accounting for some 16% of NSW school enrolments.

In the last five years, enrolments in the NSW independent schools sector have grown by 8 per cent. This rate of enrolment growth has been a consistent trend in the sector for more than twenty years, with most of this growth attributable to a significant increase in the number of low fee independent schools.

Many independent schools are small with almost half enrolling fewer than 200 students, and approximately one-third enrolling fewer than 100 students.
Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist, and Uniting Church schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools
- Community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities and students at risk.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are licensed to operate by the regulatory authority, the NSW Education Standards Authority. Most independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example those within the Anglican Schools Corporation and Seventh-Day Adventist systems.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a wide range of communities throughout NSW. It is not well understood that two-thirds (65%) of independent schools in NSW have a socioeconomic status (SES) score in the lower half of the SES distribution range, with 48% of all students in the sector enrolled in these schools.

**The Schools Leading Learning initiative**

*Schools Leading Learning* (SLL) operated between 2014 and 2017 and offered tailored consultancy support and teacher release funding to low SES schools for up to three years to build their capacity in whole school improvement planning. The first cohort of schools that commenced participation in *Schools Leading Learning* concluded its funding period after three years at the end of 2016, while a second cohort of schools formally commenced participation in early 2016. Support for the second cohort will cease in 2018. For both cohorts, the funding was intended to provide teacher release to use whole-school planning processes to identify and implement school improvement priorities. A total of 28 schools participated in the first cohort of *Schools Leading Learning*, 2014-2016. An additional cohort of 24 schools joined the project from January 2016 and was referred to as Cohort 2. Schools were invited to participate based on a range of criteria including low SES, small and/or rural/regional and schools that had limited previous support through funded programs.

The *Schools Leading Learning* approach was designed to enable school leaders to be supported to engage their own schools in a rigorous process of self-evaluation, refinement and development of school improvement planning processes. The resulting priority areas informed teacher professional learning opportunities and ultimately enhanced student learning outcomes in participating schools.
The implementation of *Schools Leading Learning* was underpinned by a framework for enabling schools to respond appropriately to their own context in planning and implementing their project (See Figure 1 below). The implementation of *Schools Leading Learning* has continued to reflect each school’s journey of ongoing school improvement and cultural change, with no defined end point.

**Figure 1: The Schools Leading Learning framework**

A core feature of the *Schools Leading Learning* model was the employment of a team of dedicated *Schools Leading Learning* consultants, who actively worked in partnership with each of the participating schools. These consultants supported participating schools to collect and analyse their performance data as part of a self-assessment process, provided mentoring and coaching for school executives and teachers, and facilitated or conducted professional learning relevant to each school’s identified priority areas for improvement. This analysis informed the development or ongoing refinement of the school’s improvement plan (a required part of the model). As will be discussed later in this paper, the targeted consultancy model adopted during *Schools Leading Learning* was a key contributor to the success of the project.

**Key Outcomes from Schools Leading Learning**

This section of the report summarises the evaluation’s findings in relation to the impact of *Schools Leading Learning*.

**Impact on strategic school planning and priority setting**

All schools that participated in *Schools Leading Learning* were required to develop an action plan to guide the implementation of their identified priorities for improvement. The nature of these plans varied over time. Initially, these plans tended to be stand-alone documents, but as the initiative
progressed, were more frequently incorporated into either a specific school improvement plan or integrated into the school’s overall strategic plan.

The most significant change to have occurred in the way that schools approached improvement planning has been an increase in the extent to which the use of data to inform schools’ judgments about their effectiveness and areas in need of further development. This has been a key part of the transformation of school planning processes that has occurred in most schools participating in *Schools Leading Learning*. While teachers in the participating schools had assessed students using a variety of instruments, in addition to NAPLAN and HSC assessments, typically little use had been made of this data to inform whole school planning.

A further significant impact occurring in schools participating in *Schools Leading Learning* has been a shift in perception about the usefulness of school improvement planning as an on-going and crucial process that actually helps to direct practice rather than simply “paperwork” that is required for registration purposes.

A third change concerns the process of decision-making about school priorities are determined. It is quite noticeable that in 2014 and prior to schools’ involvement in SLL, the priorities were commonly decided by the principal alone. This implies that there was no real consideration of collaborative discussions about data or any other factors. This would appear to be no longer the case. Also noticeable is the increasing formality of the process for identifying priorities. There has been a significant decrease in the use of informal consultation with teaching staff as the major strategy for identifying priorities in 2014-17.

**Impact on the use of data to drive school improvement**

The approach to school improvement that underpins *Schools Leading Learning* is based on increasing the quality of analysis of information about the effectiveness of not only school wide aggregate data, but the impact of particular strategies and programs at the classroom and year/grade or faculty level on student learning outcomes. In 2017, this philosophy is now commonly accepted and understood in the vast majority of participating schools. This change has come about as a result of the intensive focus of SLL consultants on providing extensive professional learning in relation to the link between student data and whole school improvement. The introduction by the consultants of contemporary practices such as benchmarking student achievement against the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Continua and the use of data walls to visualise progress has also been of particular importance in providing more timely and relevant data about students’ learning.

**Impact on Principals’ leadership practices**

Building the capacity of school leaders was a key objective of *Schools Leading Learning*. The evaluation data suggests that *Schools Leading Learning* had considerable impact on school leaders taking a more systematic approach to the implementation of staff development and appraisal processes. This might have been expected given the initiative’s strong emphasis on provision of teacher professional learning.
to underpin school improvement. This in turn, had a substantial impact on the extent to which principals have more efficiently deployed human and financial resources to facilitate student learning.

The positive changes in relation to whole school planning appear to have translated to the same extent in the achievement of closer alignment between identified school priorities and hiring/recruitment of staff. The reported results may reflect the perceived lack of necessity to change the current hiring/recruitment practices in the participating schools, or the reality that school staffing matters are often more complex and take longer to resolve than change in operational procedures.

**Impact on teaching practices**

Table 1 below shows that the greatest impact in relation to teacher practice had been on increased sharing and dialogue between teachers for planning and programming (77 percent responded to a great extent) and on teachers exhibiting more collaborative practice with peers at stage/grade levels (73 percent). There was also substantial impact on other teacher practices such as more student-focused pedagogy, greater use of data for decision making, and greater consistency and coherence of teaching within and between grade/stage levels. It should be noted that increased dialogue and collaboration between teachers were also common outcomes for other large-scale school improvement initiatives such as the *National Partnership for Literacy and Numeracy* and the *NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan*.

### Table 1: Principals’ ratings of the impact of *Schools Leading Learning* on teaching practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Great extent (%)</th>
<th>Moderate extent (%)</th>
<th>Little extent (%)</th>
<th>Not at all (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More student focused pedagogy</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater use of data for decision making</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More collaborative practice with peers at stage/grade level</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased sharing and dialogue between teachers in relation to planning and programming</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater consistency and coherence of teaching within and between grade/stage levels</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These impacts are significant, as they also foreshadow deeper changes in the culture of the school. When asked to comment further on these changes, principals identified: the importance of the professional learning provided by *Schools Leading Learning*; the adoption of a whole school approach in breaking down barriers between stage levels and departments; and the adoption of more consistent pedagogical approaches between classrooms.

The increased sense of professionalism and collegiality that has occurred in *Schools Leading Learning* schools has also come about through the increased professional leadership evident in the schools, which has come about as a product of the skill-building and mentoring provided to school executive
staff by the AISNSW consultants. This has empowered school leaders to change, for example, the focus of staff meetings on teacher learning and sharing rather than administrative matters. Principals have identified a trend for teachers taking greater ownership, not only for their own professional development but also for other staff, and have consequently adopted approaches that have turned professional learning in their schools from an individual pursuit to a collective endeavour.

**Impact on schools’ approaches to professional learning**

Since 2014 there has been a significant growth in understanding of the relationship between student learning needs, identified whole school priorities and the implications for teacher professional learning.

The growing awareness of the link between student learning needs and teacher learning needs, which reflects much current research on effective school practices, is a key outcome for schools from their participation in *Schools Leading Learning*. While the SLL consultants played a key role in the early stages of the initiative in drawing out these linkages, by 2017 more schools were increasingly making the connections between areas identified for improvement and areas in which their staff needs further development.

In some schools, there is now greater coherence with the overall program of teacher professional learning, as these needs (based on student learning data) also are central to the school’s strategic plan. The resources made available for teacher professional learning in 2017 aligned much more closely with the priorities identified in the school improvement plans than in the past where teacher choice was once the dominant determinant of the professional learning that did or did not transfer into practice.

Almost all schools visited identified that the adoption of a whole-school approach to professional learning had become standard practice. The comment is frequently made that teachers are now willing to participate in peer observation processes, again a situation that would not have been observed prior to participating in *Schools Leading Learning*. Principals note that teachers are now eager to find out the results of NAPLAN and other assessments, and equally eager to identify how they can enhance their teaching to better meet students’ learning needs informed by this data.

**Impact on student learning outcomes**

The data in Table 2 below reports principals’ perceptions of the impact that *Schools Leading Learning* has had on a range of student outcome measures. The responses need to be viewed with some caution, since they reflect both genuine impact and the relevance of the measure to each schools’ intended outcomes. The most significant impact has been on school-based measures of student achievement, and to a lesser extent on student engagement in learning and student attitudes and behaviour.
Table 2: Impact of Schools Leading Learning on student learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Great extent (%)</th>
<th>Moderate extent– (%)</th>
<th>Little extent (%)</th>
<th>Not at all– (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN results</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/class-based measures of student achievement</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement in learning</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attitudes and behaviour</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attendance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lessons learned from Schools Leading Learning 2014-2017 and implications for future school improvement initiatives

Analysis of the Schools Leading Learning evaluation findings over its four years of implementation reveals a number of key lessons in relation to factors that have contributed to the success of the initiative and are of relevance for the design of future school improvement initiatives. These lessons are summarised below.

- While Schools Leading Learning was targeted primarily at under-performing schools and those serving low socio-economic communities, its underpinning model of school improvement is relevant to schools across the NSW independent sector. All schools, regardless of their current level of performance, need to engage in a constant process of analysis and reflection to ensure that their structures, processes and practices will continue to produce high level outcomes for their students. School improvement therefore needs to be oriented towards what will be important for students to know and be able to do in the future and encompass the continuing growth and development of higher performing students as well as those classified as underachieving.

- School improvement requires changing school culture, not simply adding additional programs. There should be no doubting the profound nature of the change that is required in raising expectations for performance, for example, or in changing how teachers work together as colleagues, how classrooms are structured, how students are engaged in their own learning. Schools entering into an improvement program therefore need to have clear understanding of what will be entailed and the degree to which the existing culture of the school may be challenged.

- Schools Leading Learning demonstrated that if school improvement is predicated on achieving enhanced teacher quality, a different approach to teacher professional learning than in the past is required: it must be focused on developing the teachers’ confidence and competence to address identified school needs rather than teacher’s individual interests and preferences. This teacher professional learning is best delivered on the school site and preferably in the classroom, with an emphasis on modelling by colleagues, and with strong expectations that teacher practice will
Structured reflection on the success of practice must become routine, and not an add-on to teacher’s work but an integral part of it.

A key ingredient for success provided by Schools Leading Learning include the additional time given for professional learning as defined above - which includes time for collaborative review and reflection as well as identification of what teachers need to do to increase individual student learning. The way in which participating schools chose to structure this time was not always the same, but the lesson to be learned from this experience is that unless dedicated time is structurally embedded into the school’s operation, the level of impact will be less than it could be. This process needs to become viewed as normal practice, not a project-funded add on that will end when funding ceases. Principals have a particular responsibility to find ways to finance these activities in a sustainable way.

The Schools Leading Learning experience provides strong evidence that school improvement is greater when conducted as a collective enterprise co-ordinated and supported at a sector level than when it is left to the resourcefulness of individual schools. The success of Schools Leading Learning was underpinned by the initial efforts taken by the AISNSW to ensure that the project had a sound project design based on relevant research, and by ensuring schools were adequately prepared for their participation. The chances of success were greatly enhanced when the Principal and staff were clear about what was expected of them, not only in terms of compliance with the initiative’s accountability requirements but also the outcomes that were intended. The role of the AISNSW in setting the expectation that SLL involved fundamental cultural change was a key understanding that emerged during the implementation of the initiative. The AISNSW also played a critical role in ensuring that both the Principal and key staff developed a sound understanding of the research base underpinning schools’ improvement projects. In successful Schools Leading Learning schools there was an ongoing relationship developed between the SLL consultants and school leadership teams. This relationship was developed through interactions including provision of targeted professional learning opportunities as well as frequent and regular discussion of progress.

As identified in much of the academic literature on school effectiveness and school improvement, the importance of effective school leadership and the critical role of the Principal has been one of the key success factors in Schools Leading Learning. Supporting the development of principals has been a key role for the AIS consultants from the outset of the initiative. Principals need to feel empowered in practice to make informed staffing decisions when necessary and to redeploy resources and change existing school structures and operations is also fundamental to effecting change. Principals have a critical role to play in creating the moral imperative for change and the role of Schools Leading Learning in this process. In successful schools, Principals played an active role in the project, and while involving other staff in coordination and implementation, retained overall responsibility for its progress and achievements. In this situation the Principal ensures that teachers and other members of the school community clear understood the nature of the initiative, the key outcomes to be achieved and the complementary roles of each of the participants in the initiative. As in any change process, Principals of successful Schools Leading Learning...
Learning schools thrived on their key role in promoting change, communicating the “big picture” to their staff and clearly identifying future directions.

- Also in line with current research, Schools Leading Learning demonstrated that the cornerstone of school improvement is the effective use of data to inform practice – which would appear to be an essential element of any future school improvement efforts. The consultants placed strong emphasis early in their engagement with schools to improve their capacity to collect, analyse and interpret data, particularly in relation to student learning outcomes. The introduction of consistent approaches to measurement of learning outcomes and the concept of learning progressions, particularly provided by the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Continua was an important element contributing to successful school change. Not only did these key tools provide direction and focus for classroom teaching in literacy and numeracy, but they also provide an opportunity for constant tracking and monitoring of student progress in relation to key criteria, on a more relevant and timely basis than NAPLAN or HSC results.

- Perhaps more importantly, in successful Schools Leading Learning schools, the data analysis and reflection processes provided the context for resulting teacher collaboration and discussion of the most appropriate direction for future student learning. Engaging in these processes reinforced teacher understanding that it is the quality of teaching and learning that “makes the difference” in students’ outcomes, rather than blaming poor results on the students’ social backgrounds. It needs to be emphasized at this point, and the important learning from the Schools Leading Learning project, is that improving a school’s capacity to analyse data is not simply about increasing technical expertise. This alone is insufficient to drive improvement. Data analysis needs to be purposeful and conducted honestly, openly and collaboratively. It needs to be underpinned by a mindset that accepts that every student and every teacher brings a set of complementary skills and attributes into the school setting and work from this base, whatever it may be, with the explicit intention of developing these skills further. Importantly, this strength-based approach towards collaboration also provides the platform for highly targeted and individualised professional capacity building of teachers. Successful SLL schools saw learning as a journey that may have some high and low points, but always has the end point in mind. They perceived setbacks as an opportunity to identify what is working for each individual and what is not, rather than an opportunity for criticism or blame.

- Finally, Schools Leading Learning has created an understanding in most of the participating schools that improvement is a journey, which often does not have clear beginning or end points. The particular strategies adopted during an improvement project have to be seen in the context of past interventions as well as future plans, hence the importance of the improvement priorities identified in the project becoming rapidly integrated with and embedded into the schools overall strategic plan.
Conclusion

After four years of implementation, Schools Leading Learning has proven to be an effective model of school improvement in independent schools’ context in NSW. The majority of participating schools have made significant progress in not only enhancing aspects of their pedagogy but more importantly, have a better understanding of the processes involved in bringing about school improvement. The most successful schools in the project now understand that “school improvement” involves more than simply improving test results, but requires systematic re-thinking of the systems and structures, and beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that produce these results. They understand also, that school improvement requires more than working harder, or demanding more from teachers and students, but doing things differently.

As outlined above, the success of the model has drawn from both the inherent strength of its core program logic, and the excellence of implementation of its key design principles. The essence of the program logic, that schools’ capacity for sustainable improvement can be enhanced through developing the capacity of its leaders and teachers has been amply demonstrated, particularly in relation to the ability of school staff to better identify the authentic learning needs of their students, to better diagnosis the factors that are helping or hindering their success in meeting these needs, and to design and implement more appropriate structures and activities that assist students to achieve.

The key principle underpinning Schools Leading Learning, that school improvement needs to be “owned”, and directed by the individual schools themselves and tailored to their unique circumstances rather than an imposed “one size fits all” approach has also been fundamental to the success of the initiative, particularly in the context of independent schools. It is evident that this has occurred in the majority of participating schools. “School improvement” is clearly understood in the 2017 cohort of schools to be an ongoing process, not a one-off event or a packaged solution. Similarly, most of the participating schools are now genuinely engaged in what can be described as “continuous improvement” in which there is a constant process of refinement and re-adjustment of practices, based on evidence of achievement. While new priority areas may be identified over time, few, if any, of the participating schools would now argue that once progress had been made towards one or other of their objectives that they can “tick that box and move on” – a comment that was once commonly heard.

It is evident in 2017 that many of the schools visited had invested more heavily in capitalising on the opportunity provided by Schools Leading Learning, not only in financial terms but also in the commitment they demonstrate to achieving substantial change in their school’s programs and practices. This understanding of the serious of the school improvement enterprise is qualitatively different to that observed in the early years of the initiative. The greater seriousness of engagement is illustrated, for example, in the transition of responsibility for the school’s engagement with Schools Leading Learning from one or a few individuals to wider school teams (usually but not exclusively at executive level), who have taken on a broader school improvement remit in addition to the priority areas identified in their SLL action plan.
While the successes of the individual schools involved in *Schools Leading Learning* have been encouraging, the most significant outcome from the initiative has been the demonstration that school improvement is possible in the disparate independent schools sector on a larger scope and scale than has been attempted previously, at relatively low cost, provided that the support infrastructure provided at the sector level is organised and delivered in accordance with the design principles outlined earlier. Successive evaluation progress reports have identified the key role of the SLL consultants in providing the tailored support and accountability processes that have facilitated school engagement in the process. This type of consultancy support has been different from that typically accessed by schools in the past. The *Schools Leading Learning* consultants have acted more as mentors or critical friends, with strong expertise in facilitating the process of improvement from a holistic perspective than subject matter experts.

The project infrastructure provided by *Schools Leading Learning* has arguably been a more effective and efficient means of promoting school improvement than many of the alternative options attempted in the past. Its impact has been much greater than is likely to have been achieved by simply providing equivalent grants to schools to fund their own programs, for example. Many past initiatives have attempted to enhance teacher and leader capacity through expensive professional development programs, yet few of these had any sustainable impact on teachers’ classroom practices. The more tailored approach provided through *Schools Leading Learning*, in which the teachers’ learning needs are dictated by student learning needs, and in which both the expectation for change in pedagogy and the expectation that the impact of this change will be measured, has provided a much more substantial basis for capitalising on the investment made in teacher professional learning.

Likewise, the scope and scale of change achieved through the *Schools Leading Learning* consultancy model is underpinned by the consultants’ adoption of a consistent approach to the improvement process, the adoption of common planning frameworks and measurement tools, and their deep understanding of the context and needs of the participating schools developed over time. The team approach has provided for a greater level of consistency and continuity of advice than would be possible if schools were to simply be provided with the means to purchase their own *ad hoc* support. Similarly, while independent schools in NSW are not directly answerable or accountable to the AISNSW for their actions or outcomes, the ongoing relationship between the *Schools Leading Learning* consultants and their designated schools has provided for demonstration of a higher level of professional accountability, at least in terms of the identified school improvement priorities. Participating schools know that they will be challenged to produce evidence of their achievements in relation to their goals on a regular basis, as well as their adherence to the project requirements and acquittal of project funds.

Finally, the value of including regular, systematic and independent evaluation in the overall project design (and budget) has been amply demonstrated in *Schools Leading Learning*. As noted above, the initiative has continued to evolve and strengthen over time based on the AISNSW management and consultancy teams’ observations, as well as ongoing evaluation findings. All of the formative evaluation recommendations made since 2014 have been adopted by the AISNSW, and contributed
to the overall success of the initiative. The expectation that schools will take part in the independent evaluation also helps to strengthen overall project accountability. Indeed, feedback from schools participating in evaluation case studies has shown that many consider the experience to be beneficial and useful to them in providing an opportunity for reflection on their achievements and future challenges.

As with any school improvement initiative, *Schools Leading Learning* has some inherent limitations, most of which are not within the immediate capacity of the AIS NSW to control, but may be in a position to influence over time. Since the core of the model depends on building the capacity of teachers and school leaders, the extent to which this capacity can be built depends on the ability and willingness of these teachers and leaders to understand, accept and adopt new ways of working. In practice, this is not always possible within the same timescale or to the same degree. As noted earlier, school improvement involves a change in culture as well as pedagogical practices. In some instances, teachers may, rightly or wrongly, perceive this cultural change to be at odds with the beliefs and values upon which the school was founded. Others may have deep-seated ideological commitment to certain methodologies or programs which may not align with current known best practices. In either instance, unless these differences are resolved, the end result inevitably is the need for separation. This has, in fact occurred in a considerable number of schools involved in participating schools. Principals need to be aware of this consequence and supported in the process.

A second limitation arises from the demographics of the participating schools and the communities they serve. *Schools Leading Learning* was targeted specifically towards schools in low socio-economic communities. In these schools, student enrolment numbers are often volatile, with consequent impact on staff numbers and financial resources available. Schools in these communities often experience high rates of teacher and leader turnover. Subsequent appointments may not have the same skill sets or commitment to either the particular projects identified in *Schools Leading Learning* or to school improvement generally. History suggests that such turnover is inevitable, if not entirely predictable. The implication from this is that the school improvement initiatives must establish internal processes for managing continuity of effort, so that the momentum for change established is not lost.

A third limitation concerns timetable issues in the first instance, but also reflects some deep-seated views about the role of the teacher. Some schools struggle to make the time available for teachers to engage in planning and review, and professional learning in school time. While *Schools Leading Learning* provided teacher release funding to schools, not all schools are able to access casual teachers, either because they are situated in fairly remote locations, or the casual teachers that are available do not meet the schools’ criteria or reflect the school’s ethos. Perhaps more importantly, many teachers are reluctant to take time “off-class”, and many parents also expect the teachers to be in front of their class full-time. Changing these views is a serious undertaking, requiring schools to re-think how the school day is structured and staffed, so that time off-class becomes considered “normal”, and the additional staff required not seen as casuals but permanent, specialist staff performing particular functions, so that continuity of students’ learning is maintained.
In summary, Schools Leading Learning has proved to be a successful model for guiding school improvement in the independent school sector in NSW. While the initiative *per se* comes to an end in 2017, its underpinning principles have been retained in a new venture initiated by the AIS to provide a School Improvement Service on a wider basis across the sector in 2018. It is encouraging that the take-up of this new initiative has already been strong, (being both voluntary and requiring a financial co-contribution by participating schools), with the value placed on the form of support provided through Schools Leading Learning further indicated by the fact that more than 90 per cent of the schools involved have chosen to continue their engagement through the new model. It is encouraging also that the design of the new model builds on the lessons learned through the implementation of Schools Leading Learning and other recent AISNSW initiatives. The investment made in these initiatives has thus been beneficial, and while already making a substantial contribution to better teaching and learning in participating schools, is poised to make a continuing contribution in future.