

How to build a system that drives school improvement

Marell
Consulting Limited

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Introduction

School improvement in many schools comes as an afterthought. Something that school leaders think about when things go wrong, usually when they get a poor Ofsted inspection outcome. There are some schools where this is not the case, where leaders follow a system of improvement, usually revolving around the self-evaluation cycle.

Unfortunately, this cycle is not always implemented effectively and even when it is, it only serves to identify and address areas for improvement over a long period of time, typically 1 year. It is not responsive enough to address urgent issues that arise during the year.

At Marell Consulting Limited we have developed a school improvement approach which combines the self-evaluation cycle with the continuous improvement cycle in order to:

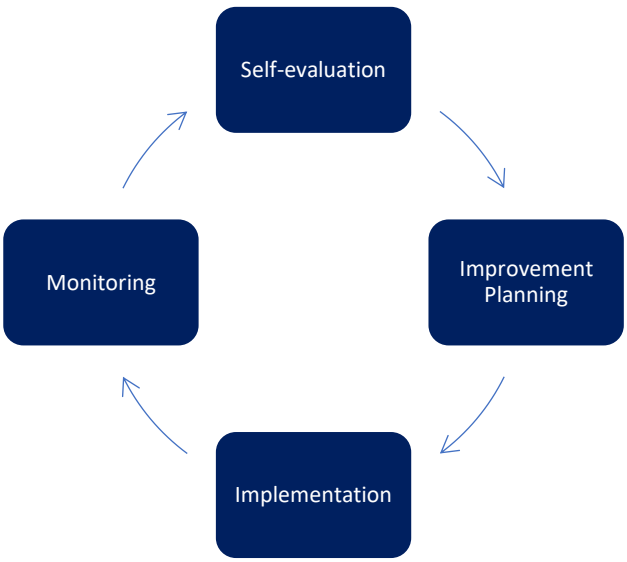
- Monitor every aspect of a school's provision,
- Evaluate each aspect identifying strengths and areas for improvement,
- Address areas for improvement in a timely manner
- Make long-lasting improvements that have a positive impact on the quality of education experienced by pupils.

Our systems make it possible for schools to do what they do well and consistently improve on it while meeting the independent school standards and always being inspection ready. This guidance outlines the key steps to take towards building such a system.

1. Make sure that self-evaluation is effective.

A large majority of schools follow a self-evaluation cycle; however, they do not always follow the same steps and their effectiveness varies widely.

The self-evaluation cycle is usually represented using the **key** elements that are shown in the diagram below:



In order to make sure this process is effective; it is important to consider the guidance outlined below.

- **Self-evaluation must be based on evidence** – I have read many self-evaluation reports that were not based on evidence. These reports contained statements assigning good and outstanding grades for the quality or effectiveness of various aspects of a school's provision without referring to any evidence to justify the grades. The grading statements were followed by paragraphs describing what the school does and how it is done but not how well it is done or what impact each procedure has on the quality of education experienced by pupils at the school. The grades awarded were based on the opinion of the person who wrote the self-evaluation report and their desire to make the school look good no matter what the reality was.

  That sort of report is not accurate and cannot provide a solid basis from which to plan improvements. Self-evaluation must be based on evidence. When there is evidence, it is possible to make evaluations. Evidence also justifies the grades awarded for the various parts of the provision. So how do we get this evidence? We get it by monitoring every aspect of the school's provision. The outcome of monitoring is the evidence that we can then evaluate to create the basis of our self-evaluation. Now let's talk about how you go about monitoring every aspect of your provision.

- **Monitor every aspect of your provision** - This can be done by drawing up a schedule which clearly states what will be monitored, who will do it and how often. The schedule can be compiled by listing every aspect of a school's provision that needs to be evaluated. Make sure to include aspects related to the school's specific educational vision, Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework, compliance with the Independent School Standards.

  For each aspect to be monitored, choose those who will implement. Make sure you choose the right person for each task - do they have the knowledge, experience or skills to complete the tasks, do they have the time to do it given their current workload?

  Next, decide the frequency at which each aspect should be monitored, making sure it is practical and not just an aspiration. Finally, consult the people who have been chosen to implement the schedule in order to ensure that they also think they are capable of completing the tasks assigned and that they have the time to do so based on their existing workload.

  After this, the schedule can be compiled in the form of a calendar listing all monitoring activities per month. To ensure consistent implementation of the schedule it is useful to have a "driver"– someone who will ensure that people complete their tasks as scheduled and hold them to account when they don't. After each monitoring activity, evaluate the outcome and identify any issues that need urgent attention, these will be addressed using a continuous improvement approach which will be outlined further on in the document.

  When this schedule is implemented effectively, the school will have detailed evidence about how effective every aspect of the provision is therefore making self-evaluation a meaningful exercise based on evidence. We have developed a template which schools can use to build their monitoring schedule; it can be found here:

- **Self-evaluation must include clear identification of strengths and areas for improvement** – this should be done for each aspect of the school's provision when evaluating the outcome of monitoring. It is important to stress that strengths are areas in which the school does exceptionally well and not just areas in which they do well. Identifying areas for improvement is important as these will form the basis of the school improvement plan.

- **Self-evaluation must include input from the whole organisation** – In some schools, self-evaluation is a task on someone's to-do-list which they complete in their office and produce a report. This top-down activity does not describe effective self-evaluation. The whole organisation should contribute to the school's self-evaluation and this can take a variety of approaches all of which can be effective if certain guiding factors are followed.

  In some schools, the Heads of Departments are asked to compile an evaluation of their department, identify strengths and weaknesses and pass it onto a senior leader who will use this information to compile a whole school evaluation. In other schools, the senior leader responsible for co-ordinating self-evaluation meets with the middle leaders responsible for various aspects of the school's provision and together they come up with a whole school self-evaluation. Both approaches described above can be effective if the following criteria are met:

  - Heads of Departments and middle leaders take into account the input of staff in their departments so that the process includes a bottom-up perspective;
  - everyone is clear about what is being evaluated and the categories are communicated clearly;
  - everyone is free to make evaluations about aspects that might not be in the defined categories but have an impact on their daily practice;
  - everyone knows what is considered good by the external bodies who are tasked to evaluate us;
  - everyone is honest in their evaluations.

  I raise the issue of honesty here because there is a temptation for staff and leaders to say that aspects of the provision are good because we want them to be, because they think that identifying areas that need improvement exposes the school and will lead inspectors to see what they might otherwise have not seen. Inspectors will identify genuine areas for improvement whether or not we have identified them in our own self-evaluation and inspectors aside, don't we want to identify areas for improvement so that we can address them and provide a better quality of education for our pupils?

  At Marell Consulting Limited our approach involves:

  - summarising the evidence gathered throughout the year from monitoring;
  - highlighting the evaluations made after each monitoring activity
  - distributing the summaries across the whole organisation
  - asking everyone to evaluate the school using Ofsted's evaluation criteria
  - assigning grades for each area of judgment
  - collating the grades
  - writing the final self-evaluation report.

Our approach combines the school's own evaluations of various aspects of their provision carried out by various people throughout the year and a final whole school evaluation using Ofsted criteria so that inspection does not bring about any surprises.

- **Self-evaluation must be guided by defined criteria** - from the school's own educational vision; from Ofsted's education inspection framework and from the DfE's Independent School standards. We talk about the school's own educational vision because every independent school was opened for a reason. The proprietors of the school took the time to apply to the DfE to start a school because there was something they felt strongly about, something they thought was not being done well in the existing education system, something they wanted to fix.

  Hopefully whatever it was is reflected in the school's vision or mission statements. To get to grips with this vision it helps if the proprietor of the school takes the time to share what it was that drove them to start a school of their own. Whatever it is, are you doing it? How well do you do it? It is important for a school's self-evaluation to have some criteria about how well the school is fulfilling that vision. Including Ofsted's inspection framework in your self-evaluation criteria has obvious advantages, you get an idea how inspectors will see and grade your provision before-hand, so you are not taken by surprise. Including criteria about how well your school meets the independent school standards is critical – persistent failure to comply with the standards can lead to loss of a school's registration with the DfE and school closure.

  Not everything in the standards is about quality of education but failure to comply can deprive you of the opportunity to provide a good quality education. Finally, it is important to allow staff the space to evaluate aspects that may not be covered by the criteria outlined above, aspects that affect their daily practice.

  At Marell Consulting Limited, we have developed a template to guide the self - evaluation process included as part of the documents provided.

2. Make sure improvement planning is robust

- **Improvement plans should start with the areas for improvement identified through self – evaluation**: these are the school's improvement aims. They will usually be broad statements about what needs to improve so the next task is to break these down into improvement actions.

- **Relevant research must be used to inform improvement actions** – this is something that is rarely done. Those responsible for school improvement tend to rely only on their knowledge and experience to come up with possible solutions to the issues that need to be addressed. People in these positions will obviously be suitably qualified and experienced, I am not criticising that, I am suggesting that in addition to their own knowledge they could also check what the latest research says about the areas that they are looking to improve – The Education Endowment Foundation is one example of a good source of research information. They (the EEF) develop and summarise the best evidence available about what works to improve teaching and learning.

- **Consult those who work in similar schools to find out what has worked for them**. Creating partnerships and targeted networking can help build the relationships from which school leaders can draw on for advice about effective practice. Networking in this context is not limited to physical meetings attended regularly, it can include online networking – LinkedIn and Twitter have large networks of teachers and school leaders who share useful information.

- **Staff members should be consulted when compiling improvement actions** – this is very important. Those who compile improvement plans have a view from above and although they might be more experienced and qualified than those on the ground, like teachers and support staff, they lack a certain perspective that only those in the thick of it have. Encourage and empower them to conduct action research. Ask them how they think things can be improved and discuss with them how you think things can be improved. This will lead to more powerful improvement actions and a stronger buy-in to the school's improvement plan.

- **Actions on improvement plans must be SMART** – Anytime the acronym SMART is mentioned, everyone nods because they know what it's all about. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound is what most will reel out – there are minor variations for some of the letters but that's not what's important here. What's important is the fact that very few people write SMART targets or actions despite being able to say what SMART stands for. On an improvement plan, how can you make sure the actions you have set are **S**pecific?

  Here's a test that is useful - if someone picks up your improvement plan and chooses any action on the plan, will they be able to go and do it without asking you a follow-up question? If the answer is yes, then the action is specific. If the answer is no then your action is not specific. The answer to their follow-up question, in the case where they have one will be a more specific action.

  The **M**easurable aspect can be taken care of by drawing up success criteria. Criteria which outlines how you will know that you have achieved what you set out to do. In order to know if your actions are **A**chievable or **R**ealistic, it's important to consult others, is the person who has been chosen to complete an action the right person for the job? Do they have the knowledge or experience required? Do they have the time to do it? Can you provide them with the resources to complete the task? The **T**ime-bound element is taken care of by deadlines.

- **Those responsible for implementing improvement actions should be consulted -** As mentioned above consulting those responsible for completing improvement actions is important if we want those actions to be achievable and realistic. It is also important because it increases buy-in from staff and improves the chances of effective implementation

- **Circulate the completed improvement plan** – having a robust improvement plan is important but implementation is everything. In addition to being involved in self-evaluation and being consulted in improvement planning, if staff can hold the school's improvement plan in their hand it adds to the feeling of ownership and responsibility which in turn increases the likelihood of implementation.

3. Make sure improvement plans are implemented strictly

- **Link the improvement plan to the performance management process** – do this with any staff member who is responsible for implementing an action on the improvement plan. Adding school improvement actions to their performance management targets is a powerful way to hold staff to account for implementation. This is assuming of course that the school's performance management procedures are robust and maybe even include incentives for achievement of targets

- **Delegate a "driver" to ensure that staff implement the actions assigned to them** – this is key to successful implementation of the improvement plan. If the plan is not followed strictly, no improvements will be made. The "driver" does not necessarily need to be the Headteacher, it just needs to be someone who has a way of getting people to do what needs to be done. Someone who can motivate, influence, inspire others to action.

- **Regularly monitor how well the improvement plan is implemented, hold people to account for their actions, record progress** – This can be done once a term, checking if actions that should have been completed have been completed, looking at the evidence, recording progress on the improvement plan. This can be done by the "driver" mentioned above. What happens when staff have not completed their actions? Holding people to account for completing their actions can sometimes be challenging in a small independent schools where staff feel like a family. Using an external critical friend can be useful – a fellow school leader from another school or a consultant.

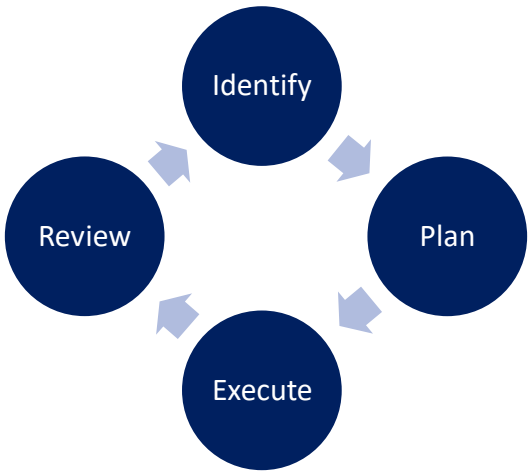
- **Review the results, summarise improvements, identify areas that still need to be addressed** – After checking how well implementation is going move on to checking if the actions implemented are leading to the results that you seek. Are improvement actions addressing the issues identified during self-evaluation, are they having the desired impact? If yes, what improvements have been made? If no, how else can you address this area of improvement? Is there an alternative set of improvement actions that can be set? If so, add these actions to the improvement plan.

- **Circulate the improvement plan each time it is updated** – keeping everyone informed of progress contributes to the aim of making improvement part of the school culture. It reminds staff that as a school there is an aspiration to do better all the time. It gives staff members a sense of pride in their contribution to the betterment of the school and will increase their commitment to continue playing their part. Seeing the improvements that have come as a result of their input will strengthen the drive to do even better and lead to consistent implementation of improvement actions.

Effective self-evaluation, robust school improvement planning and strict implementation of improvement plans makes it possible for schools to monitor every aspect of their provision, identify strengths and areas for improvement, address areas for improvement and improve the effectiveness of the school. This will have a positive long-term impact on the quality of education pupils experience at the school. These processes however are ideal for making big changes over a long period of time – typically 1 year. They are not responsive enough to address urgent issues that arise during the year. To address these, the continuous improvement cycle is more effective.

4. Use the continuous improvement cycle alongside the self-evaluation cycle

Continuous improvement is an ongoing approach to improve products, services or processes. It is not a process that was developed for the education sector, but it can be applied successfully to drive school improvement. Its aim is to make small incremental changes over time, and it is a good approach to use to address the gap left by the self-evaluation cycle. Continuous improvement is usually represented by the "plan, do, check act" cycle however for the purposes of this guidance, the "identify, plan, execute, review" cycle is more relevant.



- **Identify** the changes needed – in order to identify what changes are needed you need to have a system of monitoring every aspect of your provision regularly. We have already discussed in detail how this can be managed using a schedule – see the section titled "Make sure the self-evaluation process is effective". After each monitoring activity on the schedule is completed analyse the outcome and identify any issues that need urgent attention. Issues that cannot be left until the next self-evaluation, issues that need immediate change.

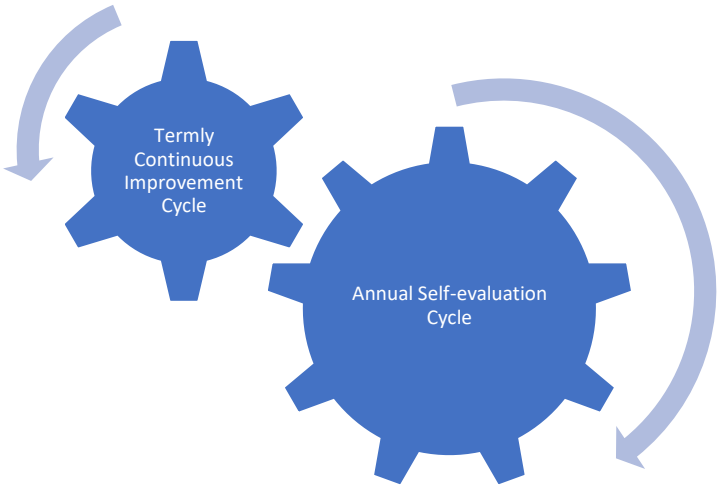
- **Plan** how improvements can be made – follow the guidance given above under the heading "Make sure improvement planning is robust**".** The only difference between what you do for this step under the self-evaluation cycle and the continuous improvement cycle is the timeframe. Actions that are taken here have shorter time frames, instead of a year you will be aiming for example to complete actions within a school term or half-term as you will be dealing with something that needs to be addressed urgently. Also, if the proposed solution does not address the issue, you need to have enough time to propose another solution and implement it.

- **Execute** the plan – follow the guidance given above under the heading "Make sure improvement plans are implemented strictly". The only difference is that here you will be implementing a plan to address 1 or 2 issues identified after 1 aspect of the provision has been evaluated as opposed to addressing all the issues identified after a whole-school evaluation.

- **Review** the results – monitor how well the plan was implemented. What was the outcome? Did implementing set actions resolve the urgent issue that was identified? If the responses to these questions are positive then great, the issue has been resolved. If not, what went wrong? Is there an alternative approach that can be used? If so, move on to the plan stage of the cycle and repeat.

5. Combine the 2 cycles

In order to drive school improvement, leaders need to build systems that not only address areas for improvement annually, systems should be responsive enough to identify and address urgent issues as they arise during the year. Systems that combine an annual self-evaluation cycle and a termly continuous improvement cycle running together. This is the type of system that we at Marell Consulting Limited promote and it can be seen in the diagram below:



Effective implementation of annual self-evaluation combined with regular continuous improvement will ensure that your school;

- consistently improves the quality of education pupils experience,
- delivers its specific educational vision,
- complies with the standards and
- is always inspection ready.

However, success is determined by how well these procedures are implemented. In order to implement these procedures effectively, it is important not only to follow the guidance given in the section titled “Make sure improvement plans are implemented strictly” but also to make school improvement part of the school’s culture.

6. **Make improvement part of the school culture**

First, let's talk about school culture. There are many ways of defining school culture but for this document I will use one of the definitions of culture offered by David W Hughes in his book "Future-Proof Your School". He says that a basic social model of culture is the idea of "the way we do things around here", that it is "the distinctive and even quirky behaviours that characterise how a particular school operates".

School improvement can only be effective when it becomes part of "the way we do things around here", when the proprietors, the headteachers, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and support staff take the time to think about what they do, how well they do it and consider how they can do it better in the future to benefit their pupils. So how can we achieve this?

- **Involve staff in all school improvement procedures** - We have already mentioned in detail the importance of consulting and involving staff extensively in monitoring every aspect of the provision, self-evaluation, improvement planning, implementing improvement plans. It increases buy-in and inspires ownership of these procedures therefore contributing to making school improvement part of the school culture.

- **Share the school's specific educational vision** – Making sure that all staff know the reason why the proprietors started the school. Understanding what they felt so strongly about that they needed to start their own school goes a long way towards inspiring staff to want to deliver on that vision and to do it well.

- **Recruit staff members who are the right fit** – Make sure those responsible for recruitment search not just for people who are suitably qualified and experienced for school roles, but for people who are the right fit for the school. People who are aligned with the school's specific vision and whose experience shows that the way they do things is similar to the "the way we do things around here"

- **Ensure induction is effective** - Making sure that when new staff members join the school they are effectively inducted into "the way we do things here" is important, as important as making sure that "the way we do things here" includes your school's approach to improvement

Following this guidance will help you drive school improvement in your school. Marell Consulting Limited works in partnership with Headteachers and the leaders of independent schools to develop customised school improvement systems. Get in touch and we will work closely with you to develop yours. We also deliver training workshops which expand on this guidance and details of the next one can be found on our website.