

BUILDING COMMUNITIES IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE



How schools build strong, resilient networks to support student outcomes



Providing feedback

This resource is the result of the collaboration of numerous educational leaders from across Victoria. Their input and feedback was essential in tailoring the guide to meet schools' needs. This is the first version of the resource and your feedback will assist the Department in further improving the guide. You can provide input into the development of future versions by emailing fiso@education.vic.gov.au

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INTRODUCTION

To achieve school improvement goals, effective implementation is required. Schools have different strengths, starting points and contexts — there is no one-size-fits-all model for school improvement. To sustain and accelerate improvement, schools need to identify the right evidence-based improvement strategies, plan for effective implementation, and translate these strategies into the day-to-day work of staff.

The Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) Implementation Guides describe the professional practices of effective implementation within the improvement cycle. This includes identifying the education challenges where efforts will be prioritised, planning for how the prioritised challenges will be addressed, identifying and celebrating what is working, and adapting when barriers are encountered or changes occur.

IMPROVEMENT CYCLE



The guides aim to support schools to effectively implement strategies in six FISO dimensions.

This guide focuses on **building communities**. That is, it guides schools in better serving their communities through engaging and working inclusively with a broad range of people and organisations.

The six FISO Implementation Guides focus on the following dimensions:

BUILDING PRACTICE EXCELLENCE

CURRICULUM PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT

EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND BUILDING SCHOOL PRIDE

SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND PROMOTING INCLUSION

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

STRATEGIC ENABLERS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

FISO Strategic Enablers for Implementation Guide

Complementing this guide, the [FISO Strategic Enablers for Implementation Guide](#) aims to support schools to reflect on and strengthen four common enablers:

1. Self-evaluation capability throughout a school
2. Real-time data monitoring implementation
3. Leadership capability for school improvement
4. Robust implementation structures

Strengthening these enablers in schools supports implementation across all dimensions. The FISO Strategic Enablers guide contains guidance, research and supports for school improvement and leadership teams. Use the FISO Strategic Enablers guide in conjunction with this guide.

Principles

Three key principles underpin decision-making and ways of working when using this guide:

1. All school staff, students, families and members of the wider school community have a role to play in school improvement and implementation work.
2. School leaders actively engage other staff members, students, families and members of the wider school community in school improvement and implementation work.
3. Everyone in a school has perspectives, experiences and information that can help schools better understand context and educational successes, needs and challenges.

How to use the guides

The guides can support schools to use the improvement cycle to implement improvement initiatives, for example as part of the school review process, for annual planning and monitoring or as part of Professional Learning Communities inquiry cycles. In this guide, the referencing of goals and actions can be related to four-year School Strategic Plans, Annual Implementation Plans or shorter cycles as established by your school.

In school review: School leaders, in partnership with the School Improvement Team (SIT) and school community, can use the guides to gather and examine evidence to inform the pre-review self-evaluation and reflect on the effectiveness of past improvement initiatives and their implementation. The guides can also be used by the school review panel, in partnership with the school community, to develop a new four-year strategic plan.

In annual implementation planning and monitoring: The School Leadership Team, in partnership with the school community, can use the guides to develop the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) targets, actions and activities during Term 4. The SIT can also use the guides to reflect on how the school monitors progress each term, and during mid-year monitoring activities.

In regular cycles: Professional Learning Communities/Teams (PLCs/PLTs) can use the guides to plan and implement inquiry cycles, using real-time evidence to monitor, evaluate and celebrate student progress and reflect on the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

EVALUATE AND DIAGNOSE

Student-centred challenges in the area of building communities can be complex to define. The opportunity at this stage of the improvement cycle is to work with the wider school community to find the challenges where investing time and effort will have the greatest impact.

This is helped by working together to define the challenges, better understand the causes and build commitment around identified areas of improvement. Engaging in community challenges is important because collaborative partnerships with the wider school community can significantly improve students' health, wellbeing and engagement.

Effective school and community partnerships can significantly improve students' health and wellbeing outcomes. A meta-analysis found moderate impact on students' social-behaviour competence and mental health respectively, with the strongest effects stemming from interventions that promote positive communication and collaboration with parents, carers or kin and home-based involvement and supports (Sheridan, et al., 2019).

Assess the school's readiness to build and sustain strong communities

The first step at this stage is to determine the readiness of the school to implement change. The school can use the discussion points, FISO dimensions and key questions in the table below to reflect on readiness, using a range of information and evidence to inform the discussion.

The following resources can support schools in getting ready to improve community engagement:

- The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model (VTLM) [Practice Principles](#) (Partnerships with parents and carers enhance student learning)
- VTLM [Vision for Learning](#)
- [Parent Information Kits](#)



Download and edit a template of the [Assessing readiness table](#) (below).

DISCUSSION POINTS	FISO DIMENSIONS	KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK
Shared vision that articulates the school community's values and goals	Vision, values and culture	Have our leaders and teachers worked together with the whole school community to develop our vision and values? Are our values visible in how we engage with the community?
A commitment to open communication between the school and families and the wider community	Building communities	What values underpin the way we communicate with the wider school community?
Open and reflective relationships between school staff and members of the wider school community to work towards sustained school improvement	Parents and carers as partners	To what extent is the wider school community involved in decision-making and school improvement? Are effective partnerships with parents/carers/kin embedded within the school culture?

What can be learnt about community engagement from 2020?

Before addressing how schools can build strong, resilient networks, it is important to recognise the significant disruptions to face-to-face learning in 2020, and the pivotal role that schools played in supporting communities. Questions to consider include:

- What were the community's experiences of remote and flexible learning?
- What did the school community learn about itself? How was this shown?
- What was learnt about collaboration with the wider school community? What strategies worked well?

Lessons from 2020 remote and flexible learning

- Family engagement in learning had a significant impact on the quality of students' learning and motivation.
- Families appreciated teachers communicating about how to support their children with remote and flexible learning, including timely feedback and structured schedules.
- Families valued the technology support schools provided.
- Families are now more engaged with their children's learning.
- As a result of families and schools working together to understand each other's situation during this time, families are better connected with their children's school.
- Schools are now more likely to increase online communication with families.

(Learning First, 2020)

Identify the main challenges to building strong, resilient communities

The second step in this stage is for a representative group of leaders and staff to gather and interpret evidence to understand the challenges they want to solve, and which will have the greatest impact.

As a starting point, reflect on the following questions together:

- What assumptions guide how leaders, teachers, staff, students and the wider community communicate with, collaborate and support each other?
- Have diverse community groups, service providers and families with multiple perspectives had the opportunity to validate the above assumptions?
- Are decisions about community engagement informed by evidence-based research?

What does the research evidence say?

- Connections between teachers and the wider school community build the professional capital of a school and the wider school community (Salinas, et al., 2019).
- Shared decision-making and consultation with families and the wider community are vital in planning and designing effective supports for students (Attree, 2011).
- Collaborative partnerships between parents, communities and schools are particularly important for driving improvement in culturally diverse schools and can significantly improve students' health and wellbeing outcomes (Bradford & Clarke, 2015; Sheridan, et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016).

Further research evidence supporting the building communities dimension can be found in the [community engagement in learning evidence base](#).

Examine existing community engagement efforts

The SIT can undertake the following activities to better understand current community engagement efforts.

1. Identify and map the different groups in the school's community, and the strength of the school's relationships with these groups. Use evidence from a variety of sources to support this activity. As a starting point, review the cultural and language diversity data in the [local government areas report on population diversity](#).
2. Document activities involving the wider school community. Note who the audience is for each activity. The activity may have a whole-school focus, or focus on a section of the school (for example, a science expo or a VCE briefing for parents of Year 12 students).
3. Rate how successful activities have been in the past. Discuss with the SIT, the school council and community: What evidence supports these ratings? What could be done to improve the event? Is the activity worth sustaining?
4. Reflect on which activities make a significant contribution to the school community. Assess as a SIT: Are there missed opportunities for engaging parents/carers/kin and the wider community in school-sponsored activities? Discuss how you could increase engagement of any community groups that are under-represented or harder to reach.
5. Document the most valuable activities to ensure they are retained. Improve those of modest value and cease those with very little value (as indicated by attendance and feedback). Revisit this periodically and after key activities.

Community organisations that partner with schools

Family violence services: Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria has a database of family violence services across Victoria.

Local Government Area (LGA) services: Including youth groups, health services and libraries. Some LGAs offer free general practitioner and counselling services for young people.

Headspace schools: National workforce that partners with schools to build the mental health literacy and capacity of staff.

Victoria Police: The Victoria Police Youth Corps provides a two-year school-based program for Year 9 and 10 students. Youth Resource Officers are assigned to work with LGAs and increase the capacity of officers to work with young people in their local context.

Community Hubs: A not-for-profit organisation that supports migrant and refugee women and their families. Community hubs partner with schools to support them to collaborate with diverse community groups.

Homework Clubs: The Centre for Multicultural Youth has a database of over 350 learning support programs across Victoria.

Sustainability Victoria: Offers a free ResourceSmart Schools program that supports Victorian schools to embed sustainability across school facilities, community and curriculum.

Gather key community engagement data

Identify all relevant sources of data to be gathered by the SIT team.

Use improvement measures in our system:

- Parent Opinion Survey: to understand parents' perspectives on various aspects of the school
- School Staff Survey: to understand how staff perceive parents/carers/kin and community engagement. Two specific factors include
 - 'parent and community involvement' (in the School Climate module)
 - 'parents and community involvement, engagement and outreach' (in the School Leadership module).

Collect data and information from school communities:

- Create surveys for parents/carers/kin to monitor opinions and matters of concern to them and/or the school. Use short 'pulse' surveys of three to four questions, communicate the findings to participants and indicate what action will flow from them.
- Run focus groups with parents/carers/kin to collect deeper views and insights. For example, a focus group may explore how the school can become more welcoming to parents/carers/kin and the wider community.
- Engage parents/carers/kin through existing channels, such as at parent-teacher conferences and school events, gaining their feedback in an informal way. After informal gatherings, the staff involved can meet, debrief and record the feedback collected.

Some parents may face additional barriers to participating in surveys (for example, English as Additional Language parents, parents from refugee backgrounds or parents with disabilities). All government schools have access to interpreting and translation services.

Schools can also gain the perspectives of these parents through focus group discussions, and by inviting parents to share their perspectives in non-written forms, such as drawings and other images.



Work together to make sense of community engagement evidence

Once all data, information and assessments of existing efforts have been gathered, the SIT can work with relevant members of the school community to ‘triangulate’ assumptions — that is, use multiple methods and sources to test their validity. This will help the SIT and school community members thoroughly understand the root causes of challenges, and identify and prioritise areas for focus.



Download and edit a template of the [Making sense of data and evidence table](#) (below) to help in this process.

SENSE-MAKING ACTIVITIES	REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS AND SENTENCE STEMS	ACTIONS TO SUPPORT PRIORITISING AND SETTING GOALS
<p>Identify patterns in community engagement data</p>	<p>What were the trends? “In general I noticed...”</p> <p>What surprised you? “I wasn’t expecting to see...”</p> <p>Were there contradictions? “On the one hand...On the other hand...”</p>	<p>Document perspectives from each member, highlighting where multiple members agreed.</p>
<p>Test assumptions about community engagement</p>	<p>What does our school do well in building communities? How do we know?</p> <p>What do we think are the highest-priority focus areas in building communities? How do we know?</p> <p>Are there other things the data is telling us? How can we be sure?</p>	<p>Document perspectives on the highest-priority needs.</p> <p>This may also make it clear that more data is required. If so, data should be gathered and brought back to the group.</p>
<p>Build consensus on priority areas of focus in building communities</p>	<p>Allow each team member to respond to these questions:</p> <p>Where is the data telling us we need to focus efforts to build communities?</p> <p>What are the root causes of challenges in those areas</p>	<p>Record responses from each member. If there is not a clear consensus, ask members to justify their responses, seek additional data or use a voting system.</p>

Partnerships between schools, families, communities and service providers can address complex student needs. In one study that showed promising program evidence, parents worked with parent educators and teachers to promote language and literacy at home. Parents read aloud to children at home, supported by an implementation manual, reflection tool and a home visitation program (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020).

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

PRIORITISE AND SET GOALS

Use the data, discussions and assumptions developed in the evaluate and diagnose stage to identify where improvement efforts will be focused. These may be the areas of greatest need, or where opportunities exist to maximise impact. Each school's goals will be specific to its context, including its community demographics, performance strengths and challenges, and staff climate and capability.

Effective schools build positive ways to communicate with students and the wider school, as well as with families and the community, to develop a shared vision of the school ethos and learning environment, with a strong focus on instruction and problem-solving (Goldberg, et al., 2019).

Identify goals to strengthen community engagement

EMERGING | EVOLVING

Schools which are 'emerging' or 'evolving' in building communities, or which are beginning to focus improvement efforts in this dimension, may consider:

- identifying and building the capacity of teachers and education support staff to strengthen school and community links and partnerships
- identifying opportunities to expand the school's network and resources and tools to strengthen community connections and links
- strengthening communications with the school community, including how the school engages with culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- identifying the need for and developing tools to assist with evaluating the school's effectiveness in building community and family relationships
- connecting with higher-performing schools in the local community, to learn from them and emulate their practice
- appointing a Community Engagement Leader to build and strengthen relationships across the community
- engaging with the Koorie education workforce to build more effective relationships with the local Koorie community.

EMBEDDING | EXCELLING

Schools which are 'embedding' or 'excelling' in building communities, or which have sustained improvement efforts in this dimension, may consider:

- engaging with communities to identify opportunities for community-based mentorships
- scaling existing strategies for boosting parent and community participation in the life of the school
- embedding Koorie parent, kin and community participation in the life of the school
- strengthening and expanding community partnerships to provide learning opportunities for staff and students
- exploring options for community services to be integrated into the school.

Key resources

- [VTLM Practice Principles](#)
- [Improving school governance](#)
- [Literacy and numeracy tips to help your child every day: a guide for parents of children aged 0-12](#)
- [Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan](#)
- [The School Communications Toolkit](#)
- [Communicating with CALD communities](#)
- [Support from the Koorie Education Workforce](#)

Download and edit the [Identifying where efforts will be prioritised](#) template to help identify key opportunities.



BUILDING COMMUNITIES DEVELOP AND PLAN

Once goals have been set and prioritised, the SIT can develop plans for how these will be achieved, mapping out all possible actions and approaches, then selecting those likely to have the greatest impact given the school's context.

Use a theory of action to plan backwards from goals

Schools may choose to develop a theory of action to explain how change will be achieved. This describes the relationships between the intended impact, outcomes, outputs and actions to help schools see the changes that will need to occur for implementation to succeed.

Along the way, the SIT can test the theory using questions such as:

- What assumptions are being made about the relationships?
- Whose perspectives are we including? Whose are we excluding?
- Are the proposed actions informed by research evidence?



SITs can use the editable [Theory of action](#) template and review the case study below.

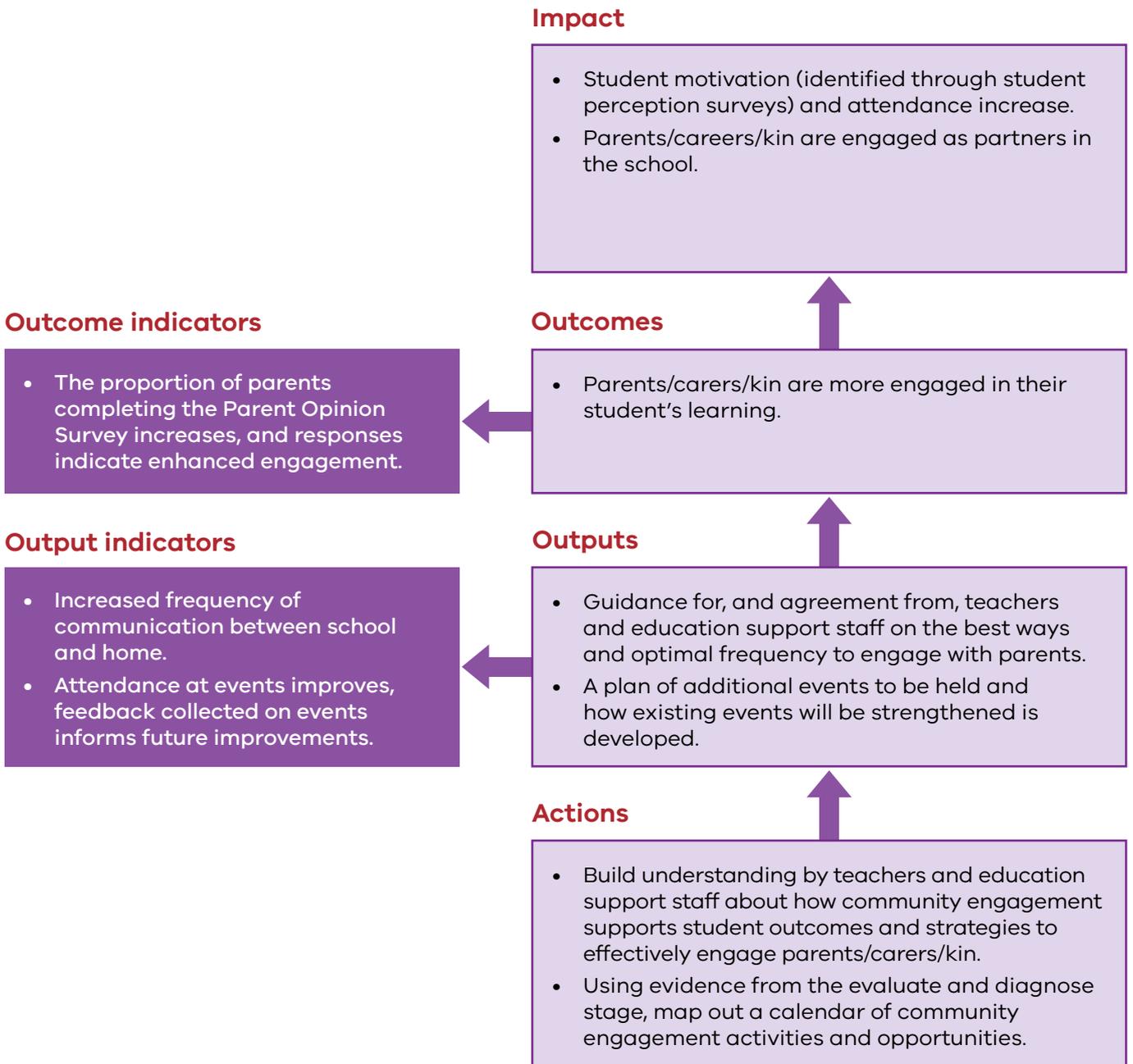
Leaders may need to put implementation structures such as teams and schedules in place and ensure professional learning plans are aligned to teachers' and students' learning needs. For more information about leading change and structures for implementation, see the [Strategic Enablers for Implementation Guide](#).

Common barriers include time constraints, and improvement strategies being too broad or ambitious. Schools should develop plans with a limited number of achievable actions.

Connections between teachers and with the broader community enhances engagement of teachers in their work and strengthens the school community as a whole (Sahlin 2019). Partnerships between schools, communities and service providers can also address complex student and community needs to improve student attendance. A rapid evidence review of 22 studies on community engagement highlighted the importance of shared decision-making and consultation with families and the wider community in planning and designing supports for students, with mutually reinforcing activities that will have a collective benefit for student outcomes (Attree, 2011).

Illustrative practice case study

At one school, the SIT has identified low community engagement as a key challenge. Interviews with families indicate that they do not feel they know their child’s teacher, as the main form of communication from the school is student reports, received twice a year. The following theory of action was developed to improve engagement with parents/carers/kin.



Develop actions to build strong and resilient community networks

There are many types of involvement schools can consider in building communities. The Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships developed by Johns Hopkins University identifies six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community (Salinas, et al., 2019).

In planning for building communities, the SIT can discuss, adapt and document the following suggested actions, or add actions specific to the school's context.

Schools which are 'emerging' or 'evolving' in building communities, or which are beginning to focus efforts on this dimension could consider:

- creating a Community Engagement Leader to build and strengthen relationships, identify opportunities for partnerships and monitor community engagement over time. They may solely support the school community, or work across several schools or a Community of Practice (CoP)
- allowing the school grounds and facilities to be used as a community hub, providing access to community members before, during and after school hours. This may include for activities such as sport, music or dance, or for cultural schools or classes at weekends or after-hours
- opening the school café before and after school for parents, so that they can drop in and buy meals or drinks
- finding ways to engage community members in the day-to-day activities of the school through school newsletters, social media, and information or discussion sessions
- inviting local community members and leaders to school open days, fetes, fundraising activities, assemblies, concerts and other school events that encourage them to feel welcome and part of students' learning and engagement
- providing access to and promoting information in appropriate community languages (for example, onsite and telephone interpreters, Auslan interpreters, and translated written information)
- using language and signage that is clear and accessible to all members of the community and avoiding or explaining educational terms.

Resources to support engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse families

DET: [Supporting students from refugee backgrounds](#)

Centre for Multicultural Youth: [Opening the school gate: Engaging multicultural families in schools](#)

Foundation House: [School's in for Refugees: Support students of refugee backgrounds to thrive at school](#)

[Schools and families in partnership](#)

Download and complete the [Mapping possible actions](#) template to ensure the benefits and potential barriers for each action are considered.



Schools which are 'embedding' or 'excelling' in building communities, or who have a focus on this dimension could consider:

- teaming up with the local adult education provider to host family learning onsite
- initiating school-based Koorie community events, such as events connected to Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week
- strengthening links with feeder/secondary schools, early learning centres and community organisations. The school and partner organisations can complete the [VicHealth Partnership Analysis Checklist](#) to identify the current strengths of the partnership, and ways to work together more effectively
- integrating opportunities for students to learn from the community across the curriculum through guest speakers, excursions and events
- creating a school-wide approach to communication, including non-verbal cues, the design of physical spaces in the school (especially the school office) and the processes used by staff to ensure community members feel welcomed, safe and valued.

In developing actions, the SIT should discuss whether they meet the characteristics of effective implementation:

- Are actions and activities sufficiently 'bite-sized'?
- Are actions easy to understand? Is it clear what will be implemented?
- Can actions be embedded in the school's everyday structures and routines (making them easier to prioritise and adapt to)?
- Is it clear who will be responsible for what, and when? Are there systems for monitoring this?
- Are timelines and monitoring cycles short? (Completion builds satisfaction, opportunity for celebration, acknowledgement of achievement and momentum for further work.)

A meta-analysis that examined the effects of family-school interventions on students' social and emotional competencies found larger effects on students from vulnerable backgrounds (for example, from low socio-economic and non-metropolitan settings). These findings have implications for tailoring interventions to the context of students' backgrounds, family characteristics and their communities (Sheridan, et al., 2019).

BUILDING COMMUNITIES IMPLEMENT AND MONITOR

The success of any plan depends on how well it is implemented. Implementation is not a one-off event, but an iterative process of actioning what is planned, identifying and celebrating what is working, and adapting when barriers are encountered, changes occur, or plans fall behind schedule.

Identify how efforts to build communities will be monitored

Monitoring enables leaders to know what practices are changing in their schools and what impact those changes are having. Monitoring also helps to identify any barriers to implementation early, so that approaches are adapted and strategies put in place to get back on schedule. Monitoring usually involves collecting quantitative and qualitative data.

Sometimes, data collected across Victoria (available in Panorama) will assist with monitoring and assessing impact from year to year. At other times, schools will need to develop tailored tools to monitor implementation in real-time over shorter regular cycles, or at the end of each term.



Download and use the [Identifying how actions will be monitored](#) template to help with this process.

Sources of evidence for monitoring the implementation of planned actions to build communities include:

- community surveys for the whole school community, or for a select group of participants of specific programs. Consider the number of questions and how frequently surveys will be sent out and analysed. The number of survey responses can also be an indicator of engagement
- focus groups or interviews with parents/carers/kin, feeder/secondary schools or early learning centres, teachers, support staff, regional staff and students
- program and event attendance data and reflections from attendees
- planning documentation (policies, engagement plans, meeting minutes)
- data collected through learning management systems, such as frequency and nature of communication with parents/carers/kin and traffic on school websites or social media accounts.

The Australian Council for Education Research found that award-winning partnerships used baseline data to identify the initial need or opportunity for partnerships. Data was also used to monitor and review progress, and to identify the impact of their program and partnership on students and others. These partnerships also recognised the importance of evidence-based programs, continuous improvement and sustainability (Lonsdale, 2011).

Survey tips

- Short, focused surveys with a clear purpose are most effective for monitoring.
- Questions need to be carefully designed for your audience, use clear, accessible language and be presented in a logical order (Taherdoost, 2016).
- Pre-test surveys with a small group for feedback before sharing more broadly.
- Combine all monitoring questions for the same group into one survey. Consider other ways you can minimise the burden of completing surveys.

For more information about real-time data monitoring, see the [Strategic Enablers for Implementation Guide](#).

Implement plans to build strong and resilient communities

Once goals are set, plans have been developed and monitoring tools are in place, school leaders can implement plans effectively by:

- ensuring time is allocated to build relationships and support the implementation of actions
- identifying champions of the work to enhance community engagement, and seeking to engage them early
- sharing the rationale for focusing on building communities and gaining 'buy-in' from staff and students
- regularly revisiting the importance of building the school community, and communicating the expectation that all staff contribute to improvement efforts in this area
- establishing and celebrating events, engagements and milestones in action plans
- using and adapting monitoring tools regularly and seeking out a variety of evidence to understand the impact on the school community
- using the improvement cycle over shorter periods to diagnose challenges and adapt implementation.

Community engagement case studies

- [Canterbury Primary School](#): taking student learning beyond classroom walls to a local radio station, where students participated in a workshop with a local radio host.
- [Eastbourne Primary School](#): collaborating with local early learning providers to ensure all students make greater-than-expected progress through personalised learning.
- [Bendigo Senior Secondary College](#): organising student-led community events in the lead-up to the 2016 election, to inform others about national and global issues.
- [Timboon P-12 School](#): working with businesses and community members to integrate agriculture and food technology into the curriculum as part of the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP) partnership.

Positive relationships in practice: Morwell Park Primary School

Morwell Park Primary School, a finalist in the 2020 Victorian Education Excellence Awards, has created a culture of inclusion, trust and respect with the Koorie community, establishing strong foundations for positive relationships with students and their families.

Focused on ensuring high expectations for all Koorie students through the belief that they 'can and should' attain high levels of achievement, the school effectively uses data to pin-point learning needs, and engages parents in developing students' Individual Education Plans.

Working with the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, parents and community organisations, through a dedicated Marrung Leader, the school has reformed the curriculum to ensure greater acknowledgement of Aboriginal history, events and peoples, extending a whole-school understanding of Koorie perspectives.

The school's sustained focus on lifting academic achievement for all Koorie students has resulted in significant gains for Koorie attainment, evidenced by outstanding results at the school. NAPLAN data has steadily improved over the last three years, with significant numbers of students achieving in the top two bands of reading and numeracy.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Links to additional resources

- [Centre for Multicultural Youth, Learning Beyond the Bell](#)
- [Centre for Multicultural Youth – Opening the school Gate: Engaging Multicultural Families in Schools](#)
- [Contact list of Koorie Education Coordinators](#)
- [FISO Continua of Practice for School Improvement](#)
- [FISO Implementation Toolkit](#)
- [FISO Improvement Cycle](#)

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