



New role, new partnerships

A school leader's guide

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This guide for school leaders has been produced in collaboration with Nous Group, an Australian management consulting firm that works with public, private and not for profit education agencies and institutions to improve educational outcomes. It includes a framework for interpersonal behaviours related to leadership, as well as supporting research, tools and references.

This icon indicates a link to a resource



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This project was funded by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) with funding provided by the Australian Government.

Introduction

The Leadership Scenarios

Principals have a key role to play in making a difference to the lives of young people and to society. However, they work in a challenging and changing environment; they are unlikely to succeed unless they are well prepared and understand their role.

The Leadership Scenarios are a series of videos, each with a framework, guide and list of resources for developing practice. They have been designed to assist new principals in understanding and dealing with the challenges they may face in their new role and appreciate how their work relates to the [Australian Professional Standard for Principals](#) (the Standard) and [the Leadership Profiles](#).

The Standard is a public statement that sets out what principals are expected to know, understand and do to succeed in their work. It is represented as an interdependent and integrated model that recognises three leadership requirements that a principal draws upon within the five areas of professional practice.

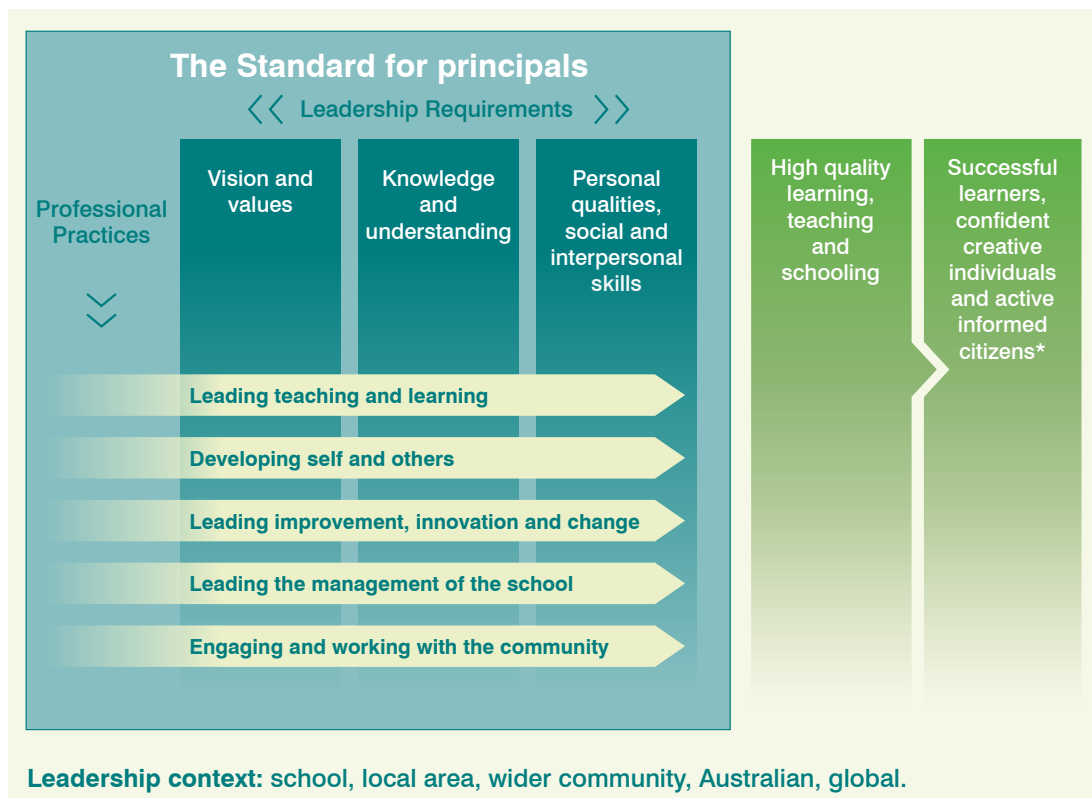


Figure 1: The Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Source: Australian Professional Standard for Principals, AITSL (2014)

New role, new partnerships

New role, new partnerships, focuses on building strong partnerships with families - in particular:

- understanding and working with families
- anticipating and responding positively to issues.

Importance of building strong relationships with families

Families – which include parents and carers – are important. Their expectations and aspirations affect student outcomes and attitudes towards learning.

Good family-school relationships mean children:

- do better academically, emotionally and socially
- attend school more regularly
- are better behaved.

Clear communication and engagement strategies with families underpinned by strong relationships with school leaders and staff make families more likely to support learning, school policies and practices, and more willing to cooperate if an issue arises. High trust relationships are built over time so new school leaders should invest time and effort in beginning this process as soon as possible. They should aim to achieve the right balance of visibility, authenticity and engagement for themselves and their staff.

Even with healthy relationships, issues will inevitably arise. However, stronger relationships will lead to better prevention and management of situations. For school leaders, managing difficult relationships or incidents can be time consuming and stressful. Identifying issues early and taking action can pre-empt many of them from escalating. This approach also requires the development of robust processes, for which school leaders are ultimately accountable.

The *New role, new partnerships* framework overleaf outlines three key steps to building strong relationships with families.

‘Parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations they transmit to their children.’

Source: Hattie (2009, p. 70)

‘Only when schools, students, families and communities share the burden equally do schools “perform” well. Current examples of collaborations between school and community in every part of the world attest to this fact.’

Source: Rothstadt, Csoti & Otero (2011, p. 136)

Leadership scenarios

New role, new partnerships

A framework for building strong relationships with families



Figure 2: New role, new partnerships framework

Step 1

Engage early: understand and work with families

New school leaders are faced with the challenge of understanding and engaging with new families or with known families in a new role. This requires understanding families' different expectations of the level of engagement provided by schools and school leaders should adjust their approach to align with each families' needs.

Evidence suggests that the impact of family engagement is more significant in the early years of education. Therefore a strong focus on building relationships with families in the primary years will have a positive effect on student outcomes.

Building relationships at secondary school level can be more difficult but is no less important. Finding ways to maintain an open dialogue between staff and families without encroaching upon young people's blossoming independence, is crucial. This can include holding open sessions about common issues that cause concern, such as mental health, building resilience or peer relationships.

'Parent engagement is about leading with our ears, not with our mouths.'

Source: Ferlazzo (2011, p. 1)

Getting to know your families

School communities are diverse. New school leaders should gain a general understanding of the parent/carer community, as well as individual family needs and expectations. To do this, school leaders can use a range of approaches:



Draw on existing data on family satisfaction and complaints.



Build a school-level database of parent skills and talents.



Meet with school-based health care workers and community service providers.



Engage in frank conversations with parents and carers to understand key themes and recurring issues.

New principals are usually a source of significant curiosity, and sometimes anxiety, among the school and wider community. High visibility and good communication are always important, but in the early stages of a new leadership role they are essential. The most effective principals make sure every family feels known, even in the largest schools.

Balancing competing demands after appointment can be a challenge, so finding smart ways to engage with families is worthwhile. Existing communication structures and forums, such as newsletters, parent-teacher interviews, committee meetings and extracurricular activities can be used to get to know families. Whatever the forum, be visibly present and devote time to engage with as many parents and families as possible.

Informal engagement with families is equally important for school leaders. Successful leaders often make themselves available in entrance halls and at school gates at the beginning or end of the school day, and demonstrate support for their students at extracurricular events. This is a key method for gathering informal feedback and understanding different segments of the school community.

Despite a school's best efforts, there will always be some families who rarely participate in school life. It is important to learn about these families, understand why they are not participating, and take steps to connect in a way that works for them. Engaging with community organisations and leaders can help to break through some of the physical, emotional or cultural barriers that inhibit parent participation. Building a personal relationship with these families will pay dividends in the longer term. This might involve visiting them at home. It will most certainly involve making school events easy to access, affordable to engage in and welcoming to all.

'Principals of schools with more positive cultures placed high value on being visible to stakeholders throughout the day. Despite other demands on their time, these principals saw their visibility as a top priority ... by contrast, principals of schools with more negative culture ... valued visibility, but saw it as something that could only occur after paperwork was completed.'

Source: Fiore (2000, p. 11)

The welcoming environment walk through



'Telling their stories' - school case studies in parental engagement



Establishing strong relationships with families

Families will look for the principal to be visible and available. However, it is not viable for the school leader to be visible and available at all times. Building strong relationships with families begins in the classroom, with regular dialogue about student progress, and is the responsibility of every member of staff.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) outline how teachers at all career stages are expected to engage parents/carers in the educative process (Focus area 3.7), report on student achievement (5.5) and engage with parents and carers (7.3).

Under 'engage with parents and carers' (7.3), the following expectations are set:

- Graduate: Understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers.
- Proficient: Establish and maintain respectful and collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing.
- Highly accomplished: Demonstrate responsiveness in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and wellbeing.
- Lead: Identify, initiate and build on opportunities that engage parents/carers in both the progress of their children's learning and in the educational priorities of the school.

The Standard outlines the expectation for principals to develop and maintain positive partnerships with students, families and carers. To do this, new school leaders should focus on:

- promoting parental and carer engagement as a key aspect of raising the achievement of all students
- modelling effective family engagement techniques
- sharing simple and effective techniques that staff can use to build relationships.

School staff should be equipped to look for opportunities to reach out personally and leverage informal opportunities to build relationships with families. Each staff member needs the knowledge and encouragement to:

- identify the needs and expectations of their students' families
- identify whether needs and expectations are being met
- help families understand what support the school has available.

Successful engagement with families requires confidence and capability that is different to the teaching or administrative elements of day-to-day roles. These interpersonal skills are an important part of staff development. School leaders should provide relevant professional learning, allocate time to engage and have clear expectations around family engagement.

Developing a family engagement strategy

A strategic and planned approach that considers families' different needs, abilities and desires for engagement is required. School leaders need to ensure that:

- communication with families is regular and easily accessible through the use of technology
- school norms or code of conduct are documented, understood and supported by a clear issues resolution process
- families can be engaged in school life at a level they feel comfortable with, ranging from school community social events, involvement in classroom activities to participation in committees and focus groups
- families can actively engage in student learning through information and reporting sessions, parent skill-building workshops and access to data/feedback on their child's achievement/progress
- consideration is given to inclusive practices that cater for the cultural needs of families, such as policies on racism and discrimination, celebrating diversity and translation/interpreting services
- a proactive, outreach approach is used to reach families who are less engaged.

School leaders should prioritise and optimise their involvement in engagement opportunities. To do this, they should identify the following:

- key points of engagement during the school year
- specific activities required at each time
- appropriate levels of engagement to meet school and families' needs and expectations.

A range of potential expectations and appropriate engagement approaches are listed below.

High interest, high engagement families:

talk to families about how their engagement improves their child's outcomes and facilitates effective involvement.

High interest, low engagement families:

keep informed with regular formal communication and informal conversations whenever possible.

Families that are harder to reach:

reach out with informal interactions and show the school values their engagement in their child's education.

In developing an engagement strategy, it is important that school leaders don't stereotype families as, if they do, their approaches are unlikely to match family needs and expectations.

Parental engagement in learning and schooling – lessons from research



Strengthening family and community engagement in student learning resources



AITSL's Illustrations of Practice – Leading parental engagement initiatives



Cultural consideration

The engagement process requires cultural sensitivity and safety. A culturally safe environment is one where people can feel confident and comfortable in their identity, culture and community. This requires teachers to have an awareness of their own and others' world view, knowledge of similarities and differences in cultural practices and skills for communication and interaction both within and across cultures.

Cultural competence can be enhanced by:

- developing a reconciliation action plan for the school
- understanding the diversity within the community
- communicating with consideration for all families, including those belonging to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups
- helping all students connect with other students with similar experiences
- facilitating family engagement by offering appropriate translation services
- celebrating diversity in the classroom
- taking positive action against racism and discrimination.

Step 2

Anticipate and act: notice early signs and apply processes

Early intervention is the best way to address family issues that may arise. School leaders and staff should be familiar with different families to notice changes in engagement and problem-solve potential issues before they escalate. Early intervention is essential to manage small issues and avoid unnecessary escalation or the need for formal conflict management processes.

Identifying issues early and taking action

There are a number of early warning signs that suggest an issue or complaint may arise. These will differ for each family and require different management strategies, but can include:

- a sudden increase or decrease in the level of involvement and engagement with the school
- children mentioning their family's frustration/unhappiness with their teacher or school processes
- an increase in aggressive (overt or passive) and/or avoidance behaviours
- out of character student attendance, behaviour, academic results or extracurricular outcomes.

If any of these warning signs arise, a staff member or the school leader should contact the family to identify whether there are any problems. If a problem is confirmed and shared, staff should work with parents/carers to take prompt action and deal with the issue before it escalates.

Developing robust processes to resolve issues

It is important to outline how families can raise issues and complaints, and how and when issues will be resolved. Therefore, having processes to handle and proactively manage complaints and issues is essential. School leaders, staff and families can work together to co-design policies and processes to guide how to respond effectively to various issues or complaints. Warm and open relationships between staff and families, combined with a solution-focused attitude, will usually lead to the early resolution of difficulties in most instances.

Regardless of the approach or level of staff involvement, family issues or complaints must be addressed promptly and within agreed timelines. While the length of time will vary according to the type of issue, aim for rapid resolution and communicate any delay to the family.

Schools should establish and maintain a system to record and monitor issues and complaints, and document their resolution. It is important to note all of the details relating to the issue, the actions taken and outcomes achieved. This will ensure that all these matters can inform school improvement and are available to refer back to if required in the future.

The issues management process must be reviewed as part of an ongoing focus on school improvement to ensure it develops over time and remains relevant.

Step 3

Respond positively: work together to resolve issues

Families can raise concerns or complaints about any aspect of a school's operations and, regardless of how well a school leader and staff engages with families, there will be instances where early intervention may not be enough to resolve the issue. In all circumstances, school leaders should expect staff to proactively manage issues and complaints at the right level, demonstrating awareness and understanding of when an issue needs to be escalated and managed by a more senior member of staff. Figure 3 outlines the different levels at which schools might choose to address different issues (depending on school size or other procedures, school leaders might manage all complaints).



Figure 3: Continuum of issues and management level

One feature of good family engagement is an increased willingness from all parties to engage with and work through more serious and complex issues when they arise. In these circumstances, the following process can be used by schools to help to resolve the situation.

Understanding the issue

A positive experience during the first contact with the family will build the right foundation for resolution. Clearly understanding the issue from the family's perspective is critical to the success of the rest of the process. It is important to:

- **establish mutual respect:** understand and appreciate each other's perspective
- **gather all of the facts:** listen intently and focus on the situation, not the person
- **hear them out:** treat the family with respect and courtesy, but probe when needed
- **check understanding:** summarise what you heard to ensure you are on the same page
- **clarify next steps:** outline the next steps to resolve the issue.

At the end of the first contact with the family, ensure that the school and the family are 'on the same page' about the circumstances surrounding the issue and the next steps.

Understanding needs and desires

School leaders or staff dealing with the issue must:

- follow the school norms and code of conduct
- understand the needs and expectations of families
- have realistic expectations of the outcomes of the issue
- manage the family's expectations as part of the process.

Approaching an issue with a solution-focused mindset and a collaborative attitude is likely to bring about a best possible resolution of the issue. To achieve this, both parties may need to accommodate different perspectives and, at times, compromise to achieve workable solutions. Such an approach should minimise a competitive and hostile process, where issue resolution is not viable or agreed to by all parties.

Regardless of the approach, school leaders and staff should be honest and demonstrate humility when they deal with issues. They must also be able to acknowledge when the school is genuinely responsible for the cause of the issue. In this situation, the conversation should involve working together to improve the situation.

Generating, agreeing and implementing solutions

Once the issue is clearly understood, the school leader or member of staff should work with the family to develop and agree on a solution. It is helpful to prepare for the session, taking an objective and broad view of the possibilities. Consider similar situations and strategies that may have worked in the past to prompt thinking.

During the meeting, work with the family to come up with a range of potential solutions to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. It is very important not to judge ideas at this point and/or to evaluate their viability. Instead, consider the advantages and disadvantages of each solution. If the disadvantages of a solution outweigh the advantages, cross it off the list. Repeat this process until only practical solutions remain.

Once the list of potential solutions has been minimised to two or three, select the solution that will provide the best outcome for all involved. It may be decided that a combination of multiple solutions is implemented. Trial the solution by agreeing on:

- actions to be taken and accountabilities
- timing for implementation of actions
- next steps and review.

If the situation is being addressed by another member of staff, it is important the school leader is kept up to date with the issue and actions being taken.

Win/Win solutions – The role of collaboration in resolving problems



10 best strategies for dealing with difficult parents



Assessing whether the solution worked

After agreed actions have been trialled, conduct a meeting with the family to review whether the solution worked. Reflect on the questions below:

- What has worked well?
- What hasn't worked as well?
- What could be done differently to help solve the issue?

If the problem remains unresolved, consider and try a different solution. Involve others to help generate possible alternatives. It may not be possible to resolve all issues to the family's satisfaction, so a recalibration of expectations may be required. The school leader must be across significant or recurring issues so they can check in with the family if required.

Consider the effect on yourself

Remaining calm throughout the issue resolution process is important, particularly when directly engaging with families. The situation surrounding the issue may not be able to be controlled, but personal emotions can be. Remaining calm will help to progress the situation.

Education systems and sectors often provide guidance for dealing with family issues. One common approach to keeping yourself calm is the STOP approach:

- **Signal:** take note of your body's early warning signs of tension (such as shallow breathing).
- **Take:** control through breathing, take ten deep breaths and visualise release of tension.
- **Opposite:** a habitual response to tension is for our muscles to tighten and to negatively self-talk. Instead, do the opposite: breathe deeply and use positive self-talk.
- **Practice:** regular and timely practice can help. Try this before a meeting that might be difficult.

Keeping calm is particularly important when engaging with a family member who is angry or behaving aggressively. The reasons for a family's anger could be situation specific, informed by certain triggers or due to a personality trait. Regardless of the reason, there are a number of approaches school leaders can use to help resolve the situation. In general, these include finding common ground, bringing along staff to support and recognising when an issue requires escalation. Figure 4 indicates specific tools that school leaders and staff can use when interacting with angry or aggressive families.

Remain calm and in control: employ STOP					
Prioritise deflation	Let the family have their say	Validate family's emotions; understand their perspective	Speak in a soft, calm tone; show undivided attention	Avoid negative triggers and language	Reschedule action to give more time to find solution and diffuse situation

Figure 4: Approach to engaging in difficult situations

Source: Victorian Department of Education and Training (2009, pp. 1-2)

The AITSL school leader's guide [New role, new conversations](#) contains advice for carrying out difficult conversations. This includes guidance around collecting and considering information, clarifying the nature of the conversation, adopting the right mindset, creating a positive environment and effectively structuring the conversation.

Monitor and care for your own wellbeing

Managing difficult relationships or incidents can be time consuming and stressful. It can be easy to lose perspective, focus on the negative and overlook overall high levels of family satisfaction. Maintaining an open and balanced mindset will deliver better results. Seek a coach and mentor to work through more difficult times. This provides space to explore the issue and potential solutions, as well as providing personal encouragement and support.

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