RECONCEPTUALISING THE PRINCIPAL ROLE

Principals are critical actors for the delivery of quality education outcomes and positively shaping the lives of young people. How principal roles are designed, how principals are supported in their roles, and how their time is prioritised and utilised are important strategic questions for the Government and Department.

There are two key drivers behind the need for change in principal roles which require immediate focus:

- **Strategic intent:** *Our strategy for public education in South Australia* (the education strategy) provides a framework for the future directions of public education. The strategy sets a clear purpose for public education and four areas of impact: *wellbeing, learner agency, effective learners,* and *equity and excellence,* which define our focus and priorities. This strategy will lead to changes in priorities and practices at the school level. Obtaining clarity about the role of principals and the capabilities they will need to confidently lead these changes must be a priority.

- **Building future capacity through confronting today's problems:** The current reality for principals is that they are experiencing historically high levels of work intensification and time poverty[1]. The current body of research, and our members lived experience, is that principals' work has been defined by an expanding array of policy and procedures, data management, record keeping, and the endless focus on targets. The ultimate result is that less time and focus is given to education improvement through building and sustaining positive school cultures, developing educators' capabilities, and strengthening across system collaboration[2].

These two drivers of change have a symbiotic relationship; we need clarity on the role principals play in leading change and we need to create the conditions where principals have the capacity in their day to day work to achieve the impacts needed. A strategic response is required at two levels:

- **The role, capabilities and expected outcomes of the principal role** must be reviewed to achieve alignment with the directions for change established in the education strategy.

- **The current work demands of principals** must be critically reviewed to give back time and space for the leadership within their schools that is essential for a sustained focus on education change and improvement.

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[1] The Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2022, ACU Institute for Positive Psychology & Education,

[2] SASSLA Conference Presentation Education Leader Workload - Causes, Consequences and Responses 2022, Australian Principals Federation (WA Branch).

The Principal Role as a Driver of Systems Change

Principals' witness first-hand the impact of the social, economic, cultural, and technological changes that are shaping the lives of young people and their families. They work in an environment where these challenges are real and directly experienced. They adapt and apply new professional knowledge and deal with uncertainty, risk, and paradox as a daily experience. They encounter this through multiple lenses:

- Through day-to-day engagement with young people in a school setting.
- Through interaction with parents, carers, and community-based organisations.
- Through interaction with the Department for Education, other Government agencies and private businesses.

Principal roles are positioned at the intersection of people working in schools and people in the corporate governance and service functions of the Department. Principals occupy a unique position that gives them a wider view of how policies and systems of work shape practices, culture, and behaviour at a school level. Focussing on the principal role has the capacity to shine a light on the functioning of the wider system of work to gain an insight and understanding of the changes needed for sustained improvement.

There are four key fields of enquiry that will assist in achieving a big picture view of changes needed to the principal role:

- Responsibility, decision making and accountability of principals.
- The team around the principal.
- Illuminating good practice in the principal role.
- Towards a new generation of school leaders.

These areas of enquiry are not mutually exclusive; rather, they provide different entry points to build a richer and more detailed understanding of the future orientated principal role we need, both within the context of a school setting and at a systems level. We briefly outline our thinking on each of these areas of enquiry in the attached document.

ATTACHMENT

Responsibility, Decision Making and Accountability of Principals

Over the last 20 years the work of principals has been shaped by a philosophy of local management which has been defined by:

- Direction from the centre on education and operational policy.
- Devolution of authority to schools for operational decisions within established policies.
- Strengthened accountability and measurement systems for management and compliance.

The natural evolution of this system has led to[3]:

- Increased operational and risk management undertaken by schools.
- An expansion and increased codification of policy directives on education and operational requirements.
- An increased use, and reliance on reporting and accountability systems and tools.

Current evidence clearly shows that the workload of principals has been intensified and effort focussing on student learning and school culture has been crowded out by ever expanding managerial work. As a result of the work demands and pressures, leaders are less able to prioritise critical elements of their role that enhance the positive educational outcomes of students and work-based cultures that promote the growth of teaching and learning[4].

The current reality is that schools are being choked by an increasing array of policy, accountability, and compliance requirements, many of which fall directly in the hands of principals[5]. The principal role has become more instrumentalised and principals have less time to bring passion and creativity to their work – the very things we need to confront the challenges of today.

A critical enquiry into the role of the principal is urgently needed. Three questions can frame this task:

- **The responsibilities of the principal role**: Responsibilities are defined by getting clear about the objectives of the role, and the scope of principals' work to successfully support the education strategy. This area of enquiry will focus on defining the scope of principal work and describing successful leadership at the school level.

- **The decision making role of the principal**: Defining what decisions are made at the school level brings into question important issues including the contextual nature of decisions and effective corporate governance in relation to efficiency and risk management in decision making. It helps to define what is managed tightly and what is managed loosely in an organisational system of work.

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[3]SASSLA Conference Presentation Education Leader Workload - Causes, Consequences and Responses 2022, Australian Principals Federation (WA Branch).

[4] *Deloitte Consulting* 2017, NSW Department for Education, Principal Workload and Time Use Study.

[5] *Deloitte Consulting* 2017, NSW Department for Education, Principal Workload and Time Use Study.

- **The accountability of the principal**: Accountability is concerned with the consequences of a person's actions rather than their initial duty to carry these actions out. Accountability is individually owned and is what takes place after a situation has already occurred. For this reason, describing accountabilities is the final question in this trilogy of questions.

The Team Around the Principal

Schools are highly complex institutions, and they increasingly need to draw on different resources and managerial capabilities to do the work needed. Research indicates that more rather than less systemic support is needed for the potential of school autonomy to be realised[6].

Principals provide leadership and direction at a school level, and they also actively contribute at a regional and corporate level in evaluating the effectiveness of policy and service offerings. They work and collaborate with their leadership teams and business support staff on managing the day to day demands of the school. They also work with regional and corporate staff in accessing and using the specialist services that support the needs of their students and the school. The metaphor 'eco-system' aptly describes the interconnected roles that are needed by the principal to lead a successful school.

Over the last twenty years, changes have occurred in the role and functioning of the eco-system around the school. A significant change has been the reconfiguring and standardisation of service models and a progressive increase of work demands on schools that relate to compliance and accountability functions. From perspective of principals, the system has become more directive and less flexible and nuanced in how it directly supports them.

The team around the principal requires focus across three dimensions:

- **In school leadership:** Getting clear about the depth and quality of leadership capacity needed for shared leadership at the school level and the business focused staff needed for school governance and operational support.
- **District support:** Getting clear about how district resources are used to positively support the work of schools including defining the range, quality, and accessibility of services that are needed for a successful school. An important area of enquiry is the role, structure, and capabilities needed by district based education directors.
- **Central support**: Obtaining clarity about corporate governance requirements and the specialist and shared services needed for effective and efficient management of the public education system.

Two important value-based policy considerations underpin this work:

- We need to flip the more conventional approach of seeing and understanding the system of work through a 'corporate lens' to an approach that evaluates the system of work through a 'school lens'. Perspectives of principals must be brought into the foreground of organisational thinking and decision making.

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[6] Suggett, D 2015, School Autonomy; Necessary but not sufficient Evidence Base: A Journal of Evidence Reviews in Key Policy Areas.

- Organisation and cultural elements are just as important as the more functional questions that arise. How we engage, work together, and share responsibility must also be an important area for exploration.

Illuminating Good Practice

Success in the principal role is less about following a rote description and more about applying capabilities and skills in meeting the ever-changing conditions in which schools operate. What we do know is that many problems and challenges we now face require a deeper well of capabilities to draw on.

The current widely used Australian Principal Standards shed little light on personal qualities like curiosity, persistence, resilience, flexibility, and responsibility, that are increasingly important for principals to be successful. The Standards describe a 'destination' not a 'journey'; whereas capabilities focus on process - how people gather and apply their personal qualities and professional knowledge to make a positive difference in the work they do.

To illuminate good practice, we need to look at the lived experience of people in school leadership roles. The best evidence is derived from capable school leaders who have deeply embedded tacit skills and knowledge on what works and what is needed to confront future challenges[7].

Capabilities can have a powerful transformative effect if they are owned by the profession, presented in accessible language, and embedded in organisation behaviour through recruitment, selection, and performance development processes.

Toward a New Generation of Leaders

Conventional thinking has tended to define a job in isolation of the person. It has been naturally assumed that people will adapt to changing requirements and there will always be a pool of applicants readily available. In the post COVID-19 labour market, this assumption no longer holds true[8].

Recent studies of principal workload clearly identify serious issues with excessive workload and increased risk of exhaustion and burnout[9]. Application for principal roles have been in serious decline since the early 2000s and stories abound about the difficulty of attracting candidates to principal roles. In a generation we have moved from a lengthy waiting list for available leadership positions to a problem of endemic low supply.

The new reality is that the dynamics of the labour market have changed, and people across all sectors of work now have different interests and expectations in managing their careers and

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[7] Leithwood, K and Azah, V 2014, Secondary Principals' and Vice Principals Workload Study, Final Report of research to Ontario Ministry of Education.

[8] This is being widely reported in all Australian jurisdictions. The SASSLA response to Chapter 2 - Education Leaders and Teachers, observed that the market for school leaders appears to be stuck in low supply of suitable candidates relative to available vacancies and reduced leader mobility; demographic related behaviour change has created further pressures and risks.

[9] SASSLA Paper - Country School Visits Observation: A case study of four principals 2022. The key themes identified for leaving the role were excessive pressure, perceived lack of support, meaning and confidence, and a desire to restore some stability in their personal lives.

personal lives. Research indicates that qualitative factors such as capacity to achieve work life balance and good work conditions are increasingly determining factors in career choices[10].

Over the last twenty years the behaviour of the teaching workforce has changed. The most visible representations of this are increased adoption of flexible work practices and reduced job mobility. Fewer teachers are willing to commit to a leadership role where the hours of work and emotional demands are high. There is also a discernible change in the discourse about how we talk about leadership roles that tends to dwell on the difficulties and challenges rather than the many positives; this is a cultural phenomenon that we need to be conscious of, and attentive to.

A future facing principal role must be designed to attract applicants who are committed and able to lead schools in delivering on our purpose of public education. This means we must radically shift thinking towards designing job roles that acknowledge and respond to changing demographic, social and cultural conditions, and people's individual needs and interests.

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[10] Cranston, N 2007, Through the eyes of Potential Aspirants; another view of the principalship, School Leadership and Management, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 129-128.