

# Six Effective Practices in High Growth Schools

This *Learning Curve* describes effective practices common to NSW government schools that achieved high growth in NAPLAN between 2010 and 2014. These High Value-Add (HVA) schools showed a strong positive institutional culture that emphasised academic, professional and personal development and strong engagement among students, teachers and the leadership group.

## KEY EFFECTIVE PRACTICES:

Effective  
**collaboration**

Engaging and sharing  
in **professional  
learning**

Setting  
**whole-school  
goals** and strategies  
for change

Using explicit and  
**effective teaching  
strategies**

Creating an  
environment that  
promotes learning and  
higher levels of  
**student engagement**

Setting **high  
expectations** for  
achievement



## Identifying HVA Schools

The aim of this study was to explore the key drivers of school improvement that were common across HVA schools. A robust value-added approach was used to identify 36 NSW government schools (20 primary schools and 16 high schools) that made a particularly strong contribution to student NAPLAN growth from 2010 to 2014. Value-added measures of school performance control for important contextual factors in estimating the contribution that a school makes to growth in student achievement. Quantitative data were analysed to identify whether HVA schools had higher levels of positive student behaviour, higher student engagement and more frequent use of effective teaching practices. Staff from the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) also interviewed school leaders and teachers in 14 schools to understand improvement drivers in their schools.

Drivers of school improvement are complex and context specific. However, this research found that HVA schools shared a common focus on six key practices:

- effective **collaboration** among staff
- engaging and sharing relevant **professional learning**
- setting **whole-school goals** and strategies for change
- using explicit and **effective teaching strategies**
- creating an environment that promotes learning and high levels of **student engagement**
- setting **high expectations** for student achievement.

The full report can be accessed at the CESE website <http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications>

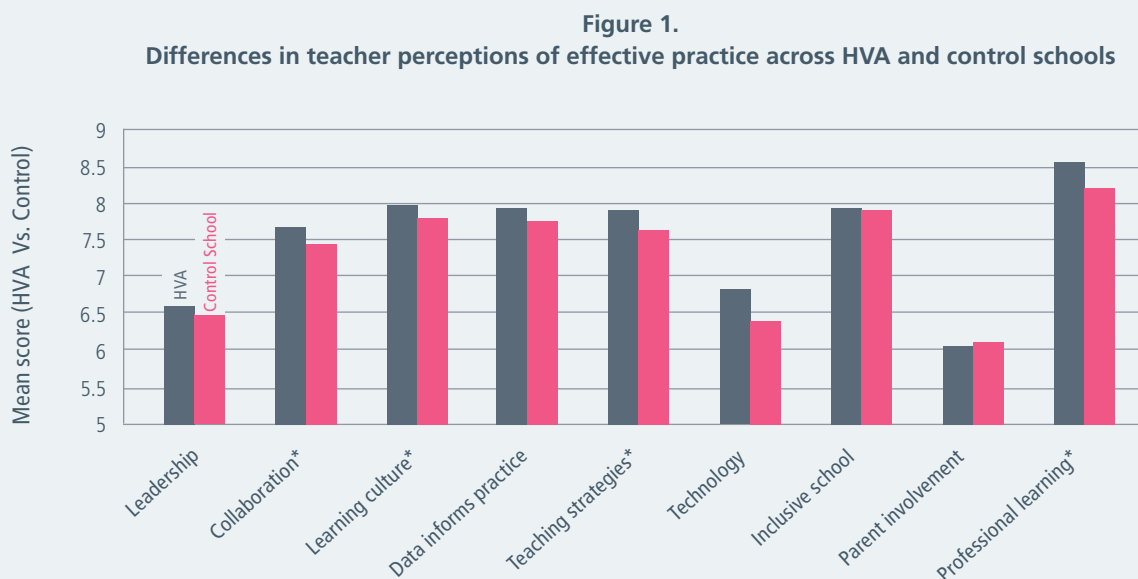
## 1. Effective collaboration

Effective collaboration was considered vital to driving whole-school improvement. This often included sharing resources and making them easily accessible to staff, as well as taking a collaborative approach to planning, programming and assessment throughout a school. HVA schools told us that this shared approach to teaching and planning was important in supporting students with additional learning needs, including those at risk of falling behind and those excelling beyond their year level.

The *Focus on Learning* teacher survey<sup>1</sup> also revealed collaboration as a key feature of HVA schools. As shown in Figure 1, teachers in HVA schools self-reported higher levels of collaboration than teachers in a group of comparison schools.

Some examples of effective collaboration in HVA schools included:

- teachers sharing work samples to ensure consistency in teacher judgement
- developing easily accessible platforms to share teaching resources (e.g. shared drives)
- using peer coaching and support programs to promote and develop effective teaching practice.



\*Indicates that the results are statistically significant.

Note: A positive difference with p-value less than .05 indicates that teachers in HVA schools are significantly more likely to report using more effective teaching strategies than teachers in control schools.

## 2. Engaging and sharing in professional learning

HVA schools emphasised the need for professional learning to be relevant, shared and sustainable in driving whole-school change. To this end, HVA schools told us that professional learning needs to support strategic school goals and be shared among staff so that learning is embedded across the school. In addition, the implementation of professional learning needs to be supported within a school so that the benefits of learning can be maximised and not forgotten. These views were consistent with results of the teacher survey (summarised in Figure 1) showing that, compared to teachers in schools that didn't show high growth over time, teachers in HVA schools were significantly more likely to engage in professional learning to improve their teaching practice.

Some examples of how professional learning has been effectively used in HVA schools included:

- identifying strategic opportunities for professional learning that directly relate to school goals and provide tangible skills and materials that can be used in the classroom
- using staff meetings as a platform to share professional learning and internal expertise across a school
- having peer supports to ensure that individual teachers can effectively apply professional learning in the classroom.

## 3. Setting whole-school goals and strategies for change

HVA schools emphasised the importance of staff working together and setting shared goals in achieving school-wide improvements in student performance. This included identifying key strategic whole-school goals, embedding strategies to achieve goals across stages and faculties, giving staff the support they need to achieve learning targets, and promoting collaboration and sharing of effective practice.

Some examples of how HVA schools implemented change at a whole-school level included:

- identifying explicit whole-school goals that are embedded across stages and faculties (e.g. integrated curriculum for literacy)
- having whole-school planning days and regular staff meetings to plan, discuss, support and evaluate progress towards achieving goals
- creating cross-stage/faculty project teams (e.g. focussing on literacy) to support learning programs and assessment tasks at a whole-school level.



## 4. Using explicit and effective teaching strategies

Some of the key practices related to effective teaching mentioned by HVA schools included: using data to identify and respond to individual student learning needs; adapting teaching practice and differentiating the curriculum; and taking an explicit approach to teaching where learning outcomes are clearly communicated and students are supported to succeed. These views were complemented by the outcomes of the teacher survey (summarised in Figure 1) showing that teachers in HVA schools were more likely to report using effective teaching strategies (e.g. setting clear learning goals, giving regular feedback to students) compared to teachers in schools that didn't show high growth over time.

Some examples of how explicit teaching was supported and implemented at HVA schools included:

- using student data (e.g. NAPLAN, Literacy and Numeracy Continua<sup>2</sup>) to identify students' learning needs, develop learning targets and monitor progress
- extensive use of pre- and post-testing to assess learning outcomes in the classroom and to guide teaching practice
- developing accessible teaching resources that include templates for how to differentiate lessons and assessments
- using explicit instruction by showing students what success looks like and breaking down the steps required to achieve success
- showing students exemplars of success (e.g. sharing work samples that meet achievement benchmarks).



## 5. Creating an environment that promotes learning and high levels of student engagement

HVA schools told us that promoting a positive learning culture where students are engaged in school and value their outcomes is key to improving school performance. This included making classroom learning relevant to students' lives, using technology and innovative programming to enhance student engagement, and supporting students to strive by maintaining high expectations.

These practices were also reflected in the results of the teacher survey (summarised in Figure 1). Teachers in HVA schools were more likely to report engaging in practices that promote a positive learning culture for students. Items that make up the learning culture domain of the teacher survey include giving feedback, making learning relevant to students and tracking individual student progress. Furthermore, these findings were complemented by the outcomes of the *Tell Them From Me* student survey<sup>3</sup> showing high levels of student engagement in HVA schools. As summarised in Figure 2, compared to students in schools that didn't show high growth over time, students in HVA schools were more likely to report<sup>4</sup>:

- being socially engaged, including participating in sports and clubs, and feeling a sense of belonging
- being institutionally engaged, including valuing school outcomes and showing positive behaviour at school
- being intellectually engaged, including being interested, motivated, and challenged in their subjects
- receiving quality instruction, including rigorous and relevant teaching strategies, and effective learning time
- having positive perceptions of their class context, including good relationships with teachers and a positive learning climate.

Some examples of how HVA schools promoted a positive learning culture and high levels of student engagement included:

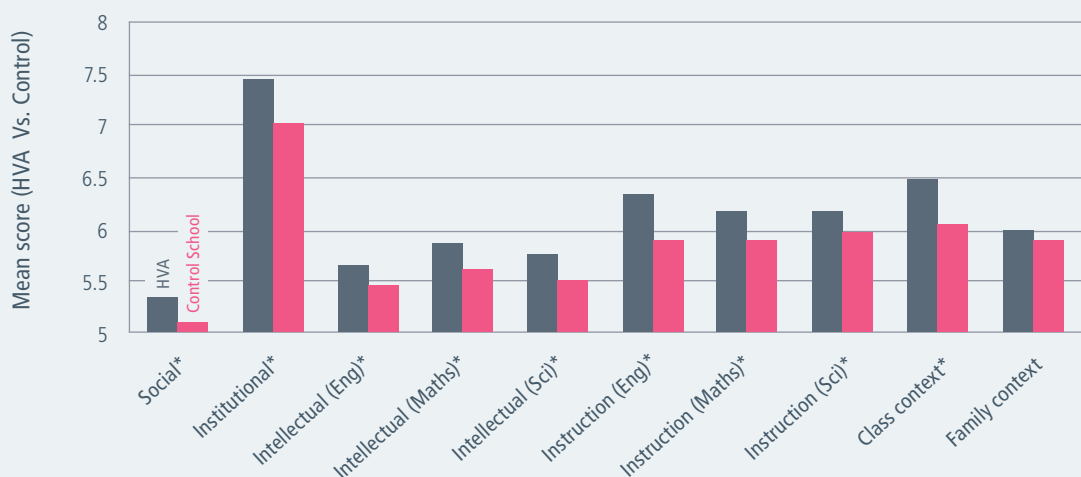
- using innovative teaching techniques (e.g. online curriculum, visual learning through technology)
- teaching students about literacy/numeracy through real-world examples (e.g. reading transport timetables, understanding mobile phone contracts)
- organising trips to a local university for students and parents to help raise their expectations about future academic study.

## 6. Setting high expectations for achievement

Creating high expectations for students, both academically and behaviourally, was reported by HVA schools as essential to improving student performance. Some examples of how high expectations were cultivated within HVA schools included:

- sharing work samples among teachers to ensure that assessment expectations are consistent and that a culture of high expectations is promoted across a school
- displaying explicit learning progressions (e.g. Literacy and Numeracy Continua) in classrooms to show students what performance benchmarks are and to encourage them to pursue higher levels of achievement
- having a common set of guidelines across a school that rewards positive behaviour and has a transparent set of procedures for responding to negative behaviours (e.g. Positive Behaviour for Learning program).

**Figure 2.**  
Differences in measures of student engagement across HVA and control schools



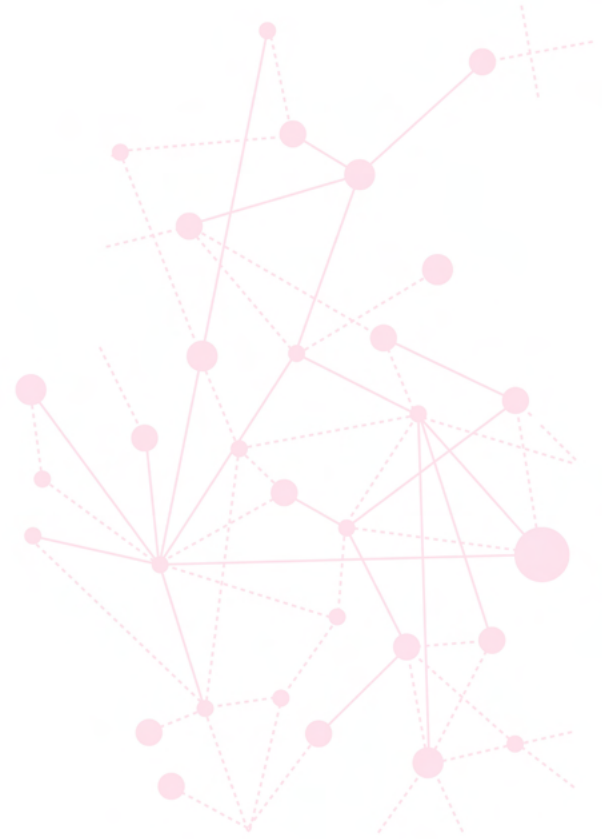
\*Indicates that the results are statistically significant.

Note: A positive difference with p-value less than .05 indicates that student engagement levels are significantly higher in HVA schools compared to control schools.

## Conclusion

The outcomes from this exploratory analysis have identified a number of factors that appear to be associated with the growth observed in HVA schools. The strong focus on teacher collaboration and access to relevant professional learning to improve practice was clearly emphasised in both qualitative interviews and results of the teacher survey. The efforts outlined in the interviewed HVA schools to know the students and use explicit teaching strategies was strongly supported by both the teacher survey and the student engagement results. Furthermore, the triangulation of evidence from stakeholder interviews and survey data suggests that setting high expectations for students that are consistent across the school may contribute to improved student achievement.

This study is not without limitations and these are discussed in more detail in the full report. Notwithstanding these limitations, the current study provides an important contribution to the evidence-base on 'what works' to produce high growth schools. In summary, these schools tend to possess a positive institutional culture that emphasises and nurtures personal, academic and professional development and strong engagement among students, teachers and the leadership group. Supporting schools in NSW to cultivate these approaches may assist schools in maximising the contribution they can make to their students' learning.



- 1 This survey, developed by the Learning Bar, measured teacher perceptions of nine aspects of effective teaching (as shown in Figure 1). This survey was administered to teachers in a sample of NSW government schools in Term 4, 2014, including 15 primary schools (nine HVA and six control schools) and 26 high schools (13 HVA and 13 control schools). Data was not available for all schools. See *High Value Add Schools: Key Drivers of School Improvement* (<http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications>) for further details on this analysis and the selection of control schools.
- 2 The Literacy and Numeracy Continua, developed by the NSW Department of Education, are learning progressions designed to help teachers assess, monitor and progress students in their learning.
- 3 This survey was developed by the Learning Bar and measures various aspects of student engagement. This survey was administered to a sample of NSW government high schools in Term 3, 2013.
- 4 Findings are based on results from a sample of 21 control high schools and nine HVA high schools. Data was not available for all high schools or any primary schools. See *High Value Add Schools: Key Drivers of School Improvement* (<http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications>) for further details on this analysis and the selection of control schools.



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation  
GPO Box 33  
Sydney NSW 2001  
Australia

 02 9561 1211

 [cese@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:cese@det.nsw.edu.au)

 [www.cese.nsw.gov.au](http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au)

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