

From the President

Dr Jim Watterston FACEL



School leadership: are we adequately preparing leaders for the contemporary environment?

While the educational debate currently focuses on issues such as funding, equity, teacher quality, autonomy, university entry standards and more recently, school discipline; in this column I would like to raise the flag for school leadership as a major priority that needs greater prominence and action.

The changing role of the modern school principal in Australia requires a different kind of leadership demanding an expanded and more sophisticated skill set. The advent of a more autonomous approach across all sectors requires that school leaders know how to lead in this dynamic environment where enhanced governance, innovation and a contextual need for strategic improvement are the core elements. The issue is, as a profession are we systemically, collectively and strategically preparing a pipeline of high quality and role-ready aspirant principals to meet these challenges?

Early career principals, from my observation, develop a skill base as they are appointed and use their emerging experience in the new position to improve their performance 'on the run'. As I reflect on my own experiences as a first time principal, I was never appropriately prepared for the job (and many would say that I am still not but that is a different story!). I know only too well that my own career development has occurred by biting off more than I could chew, then developing the required just-in-time attributes and knowledge as I went along (hoping all the while that nobody would notice while I acted my way through). Unfortunately, I am of the view that not too much has changed over the years as we still appoint first time school principals who are primarily good teachers hoping that they will 'magically' become great strategic leaders.

On the job training is not enough. We (systems, sectors, the profession) can't leave this to chance. A different type of leadership is required in contemporary school education in Australia as we move to more autonomous schools, flexible use of resources at the school level, and increased parent and community involvement. School principals play a key role in creating and sustaining high-performing schools. As described in the OECD (2008) report, *Improving School Leadership*, increased school autonomy and a greater focus on schooling and school results have made it essential to reconsider the role of school leaders. There is much room for improvement to support current school leaders and to provide relevant and targeted support for future principals.

We now have principals in schools, particularly government schools, who haven't experienced this type of resource allocation or school environment. There is an opportunity for collective collaboration about what's possible, to think more laterally and to be more innovative around local context. It's time to reconsider school leadership and for state schools to reach out to counterparts in Independent and Catholic

schools to understand what opportunities there are through the emergence of greater autonomy. This would include, for example, proactive strategies around governance and the value and benefits of expertise-based School Board/Council members rather than the current focus on a representative structure.

Professional learning for current and aspirant principals needs to include supporting measures that enhance development as the role expands into new areas of responsibility, and for principals to exploit the opportunities they have been given using their evidence base to develop localised responses. For aspirant principals this will require building on the use of successful strategies through internships, accreditation and professional development which is targeted and personalised.

It is time to think about what's required to address this different style of leadership and prepare prospective principals so that they are ready to do the job rather than learning by mistakes on the job. Coupled with the imperative of an emerging shortage of readily available aspirants, it is clear that for school systems to prosper and improve the performance of students, greater attention and resources must be devoted to succession planning, recruitment strategies and ongoing school leadership development. A compelling body of evidence makes it clear that leadership does matter and that it does make a difference to teacher and school performance. It is essential that we consider how we might be able to increase the number of well prepared, high quality aspirant school leaders making themselves available for school principal positions. Our 2014 conference keynote, Linda Darling-Hammond, advises that in order to address this leadership shortage, and to provide for 'whole of career leadership development', some countries are now identifying leadership potential in teachers in their first few years after graduation. This is not a straightforward or simple task. Similarly lessons from international case studies (Darling-Hammond, *et al*, 2007) emphasise the need for a greater focus on instructional leadership, doing a better job of integrating theory and practice, and providing better preparation in working effectively with the community.

As a profession, our collective responsibility and challenge is to provide and leverage high quality leadership development opportunities to address the skill set required for the expanding role of the principal. Building a pipeline of well trained aspirant principals who have the articulated prerequisites to hit the ground running with confidence for their first appointment is essential. Technical leadership can be learned, whereas educational leadership is in short supply and proficient practitioners will always be highly prized and sought after. As we face issues and challenges like never before, we desperately need high-quality educators to take up opportunities for promotion to school leadership and, in their turn, share their experience to develop our next generation.