

From the President

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Autonomy

I am concerned that across this nation, and indeed the wider educational landscape, there has been considerable confusion generated around what is meant by the term 'school autonomy'. I have come to the view that it has fast become the most misunderstood, misused and ubiquitous term in the educational leadership lexicon.

I feel like Peter Finch in that movie, *Network*, whenever I hear academics and education commentators referring to their particular version of school autonomy like it is some sort of disease or plague. Like Finch, I want to scream, "I'm not going to take it any more," as yet another self-appointed expert reminds us that there is no evidence that school autonomy makes any difference to school performance or worse still, that school autonomy is just a strategy for governments to cut centrally provided services and to make schools and their leaders do more with less.

Perhaps I could begin this article by articulating what it is not. Autonomy is not a cult, a new business model or something to be feared. Indeed it is not something that is inherently good or bad nor is it an economic rationalist's method of seeking to manage schools. Autonomy is not a gift, a problem or a strategy. It is a necessary condition and operating platform but in itself, 'autonomy' will not automatically improve outcomes.

Autonomy has been the hallmark of decision-making and innovation ever since humans asserted themselves and took over the planet. All of us generally want to make the decisions that have a direct impact on our lives rather than have those decisions made for us. Just watch any three year old and you'll see that nobody is going to tell her or him how to do anything they don't want to do! Autonomy is about being given responsibility to bring about an outcome and then being given the space to do it while being held appropriately accountable. Catholics, for example, talk about subsidiarity; the notion that decisions are best made at the appropriate level of most impact.

Contrary to populist mythology, autonomy has always been the foundation in schools where great leaders have brought about significant positive change. Good principals in every era have been able to make constructive decisions based on local needs no matter what control was exerted from the bureaucracy above. From Plato through to Daniel Pink in his bestselling book, *Drive* (2012), for over 2000 years we've been shown that empowerment, self-determination, devolution or local decision-making can improve the quality of decisions, performance, motivation and self-satisfaction.

Let me put it more simply from within my own context. Would the 1234 school principals in state schools in Queensland prefer the 'department' to provide them with their school's specific priorities and strategies going forward

without regard to their location, size or socio-economic context? Perhaps a set of instructions issued each Monday and then a template completed to ensure compliance on the following Friday could be the way to do it? Or is it better that we build capability across the principalship to ensure that all school leaders in conjunction with their teams can be the architects of their evidenced-based strategic initiatives to suit their local context? I am arguing that micro-management and a one-size-fits-all approach does not lift systemic performance! Autonomy is not an abandonment of schools by the system; it is a platform and delegated authority that enables people to make the best decisions based on local realities and needs. School autonomy is actually about ensuring that those who know the most about the school are empowered to collaborate and make the key decisions to guide progress within their community by taking into account all of the complexities, challenges and local features.

The Independent Public School movement for example, which is a particular construction of state school autonomy emerging in some Australian states, is not about allowing selected schools to hive off their individual share of the Department's resource base and separating from the system to go it alone although most people would be forgiven for thinking that is how it works. IPS is about enabling school leaders to make core decisions that will impact on teaching and learning while the department devotes resources to build capacity and capability, and provides an authorising environment built upon collaboration and shared responsibility. Schools, like individuals, need relevant and constructive feedback (accountability) along with capability building to ensure that the job can be done successfully and sustainably. In this way autonomous school decision making is compatible with teamwork and the Fullan notion of systemness.

School performance has more to do with the quality of decision-making and the density of a school's leadership rather than the simple delegation of necessary decision-making capacity. Nearly all school leaders want to make their own decisions but the big question is do they have the experience, knowledge and capability to effectively do so? That decision-making prowess comes from working as a system and learning from the high performers around us.

Let's stop deriding and demeaning the concept of 'school autonomy' and embrace it for what it is to make sure that school leaders make the best possible decisions with the required support and guidance provided. To do this we need to focus on the things that matter such as high quality leadership preparation programs and ongoing tailored professional development through the lifecycle of a leader's career to ensure that the necessary autonomy can be fully harnessed and exploited to benefit all learners.