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# 'Trends and Imperatives in Educational Leadership', in NSW DET

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## TRENDS AND IMPERATIVES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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### The Dynamic and Challenging Context of School Leadership

The job of the principal and other school leaders has become more demanding, stressful and complex. Whitaker (2003) argues that the contextual changes and shifting roles of principals have contributed to problems of selection, recruitment, and retention of quality candidates (see also Norton, 2002; Goodwin, et. al., 2003).

Elements of the contemporary educational leadership context include:

1. The aging population of principals and other educational leaders and leadership succession.
2. Attracting and preparing the next generation of educational leaders.
3. New accountabilities and responsibilities.
4. New technology.
5. Public and stakeholder demands and criticism.
6. Competition within and between educational systems.
7. Balancing managerial and leadership responsibilities.
8. Initiating and coping with change.
9. Fostering and distributing leadership across the school and system.
10. Developing and maintaining a positive school culture centred on teaching and learning.
11. Facilitating staff professional learning.
12. Handling conflict.
13. The need for 'moral', 'authentic' leadership.

### Best Practice In Leadership: Findings From AESOP<sup>1</sup>

A recent research project carried out in NSW, AESOP (An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project) revealed how educational leaders are coping with and utilising the contemporary educational context.

AESOP took place in 2001-2004 at public secondary and central schools in NSW where 'outstanding' educational outcomes had been identified in years 7-10. Sites were selected using a variety of data including performance in standardised tests, public examinations, various value added measures and nominations from various stakeholders.

Sites were of two types: subject departments responsible for teaching certain subjects and teams responsible for cross-school programs in Years 7-10. Fifty sites across NSW from 38 schools were studied.

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on AESOP, see AESOP (references); Dinham (2004).

Analysis of data revealed common attributes and practices of principals (and other leaders) of these schools, central to which is a school-wide focus on students and their learning.

### 1. External Awareness and Engagement

Principals of schools where outstanding sites were identified exhibited a keen awareness of the wider environment and a positive attitude towards engaging with it. They place a high priority on good communications and relationships with external stakeholders.

Rather than seeing change as a threat, principals are open to opportunities. Even with mandated change, principals look for how they can adapt what they are doing to meet new requirements and consider ways their school might benefit from such change.

Rather than being inward looking, they seek out, foster, and utilise external networks and resources to assist with change. These can be at the local through to the international level. They are entrepreneurial in obtaining financial and in-kind support from the system, government, community and the corporate sector and utilise such support to realise their vision for the school.

These leaders have positive attitudes that are contagious. They realise negativity can be self-handicapping and attempt to drive it out. Their positive approach motivates others and acts as a form of organisational energy to keep the school moving and improving.

Finally, these principals are prepared to seek outside assistance when they cannot solve problems. They are not afraid to 'put their hand up' for help and don't see this as failure or inadequacy.

### 2. A Bias Towards Innovation and Action

These schools have strong executive structures with clearly understood responsibilities. Principals use these structures effectively.

They use the discretion available to them and push against administrative and systemic constraints when necessary. They tend to be ahead of the system and act as 'ground breakers'. They have credibility with system officials and receive support or approval for new approaches. Some appear to operate on the principle that 'it is easier to gain forgiveness than permission'. They encourage and support staff to leave their 'comfort zones' and creatively use resources at their disposal to support innovation.

They are informed risk takers. Even when things are going well, they are prepared to experiment and support those proposing initiatives. They risk time, money and failure, and empower others to do the same. They don't say 'yes' to every request, but do use 'yes' to empower and recognise others (less effective principals were observed in other studies to use 'no' as a means of controlling staff).

Principals were found to have a major influence on the development and application of policy. Some leaders and staff characterise this as 'zero tolerance', but this is more a case of having clear guidelines, effective communication and consistent application, with everyone knowing where he or she 'stands'. The simple, standard things are done well. This is not to imply rigidity, with principals prepared to exercise discretion and compassion when needed. Students know what to do and who to seek help from when problems arise and often this understanding begins in primary 'feeder' schools with visits from key secondary staff and orientation visits to the secondary school playing an important role in easing the Years 6-7 transition.

### 3. Personal Qualities and Relationships

Principals have high-level interpersonal skills and are generally liked, respected and trusted. They use peoples' names when 'out and about' in the school and show interest in what others are doing.

Students, staff and community members speak positively of principals who are ‘open’, ‘honest’, ‘fair’, ‘friendly’ and ‘approachable’. They value the fact the principal listens to and respects them.

They exhibit the characteristics they expect of others such as honesty, fairness, compassion, commitment, reliability, hard work, trustworthiness and professionalism. They provide a ‘good example’ and tend to have a social justice agenda, believing in education for social good and the importance of putting students first. They are good communicators and listeners and provide prompt feedback and recognition to staff. They are seen to work for the school rather than themselves and model ‘do as I do’, rather than ‘do as I say’.

These principals possess intelligence and imagination. They are good judges of individuals, astute, and are able to balance ‘big picture’ issues with finer detail. They have good recall of a multitude of issues, facts and problems and can pick up the threads of previous interactions. They deal with many issues concurrently and know when to consult and when to be decisive. They understand school ‘politics’ and have the courage to make unpopular decisions.

#### 4. Vision, Expectations and a Culture of Success

These principals don’t attempt to ‘build Rome in a day’. They have a long-term agenda and work towards this. They set achievable goals rather than short-term targets.

The norm for principals was 6-7 years in their current school, and when they had not been Principal for this time had often served in the same school as a deputy principal or head teacher, helping them to ‘know the territory’. An implication is that ‘quick fixes’ or ‘flurries of change’ (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) are unlikely to be successful. It takes time to alter patterns of thought, behaviour and practice and to achieve effective, lasting change. Some schools had been in decline prior to the appointment of the principal, suffering falling reputation, students, staff and resources. With time and effort things have ‘turned around’ such these schools are now ‘full’.

Principals possess the ability to see the ‘big picture’ and communicate this to staff. They have high and clear expectations of others (and themselves) and do not easily accept ‘second best’.

They treat staff professionally, expecting a high standard of professionalism in return. Principals place a high priority on the school environment. Graffiti and mess are not tolerated. Staffrooms, classrooms, playgrounds and other spaces are clean and pleasant, with resources diverted for furniture and fittings. Principals realise the importance of school pride, identification with the school and its reputation in the community. Students and staff respond positively to this.

Principals take every opportunity to recognise student and staff achievement and to ‘talk up the school’. They utilise a variety of media including assemblies, newsletters, announcements, awards, letters, personal approaches, classroom visits, and the local press. They create a school climate of high expectations and success and find ways for every student and teacher to receive recognition. Such recognition is seen as authentic and eventually makes an impact with an upward cycle set in motion.

Principals are frequently given credit by staff, students and community members yet usually deflect this. Generosity and lack of professional jealousy is another aspect of leadership that positively influences the climate and culture of the school.

#### 5. Teacher Learning, Responsibility and Trust

Principals place a high value on teacher learning and act as roles models, learning from others. They support staff professional development and bring ‘experts’ into the school to provide assistance.

There is an expectation that those taking up these opportunities in-service others to maximise outcomes. Staff development days and meetings are used to provide teachers with skills, knowledge and confidence to try different teaching approaches.

Principals foster the leadership of others. They identify ‘talent’ and ‘coach’ and support these people, sometimes at the risk of being accused of favouritism. They realise that if change and improvement

are to 'take root' in the school culture, they need to build and distribute leadership capacity throughout the school and to trust people. Sharing of responsibility also assists in leadership succession.

## 6. Student Support, Common Purpose and Collaboration

Principals often identify and utilise a central focus, e.g., ICT, assessment, literacy, pedagogy, student welfare. Programs to support and develop such areas bring members of the school together, leading to better understanding, commitment and outcomes.

These leaders are pragmatic. They know it is impossible to gain unanimous support and involvement. Rather than attempting to 'move' all staff, they concentrate on those who are committed and provide them with support. These 'pockets' of staff may be within faculties or across the school. Principals facilitate bringing like-minded staff together. There is a danger, in that some staff may be 'left behind' or be resentful and obstructive. As part of their risk taking approach, Principals believe that the 'contagion effects' of committed staff and demonstrated success will bring some - but probably not all - negative or reluctant people 'on-side'.

Whether the focus of the visit was on a curriculum area and/or a program, it was found that student support in all its guises was central to the outstanding outcomes achieved. Student support is seen as broader than 'welfare' and 'discipline'. It is every teacher's responsibility and has an academic focus of 'getting students back into learning', rather than being about 'warm fuzzies', or 'enhancing self-concept', to use the words of a number of teachers interviewed. Student support and academic achievement are seen as mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. The belief is that students cannot learn until their needs have been met and improved student behaviour creates an environment where learning can occur.

Principals and other leaders facilitate the centrality of student welfare through supporting welfare teams and ensuring a common approach and commitment. Students understand and support welfare policies and procedures and see student welfare as something done *for* them rather than *to* them. Clear communication, good understanding and consistent application lie at the heart of the success of school welfare programs and procedures. Again, the standard things are done well.

## 7. Focus on Students, Learning and Teaching

The key finding emerging from AESOP is the enacted belief that the core purpose of the school is teaching and learning. Principals and staff recognise that every effort must be made to provide an environment where each student can experience success and academic, personal and social growth. Even in schools identified for success in cross-school programs there was a focus on equipping the individual student to succeed academically.

Principals of schools where 'outstanding' outcomes were being achieved were relentless in their quest for enhanced student achievement. They do not become distracted and 'bogged down' by the administrative/managerial demands of the principalship, finding ways to concentrate their energies on educational leadership. They constantly remind students, staff and the community that the core purpose of the school is teaching and learning.

Their external awareness and engagement, their bias towards innovation, their personal qualities, their vision and expectations and the climate of success that results from this, their emphasis on teacher learning, their trust of staff, and their focus on student support, common purpose and collaboration, are all geared to the facilitation of student achievement.

It is acknowledged that principals are not solely responsible for the outstanding educational outcomes observed, but their leadership has been found in the AESOP study to be crucial in producing the environment where these outcomes can occur.

## **IMPERATIVES FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

There are key imperatives for leadership arising from the current educational context. Some of these are:

- the challenge of greater autonomy
- attracting sufficient quantity and quality to educational leadership
- preparation prior to appointment
- developing and applying suitable selection and appointment processes
- inducting educational leaders
- facilitating and providing professional growth and career development
- retention and rejuvenation of educational leaders.

### **1. The Challenge of Greater Autonomy**

A key aspect arising from AESOP was principals' exercise of autonomy. Educational leaders are faced with the situation where they have greater autonomy over matters such as staffing, budgeting, school organization, innovation and decision making, yet are more accountable in various ways. Successful leaders identified in AESOP dealt with this contradictory context and had 'taken charge', rather than being defensive and reactive.

If they are to be effective in the contemporary context, leaders need to be prepared – in both senses of the word – for the exercise of greater autonomy and control over the teaching and learning environment. As AESOP demonstrated, some of the best leaders 'mine' change, taken advantage of resources and support open to them, and are change makers, fully using the discretion and powers available to them.

There is another aspect to autonomy, in that leaders need to be prepared to give autonomy to others through shared responsibility and distributed leadership, again, something successful leaders were found to do effectively in AESOP.

If educational leaders are to respond to the challenges and opportunities open to them, the 'system' needs to offer support, encouragement, constructive and timely feedback and trust.

### **2. Attracting quality and quantity to educational leadership**

There is a need to widen the pool of potential educational leaders, and to deepen the pool through attracting quality people.

The Australian teaching service is bifurcated, with a bulge in the beginning years under 30, a bulge in the later range of teachers over 45, and a shortage in the middle years (due to lower levels of recruitment and resignation during the 1990s) from where most educational leaders will come over the next decade (Preston, 2001, 2002).

Leadership succession looms as a major issue for educational systems in the developed world. Inevitably, a younger, less experienced cohort of educational leaders will be required (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003: 107-108).

As the older 'bulge' retires, opportunities for teachers to step into leadership positions will increase but due to the shortage of teachers in the middle years and the aging teaching service generally, some could face problems when they are placed in positions where they may lack (or be perceived to lack) the experience and skills to work with more experienced staff. Less experienced leaders need encouragement, preparation and support to take on such roles. Shortages will occur unless steps are taken to ensure the pipeline of leaders is sufficient. A precursor of a talented pool of leaders is attracting quality teachers and retaining them, vital but outside this discussion. A further factor



contributing to the leadership shortage is the growing feminisation of the profession. Women are underrepresented in leadership and less mobile than their male counterparts. Support will be needed to assist women (and men) to take up leadership positions across NSW.

Widening the pool of potential leaders to non-DET applicants and giving schools greater autonomy over hiring has potential to provide both sufficient quantity and quality school leaders in the future.

Concern however centres on the attractiveness of leadership. Referring to the shortage of qualified applicants for the principalship, Lashway (2002: 1) observes:

*Many individuals who possess the necessary credentials see the principal's job as impossible - a stressful, thankless endeavour that doesn't pay nearly enough to compensate for the frustration.*

Allowing educational leaders to exercise leadership through rationalising the role is needed, as is a more general reconceptualisation of teachers' work (Dinham & Scott, 1998). In other states and systems facilities managers, bursars, ICT specialists, high level ancillary staff and accountants take some of leaders' administrative loads. While Principals still have overall responsibility, they can be freed from some day to day matters to concentrate more on leadership.

'Talent spotting' has a role to play in widening and deepening the leadership pool. A study of head teachers in NSW public and non-government schools found that one third had not considered promotion until 'tapped on the shoulder' and encouraged by more senior colleagues (Dinham, Brennan, et. al., 2000). This process needs to be systematised rather than ad hoc if the pool of educational leaders is to be sufficient.

### **3. Preparation prior to appointment**

With establishment of the NSW Institute of Teachers, the professional leadership level of accreditation provides a guide to the attributes and competencies needed for leadership and recognition that a candidate has met the standards. Over time, it should be an expectation that accreditation at the professional leadership level is a prerequisite for promotion, and that reaccreditation is required for continued appointment in a leadership position.

There is potential for consortia of educational employers, professional associations, universities and others to provide tailor made, flexible educational leadership programs that articulate into formal qualifications and accreditation with the Institute of Teachers.

Head teachers in the study mentioned previously (Dinham, Brennan, et. al., 2000) were critical of 'one size fits all' leadership programs as their needs were so diverse. Many educational leaders do not have a clear view of what a role encompasses until they have taken it on. Potential leaders should visit, observe and work with those in the position to which they aspire. Linking aspiring educational leaders through mentoring and on-site visits is a valuable form of preparation in enhancing a 'real world view' of the position concerned and in providing necessary skills and knowledge to take on promotion. Mentors can also assist aspirants to gain a clearer view of their strengths and weaknesses, informing their preparation for promotion and on-going professional learning. The Head Teachers who participated in the AESOP visits described these as the 'best PD ever'.

Leadership preparation programs must reflect the dynamic, contextual realities and provide preparation and strategies for dealing with complex issues and problems. Programs must be informed by contemporary research on school leadership and experiences and best practices of local and international Centres of Educational Leadership. Exemplary principals and other executive should play key roles in such programs and be released and recognised for their involvement.

The recently established National Institute for Quality Teaching and Educational Leadership has potential to facilitate national cross-sectoral approaches to educational leadership (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003: 167).

In any leadership program, geographic and professional isolation needs to be addressed. Isolated, less experienced and aspiring leaders need to have greater access to more experienced colleagues.

#### **4. Developing and applying suitable selection and appointment processes**

Promotion procedures reliant on written responses to criteria, referees' reports and interview need to be augmented by more dynamic forms of assessment. Because context is so important, the aspirant's present situation and that of the position applied for should be considered. In other systems and professions, assessment centres operate where aspiring leaders receive coaching and participate in simulated leadership activities and assessments, receiving constructive feedback.

Promotion procedures need to be built around the attributes identified by AESOP and other studies. For example, personal qualities have been shown to be of great importance. How best might these be assessed for any candidate and for any position? Once again, accreditation at the professional leadership level of the NSW Institute of Teachers would be one indicator of leadership suitability.

#### **5. Inducting educational leaders**

Formal induction programs for educational leaders are essential to assist leaders to quickly adapt to their new role and to support them in their first years. In the past, the timing of formal programs has been problematic as principals and other leaders often receive their appointments throughout the year in a domino effect – a vacancy appears and is filled, creating another vacancy, and so forth.

Induction is different from information giving and administration and includes both 'management' and 'leadership' aspects. More experienced colleagues – including those recently retired and others released for the purpose – are needed to act as coaches, consultants, role models and critical friends in the induction process. Timely support and feedback must be available. A 'sink or swim' approach can lead to drowning.

#### **6. Facilitating and providing professional growth and career development**

Educational leaders are discouraged from undertaking further study that would benefit them and the profession. Fees, the pressure of time, and lack of financial recognition all militate against involvement in formal study. Time is as important as money to busy educators. Leaders and potential leaders would benefit from 'time out' to complete leadership courses.

As noted, such programs could and should be designed, conducted and accredited by a consortium of credible providers comprising DET, other systems, universities, other providers, and professional associations.

There is a need for greater coherence between the DET's education policies and initiatives and school leadership development programs. It is essential that these programs integrate the leadership implications of initiatives such as *Professional Teaching Standards*, *Professional Learning*, and *Quality Teaching*. The DET also needs to review its other key school leadership policies and bring them in line with the emerging realities.

#### **7. Retention and Rejuvenation of Educational Leaders**

Retention of educational leaders will be enhanced through mentoring and other initiatives mentioned previously. 'Time out' through sabbaticals can enable leaders to recharge their batteries, visit other schools and systems and complete formal qualifications. It is expecting much of leaders to fit their professional development in and around their school commitments.

In school education, leadership tends to take teachers progressively away from the classroom and to be a 'one way street'. In other educational organisations leadership positions are taken on for a fixed period, with the option of reappointment. This enables leaders to make a concentrated contribution for a known period of time before stepping aside. This need not apply to all leaders and all positions, but would provide flexibility and enable leaders to bring their experience back to the classroom and to step away from formal leadership without 'loss of face'.



With the general aging of populations in the developed world and emerging workforce shortages, there is pressure to delay retirement when only a few years ago retirement ages were falling. If educational leaders are needed until their mid-60s, retention and rejuvenation assume greater significance.

## Note

Many of the imperatives and suggestions above are being addressed in various ways. However, the looming turnover in leadership and the current and emerging realities make these even more pressing if public education in NSW is to retain its dynamism and relevance.

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