Using the PRINCIPAL PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT TOOL

Australian Council for Educational Research
Highly effective leaders continually seek ways to become still more effective. They do this by reflecting on their current leadership and how it might be further improved, and by involving trusted colleagues in this process.

The Principal Performance Improvement Tool (PPIT) has been developed to assist school principals and others who aspire to this role to reflect on their current leadership practices. The tool is informed by international research into the kinds of leadership that result in improved teaching and learning. It also draws heavily on the lived experiences of practicing school principals.

The PPIT describes what highly effective principals do. Underlying these observable leadership behaviours are personal attributes – values, dispositions, skills and understandings – reflected in the practices described in the tool.

Although principals generally work as part of a leadership team, the PPIT is designed to assist principals to reflect on their individual leadership. The tool is not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of entire leadership teams. And, unlike the National School Improvement Tool, it does not address whole-school improvement efforts; its focus is on the work of individual principals.

The PPIT describes four levels of increasingly effective practice in each of six aspects of school leadership. A principal can use this framework to reflect on their leadership and to identify opportunities for improvement. The tool’s descriptions of increasing effectiveness – from ‘low’ to ‘outstanding’ – distinguish it from frameworks that define only a single performance standard, and others that primarily describe career progression as a principal. A distinctive feature of the PPIT is that it identifies better and worse practices as a leader and provides a language for talking about those practices.
A principal can use the PPIT to reflect on their own leadership; however, reflections on leadership ideally are not solitary exercises. They include the perspectives of others who are in a position to provide meaningful input.

Becoming familiar with the PPIT

A first step in using the PPIT is to become familiar with, and develop an understanding of, the tool itself. The PPIT does not describe everything principals do in their day-to-day work. Instead, it identifies practices shown by research to have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning and thus student outcomes. The tool focuses self-reflection on these practices and not on other aspects of a principal’s work – as important as these may be.

Focusing on current performance

The intention of the PPIT is to support reflection on current performance as a principal. This usually means calling to mind specific actions, interactions and initiatives illustrative of practices and behaviours described in the tool. These examples provide evidence of the quality and effectiveness of a principal’s leadership. Because the tool is designed to support reflection on current practice, examples need to be relatively recent. The aim is not to demonstrate improvement over time, although a principal’s use of the tool at different times during their career may be helpful in reflecting on how their leadership has improved.
Using multiple indicators of performance

Principals can develop a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of their leadership by gathering feedback from multiple sources. These sources may include self-reflections, conversations with colleagues, input from mentors and responses to staff/parent/student surveys. The ‘triangulation’ of input in this way increases the accuracy of conclusions based on the tool and minimises the impact of extraneous influences and possible biases. From the perspective of the principal, a guiding question is, ‘How can I demonstrate that this behaviour is a consistent and verifiable feature of my leadership?’

Recording demonstrated practices

The PPIT can be used to record demonstrated practices. One way to do this is to highlight practices and behaviours when they are identified as regular features of a principal’s leadership. Agreement may need to be reached (for example, through conversations with others) on how regularly something must be observed to be highlighted. The intention in highlighting is not to use the tool as a checklist or to conclude definitively that a particular practice is present or absent; the fact that something is not highlighted may simply mean that there has not been an opportunity to demonstrate or observe that behaviour. Principals can use this highlighting process to reflect on what they are doing well and to identify areas for improvement.
INDICATORS OF LEADERSHIP

In using the PPIT it is important to think broadly about the many ways in which leadership is demonstrated in a school, including through a principal’s daily decisions, actions, strategic planning, conversations, problem solving, communications and outreach. Almost everything a principal says and does is a potential indicator of the quality of their leadership.

Some aspects of a principal’s work may be more difficult to demonstrate than others. Ongoing actions to protect and build the school culture; efforts to inspire, influence, build trust, gain respect and achieve buy-in; work to build relationships; confidential conversations; the encouragement of others; and the judicious timing of decisions and interventions may all be largely invisible to others in the school. However, wherever possible, such activities need to be recognised as evidence of a principal’s leadership and incorporated into reflections on practice.

The perspectives of others

Colleagues can be valuable sources of reflection and feedback, as can others outside the school if they are sufficiently familiar with a principal’s work. The perspectives of others can be especially helpful in reflecting on a principal’s success in developing a shared vision for the school, achieving school-wide commitment to school goals and building productive relationships within and beyond the school. Such feedback might be sought informally in conversations with parents, the school leadership team, teachers and students. Other insights may be available from local business and community leaders, a coach or mentor, members of a collegiate group to which the principal belongs and regular performance reviews. Some principals use formal methods for gathering feedback on their leadership, including 360-degree feedback exercises and surveys of teachers and parents.

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Indicators in day-to-day work

A principal’s leadership influences most aspects of a school’s work. However, much of what is achieved in schools is a team effort, meaning that it can be difficult to identify and confirm a principal’s personal contributions. A challenge for principals is to reflect on the ways in which their leadership has had an impact in the school. In some instances there may be documentary evidence such as written testimonials, newsletters, emails, annual reports, strategic plans, websites and minutes of meetings. But the evidence of a principal’s impact is more likely to be in observable changes to a school’s culture, processes, structures, resource allocations, staffing, professional learning, facilities and external partnerships, and may be reflected in data such as staff retention rates and sick leave, levels of parental engagement and measures of student attendance, behaviour and achievement.

Evidence from other tools

Principals and schools use various tools to evaluate their work and impact. These tools include, but are not limited to, the National School Improvement Tool, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles, the McKinsey Organizational Health Index, the Diagnostic Inventory of School Alignment, the Australian Business Excellence Framework, the School Improvement and Accountability Framework, and the Leadership Impact Assessment Tool. These tools and others can be helpful in reflecting on a principal’s leadership and for gathering evidence relevant to the behaviours and practices described in the Principal Performance Improvement Tool.

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