

Leadership that transforms schools and school systems



Professor Brian Caldwell
Educational Transformations and University
of Melbourne

*Professor Brian J. Caldwell is Principal Consultant at Educational Transformations and Professor Emeritus at the University of Melbourne, where he is a former Dean of Education. He has served as a researcher, author and consultant on leadership and the management of change in schools and school systems for four decades, and his professional assignments span 43 countries. He has been an Australian contributor to the seven-nation International Study of School Autonomy and Learning since 2014. He has authored, co-authored or co-edited 16 books on related work, with his most recent being *The self-transforming school* (2013) and *The autonomy premium* (2016). Previous titles include *Re-imagining educational leadership* (2005) and *Why not the best schools?* (2008). He is a former President and Gold Medallist of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders and a former Deputy Chair of the Australian Council for Educational Research board of directors.*

Abstract

This paper will report on the findings of four international research projects on leadership in high-performing school systems around the world. The session will focus on building the capacity of school leaders to exercise professional autonomy and how different levels of government achieve strategic alignment among policies in their efforts to lift performance.

The paper summarises findings reported in *The autonomy premium* (2016) along with the findings of a national survey of principals in Australia. The major part of this paper is devoted to comparing Australia on 15 benchmarks derived from international studies in 2017 in Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Estonia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States.

The key message is that Australia will not become one of the top 10 high-performing systems unless there is a transformation of approaches to leadership and leadership development at all levels, and unless due account is taken of outstanding practice in schools and school systems around the nation.

Innovation and the resourcefulness of leaders abounds, but these must be scaled up. This paper will explore the challenges and priorities for governments and leaders in schools and school systems.

Foundations

The framework for these studies was established in research in 2007 in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools, conducted in Australia, China, England, Finland, United States and Wales. Findings were published in *Why not the best schools?* (Caldwell, 2008). It was concluded that:

Schools that have been transformed or have made good progress to transformation are adept at strengthening and aligning four forms of capital: intellectual capital, social capital, spiritual capital and financial capital, achieving this strength and alignment through outstanding governance. (Caldwell, 2008, p. 10)

‘Intellectual capital’ refers to the level of knowledge and skill of those who work in or for the school. ‘Social capital’ refers to the strength of formal and informal partnerships and networks involving the school and all individuals, agencies, organisations and institutions that have the potential to support and be supported by the school. ‘Spiritual capital’ refers to the strength of moral purpose and the degree of coherence among values, beliefs and attitudes about life and learning (for some schools, spiritual capital has a foundation in religion; in other schools, spiritual capital may refer to ethics and values shared by members of the school and its community). ‘Financial capital’ refers to the money available to support the school. ‘Governance’ is the process through which the school builds its intellectual, social, financial and spiritual capital and aligns them to achieve its goals.

A finer-grained analysis of what these entail and a more nuanced view of school autonomy has emerged in recent studies.

A nuanced view of autonomy

This framework described in Caldwell (2008) was the starting point for a second series of studies from 2014–17 as part of the International Study of School Autonomy and Learning (ISSAL), which brought together a team of researchers from Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Finland, Israel and Singapore. Findings for Australia were included in two publications: a book entitled *The autonomy premium* (Caldwell, 2016a) and a report of a national survey of principals entitled *What the principals say* (Caldwell, 2016b). The distinction between structural autonomy and professional autonomy was an important finding.

‘Autonomy’ refers to the decentralisation from the system to the school of significant authority to make decisions, especially in respect to curriculum, pedagogy, personnel and resources, within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities.

‘Structural autonomy’ refers to policies, regulations and procedures that permit the school to exercise autonomy. Schools may take up such a remit in a variety of ways, or not at all, including ways that are ineffective if the intent is to improve outcomes for students. The granting of autonomy may make no difference to outcomes for students unless the school has the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference and uses that capacity to achieve this end.

‘Professional autonomy’ refers to teachers and principals having the capacity to make decisions that are likely to make a difference to outcomes for students, and this capacity is exercised in a significant, systemic and sustained fashion. Professional autonomy calls for the exercise of judgement, with a high level of discretion in the exercise of that judgement.

International benchmarks

Two projects have been mounted in 2017: one dealing with strategic alignment among different levels of government, and the other with programs for preparation and ongoing development of teachers and principals.

Narratives have been prepared on strategic alignment in 12 countries, 10 of which performed at a significantly higher level than Australia on at least one of the tests in PISA 2015 and TIMSS 2015; the 12 countries are Australia, Canada (Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario), China (Hong Kong), England, Estonia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and the United States (Massachusetts). The narratives reveal that different levels of government make provision and provide support for school autonomy in different ways. Based on principals’ self-reports of school autonomy in PISA 2015, it was evident that some of the 12 countries were above and some were below the OECD average for school autonomy.

Fifteen benchmarks were identified, with 12 that facilitate comparisons in accounting for current high performance and three on roles in adaptability or sustaining high performance in the longer term. These benchmarks are as follows:

Benchmarks in securing current levels of performance

1. Trust
2. Constitutional arrangements
3. Number of levels of government
4. Educational history
5. Establishment of current roles
6. Societal valuing of education
7. Priority attached to the human resource
8. Local government
9. Number of schools administered

10. Disruptive change in education
11. School autonomy
12. Professional capacity

Benchmarks in adaptability

13. Innovation in education
14. Preparing for the future
15. Alignment of education, economy and society

Australia falls short in the value it places on its schools

Where does Australia stand on how it values its schools among the 15 benchmarks? I have selected six: trust; educational history; societal valuing of education; priority attached to the human resource; innovation in education; and alignment of education, economy and society. The benchmarks are not values in themselves, but there are values at play in the way we deal with them in policy and practice.

Trust among stakeholders is invariably listed as a characteristic of outstanding performance. Narratives on policy in school education in several countries referred to a high level of trust. Trust is particularly evident in some of the world's top-performing school systems, including Estonia, Finland, Japan and Singapore. There is evidence that principals in Finland do not engage in detailed oversight of teaching and learning to the extent they do or should do in many other countries, including Australia, because they trust their teachers to know what to do and when to do it; this is related to outstanding programs in initial teacher education and the high level of professional autonomy of teachers.

Public discourse and media headlines often suggest a lower than desirable level of trust in schools and school systems in Australia. Frankly, I have seen no counterpart to the continuous battles between different levels of government that characterise the scene in Australia, and this does little to enhance public trust. I include here the debates and conflicts about funding for schools that have raged for more than 50 years.

Most of the high-performing countries have a long educational history extending over many centuries. Australia, in contrast, has had systems of public education for less than 150 years. Australia does not value or have confidence in its public schools to anywhere near the same extent as evident among the top performers, where the importance of public education was established or resolved long ago. Settlement about the roles of public and private education has not been reached in Australia.

This does not mean that Australia will or should end up with close to 100 per cent of schools in the public sector should it become a high-performing nation. After

all, in another international comparison, less than 10 per cent of students in high-performing Hong Kong attend a state-owned school. The large majority attend schools owned and operated by a private or not-for-profit entity, including churches.

Associated with the benchmarks of trust and educational history is societal valuing of education. While there is acceptance of education's importance in Australia, we fall short of the top performers in this regard.

Some high-performing countries realise that the human resource is the most important resource in securing their futures. Singapore is the stand-out example because the country has no resources other than its people. Education has been a driving factor in the journey from independence in 1965, becoming one of the region's economic powerhouses. The carefully designed and integrated approach to initial teacher education and leader development in Singapore is among the world's best, as highlighted in a recent report (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The OECD reports that innovation in schools is generally more extensive than is often understood, and this is the case in Australia. An important issue is the extent to which innovation in schools contributes to innovation in a general sense. It is noteworthy that all high-performing nations in PISA and TIMSS are in the top 25 countries on the Global Innovation Index (Australia is 19th of 126 countries/economies).

An interesting variation on the language of innovation was provided by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who noted in a speech at the World Economic Forum in 2016 that Canada, like Australia, had been known up to that point for the economic strength derived from mining and other commodities. Rather than call for innovation to generate other sources of economic strength, he referred to resourcefulness:

Canada was mostly known for its resources. I want you to know Canadians for our resourcefulness ... We have a diverse and creative population, outstanding education and healthcare systems, and advanced infrastructure. (Trudeau, 2017, p. 343)

Resourcefulness may be a helpful concept for Australians, who often balk at the idea of innovation.

In most of the top-performing nations, there is a strong alignment of education, economy and society. Where that alignment is not strong, there is a high priority in policymaking to make it so. It is most striking in countries where the human resource is pre-eminent. In Australia, we currently place a higher value on university education than on vocational education. However, many of the top-performing countries have a system of basic education for nine years, after which students make a choice between upper secondary education and

polytechnic education. They may move from one stream to another if they change their minds, as is possible between continuing in universities or polytechnic colleges. Finland exemplifies this approach.

Did Australian states make the wrong decision to abandon technical schools in favour of a single secondary stream? A modern polytechnic at the upper levels of schooling could be state-of-the-art in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, facilities and equipment, and might make a major contribution in addressing concerns about performance in STEM or alleviating the need for overseas recruitment.

The agenda for enhancing the value Australia places on its schools can be described in straightforward terms:

- bipartisan effort everywhere
- serious reform of initial teacher education
- empowering schools through higher levels of professional autonomy
- declaring and acting on recognition that our most important resource is the human resource, and not waiting around for another boom—mining or otherwise
- invigorating an innovative culture in our schools by encouraging and rewarding resourcefulness
- securing a better alignment of education, society and economy, especially in rebalancing upper secondary and polytechnic education as well as university and vocational education.

What structural arrangements are best?

Two benchmarks concern structural arrangements, one of which relates to the number of levels of governments shaping what occurs in schools. Three federations were considered in the 2017 study. The federal government in Canada may play no part in education. Federal governments in Australia and the United States play an important role by making funds available, to which strict conditions are attached. Local government has a role in most countries under consideration, with this being a constitutional requirement in Finland. Local government is not mentioned in the Constitution of Australia and plays a minimal role.

Another benchmark concerned the number of schools administered by the controlling level of government. This is strikingly small in countries like Estonia and Finland (municipal government), and to some extent England (local authority) and Canada and the United States (school district). It is very large in some states in Australia—notably in New South Wales and Victoria, where the state government controls thousands of schools. Geographical distances are especially large in states like Queensland and Western Australia. Regional

levels of administration in state bureaucracies are not considered levels of government.

Conclusion

Principals can lead the effort in their schools and communities to increase the value this country places on its schools, but this is a cause that demands commitment and effort on an unprecedented scale, and a profound change in culture if Australia is to become the great nation we want it to be.

Leaders at the highest levels must now give thought to structural arrangements that suit the 21st century. This in no way diminishes what has been achieved over nearly 150 years, but serious questions must now be asked and answered to ensure that Australia can rise to the level of the top 10 high-performing nations.

References

- Caldwell, B. J. (2008). *Why not the best schools?* Melbourne, Australia: Educational Transformations.
- Caldwell, B. J. (2016a). *The autonomy premium: Professional autonomy and student achievement in the 21st century.* Melbourne, Australia: ACER Press.
- Caldwell, B. J. (2016b). *What the principals say: On school autonomy and student learning in public schools in Australia in the 21st century.* Melbourne, Australia: Educational Transformations.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Burns, D., Campbell, C., Goodwin, A. L., Hammerness, K., Low, E-L., McIntyre, A., Sato, M., & Zeichner, K. (2017). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Trudeau, J. (2017). *Common ground: A political life.* London, England: Oneworld Publications.