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School leadership and learning: An Australian overview¹



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Abstract

This paper draws together findings from a recent major review of school leadership in Australia. In 2006, DEST commissioned an ACER team to prepare the *Country Background Report* as part of Australia's contribution to the OECD's international activity *Improving School Leadership*. Preparation of the report provided a timely opportunity to consult with key stakeholders and reflect on school leadership issues in Australia. The research confirms that leadership is important for student learning: academic achievement, academic self-concept and engagement in learning are shaped by teacher and school practices that are influenced by school leadership. Leaders contribute to student learning through their influence on other staff, organisational capacity and context. However, there needs to be greater clarity around the work school leaders are expected to do, and

how they can best be supported, if they are to avoid role overload and retain the key focus on improving student learning. Creating the conditions for effective school leadership requires focus and support from the systems within which most leaders work. The paper discusses some promising initiatives in these regards, along with priorities for further development and research.

Introduction: Why the focus on school leadership?

In 2006, the OECD launched a major international project, *Improving School Leadership*. It has attracted a great deal of interest: Australia is one of 22 countries taking part².

² Information on the project is available from: www.oecd.org/edu

¹ This paper draws on the report Australia: Country Background Report. OECD *Improving School Leadership Activity* by Anderson et al. (2007). The report was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science & Training. The contributions of DEST, the project National Advisory Committee, and the individuals and organisations consulted for that report are gratefully acknowledged. The views in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily of any other organisation or individual.

The project was stimulated by several related issues. First, effective school leadership is increasingly viewed as a key to education reform and improved schooling outcomes. As a consequence, the roles and expectations for school leaders have changed substantially – being a good manager able to implement decisions made in head office no longer fulfils the job description in most OECD countries. Second, despite the growing importance attached to school leadership – or is it because of the growing importance? – a number of countries are struggling to attract well-qualified applicants to take on leadership roles (OECD, 2005). Third, there are also concerns about the extent to which leaders are adequately prepared for the job, and the availability of ongoing professional learning opportunities.

The OECD project is an exercise in international collaboration that is exploring the following key questions:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of school leaders under different governance structures? What seem to be promising policies and conditions for making school leaders most effective in improving school outcomes?
- How can effective school leadership be best developed and supported? What policies and practices would be most conducive to these ends?

The intention is to help better understand the changing nature of school leadership in OECD countries and for countries to share experiences and learn from each other.

In 2006, as part of Australia's involvement, DEST commissioned an ACER team to prepare a country background report in accordance with the OECD's guidelines and questions. The guidelines adopted a broad view of school leadership: the authority and responsibility to lead do not necessarily

reside only in one person, but can be distributed within schools and among different people. The project team conducted a detailed research review and consulted with a broad range of organisations and individuals throughout the country to produce the report (Anderson *et al.*, 2007).

In Australia the field of school leadership has been growing rapidly in recent years and a wide variety of initiatives are under way. Partly because of all this activity, but also because of the diverse nature of Australian schooling, the knowledge base about school leadership is somewhat fragmented and policy priorities are not always clear. Preparation of the country background report provided a timely opportunity to consult with key stakeholders and reflect on school leadership issues in Australia.

This paper focuses on what are perhaps the two key issues examined in the report – how can (and do) school leaders influence student learning?; and what can school systems do to better support them in this task?

In discussing these issues, caution is needed in generalising across the diversity of Australian schooling. Unlike some other countries, Australia does not have a single school system. While schooling across the country has many common features, and there have been significant steps towards achieving greater national consistency, there are a number of differences that affect school operations. The situation is made even more complex by the existence of a substantial and diverse non-government school sector that enrolls one-third of all students.

How does leadership influence student learning?

There are formidable conceptual and empirical challenges in establishing the links between school leadership

and school outcomes. A wide range of different factors are potentially important in shaping student outcomes. School leadership influences these factors and is influenced by them in ways that are difficult to conceptualise and measure. Nevertheless, an extensive research base supports the view that leadership is of critical importance in effective schooling (for further details, see Mulford, 2007).

It can be concluded that it does matter which Australian school a student attends and how that school is organised and led. Student academic achievement, academic self-concept and engagement and participation in school and then further study and/or work have been shown to be linked to teacher and school practices, that is, practices that can be influenced by school leadership.

A great deal of the school's success depends on which areas the educational leader chooses to spend time and attention. Since a single input by a leader can have multiple outcomes, leaders need to be able to see the whole as well as the individual elements and the relationships between them over time.

Australian research demonstrates that success is more likely when the schools are collegial, consultative, collaborative and involve partnerships, and matters are shared and owned by stakeholders. Small, rural schools offer particular challenges in this regard. An example of Australian research supporting these claims is a two-year case study and questionnaire study involving 96 South Australian and Tasmanian secondary schools, including over 5,000 students and 3,700 teachers and their principals (Silins & Mulford, 2004). The research found that leadership that makes a difference in both position-based (principal) and distributed (administrative team and teachers) contexts. However, both forms of

leadership are only indirectly related to student outcomes.

The important variable that links leadership, teachers' work and student outcomes is *organisational learning supported by appropriate and ongoing professional development*. Organisational learning involves three sequential development stages: a trusting and collaborative climate; a shared and monitored mission; and taking initiatives and risks. The process identified by the research is that leadership contributes to organisational learning, which in turn influences what happens in the core business of the school – the teaching and learning. It influences the way students perceive their schooling, how teachers organise and conduct their instruction, and their educational interactions with, and expectations for, their students.

The South Australian and Tasmanian research also found that students' positive perceptions of teachers' work directly promotes their participation in school, academic self-concept and engagement with school. Student participation is directly and student engagement indirectly (through retention at school) related to academic achievement. School size is negatively, and socioeconomic status and student home educational environment are positively, linked to these relationships.

The research indicates that particular leadership practices seem to be more effective in promoting improved student outcomes in schools:

- values held by successful principals include being ethical, authentic and consultative and demonstrating integrity, compassion and an ability to promote staff ownership;
- successful principals provide individual support, develop organisational culture (working with and through others to build

professional commitment and capacity that focuses on teaching and learning), and provide structure, vision, expectations for performance and intellectual stimulation; however, there is a need for staff ownership for any changes in school structure and organisation to be accepted;

- distributed or shared leadership is vital for school success, especially where it is collaborative, facilitative, focuses on student learning and improvement, is motivating for teachers and students alike, and develops a critical mass of reform-minded staff.

The research does not imply that there is a 'one size fits all' formula for effective school leadership. The context for leadership and school reform must be taken more into account with variables such as Education Department policies and practices, school location, school size, and home educational environment having been shown to have a clear, interactive effect on leadership, the school and student outcomes.

Although the background report was able to draw on a wide range of Australian research studies, this is a challenging area of work that needs ongoing support, the development of new conceptualisations and empirical approaches, and close interaction with the fields of policy and practice.

How can leaders be supported in focusing on student learning?

Finding the 'next generation' of school leaders is a key issue in Australia. It draws attention to the need for better pathways and processes of support for prospective and established school leaders. Although school leadership is prominent in policy and practice, the background report suggests that

Australia is experiencing serious leadership supply problems (e.g. filling principal vacancies, and identification of aspirants). Along with such problems are a number of factors influencing the attractiveness of leadership positions (e.g. negative media coverage and the intensified nature of leaders' work). Paradoxically, however, surveys of principals show that while role overload and stress are commonly experienced, the large majority also report that their role as principal gives them great satisfaction. It would seem that the excitement and rewards from leaders' work are not being communicated clearly enough to the teacher workforce as a whole or the public at large.

In most schools and school systems in Australia the only formal qualifications required of school leaders, including principals, are the same as those for teachers – completion of a four-year pre-service education course from a recognised institution and registration with the appropriate state regulatory body. Many aspirant and practising principals, however, do engage in postgraduate study and a variety of forms of professional learning. Some specific requirements for becoming a school leader are evident in some sectors (e.g. the Catholic school system in Western Australia).

Most school systems have now developed a leadership continuum framework that traces the 'leadership journey' from aspirations through to beginning in leadership roles, consolidation and growth, high achievement in the role, and transitions to other roles. Such continua are being used to support the preparation and ongoing professional learning of school leaders by identifying the types of foundation programs and other activities needed at different stages of the career.

Along with continua, the use of standards frameworks to guide the professional learning and development of school leaders is a notable development in recent years (see also Ingvarson & Anderson, 2007). Developed by school leader professional associations, employers and researchers, the more recent sets of standards reflect a complex and comprehensive professional knowledge base. This is in contrast to the lists of competencies and elements of job descriptions which characterised many of the statements about leaders' work in the 1990s.

Principal preparation and other school leadership programs reflect a variety of structures, collaborations, institutional arrangements and more active modes of learning. These include measures to address leadership capacity-building, first-time and experienced principal mentoring and shadowing programs. A number of these initiatives have been developed collaboratively and shared across State and Territory education authorities and sectors of schooling.

A new development for Australia is Teaching Australia's nation and profession-wide in its coverage, Leading Australia's Schools Program. The program is designed to meet the needs of mid-career principals with up to 80 principal participants per year in two cohorts. The intention is to develop a critical mass of high-performing school leaders, who in turn can take on responsibility for school improvement at school and system levels.

Overall, professional learning opportunities are probably most widely established for newly appointed principals (e.g. induction programs). However, a number of programs specifically target women and Indigenous leadership. In light of calls for a need to spread the leadership load in schools and to develop schools as professional learning communities,

the professional learning of leadership teams seems also set to increase in importance.

Although much has been accomplished in recent years in better preparing and supporting school leaders, some significant challenges remain:

- 1 Identifying those factors that are of central importance in the preparation of school leaders. The development and use of leadership standards frameworks can play a significant role in this regard so long as the frameworks draw on a strong evidence base and are subject to ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- 2 Striking an appropriate balance between developing capability and competency aspects to leading and managing a school, and meeting individual and school system needs, is a continuing challenge.
- 3 Improving the research evidence in Australia about how specific program components affect school leaders' development and performance on the job, and how the benefits compare to program costs. The relatively small-scale and fragmented nature of much research makes it difficult to develop knowledge and understanding of quality professional leadership learning.

Conclusion

Although Australia has a good overall record in school outcomes, including in international comparisons of student performance, there are strong pressures to lift schooling quality and improve equity. More responsibilities have been devolved to schools and accountability demands have increased. The leaders of most schools are required to work with their staff and community to develop strategic plans with clearly articulated outcome targets and improvement strategies. Success is more likely

when the schools are collegial and consultative. Creating the conditions for effective school leadership requires a strong sense of partnership and support from the school systems within which most leaders work.

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