Sidney Myer Fund
Education Program Evaluation

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Final Report

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Learning First conducted the analysis presented in this report. The interpretations of how these systems operate are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the views or official positions of governments or officials in the systems analysed.

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Overview

If schools hope to improve student outcomes, they must give teachers opportunities to learn and to improve their practice. Between 2014 and 2017, the Sidney Myer Fund awarded grants to support two elements of professional learning that can significantly improve teacher practice: peer observation and mentoring. It awarded 25 grants to schools in every state (none in the ACT and NT). This report evaluates the program and makes recommendations for future grant-making.

Learning First used survey data, interviews, observations, and grant materials such as applications and acquittal reports to address the following questions.

1. Did the philanthropic investment have the results sought?
2. How well have mentoring and peer observation been implemented in grantee schools?
3. Did teacher effectiveness improve?
4. Has student learning improved?
5. How can future capacity building grant programs be improved?

Research on professional learning suggests that peer observation and mentoring can play a key role in teacher learning, which, in turn, can improve student learning. Through observing colleagues and being observed by them, and through professional conversations with peers and mentors, teachers may gain new knowledge about teaching and learning, adopt new beliefs, and change their practice. Changes in teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practices are most likely to lead to improvements in student learning. Yet in order for peer observation and mentoring, and any professional learning activity, to succeed, school leaders must understand and communicate clearly how the professional learning aligns with a wider school improvement strategy focused on student learning.

This report has several limitations. Notably, the causal link between teacher professional learning and student outcomes is hard to measure at the best of times and almost impossible in this evaluation. Also, a range of implementation issues and pre-conditions shape teacher practice. Especially important are teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices and the learning environment at the time the school received the grant. Since the evaluation could not include pre- and post-assessments of these elements of teacher practice, Learning First relied on qualitative assessments in schools and participants' self-reporting in surveys about how, if at all, these elements changed since the school received the grant.

Despite these limitations, Learning First found evidence that the philanthropic investment improved teacher learning and student outcomes in many schools. Schools integrated peer observation and mentoring into their professional practice in different ways, many of which were effective. Despite challenges and barriers to implementation, teachers and school leaders provided ample evidence of teacher learning and improved student outcomes.

Recommendations

Learning First recommends that the Sidney Myer Fund:

1. Continue to support schools in building teacher capacity
2. Continue to focus on peer observation and mentoring programs, but emphasise that they should be a means to achieve a larger student learning strategy. Therefore the SMF should:
    1. Revise the application questions to emphasise that peer observation and mentoring should serve larger student learning goals
    2. Give preference to schools that show clearly how peer observation and mentoring should serve larger student learning goals
3. Share past grantees' successes and challenges with future grantees.

1   Conceptual Framework

Research shows that changes in teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practices are most likely to lead to improvements in student learning (see Figure 1).[1] This chapter reviews research on peer observation and mentoring and highlight bests practices in each. It then summarises research on the importance of using professional development in service of a coherent, whole-school improvement strategy. Peer observation and mentoring do not occur in a vacuum but in complex organisations, schools. While these strategies have the potential to improve teaching and learning, they are most effective when they are integrated into a coherent, school improvement plan with one shared goal, such as improving mathematics instruction.

Figure 1 Beliefs, knowledge and practice
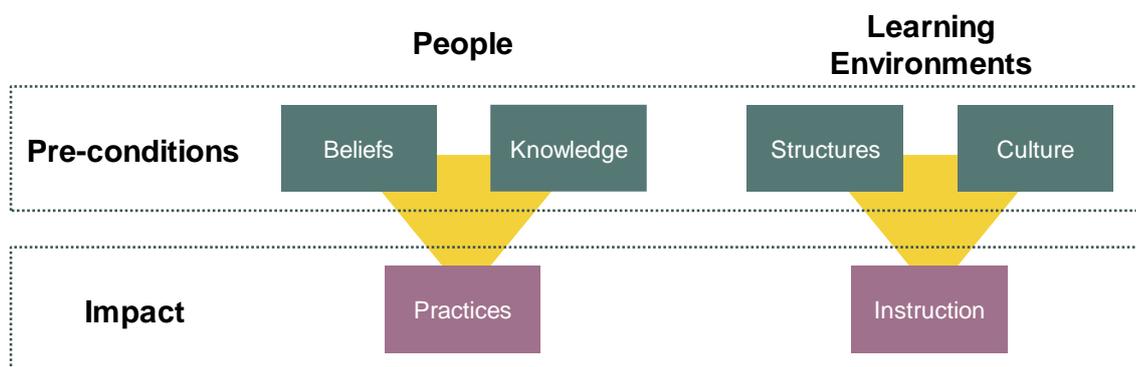
1.1   Peer observation

In medicine, professionals open their practice to collegial feedback and coaching through methods such as grand rounds, in which doctors examine challenging cases together and discuss how they might proceed.[2] School teachers, by contrast, have historically worked in isolation.[3] They have attended faculty meetings, shared resources, and swapped recess duties, but the *technical core* of teachers' work, the actual teaching and learning, has tended to happen behind closed classroom doors.[4] Peer observation can help teachers to open their practice to their colleagues, and to work collaboratively to improve the technical core of their work, classroom teaching.

Peer observation can take many forms, but when it is effective it focuses on students as much as on teachers.[5] In high-performing systems such as Hong Kong and Japan, teachers observe one another as part of their collaborative lesson planning process, and they watch closely to see how students are responding to the lessons they have designed together.[6] When teachers in British Columbia engage in their collaborative improvement cycles, known as Spirals of Inquiry, peer observations help them to gauge the impact on their instructional changes on student learning.[7] In Harvard's Data Wise Improvement Process, observations help teacher teams to agree on a problem of practice to address and monitor the effectiveness of their action plan.[8]

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[1] Guskey, 2002
[2] City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Mehta, 2013
[3] Lortie, 2002; Mehta, 2013
[4] Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011
[5] Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016
[6] Jensen et al., 2016
[7] Jensen et al., 2016
[8] Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2013

Researchers and practitioners agree that several key elements help peer observations to succeed. First, everyone needs to be clear on the purpose of peer observation.[9] It is *not* to evaluate or judge. It is to learn.

Pre-observation

Peer observation must happen in an atmosphere of trust.[10] In order to create that atmosphere, it is helpful for participants in observations to set formal norms for conducting and discussing peer observations. For example, teachers may agree to 'ground statements in evidence' by only making points that they can back up with data from the observation.[11] Teachers observing each other's practice should hold a pre-observation meeting to agree on a focus for the observation, such as 'students' ability to vary sentence structure in narrative writing.' During the pre-observation meeting, participants should also confirm the date, time, and where to sit in the classroom, and discuss any relevant background and context for the lesson.[12] Agreeing on structures, protocols, and norms for observations can help to build the trust needed for peer observations to succeed.

Observation

During classroom observations, it is neither possible nor desirable for an observer to record everything happening. The observer should collect only data related to the focus area discussed in the pre-observation meeting. The most useful pieces of observation data are *specific and descriptive*, as opposed to *general and judgmental*.[13] For example, it is more useful for an observer to write, 'The teacher asked, "Why is this a good example of narrative writing?" and 10 out of 20 students raised their hands,' (specific and descriptive) than to write, 'The students didn't seem to understand the lesson' (general and judgmental).

While classroom observations tend to focus on what the teacher is doing, it is also important – perhaps even more so – to record what the students are doing. Data on what students are saying, doing, and writing during class can provide teachers with invaluable insight.

School leaders often find it helpful to train all teachers in a faculty meeting on how to make observation notes as specific and descriptive as possible.[14] Teachers can be given a list of sample observation notes and asked to characterise them as 1) specific and descriptive, 2) specific and judgmental, 3) general and descriptive, and 4) general and judgmental.[15] Teachers can practise honing their observation skills by watching a video of a few minutes of a class and taking notes, categorising their own notes into the same four categories, then working together to make them as specific and descriptive as possible.

Judgmental feedback, either positive or negative, is always less helpful than descriptive feedback. It is worth taking time to build the skill of writing specific and descriptive observation notes, since it is counter-intuitive to many teachers, who are often accustomed to giving students general and judgmental feedback on their work ('Great effort!'). Many teachers need practice in responding to what they see in a different way.

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[9] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.; Boudett, City, & Russell, 2010; Stuhlman, Hamre, Downer, & Pianta, n.d.
[10] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.
[11] Boudett et al., 2013, 2010
[12] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.
[13] Boudett et al., 2010
[14] Boudett et al., 2010
[15] E. City, personal communication, June 2017

Post-observation

The teacher being observed and the observer(s) should meet as soon as possible after the observation. During this meeting, observers share data they collected during the observation that are relevant to the focus identified during the pre-observation meeting. The observers and teacher being observed discuss what they notice in the data, what patterns they see, and reflect on implications for practice.[16] It is very important for participants to start with, and spend ample time talking about, what they noticed by making low-inference statements about their observations. The goal is to develop a shared understanding of what happened in the classroom, and trust that the patterns observers identify and inferences they will later draw are based on objective evidence. This meeting – indeed, the entire process – should be useful not only for the teacher being observed but also for the observer.

1.2 Mentoring

Mentoring programs can take a variety of shapes in schools, and there is debate in the field about what best practice looks like.[17] In education literature, the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching' are often used interchangeably, though 'coaching' can imply a more targeted focus on building specific skills, while 'mentoring' often implies general support and advice. Regardless of the name for them, mentoring and coaching relationships will be most beneficial if they help teachers to become more effective in supporting the student learning goals the school has prioritised.

While mentoring may occur at any stage of a career, many mentoring programs are designed to help early-career teachers to develop their professional identity and to feel supported in the difficult first few years of teaching. Mentors can help induct beginning teachers into a community of practice,[18] in which they feel comfortable seeking help from, and learning with, their colleagues.[19] Early support may make teachers more likely to stay in the profession.[20] Through conversations with their mentors, mentees can begin to apply the theories they have learned in their teacher education to the reality of their classrooms.[21] Talking with a mentor can help teachers to reflect, and create a structure for conversations about improvement.

On the other hand, the mentoring relationship is likely to suffer if mentors are supervising their mentees.[22] Although it can be difficult to arrange at a small school, it is helpful if a teacher's mentor is not also his or her evaluator. School leaders must choose mentors carefully and support them in their work, understanding that in order to be an excellent mentor, being an excellent teacher is necessary, but not enough.[23] School leaders should ensure that role descriptions are clear and that teachers and mentors know what they are expected to do, how often they should meet, and where they should seek help if they encounter an unexpected roadblock in their relationship.[24]

Ideally, mentors should teach in the same or a similar subject or primary grade level to their mentees, and have significant experience, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge in that subject.[25] They should be trained in how to structure the relationship, set norms, give feedback and build trust.

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[16] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.
[17] Brondyk & Searby, 2013
[18] Lave & Wenger, 19919

[19] Cameron & Grant, 2017
[20] Cameron & Grant, 2017
[21] Peiser, Ambrose, Burke, & Davenport, 2018
[22] Hobson & Malderez, 2013
[23] Weisling & Gardiner, 2018
[24] Weisling & Gardiner, 2018
[25] Weisling & Gardiner, 2018

Traditionally, most interactions between mentors and mentees have happened out of class, but recent research has found benefits in bringing the mentoring relationship into the classroom.[26] For example, instead of simply reviewing a mentee's lesson plans, a mentor may come into his or her classroom and co-teach part of the lesson. Mentors may also model lessons in their mentees' classrooms or step in to offer support if a lesson seems to be going off track. For this type of mentoring to work, mentees and mentors alike need to understand that when a mentor steps in or teaches part of a class, it does not mean the mentee is doing something wrong. Rather, the additional support should empower mentees to take risks they would be unlikely to take without a mentor's guidance. The mentor's presence can help a less experienced teacher feel safe trying a new strategy, knowing the mentor will ensure that student learning does not suffer as a result of the mentee trying something new.[27]

Mentoring can also benefit the mentor by creating an opportunity for ongoing professional development.[28] In high-performing systems such as Singapore, teachers have a clear career ladder to follow. Once a teacher climbs to the next rung, he or she is expected to mentor less experienced teachers.[29] Mentoring other teachers is very different from teaching students, and thus it gives experienced teachers an opportunity to learn a new skill and contribute to their school's improvement in a new way.

1.3 Observation and Mentoring as Part of Improvement Strategies

Most schools are engaged in dozens of well-meaning professional learning initiatives, but are these initiatives working together to lead to meaningful improvement? Or are they simply pulling everyone in too many directions? Research is clear that one-shot professional development is unlikely to help teachers improve.[30] It is not surprising, therefore, that the millions of dollars schools spend each year on professional development have not led to sustained improvements in teaching and learning.[31] Nevertheless, research shows that professional learning for teachers *can* influence student outcomes if it involves sustained collaboration among teachers in a school.[32]

In order for any professional learning activity – including peer observation and mentoring – to succeed, school leaders must be clear about how all professional learning in the school contributes to a strategy for meeting student learning goals. Fast-improving schools and systems tend to have high levels of *internal coherence*, which is defined as the capacity of the adults in them to connect and align their resources in order to carry out an improvement strategy."[33] In schools with high internal coherence, school leaders focus teachers' professional learning time on *one improvement strategy,* grounded in *specific student learning goals.*[34] This is not easy to do. Teachers and school leaders face a constant barrage of new initiatives and professional learning opportunities. Principals planning schoolwide professional development face literally thousands of topics that could be useful for teachers. As a result, professional development is often scattered and unfocused.

Why choose one improvement strategy, focused on specific student learning goals? Because, as the saying goes, if you are focusing on everything, you're focusing on nothing. If the goal of school improvement is to provide teachers with new skills that will, in turn, help their students to learn, then how can teachers best learn these skills?

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[26] Weisling & Gardiner, 2018
[27] Weisling & Gardiner, 2018
[28] Jensen et al., 2016
[29] Jensen et al., 2016
[30] Cohen & Ball, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; TNTP, 2015
[31] TNTP, 2015
[32] e.g. Cohen & Ball, 1999; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009
[33] Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2017, pp. 2-3
[34] Forman et al., 2017

Teacher and student learning are not so different. If we want students to master a new skill at a deep level, we give them multiple learning experiences, each connected to the last, as they grapple with new concepts and practise the new skill. Not connecting teachers' professional learning experiences in exactly the same way would be like telling primary students that we want them to learn to divide fractions, but then giving them one lesson on that subject, one on percentages, and one on money. We would not be surprised if, at the end of the week, the students did not know how to divide fractions. Similarly, if teachers are not allowed to focus on one skill for long enough to master it, why should we be surprised if over time they do not improve their practice?

In order to achieve their desired impact, mentoring and peer observation programs must be connected to a coherent school improvement strategy. These programs – along with all professional learning activity – should align with one another, and contribute to the same student learning goals. Teachers need to understand and feel ownership over how their professional learning is helping their practice and their school's improvement.[35]

Although mentoring and peer observation tend to focus on individuals, they can unquestionably shape a school's improvement strategy. For example, if a primary school wants to improve students' narrative writing, the mentor may choose to schedule observations or co-teach lessons in which the mentee's students will work on this area. Since mentors often work with early-career teachers, they may feel they also need to support their mentees with general pedagogical and classroom management techniques and cannot devote every mentoring conversation to the schoolwide goal. Nevertheless, if the goal is a touchstone of the mentoring relationship throughout the year, the relationship can help to accelerate progress toward it, and to create more effective and collaborative teachers along the way.

2 Program context

2.1 Overview of the Education Grants Program

In 2014, the Sidney Myer Fund (SMF) introduced the Education Capacity Building Stream in order to build the capacity of schools to create more effective teachers.

Since research on high-performing systems suggests that peer observation and mentoring can help schools improve teacher quality and effectiveness,[36] SMF chose to use grants to support these two activities. Its theory of action was that teachers who took part in peer observation and mentoring would be more effective in helping their students to learn. Through its networks, SMF widely publicised the opportunity for schools to apply for a Capacity Building Grant.

2.2 Evaluation overview

SMF's Education Committee commissioned Learning First to evaluate the Education Capacity Building Stream program, in order to better understand how philanthropic support for peer observation and mentoring programs can improve teacher effectiveness and student learning.

2.3 Overview of Grantee Schools and Projects

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[35] Ibid
[36] Jensen et al., 2016

SMF has run four grant rounds, from 2013-2017. The first round made grants available to eligible schools across Australia. Subsequent rounds restricted eligibility to particular States and Territories, in order to improve schools' chances of receiving a grant in a given year. A total of 25 grants have been made to schools in each state (but none in the ACT or NT). Grants began at $6,820, but most ranged from $25,000 to $60,000. For an overview of grants made by region, please see Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Grants, by Year and Region

To date, the grant has been given to seven primary schools, 11 secondary schools, one senior secondary school, one P-10 school, one specialist school, and four clusters of schools.

Recipients used the funds in various ways, most commonly to pay for teacher release time, and for consultants to lead trainings and work with school leadership teams. The funds also paid for teachers and school leaders to attend training, and in one case, for teachers in a cluster of remote, indigenous schools to fly to observe best practice at other schools in the state. One cluster of schools used part of the funding for principals to mentor emerging leaders. One school used the grant to fund a half-time pedagogical coach position.

Funding year	Regional eligibility	Grants made
2013-2014	Australia wide	7: Vic 4, one each in WA, SA, and Tas
2014-2015	NSW, ACT and QLD	6: 5 in Qld, 1 in NSW
2015-2016	NT, WA and SA	5: 4 in SA, 1 in WA
2016-2017	Vic and Tas	7: 4 in Vic, 2 in Tas

3   Program evaluation design and context

3.1   Key evaluation questions

Learning First's evaluation aims to answer the following questions:

1. Investment: Did the philanthropic investment have the results sought?
2. Process: How well have mentoring and peer observation been implemented in grantee schools?
   1. Have the programs been sustained?
   2. What factors influenced sustainability and effectiveness?
   3. What has worked well?
   4. What are barriers to implementation for schools?
3. Outcomes: Did teacher effectiveness improve?
   1. Have teachers' beliefs, knowledge, or practices improved?
   2. Have teacher and leader engagement and feedback practices improved?
4. Impact: Has student learning improved?
   1. According to different sources of evidence, has student learning improved, and is the improvement sustained?
   2. Has the program contributed?
   3. What has influenced student learning improvement, stagnation, or decline?

5. Future program: How can future capacity building grant programs be improved?

While Questions 1 and 5 will be most pertinent to SMF's future planning, Questions 2 to 4 on process, outcomes, and impact will not only inform Questions 1 and 5 but also provide insights for SMF and schools about the challenges schools face when seeking to transform teaching and learning.

4 Data and Methods

The evaluation employs a range of evaluative instruments, displayed in Table 2:

Table 2: Evaluative Instruments

Data	Type
Survey of participant schools	Quantitative and qualitative
Review of grant and project materials	Qualitative
Focus groups and interviews in six case study schools	Qualitative
Evidence of student learning (school assessment data and information from interviews and surveys)	Quantitative and qualitative

4.1 Survey

Learning First developed surveys for three different groups of school staff: principals, teachers, and mentors. Prior to the survey, Learning First contacted each school to ensure that the survey procedures and implementation were viable. Every principal or designated contact person received the link to the surveys and at least one reminder email. Learning First received 163 responses to the surveys and summarised key findings related to the research questions.

Staff members at 12 of the 25 schools took part. Thirty-nine respondents were from primary schools, and 67 from secondary schools. The minimum number of respondents per school was one, the maximum 37, and the mean 13.58.

Table 3: Number of Survey Respondents, by role

School	Mentor	School leader	Teacher	None of the above	Total by Role
1	0	2	9	1	12
2	1	2	32	2	37
3	1	0	0	1	2
4	0	0	1	0	1
5	1	4	17	0	22
6	0	3	12	6	21
7	0	1	24	0	25
8	1	4	16	0	21
9	1	2	2	0	5
10	1	1	3	0	5
11	0	0	6	0	6
12	0	0	6	0	6

Total by School	6	19	128	10	163

4.2 Grant and Project Materials

Learning First reviewed all available grant and project materials, including applications, acquittal reports, and other materials. It gained access to all 25 schools' original grant applications, and post-grant acquittal reports for 21 schools. The latter included, in many cases, supporting documents such as summaries of teachers' reflections on their learning and NAPLAN data showing improvement in student outcomes. Learning First reviewed each of these documents, with a focus on acquittal reports, which were coded for evidence of 1) sustainability of the grant; 2) supports and barriers to implementing the grant; 3) changes in teachers' knowledge, belief, and practice, including changes to the ways they give and receive feedback; and 4) impacts on student learning.

4.3 Case studies

This report includes case studies of six grantee schools. These provide a deeper understanding of how schools have implemented peer observation and mentoring programs, complementing the data collected in other elements of the evaluation. Learning First spent half a day to a day visiting each case study school, interviewing at least one school leader and from four to 11 teachers at each. (Please see the Appendix for the interview protocol). At the school in Tasmania, Learning First also had the opportunity to observe several classes to see the staff's new mathematics instructional model in action.

For a profile of the case study schools, please see Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of Case Study Schools

State	Year of Grant	Type of School	Number of Students[37]	ICSEA score[38]	Number of teachers (FTE)
Western Australia	2013-14	Secondary	775	960	54.7
Queensland - 1	2014-15	Primary	213	883	13.4
Queensland - 2	2014-15	Primary	353	828	28.9
South Australia	2015-16	Secondary	996	960	76.0
Tasmania	2016-17	Primary	243	983	16.1
Victoria	2016-17	Senior secondary	1862	N/A	126.4

4.4 Limitations

It is difficult for this study to make simple judgements of success, because:

1. The causal link between teacher professional learning (peer observation and mentoring) and student outcomes is difficult to measure at the best of times, and almost impossible in this evaluative design, which lacks specific pre- and post-test student data
2. Isolating the impact of peer observation and mentoring on teacher practice can be difficult (but by no means impossible)
3. The time between the initiative and the evaluation (in some instances about four years) can make the evaluation difficult

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[37]Source for demographic information: myschool.edu.au
[38] Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

4. As illustrated in Figure 1, a number of implementation issues and pre-conditions affect teacher practice. Especially important are teachers' beliefs, knowledge, practices, and the learning environment at the time the school received the grant. Since this evaluation could not include pre- and post-assessments of these elements of teacher practice, Learning First relied on qualitative assessments in schools and participants' self-reports in surveys about how, if at all, teacher practice changed since the school received the grant.

5. The data used in this report are susceptible to selection bias. The schools who offered to host Learning First for a site visit, and the staff members who chose to fill out the survey, may not be a representative sample of the schools and teachers who received the grant.

These limitations prevent some more definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, the data illuminate important themes about peer observation and mentoring that could assist both schools and the Sidney Myer Fund. With the data available, this report can address questions of the grants' impact on instruction, teacher and school effectiveness, and on the value of the philanthropic investment, in order to guide future investments.

5 Findings

5.1 Case Studies

This section presents snapshots of the grant's impact at the six schools Learning First visited.

5.1.1 Queensland – School 1

This primary school in Far North Queensland has 213 students, 13.4 full-time equivalent teachers, and an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score of 883, meaning that its students experience significant disadvantage. The school leaders decided to use a large part of the SMF grant to send all of their teachers to spend several days observing classes in a nearby high-performing school. They had two goals: to broaden the teachers' perspectives about what primary teaching and learning could look like, and to help the teachers to feel comfortable doing observations, so that they, in turn, would feel comfortable observing and being observed in class. Observation had not been a part of their school culture in the past.

At this school, one teacher who has taught for 25 years had never observed another teacher teach until the school received the SMF grant. She came back from the first observation day completely energised and told the Principal and Head of Teaching, 'I have to totally rearrange my classroom!' They ordered new desks, which have enabled her to do entirely different types of learning activities with her students.

The Head of Teaching told Learning First that the week before our visit, she walked past a classroom and saw that same teacher and her class sitting on the floor at the back, observing an older class. The teacher had heard that her colleague was expert at doing 'consolidations,' a part of the Far North Queensland Explicit Teaching Framework in which students review past learning. Thinking that not only she, but also her students, could benefit from seeing the older students in action, she arranged with her colleague to bring the entire class for a visit.

In 2016, this school was ranked in the top 50 most improved schools in Australia based on NAPLAN results (see Table 5). School leaders said the SMF funding played a key role in their improvement journey. The school leaders credit the grant with helping them to transform the culture from one in which observation simply did not happen to one in which teachers share practice and learn from colleagues as a matter of course. A change in culture led to a change in practice: teachers began to believe that

despite the difficult home circumstances many of their students faced, working with their colleagues to improve their teaching could make a difference to students' learning.

A final example of how the culture has changed: Learning First arrived at the school after a night of torrential rain. The bridge that many teachers had to use to get to school was flooded, and only four-wheel drive vehicles were allowed to drive across. The principal returned home to pick up his four-wheel drive vehicle and ferried teachers across the bridge so they could teach their students that day. The Head of Teaching was fielding call after call to help teachers find a way to get to school. She said that if the bridge had flooded eight years ago, half the staff would have been absent. She saw their desire to come to work as a clear indication of their sense of collective efficacy; each teacher felt that he or she was a member of a team doing important work. While this change in culture cannot be directly attributed to the SMF grant, teachers and school leaders alike identified the grant as a catalyst for their improvement journey.

Table 5: Queensland Primary School 1 - NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Results, 2014-2017

	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
Queensland – School 1	Year 3	Reading	368	410	404	407
Received grant: 2014-15	Year 5	Reading	425	465	520	494
	Year 7	Reading	523			
	Year 3	Numeracy	378	396	389	399
	Year 5	Numeracy	435	506	525	489
	Year 7	Numeracy	517			

Source: myschool.edu.au
Note: In 2015, Year 7s moved from primary to high school.

5.1.2   Queensland – School 2

A second primary school in Far North Queensland has 353 students, 28.9 full-time equivalent teachers and a low ICSEA score of 828. It used the grant to fund a large part of its Lead Teacher's salary. The teacher in that role has no teaching responsibilities and spends her entire day supporting teachers, especially the five graduate teachers. She meets with each graduate weekly, and teachers in their second and third years of teaching slightly less frequently, to help them set goals for improving their teaching practice and measuring progress toward them. She observes each graduate teacher once a week and often teaches model lessons in their classrooms.

Teachers told Learning First that working with the Lead Teacher helped them enormously in developing their pedagogy and classroom management skills. Since the Lead Teacher spends time in every classroom, she is able to ensure consistency in classroom management techniques and the school's instructional model, Explicit Instruction. When she sees a teacher try a new technique that works particularly well, she can model it for other teachers so that it spreads to all classrooms.

This school has also transformed itself from one that struggled with attendance and behaviour to one with exemplary attendance and minimal behavioural disruptions. It has also seen strong growth in NAPLAN results (see Table 6) Teachers and school leaders attribute these changes to consistency in their instructional model and classroom management expectations. By funding the Lead Teacher's work, the SMF grant played a key role in the school's transformation.

Table 6: Queensland Primary School 2 - NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Results, 2014-2017

Queensland – School 2	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
Received grant: 2014-15						
	Year 3	Reading	329	334	359	364
	Year 5	Reading	404	411	421	441
	Year 7	Reading	480			
	Year 3	Numeracy	312	331	348	351
	Year 5	Numeracy	385	424	424	436
	Year 7	Numeracy	475			

Source: myschool.edu.au
Note: In 2015, Year 7s moved from primary to high school.

5.1.3 Tasmania

In this primary school with 243 students, 16.1 FTE teachers, and an ICSEA score of 983, a new teacher who had previously taught at a school with very high-level mathematics instruction joined the staff as an Advanced Skills Teacher. The school had made significant gains in literacy in earlier years, but school leaders knew they had a long way to go with maths (see Table 7). The new Advanced Skills Teacher knew he could teach his colleagues how to teach in a different way – if he had time. The SMF grant provided that time.

Before receiving the grant, teachers had taught maths by splitting the class into ability groups and giving each group work at a different level of difficulty. This is a well-intentioned strategy because it aims to meet students at their point of need, but it has significant drawbacks. For example, if a student in a composite class of Years 3 and 4 is in the lowest group two years in a row, she would enter a Year 5/6 class doing maths at a Year 3 level. Also, in that type of instructional model, students generally do close-ended problems – problems with only one right answer. Students use memorised algorithms, or series of steps, to compute their answers, which creates little opportunity for students to develop their maths vocabulary and reasoning skills. Furthermore, the teacher is busy monitoring different groups doing different work and does not have time to lead rich, sustained discussions.

In this school's new LIFT (Launch – Investigate – Findings – Teacher) model for mathematics instruction, which was inspired by Peter Sullivan[39] and Jo Boaler's[40] work, each class is organised by one open-ended problem that can be solved by several different approaches. The problems are 'low floor, high ceiling,' meaning they are appropriate for both struggling and high-achieving students. After the teacher **Launches** the lesson by introducing the problem, students work independently to **Investigate** and try to solve it. They continue their investigation, consulting classmates, to devise solutions for the problem. The teacher then identifies students who have used different approaches to the problem to share their **Findings** with the class, calling first on students who have used the simplest approach, and working up to students who have used increasingly elegant and complex approaches. As students present their problem-solving approaches to the class, the **Teacher** validates everyone's thinking and contribution and helps the students consolidate their learning at the end of the lesson. The teacher will launch another supplementary task if time permits.

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[39] e.g., Sullivan & Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011
[40] Stanford Graduate School of Education, n.d.

Teachers report that while they used to see both struggling students and advanced students sitting and doing nothing in class because the former did not know how to begin and the latter had finished and were bored, now every student is able to make a contribution that the whole class can value. As part of their planning in the LIFT instructional model, teachers create slips of paper with 'enabling' and 'extending' prompts on them, so they can drop them on students' desks as they walk by if they see students struggling to get started or needing an extra challenge.

Teachers say this new approach has transformed their teaching, and that they could not have done it without the release time that the grant provided. They used the time to observe their Advanced Skills Teacher giving demonstration lessons to their classes, and to work with him to plan lessons. A schedule that allows each team to meet with an Advanced Skills Teacher or school leader three times a term, for several hours, enables teams to make significant progress in planning at each meeting. The school has also organised timetabling so that students have the same relief teacher every time, which makes teachers feel more comfortable leaving their classes.

Though the SMF grant ended in 2017, the school has found a way to continue supporting these structures to improve mathematics teaching. A Department of Education official who was excited by their work last year gave them a large share of the funding from her budget, and they made up the difference with the school's discretionary budget. Perhaps even more impressively, the work is continuing even though both the Advanced Skills Teacher and the principal were on leave for the first term of 2018.

Table 7: Tasmania Primary School - NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Results, 2014-2017

Tasmania School	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
+++++++++++++++++++++++Received grant: 2016-17						
	Year 3	Reading	401	388	421	450
	Year 5	Reading	493	506	499	486
	Year 3	Numeracy	380	364	389	422
	Year 5	Numeracy	480	502	474	463

Source: myschool.edu.au

5.1.4 Western Australia

This high school serves 755 students in Years 7 through 12. It has 76 full-time equivalent teachers and an ICSEA score of 960. The principal and assistant principal told Learning First that before receiving the grant in the 2013-2014 fiscal year, a large proportion of the 60 teachers on staff had worked at the school for many years and did not feel positive about peer observation. They viewed it from the perspective of evaluating their teaching rather than a tool to support improvement. The principal applied for the grant in the hope of changing this perception of peer observation and creating a more collaborative culture among staff.

Around the same time as the school applied for the grant, the Department of Education in Western Australia strongly encouraged observation as part of the teacher performance and development process. To ensure that peer observation maintained a developmental rather than evaluative focus, leaders at this high school integrated peer observation into their expectations for teachers' professional learning, but they also gave teachers ownership over all documentation relating to peer observations. In other words, while teachers needed to report that they engaged in observations, they were not required to share observation notes, reflections, or takeaways with either their performance manager or the leadership team.

Peer mentoring and observation did not happen in isolation at this school; rather, they were integrated into the school's Business Plan and supported by other initiatives that sought to improve teacher effectiveness. For example, in consultation with staff, the leadership team developed a teaching and learning framework that drew heavily from the AITSL Professional Standards for Teaching and was designed to improve teacher practice.[41] The framework provided a guide for teachers engaging in peer observation and mentoring and helped to ensure that observations focused on improving teaching and learning.

A large part of the SMF grant was used for a whole-school professional learning on peer observation. During this professional learning session, run by an external consultant from International Growth Coaching, teachers role-played post-observation conversations with their colleagues. Both leaders and teachers told Learning First that the session was very valuable and helped dispel teachers' concerns about peer observation.

After this initial work, school leaders delegated responsibility for peer observation and mentoring to the Heads of Department. They did so in order to emphasise that observation was not formal appraisal by the school administration but a developmental opportunity. As a result of this change, however, the frequency and intensity of peer observation and mentoring now varies among teams. In some, formal peer observation only happens once a year.

Nevertheless, the school's distributed leadership model has enabled departments to implement peer observation and mentoring in their own ways. In one department, for example, teachers formally observe and mentor each other rarely because they are often teaching together in each other's classrooms. Their Head of Department says they find these informal opportunities to help each other more useful than formal observations. Another Head of Department, by contrast, does frequent walkthroughs, which has led to consistency in practices such as learning intentions.

Delegating responsibility to Heads of Department has also created room for innovation. For example, the mathematics teachers decided that they did not need to focus on 'low key engagement strategies' in their peer observation and mentoring work, as most other teams were doing. Instead, they decided to trial and provide feedback on activities with new maths strategies. Maths teachers regularly observe each other teach the same lessons, collect evidence about what is and is not working with students, and share this feedback with each other at collaborative team meetings. As Table 8 shows, the Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy results are the school's highest NAPLAN results. Since 2015, this school's Year 9 average numeracy scores have been significantly above those of other schools with similar students.[42]

Table 8: Western Australia High School - NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Results, 2014-2017

Western Australia School	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
Received grant: 2013-14	Year 7	Reading		539	506	526
	Year 9	Reading	569	565	571	578
	Year 7	Numeracy		527	523	543
	Year 9	Numeracy	571	583	578	587

Note: in 2015, Year 7s moved from primary school to high school.
Source: myschool.edu.au

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[41] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011
[42] https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/48227/naplan/numbers/2017

Both teachers and leaders identified some challenges the school faces in sustaining learning through peer observations and mentoring. One is making time for formal observations, which require teachers to meet with a colleague before and after to share feedback. Another is sustaining the work: teachers and administrators said that the focus on formal observations have waned in the last year or so. Finally, some teachers still do not share the view that peer observation can support improved teaching and learning.

Despite the challenges, the teachers Learning First interviewed said that peer observation and mentoring had helped them to improve their teaching, gain new ideas, and solve problems, and that the school's overall culture was very supportive. School leaders said that the quality and consistency of teaching practices had improved, some innovative approaches to peer observation and mentoring had been introduced, and the teaching and learning environment was much more collaborative.

5.1.5 Victoria

In Victoria, Learning First visited a large senior secondary college with a diverse student body of 1862 students in year 11 and 12 and 126.4 full-time equivalent teachers.[43] Students mostly come from four feeder high schools. The college used the SMF grant to build their staff's capacity to implement a new approach to assessment, based on the work of Michael Francis and Patrick Griffin from the Assessment Research Group at the University of Melbourne.

Using the grant, the college hired consultant Michael Francis to train selected school leaders and representative teachers in developmental assessment, with a focus on creating developmental rubrics for assessment tasks. Staff who attended the initial sessions took what they learnt back to their teams in a 'train the trainer' model. Teams worked together to learn about the assessment model and create the rubrics. Team leaders mentored their teams and arranged observations to help teachers understand how to use the rubrics. For example, one teacher had 13 other teachers into his classroom to watch him use the rubrics with students. In addition to the work in teams, the entire staff received formal professional learning on peer observation and mentoring.

Peer observation supported the implementation of developmental assessment, while the new assessment model helped create a more open culture of peer observation. The principal said that because teachers were trialling developmental rubrics, which were completely new to them, they felt less threatened than they might have if the observations were more generally about their performance. Also, teachers were grateful for feedback and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues as they integrated rubrics into their practice. The principal said that for the first time in their tenure as school leaders, she and the Assistant Principal were invited into classrooms.

When Learning First visited in 2018, the second year of the developmental assessment initiative, some teachers and teams were struggling with the new assessment model. However, teachers said that their leaders' flexible approach and the support of peer observation and mentoring were helping them to make progress.

Teachers and leaders cited one notable benefit of the work as the conversations that teachers are now having about teaching and learning. They are grappling with difficult questions about learning progressions in different subjects. Teachers reported that students seem to like the rubrics and can now see what they need to do to be successful. Finally, teachers themselves spoke about the positive impact on their teaching. One teacher explained how it has made her teaching more concrete:

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[43] ICSEA score not available on myschool.edu.au. Since NAPLAN only tests Years 3, 5, 7, and 9, and this college serves students in grades 11 and 12, NAPLAN scores are not available.

I was grateful for the project, it has changed the way I think about my teaching. I think it is really sensible if the kids know what is expected of them. Before it was really airy fairy. I felt ashamed of how vague assessment rubrics were before. It also makes it clearer with your teaching; you can use it for planning.

While staff recognise the importance of peer observation and mentoring for improving their practice, they said they lacked time. They were also reluctant to leave their classes to relief teachers because of the pressure to get through the year 11 and 12 curriculum. Specialist teachers were especially reluctant because they were not able to find relief teachers who knew their subject areas.

To ensure the sustainability of this work, the college has appointed a staff member as a Learning Specialist, which is a new position funded by the Department of Education and Training. The Learning Specialist will continue to be a mentor for teachers as they integrate developmental assessment into their practice.

5.1.6   South Australia

Learning First visited a high school in Adelaide that serves 996 students in Years 8-12. It has 54.7 full-time equivalent teaching staff and an ICSEA of 960. Before the SMF grant, the school had no culture of peer observation. Many teachers said they had never observed another teacher's classroom before. The school leaders applied for the grant because they believed that deprivatising practice would help their teachers improve.

Since teachers in South Australia cannot be required to participate in peer observations, the program was entirely voluntary. The assistant principal was pleased to report that 66 per cent of teachers chose to take part in 2017. Teachers were allowed to choose the colleague who came to their class, which they said helped them feel more comfortable.

A small team of school leaders trained the teachers in peer observation during staff meetings, using AITSL resources. As the school leaders planned the training, they sought advice from a member of South Australia's Department of Education and Child Development who specialises in classroom observation. She recommended several AITSL videos that the entire staff watched together to practise taking specific, descriptive, non-judgmental notes. After a smaller, pilot group took part in observations in 2016, training in 2017 included videos of staff members talking about how much they had gained from the observation process.

The school used the SMF funds to relieve teachers from classes for observation and pre- and post-observation meetings. Although the funding had just ended when Learning First visited, the school leaders said the School Council had agreed to continue funding the program.

Staff who spoke to Learning First were very positive about the experience. One learning area leader cited a colleague who used to be very private about her practice. Now that the teacher has begun peer observations, she is eager to share resources and discuss practice with colleagues.

Table 9: South Australia High School - NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Results, 2014-2017

South Australia School	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
Received grant: 2016-17						
	Year 9	Reading	531	562	557	548
	Year 9	Numeracy	542	570	554	554
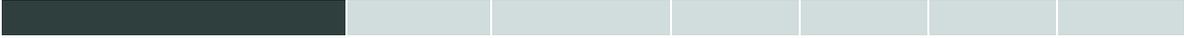
Source: myschool.edu.au

5.2 Overall Findings

5.2.1 Question 1: Did the philanthropic investment have the results sought?

Learning First found that the SMF grant helped to improve teacher collaborative culture, knowledge, beliefs, and practice in many schools that received the grant. In several schools, there is also evidence that the grants helped to improve student learning. Teachers and school leaders told Learning First that the grants played a key role in supporting their improvement journey, and that they could not have achieved the results they did without the dedicated time that the grant bought to devote to teachers' professional learning.

5.2.2 Question 2: How well have the mentoring and peer observation been implemented in grantee schools?

Have the programs been sustained?

Though the data are incomplete, and those educators and schools who chose to participate in the project were likely those who were already more involved in peer observation than other schools, the evidence is encouraging that programs have been maintained.

In the survey, 134 teachers and mentors from 12 schools answered questions about peer observation, and 118, or 88 per cent, said they had taken part in peer observation in the past year. Of 128 teachers who answered questions about mentoring, 56 (43.7 per cent) said they currently worked with a mentor. Twenty-two (17.2 per cent) said they had worked with a mentor in the past. Nine of the 22 teachers who were no longer working with a mentor said this was because the program did not continue at their school. Forty teachers (31.7 per cent) said they had not been given the opportunity to work with a mentor, but most of these had participated in peer observations.

Learning First found evidence in acquittal reports and interviews that seven of the 25 schools have maintained the programs. Four had identified another funding source to cover the cost of peer observations and mentoring once the SMF grant ran out. In one, the School Council voted to fund the program because Council members were impressed with testimonials they heard about it. In another, a Department of Education staff member contributed some of her budget to maintain the program after being inspired by the improvements in mathematics instruction she was seeing. In the other two schools, school leaders used their own budgets to fund release time for teachers to observe one another and work collaboratively. In each case, the project that the SMF grant funded proved that it was an effective use of time and money for teachers to engage in peer observation and mentoring.

In the remaining three of these seven schools, school leaders integrated peer observation into teachers' annual performance management or professional development plans. Teachers could then use peer observations and data from them as evidence that they were making progress towards their goals. One school cancelled after-school meetings for two weeks in Term 4 to compensate teachers for spending their non-contact time during the school day engaging in peer observations and pre- and post-observation meetings.

The remaining 18 schools might also have maintained the program, but not enough data exist to know.

What factors make the program sustainable and effective?

School leaders reported, and Learning First observed, that peer observations and mentoring were most sustainable when they were a) integrated into other structures rather than operating as a standalone program and b) aligned with an overall school strategy to improve teaching and learning.

For example, the maths department in the school Learning First visited in Western Australia used peer observations to support their teachers as they trialled a new, inquiry-based maths program called re(Solve).[44] One teacher was a (re)Solve champion, which meant that she was being trained in a new approach to teaching mathematics and was responsible for sending feedback and student work samples to the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training. Teachers in the department observed one another's classes to learn about the new approach and inform their colleague's feedback to the Department. Since they were engaged in observation as part of their department's goal to improve teaching and learning in mathematics, observation did not feel like 'one more thing' adding to their heavy workload.

What has worked well?

According to school leaders and teachers, the elements of the grant that worked best were:
1. the flexibility to tailor how the grant was spent to meet each school's needs;
2. the opportunity to engage outside consultants; and
3. the time the grant bought to work toward their priorities.

A major strength of the program is that it helped school leaders invest time and expertise in their existing improvement priorities. Unlike so many grant programs, the SMF grant did not burden schools with another initiative to implement on top of their existing work. The program allowed schools to invest in building a collaborative, trusting culture and accelerate progress toward goals they had already set.

School leaders appreciated being empowered to use the grant funds as they saw best under the broad umbrella of peer observation and mentoring. No two schools used the grant in exactly the same way, and there is no one approach that would work for every school. Learning First found there were many ways to use the funds to improve teaching and learning, which is not surprising, given the complexity and unique history of every school.

Many school leaders found it useful to hire outside consultants to infuse expertise into their schools. While peer observation and mentoring seeks to tap into the expertise already in a school, it is important that schools not become echo chambers, without access to the latest research findings and thinking. One primary school in Queensland planned to start a peer mentoring program, but the school leaders realised that the teachers did not have enough expertise for mentoring to be productive. In some schools, administrators thought that outside consultants lent legitimacy to the initiatives. In other words, having outside experts say that peer observation was a worthwhile use of time was much more effective than if they had told their staff the same thing.

Above all, school leaders and teachers appreciated the time that the grant allowed them to dedicate to improving teaching and learning. One senior secondary principal said, 'There is no way you can devote that kind of time unless you buy it.'

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[44] Australian Government Department of Education and Training, n.d.

What were the barriers to implementation for schools?

The major barriers to implementation that Learning First identified were:

- Teachers' initial distrust of peer observation
- Teachers' reluctance to leave their classes with relief teachers
- Limited availability of relief teachers
- Limited time
- Competing priorities and initiatives

Many school leaders wrote in their acquittal reports that a major barrier to implementation was teachers' initial distrust of peer observation. Some teachers worried about being judged; others did not feel that they had anything to gain from observing other teachers. School leaders countered this distrust through communicating clearly the purpose and value of peer observation. In training sessions, they gave staff the opportunity to practise taking objective notes during video observations. Staff were given templates to use for pre-observation meetings, for note-taking during the observation itself, and for the post-observation meeting. Several school leaders said it was helpful to clarify that all peer observation materials were teachers' property, for their learning, and for their eyes only. While school leaders could encourage – or in some cases, require – teachers to participate in peer observation, they would see none of the notes. In many cases, teachers were allowed to choose who observed them, which they said helped them feel much more comfortable.

Teachers are dedicated to their students, and many hesitated to leave their classes with relief teachers, worrying that students' time would be wasted. This was a major barrier to implementation. In some cases, schools struggled to find relief teachers. The school Learning First visited in Tasmania mitigates this problem by setting aside several days each term for teachers to collaborate and hiring relief teachers weeks, even months, in advance. Each teacher team meets for several hours on the days that relief teachers are in the school. The teacher leading the work is relieved from teaching for the day, and relief teachers rotate through classrooms so that each teacher is covered for the several hours his or her team is meeting. When possible, the same relief teacher covers the same class every time the teacher is away, so that students develop a relationship with that adult and their routines are less disrupted.

Limited time and competing priorities are also challenges. Schools are always busy places, and never have enough time to do everything that teachers and school leaders would like to do. However, when a school leader designs an improvement strategy that focuses on just one or a few student learning goals at a time, and when every professional learning activity is directly related to those goals, teachers feel that they have more time because they are able to focus their attention, and to see the impact of their professional learning on student outcomes.

5.2.3   Question 3: Outcomes – did teacher effectiveness improve?

How have teacher beliefs, knowledge, or practices improved?

The interviews and observations, grant materials, and survey responses provided evidence that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices did improve in schools that received the grant. Though data are not available for every school, and even for schools where they exist it is not possible to prove that

the grants drove the changes, participants in the study felt strongly that the grants played a key role in improving teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

The survey data suggest that peer observation influenced teachers' knowledge, belief, and practice about teaching. The 134 teachers who participated in peer observation answered three questions:

- To what extent have you learned new things about teaching as a result of observations?
- To what extent have observations changed your beliefs about teaching?
- To what extent have observations changed your teaching practice?

As Figure 2 shows, most respondents said that peer observations had influenced their knowledge, beliefs, and practices. More than 73 per cent said that observation influenced their knowledge at least somewhat. In open responses, teachers said that taking part in observations had taught them new strategies for engaging students and improving lesson structure. Forty-five per cent of teachers said they changed their beliefs about teaching at least 'somewhat.'

Interestingly, more teachers said that observation influenced their knowledge (73.1 per cent) and practices (65.1 per cent) than it did their beliefs (45 per cent), but in their open responses, many explained that observation reinforced rather than changed their beliefs about teaching. These teachers see teaching as a continuous learning process, and while peer observation did not change that belief, it provided an opportunity to reflect on and improve their methods.
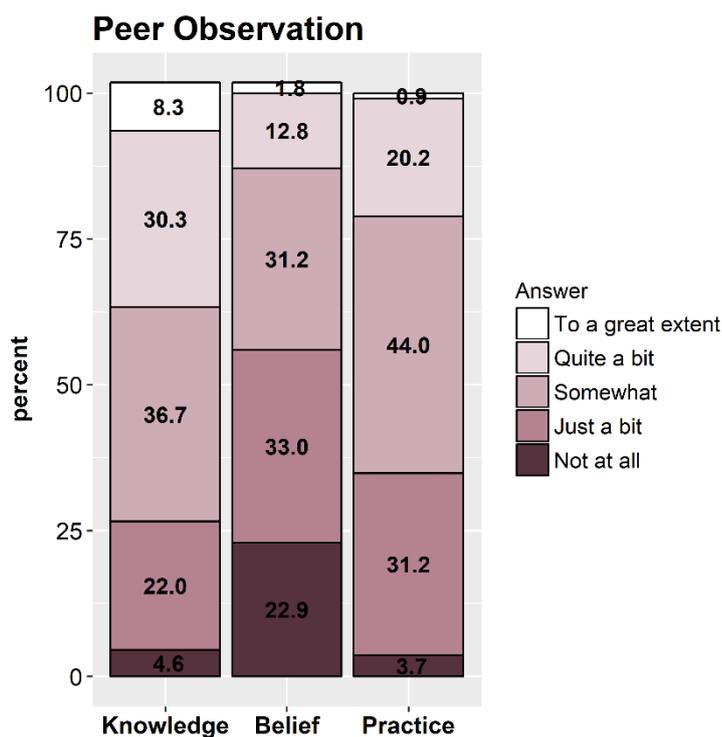

Figure 2: Self-Reported Effect of Peer Observation on Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs, and Practices (n=134)

A smaller subset of the sample answered the questions about mentoring. Their feedback was also quite positive. Fifty-six teachers said they worked with a mentor, and 22 had worked with a mentor in the past. A number had found mentoring very helpful at the beginning of their career, and some maintained the

relationship with mentors, albeit less frequently. A few sought mentoring unofficially from coaches, line managers, and other school staff, and also found it beneficial. Some teachers said it was difficult to devote the time for mentoring.

Survey respondents indicated that participating in a mentoring program affected their knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Fewer respondents in this survey had participated in mentoring programs than in peer observation (56 compared to 134). Most teachers who took part in mentoring also undertook peer observation, but the inverse was not true. Nevertheless, those who took part in mentoring said it had a greater impact than peer observation. As Figure 3 shows, of the teachers who said they had participated in mentoring (n=56), more than half said it had influenced their knowledge (87.5 per cent), beliefs (64.3 per cent), and practices (80.3 per cent). Mentoring programs might be seen as more influential than peer observation because they tend to focus on teachers who are earlier in their careers and therefore more susceptible to influence.

Figure 3: Self-Reported Effect of Mentoring on Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs, and Practices (n=56)

The grant materials and case studies also provide ample evidence that the grant had a positive impact on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practice. In one Queensland primary school, teachers said the observations they did at a nearby school had transformed their beliefs about what primary students could be expected to do. A cluster of New South Wales schools wrote in their acquittal report that the project had not only helped teachers to develop skills to work with Information and Communications Technology and to trial new literacy teaching techniques, it had reignited the passion of many staff for teaching.

Have teacher and leader engagement and feedback practices improved?

In six of the 21 acquittal reports Learning First reviewed (28.5 per cent), school leaders said that their teachers' willingness to give and receive feedback on teaching practice improved as a result of the grant. Several leaders said that teachers who used to view any kind of observation or feedback as an intrusion into their professional autonomy now proactively sought out feedback and opportunities to collaborate. Since the acquittal reports did not specifically ask about feedback, they may not have captured all improvements to feedback practices.

The survey data provide further evidence that the grant helped improve teacher and leader engagement and feedback practices. Fourteen school leaders in eight schools were in their positions before the school received the grant, so they were able to comment on school culture before and after it.

The following two survey items addressed how openly teachers discuss teaching difficulties in schools:

1. Before your school received the Myer grant, how often did teachers have open discussions about teaching difficulties?
2. Currently in your school, how often do teachers in this school have open discussions about teaching difficulties?

As Figure 4 shows, half of school leaders said that before the grant, open discussions about teaching difficulties only happened 'once in a while.' Since the grant, all reported that open discussions happen at least 'sometimes.'
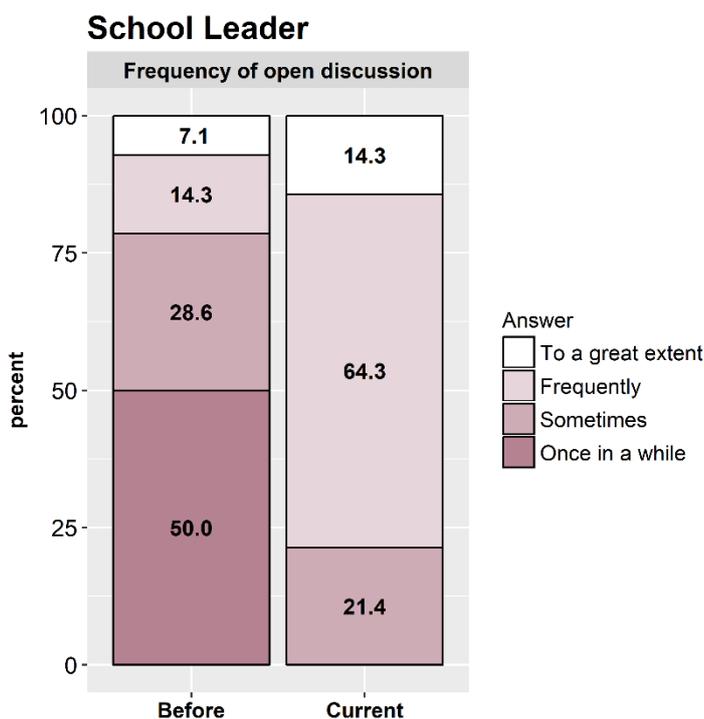

Figure 4: Frequency of Open Discussion, Before and Since Grant, According to School Leaders (n=14 school leaders, in 8 schools)

Three further sets of survey items also related to elements of engagement and feedback in schools:

1. Before your school received the Myer grant, how comfortable did staff feel having others observe their instruction?
2. Currently in your school, how comfortable are staff having one another observe their instruction?[45]

1. Before your school received the Myer grant, how open were teachers to feedback on their practice?
2. Currently in your school, how open are teachers in this school to feedback on their practice?[46]

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[45] Answer choices: 1. Not at all comfortable 2. A little comfortable 3. Somewhat comfortable 4. Quite comfortable 5. Extremely comfortable

[46] Answer choices: Not at all open 2. A little open 3. Somewhat open 4. Quite open 5. Extremely open

1. Before your school received the Myer grant, to what extent did staff share a common vision of what effective teaching looked like?
2. Currently in your school, to what extent do staff share a common vision of what effective teaching looks like?[47]

As Figure 5 shows, school leaders reported that they saw a big change before and after the grant in teachers' comfort having others observe, be open to feedback, and share a vision with their colleagues. Although these sets of questions have only 14 respondents, and their answers do not constitute evidence that the grant *caused* these changes, the responses suggest that in these eight schools the SMF grant was a part of a journey toward an improved culture.
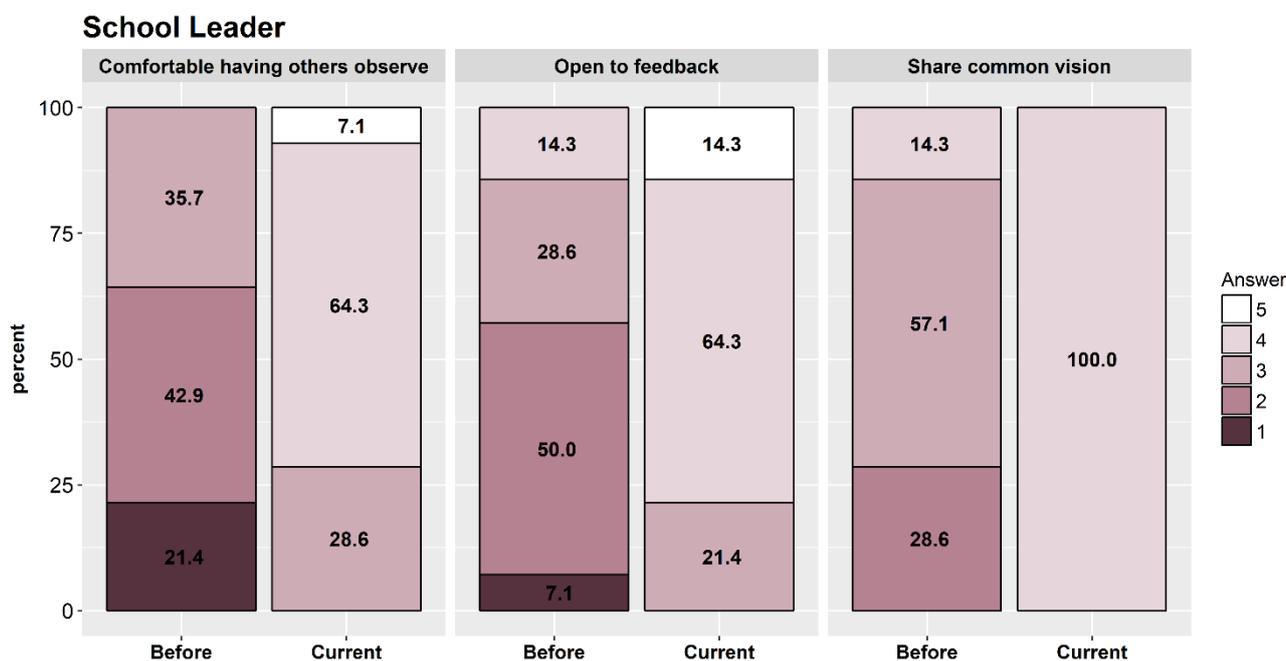

School Leader

Figure 5: Comfort having others observe, Openness to feedback, and Sharing a common vision, Before and Since Grant, According to School Leaders (n=14 school leaders, in 8 schools)

5.2.4 Question 4: Impact – has student learning improved?

Has student learning improved? Is it sustained?

In their acquittal reports, six school leaders said the SMF grant had helped to improve student learning. They gave as evidence the school's NAPLAN and PAT results and observations that students were more engaged and willing to participate in their learning. The remaining 15 acquittal reports Learning First reviewed did not mention student learning. Since the form did not explicitly ask about changes in student learning, the reports may have underreported these outcomes.

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[47] Answer choices:
1. Not at all   2. Just a bit   3. Somewhat   4. Quite a bit   5. To a great extent

According to the survey, teachers and school leaders believe that peer observation and mentoring have had an impact on student learning. As Figure 6 shows, all school leaders (n=18), and 78 per cent of teachers who took part in mentoring (n=55) and nearly 70 per cent of teachers who took part in observation (n=109), said that peer observation and mentoring affected student learning at least 'somewhat.' Although these data are based only on perceptions, it is notable that school leaders and teachers believe that the program was having a positive impact on student outcomes.
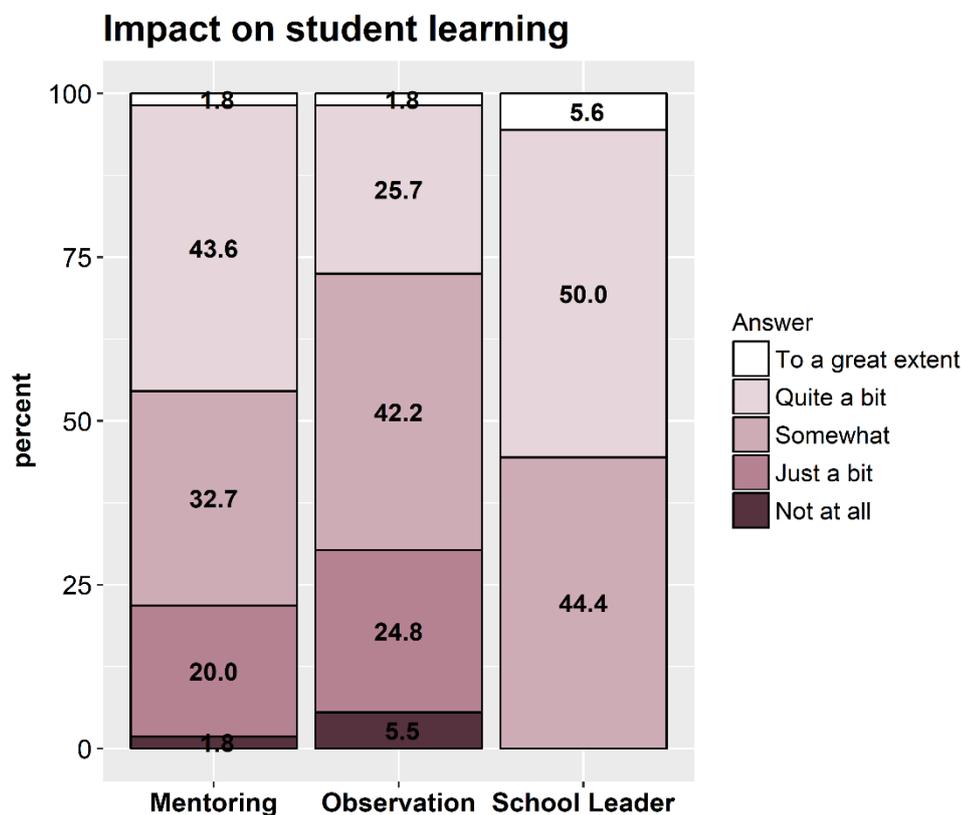
Impact on student learning

Figure 6: Impact of SMF Grant on Student Learning, According to teachers who participated in mentoring (n=55), Teachers who participated in observation (n=109), and School Leaders (n=18)

As an additional data source, Learning First reviewed NAPLAN results in reading and math for all schools that received the grant in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 (see Appendix). NAPLAN results tell a complicated story, and should be interpreted with caution. Some schools show improvement, others stagnation, others decline. As described above, Learning First found ample evidence of improvement in student learning in the case studies. Since the Tasmania school received the grant in 2016-17, any impact is not yet apparent in its NAPLAN scores.

While it is interesting to look at these scores and compare them to the all-Australia averages, three caveats must be kept in mind. First, this evaluation is not a causal study. Learning First cannot attribute any changes in student outcomes, positive or negative, to the SMF grant. Second, NAPLAN is only one data source, and while it provides useful data, no single source can capture the complexity of student learning in a school. Third, these tables do not capture demographic shifts in the student population of the schools, which may have had a major impact on outcomes.

Though it is not within the scope of this investigation to be definitive about whether the SMF grant has had an impact on student learning, it is encouraging that many schools that were funded by the grant have seen notable improvements in student learning since they received it.

What has influenced student learning improvement, stagnation, or decline?

The sample of teachers and school leaders who answered the survey, filled out the acquittal reports, and spoke to Learning First researchers is highly influenced by selection bias. Those who chose to participate are likely to have more favourable attitudes toward the program and its impact. Nevertheless, many teachers and school leaders were clear that observations had lifted student achievement by helping them to see what their colleagues were doing, and how mentoring improved student outcomes by supporting teachers as they developed their pedagogical repertoire.

1) Observations - Seeing what is possible

Observing colleagues both within one's school and at other schools gave teachers examples of what students could do. Teachers were inspired to see the high expectations their peers had for students and the strategies used to help them achieve. Once they were comfortable with observations, teachers were more likely to share resources with one another and talk with colleagues about problems of teaching practice. Observations helped to make new strategies concrete: it is much easier to try something new if one has seen a colleague model it.

2) Mentoring – Developing a teaching repertoire

Mentoring programs provided teachers with targeted coaching in areas where they had room to improve. In the most successful programs, teachers set goals to improve their practice, watched mentors model instruction techniques, and practised instructional techniques with their mentors' support and feedback.

5.2.5   Has the program contributed?

School leaders in the case study schools enthusiastically expressed a view that their students would not have improved without the SMF grant. They believed that dedicated time and expert support had accelerated teacher learning, which benefits students. One school leader called the grant, 'first-class philanthropy' in a survey response.

In schools where student learning has not improved, there are many possible explanations. First, student learning outcomes, especially NAPLAN scores, are a lagging indicator of improved teaching practice. It takes time to set up peer observation and mentoring programs, for them to lead to improved practice, for improved practice to lead to improved learning, and for improved learning to lead to meaningful improvements in NAPLAN.

Second, a peer observation and mentoring program is only one element of a school. A host of factors, from demographic shifts to teacher retirements, state-wide policy changes, changes in leadership and more – can affect student outcomes. Just as the SMF grants cannot be given full credit when student learning improves, they cannot be blamed when it does not.

6   Recommendations for future grants programs

6.1   Continue to support schools in building teacher capacity

The great strength of the Education Capacity Building Stream is its focus: building education capacity. Australia is full of talented school leaders with ambitious plans to improve teaching and learning. To do so, they need time and money, and discretion over how time and money are spent. The Education Capacity Building Stream gives them all of that.

Foundations have historically funded programs and interventions with tight controls over what the programs entail and how they are implemented. While this approach is well-intentioned, it often backfires. Since schools are eager for additional funding, they may apply for grants and then feel burdened by trying to implement highly prescriptive programs. Grant programs can feel like one more thing pulling teachers and school leaders in too many different directions. This grant program, on the other hand, gave school leaders the opportunity to support teacher learning in the way that worked best for their schools. A foundation can make a large impact in schools if it helps great leaders to develop their staff without burdensome restrictions.

An ethical dilemma about funding great leaders to make their schools greater is that it does not benefit students in schools with poor leaders. This is a great loss for these children, but any philanthropic investment of this kind is unlikely to solve this problem.

6.2   Continue to focus on peer observation and mentoring programs, but emphasise that they should be means to achieve a larger student learning strategy

Peer observation and mentoring programs are a fitting focus for grant-making because they contribute directly to teacher capacity. Nevertheless, while continuing to fund peer observation and mentoring, SMF should stress that peer observation and mentoring are not ends in themselves. Two straightforward ways to do so would be to:

1) Revise the application questions to emphasise that peer observation and mentoring should serve larger student learning goals, and
2) Give preference to schools that show clearly how they will integrate peer observation and mentoring into a larger strategy for improving student learning.

6.2.1   Revise the application questions to emphasise that peer observation and mentoring should serve larger student learning goals

The following questions could not only help SMF identify the most promising grantees but also help school leaders to develop their improvement strategies.

- Where is your school now, and what are your goals for improving student learning in the next five years?
- What is your strategy to achieve those student learning goals?
- How will peer observation and/or mentoring help you achieve these goals?
- How would you use this grant to build capacity for peer observation and mentoring to serve your larger strategic goals?
- What will peer observation and mentoring look like in your school?
- How will you know that you are on the right track toward meeting your student learning goals three or six months or a year after receiving this grant?

- What do you see as the biggest challenges in implementing observation and/or mentoring?
- What do you think it takes to do observation and/or mentoring effectively?

Learning First recommends retaining the following items from the current application:

- If you plan to use external expertise, explain why you chose a particular provider and describe how they will complement your existing capabilities.
- How will peer mentoring be embedded and/or supported in your school after the initial funds are spent?

6.2.2 Give preference to schools that show clearly how peer observation and mentoring serve larger student learning goals

When reviewing applications, SMF should consider how well the applicants' proposals integrate peer observation and mentoring into their overall improvement strategies. The most successful projects will not be about peer observation and mentoring for their own sake. While these programs can improve teaching and learning even if they do not connect to a larger strategy, they will be more effective if they do.

6.3 Share past grantees' successes and challenges with future grantees

Future grantees would benefit from reading this report. Knowing the successes other schools have enjoyed, and challenges they have encountered and how they have addressed them, could help future recipients to make the most of the grant.

7   Appendix

7.1   Interview Protocols

Principals and Leadership Teams
1. What does teacher observation and mentoring look like in your school?
2. Could you describe the last time you observed or participated in an observation or mentoring session?
3. How did you use the Myer grant to support observation and mentoring?
4. How, if at all, do you support teachers in observations and mentoring?
5. What are the barriers and facilitators to effectively implementing and sustaining observation and mentoring in your school?
6. What is your vision for observation and mentoring in your school over the next five years?
7. What would help you improve observation and mentoring practices in schools? Are there certain supports, tools, and resources that would be useful to you?
8. What effect are observations and mentoring having on
    a. teachers' knowledge?
    b. teachers' beliefs?
    c. teachers' practice?
9. What effect are observation and mentoring having on student outcomes? Do you have any evidence, even anecdotal?
10. What advice would you give to other school leaders trying to start observation and mentoring in their schools?
11. What worked well about this grant program, and what could be more effective? We're interested in knowing about the administration of the program itself, and also whether you think this is the most high-leverage way the Myer Foundation can support schools.
12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Teachers
1. What does teacher observation and mentoring look like in your school?
2. How, if at all, does your school leadership team support teachers in observations and mentoring?
3. What would help you get more out of observation and mentoring at your school? Are there certain supports, tools, and resources that would be useful to you?
4. What effect are observations and mentoring having on
    a. Your knowledge about teaching?
    b. Your beliefs about teaching
    c. teachers' practice?
5. What effect are observation and mentoring having on student outcomes? Do you have any evidence, even anecdotal?
6. What advice would you give to other teachers starting observation and mentoring in their schools?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

7.2   NAPLAN results for Grantee Schools, 2013-2015

Table 10: Average NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Scores, 2014-2017, for Schools Receiving SMF Grant in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015

School Name	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
2013-2014 Recipients						
Glossop Primary School	Year 3	Reading	443	352	349	379
	Year 5	Reading	439	488	478	436
	Year 7	Reading	564	516	521	495
	Year 3	Numeracy	417	337	337	326
	Year 5	Numeracy	417	460	487	440
	Year 7	Numeracy	592	499	515	487
Wynard High School, TAS	Year 7	Reading	511	527	526	519
	Year 9	Reading	543	547	552	579
	Year 7	Numeracy	523	522	530	519
	Year 9	Numeracy	561	561	556	578
McGuire College, VIC	Year 7	Reading	498	499	511	493
	Year 9	Reading	544	525	541	546
	Year 7	Numeracy	499	506	522	507
	Year 9	Numeracy	533	554	546	553
North Albany Senior High School, WA	Year 7	Reading		539	506	526
	Year 9	Reading	569	565	571	578
	Year 7	Numeracy		527	523	543
	Year 9	Numeracy	571	583	578	587
2014-2015 Recipients						
Mossman State School, QLD	Year 3	Reading	368	410	404	407
	Year 5	Reading	425	465	520	494
	Year 7	Reading	523			
	Year 3	Numeracy	378	396	389	399
	Year 5	Numeracy	435	506	525	489
	Year 7	Numeracy	517			
Balaclava State School, QLD	Year 3	Reading	329	334	359	364
	Year 5	Reading	404	411	421	441
	Year 7	Reading	480			
	Year 3	Numeracy	312	331	348	351
	Year 5	Numeracy	385	424	424	436
	Year 7	Numeracy	475			
Stokers Siding Public School	Year 3	Reading	421	345	356	N/A
	Year 5	Reading	563	472	480	N/A
	Year 3	Numeracy	394	354	380	N/A
	Year 5	Numeracy	515	477	459	N/A
Mundubbera State P-10 School, QLD	Year 3	Reading	346	379	406	437
	Year 5	Reading	475	468	426	479
	Year 7	Reading	526	555	522	509
	Year 9	Reading	566	556	537	574
	Year 3	Numeracy	336	387	410	358
	Year 5	Numeracy	460	478	488	470

School Name	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
	Year 7	Numeracy	528	545	537	539
	Year 9	Numeracy	581	584	546	591

Notes: NAPLAN data is not available for secondary colleges. Clusters of schools were not included, unless one school in particular filled out the acquittal report. In 2015, Year 7 moved from primary to high school in QLD and WA.
Source: myschool.edu.au

Table 11: All Australia NAPLAN Reading and Numeracy Average Scores, Years 3, 5, 7, 9, 2014-2017

All-Australia	Year Level	Category	2014	2015	2016	2017
	Year 3	Reading	418	410	426	431
	Year 5	Reading	501	499	502	506
	Year 7	Reading	546	546	541	545
	Year 9	Reading	580	580	581	581
	Year 3	Numeracy	402	398	402	409
	Year 5	Numeracy	488	493	493	494
	Year 7	Numeracy	546	543	550	554
	Year 9	Numeracy	588	592	589	592

Source: myschool.edu.au

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