

## MESSAGE FROM THE NATIONAL PRESIDENT

DR JIM WATTERSTON, FACEL



I hope this message finds all ACEL members and their families satisfied in their work and enjoying all that life has to offer.

In contemplating the provision of something worth reading in this column, I reflected on my greeting above as one of my enduring interests in the way we deal with work/life balance issues in the education arena. So

in a departure from my normal practice, I've decided to use this page to share my views about this vital, and often neglected, aspect of school leadership.

I have now been writing the Presidential introduction in this journal for almost a year and as yet I have not aroused one single comment, response or for that matter, critique of any kind. This revelation may mean a number of things including that no one actually reads this bit; that what I have to say is so benign that it is not worth commenting on; or perhaps people just don't have the time to comment. I make this point (all the while hoping that someone reads it) because as I've grown older I have made it a habit to continually reflect on what I do and if something is not working or pointless, then I stop doing it. This has not been an easy habit to develop as we (school leaders) have it ingrained in our DNA to slavishly attempt to please everyone so we don't stop doing things, we just do more.

I think many of us involved in school leadership continue to do things because we have always done them and they have always been done this way. Most of us have inherited jobs where the structures and processes are deeply entrenched, and upsetting the status quo brings dissent and complexity. My work takes me into a great number of schools on a regular basis and I am besieged by Principals who tell me that the 'paper work' and administrative requirements are getting them down and making the job very difficult. I acknowledge that to be the case (and in my 'day' job I am one of those people who make a living out of ensuring that accountability requirements are upheld by school administrators) however, I do see hard working people engaged in tasks that if they reflected on their impact, would realise that they were not rewarding the effort involved.

Teachers often tell me that they would love to see more of their school leaders in their classrooms talking to them about the quality of their work. Quite often this does not happen however, because the school leaders are too busy doing 'stuff'! Well, without wanting to be one of those bureaucrats who sit in their office handing out gratuitous advice, here it is anyway. Stop, look around and start reflecting on what you actually do that makes a difference in your environment and then cease doing the things that don't matter! "What about all of those documents that faceless people keep asking me for?" I hear you screaming (if you are still reading). A very important leader advised me many years ago to put all of those annoying bits of paper into a box and put it under my desk. The really important ones will then crawl out by themselves and climb back onto your desk. The rest can be burned at the end of the month! It works ... trust me! If you really want proof, then write a journal once a week and list all of the issues that are impacting on you at that time. Then each time you write your weekly entry, turn back to three months earlier and



re-read your issues. I absolutely guarantee that there won't be too many things in that list that still matter.

I want the school leaders I work with to do less with more impact, but it takes a little bit of courage to free yourself from the clutter of the day-to-day trivia and to give yourself permission to only do the things that matter. The one thing I can assure you is that there will always be too much work to do no matter how clever you are or how well you multi-task. Smart people conserve their energy and enthusiasm for the bits that make a difference. I tell Principals all the time that no one has ever been sacked for not getting a piece of paper in on time to head office (although some still don't believe me!). Get back into the classroom and start talking about what constitutes highly effective teaching and learning because it will make a difference and you'll reinvigorate yourself. Many of us have been working in education for most of our lives so we are sensitised to meeting deadlines, being well prepared and always doing our homework! My advice to people, and I model it myself, is to break the habit of trying to please everyone by dotting every 'i' or crossing every 't'. Only do the things you enjoy and you'll be surprised that the world won't crash around you.

In short I think Australian education is crying out for brave, energised and innovative instructional leaders who are willing to do things differently to create viable pathways for every student - regardless of their background or personal challenges. The trouble is that most school leaders (as evidenced through a range of recent surveys and research) say they are too busy to be creative and to try new things. There will never be enough money from governments and the resources will always be scarce but they are not the ingredients that will push Australia out in front of Finland and Singapore to be the world's leading education system. Start by investing in the one resource in your school that will make the most difference - you! Focus on your own physical, emotional, social and spiritual fitness and model that to the staff in your school. Examine your productivity and vow to achieve more by doing less. It will be contagious and the culture of your environment will change very quickly. I regularly see new Principals transform schools in a relatively short time when they allow the experts to do only the things that make a difference.

Life is short so only do the things you enjoy - work and play should be the same thing. As Stephen Covey so famously wrote many years ago, "No one on their death bed ever wished they'd worked harder." Plan for that day now, so that when you reflect back on your career, it is with complete satisfaction and the knowledge that your work was an adventure and it made a difference.

Now, even if no one has read this I feel better for having written it!

(Here is my email address just in case you have made it to the end of the page and you wish to tell me that work is not meant to be that easy or that this is not the BIG issue! Jim.Watterston@act.gov.au

