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Australian Institute
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Spotlight

Preparing for the rewards and challenges of a school principal role

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An effective principal will have a significant impact on student learning in their school by shaping its culture and creating a shared vision.

This is the ultimate reward of leadership. However, new principals, who have usually been highly successful teachers, encounter some common challenges when they take on the role. It can be confronting to come to grips with the extent and nature of the demands that a principal experiences.

Aspiring leaders can be better prepared for what lies ahead if they are aware of potential obstacles. They can consider their personal approach and then make informed decisions about the type of professional development activities they access.

Targeted preparation and selective professional collaboration opportunities can empower new principals to approach the job confidently, so they can focus more time and energy on improving teaching and learning.

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At a glance

Principals report high levels of job satifaction:

94%

agree the advantages of the role clearly outweigh the disadvantages

96%

say they would choose the role again if given the chance.

TALIS, 2013

The rewards

Principals often report higher rates of job satisfaction than the general population. This is usually attributed to the positive impact their work can have on students and families (Bass 2006; Brown, 2006).

Research indicates a strong, positive link between growth in student learning and effective leadership (Leithwood et al, 2006). Of the school-related factors that influence learning, effective leadership has been identified as second only to teaching in the impact that it can have (Seashore-Louis et al, 2010).

School leaders are overwhelmingly positive about the rewards of their work, reporting that it outweighs the professional and personal challenges (TALIS, 2013). Principals who transition successfully into the role are rewarded with a significant sense of accomplishment (West et al, 2010).

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At a glance

- New principals in Australia and internationally report common challenges

- Preparing for leadership is key for aspiring principals

- Professional support such as mentoring and peer networks can help

- AITSL's Leadership Scenarios guides and videos are useful resources for would-be and new school leaders.

Common challenges for new principals

What does it feel like to move from being a confident, knowledgeable educator into a new position where you may have limited experience of the demands you will face, and potentially lack some of the skills required to fulfil the multiple functions of a principal?

Being aware of some of the typical challenges can help new principals prepare effectively to deal with them.

AITSL's Leadership Scenarios are useful resources that can guide new and aspiring principals on how to overcome some of these hurdles. An AITSL-commissioned review of national and international literature on new principals' experiences revealed that there were common challenges for this group, regardless of which school or even which country they were in (AITSL, 2016a).

The need for preparation and professional support, such as mentoring and peer networks, is increasingly being identified as playing an important part in the development of effective school leaders (Sutcher, Podolsky and Espinoza, 2017).

AITSL's Leadership Scenarios feature videos, guidebooks and additional resources.

They provide:

- support for new principals to address common challenges
- a picture of real-life experiences of school leaders
- practical strategies for new leaders.

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At a glance

Research finds:

- New principals often report feeling isolated

- This is linked to greater accountability and changing relationships with colleagues

- New principals can take action to minimise these feelings and foster a supportive network.

Professional isolation

Feelings of isolation and loneliness are consistently reported as a challenge for new principals.

These feelings are not limited to school leaders in remote locations or linked to contextual factors, such as a specific school or community, but relate to a sense of being ultimately responsible (Bauer and Brazer, 2013). Researchers found that the 'shock' of this realisation of responsibility was found to be most difficult in the first three months in their new role (Spillane and Lee, 2013).

Professional isolation and loneliness are linked to the demands of the role, such as greater accountability and the weight of being the final decision-maker (Lock, Budgen and Lunay, 2012).

Having responsibility for the welfare of other people, including staff and students, adds to this burden (Spillane and Lee, 2013). The necessary adjustments to relationships with other staff can compound these feelings of being alone at the helm (Draper and McMichael, 2000). But new principals can take several courses of action to minimise isolation and create supportive connections for themselves.

"... the creation of informal social networks in the workplace that provide support mechanisms (e.g. reassurance and guidance) can reduce stress for individuals who work in contexts and settings that tend to isolate employees."

Bauer, S and Brazer, 2013, p 154

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At a glance

- Accessing professional networks and experienced mentors can help new school leaders to adjust

- Building strong relationships with staff, students and the wider community can also help smooth the transition

- *New role, new relationships* guides new leaders through five steps to building relationships for a successful transition.

Access to professional networks may help to reduce isolation, particularly if opportunities to engage with colleagues and mentors are built into preparation activities. Feedback from experienced mentors may increase a new principal's confidence and provide an opportunity to discuss difficult issues with someone understanding and knowledgeable in dealing with the day-to-day challenges of the role (Riley, 2016).

A new principal can smooth their transition by getting to know staff, students and the community, and then intentionally investing in building networks and strong relationships. Forming positive relationships can help new leaders to make a beneficial and lasting impact.

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At a glance

- New principals may need specific skills to transition from teaching to administration and business management

- Increased autonomy for schools has benefits, but comes with more accountability

- Targeted training and preparation can help with these responsibilities

- New management skills are best learnt immediately before becoming a principal.

Administration and management

Research suggests that novice principals often lack sufficient preparation for the technical requirements of administration and management in their new role (Spillane and Lee, 2013).

Skills that were not required in a teaching role may include financial management, marketing, and compliance or governance skills (Earley and Weindling, 2007).

A policy shift towards increased autonomy for schools, rather than administration through system and sector bodies, has significantly increased principals' responsibilities (Barty et al, 2003; Riley, 2014). There are obvious benefits for leaders, for example more control around resource allocation and staffing. Decentralisation, however, comes with more accountability, demands for efficiency, and the responsibility to comply with regulations, such as occupational health and safety (Clarke, Wildy and Pepper, 2007; Cranston, Ehrich and Billiot, 2003).

Targeted training for developing managerial skills could help improve principals' effectiveness (Jensen et al, 2015). These skills are best learnt in the period of time immediately before becoming a principal, allowing learning to become embedded through the timely application of new skills (AITSL, 2015b). Schools that delegate and distribute administration and management tasks to aspiring principals help them to develop the skills that they will need in the longer term.

"Our role has become all encompassing. We are expected to be financial wizards, counselling wizards, curriculum wizards, crisis-management wizards…"

Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003, p 170.

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- New principals need to adjust to new workload and time demands
- Using time management strategies can help new leaders maintain a balanced approach
- The strategic goals of the school should serve as a filter for the activities a leader opts to pursue
- See AITSL's Leadership Scenarios: *New role, new demands.*

Workload

Principals are often surprised by the nature of tasks and the time needed for administrative matters (Draper and McMichael, 2000). They must also adjust to competing priorities, such as shaping teaching practice while dealing with pressing community, administrative and political demands.

Principals in smaller schools are also likely to have teaching responsibilities themselves (Darmody & Smyth, 2014; AITSL 2016b) and some leaders choose to retain a teaching component in their role. The ambiguity, unpredictability and diversity of tasks can be a barrier to effective time management (Barty et al, 2005; Clarke, Wildy & Pepper, 2007; Quong, 2006).

Coping with heavy workloads is a common cause of stress in the principal's workplace (Darmody & Smyth, 2014). If work-related stress is not managed, it can raise the risk of burnout (Riley, 2016).

New principals are often frustrated by the lack of time to focus on leading teaching and learning due to their administrative workload (Draper & McMichael, 2000; Spillane and Lee, 2013). The volume and nature of multiple demands can also undermine the balance of work and home life, which can impact on their happiness and personal relationships (Clarke, Wildy & Pepper, 2007; Riley 2016).

New leaders can learn and adopt strategies to improve time-management skills. Those who transition successfully grasp how to prioritise tasks in line with goals for school improvement and student outcomes (Buck, 2003; O'Malley, Long & King, 2015). Principals can identify where time is being spent by auditing day-to-day work, then highlight where time management practices could be used to deal with work demands.

A key skill for any new principal is being a selective consumer of the wide range of programs and opportunities available to them. Using discretion to prioritise activities that contribute to their own and the school's key goals is vital to avoid being overwhelmed.

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- New principals need strong people management skills
- Developing effective feedback and negotiation techniques is important
- Building positive relationships with staff can avert or reduce conflict
- See AITSL's Leadership Scenarios: *New role, new conversations.*

Developing and managing staff

Successful school leaders improve teaching and learning by motivating staff and by developing their teachers professionally (Day et al, 2009). Incoming principals are often enthusiastic about the prospect of creating new and positive relationships with staff (Lacey, 2002).

However, there are many aspects to developing the school culture that require strong people management skills. These include finding a sustainable approach to school improvement, expanding the professional capability of teachers and managing problematic staff issues. These challenges can be time consuming and stressful (Cranston, Ehrich and Billot, 2003). Negotiating personal difficulties, building a collaborative team and resolving conflict between employees requires resilience and sophisticated interpersonal skills (Duncan and Stock, 2010; Wildy and Clarke, 2008).

Principals must draw on these strengths to improve the performance of teachers and support staff in their school (Day et al, 2009). Developing skills to steer effective professional conversations will strengthen relationships and reinforce a culture of high expectations with staff and students.

New leaders who have gained an understanding of the personalities of their teachers and relationship dynamics between them are better positioned for the move into the principalship. Those who have been through a considered succession planning process are less likely to encounter or exacerbate conflicts as they step into the role. This preparation can significantly enhance their experience and get them off to a good start (Bush, 2011).

Those without the advantage of extensive prior knowledge of their school can benefit from accessing technical and cultural information and support during the changeover period. This can help them to head off problematic issues before they arise or help with resolving them effectively (Spillane and Lee, 2013).

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- Effective engagement with a new school community requires careful planning

- Knowledge and understanding about the school community reduces the challenge of transition

- New school leaders should focus on:
  - being accessible
  - being visible
  - building relationships
  - responding to the school culture and community.

Engaging with a new school community

Engaging with the school community plays a major part in how principals develop their professional identity and reputation.

According to Grissom and Loeb (2011), it is also an area where principals feel least effective. This in turn directly influences how connected they feel to their new environment (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). A complicating factor is that schools are increasingly responding to a diverse range of needs and complex social issues among their students (Darmody & Smyth, 2014).

A new principal can face resistance from the school community when they make change to routines, procedures or policy. This can be especially significant when their stakeholders have become used to the leadership style of their predecessor (Spillane and Lee, 2013). Compounding the issue, new principals may perceive community expectations as being unrealistic (Quong, 2006).

Greater knowledge and understanding about school families and the broader community can reduce the degree of difficulty in this area. (Spillane and Lee, 2013). Effective engagement requires careful planning.

Building family engagement through observation, listening and open and frank discussions is a key part of supporting students to be successful in their education (Desforges & Aboucharr, 2003). This can reveal valuable insights into what is and isn't working, and provide a sense of stakeholder expectations. New principals can consider shaping their leadership direction and style in response to the culture and community expectations.

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- Teaching experience may not develop all the skills necessary for the principal role

- The quality of formal professional learning programs around principal development is important

- Programs should be evaluated to ensure they have a positive impact on future leaders.

Tailoring professional preparation

The traditional pathway to principalship is from teaching, but this professional experience alone may not develop the required skills and knowledge needed to be an effective school principal.

The Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles can help aspiring principals learn about the responsibilities and expectations of the position in order to target their individual development needs (see AITSL's online resource – *Profiles in Action for Aspiring Principals*).

The professional learning teachers have undertaken throughout their career will shape what preparation they will require for the new principal role, therefore quality programs will cater to the individual needs of participants (AITSL, 2015). Assessing the merits of principal preparation programs is important. AITSL has developed a framework to help program providers assess and improve the quality of such programs with the aim of improving the impact of participating in formal learning for future leaders (AITSL, 2016c).

System approaches to principal preparation

AITSL's report *Preparing future leaders: Effective preparation for aspiring school principals* (AITSL, 2015) contains recommendations for aspiring principals, systems and sectors, professional learning providers and other groups for improving current approaches to principal preparation in Australia.
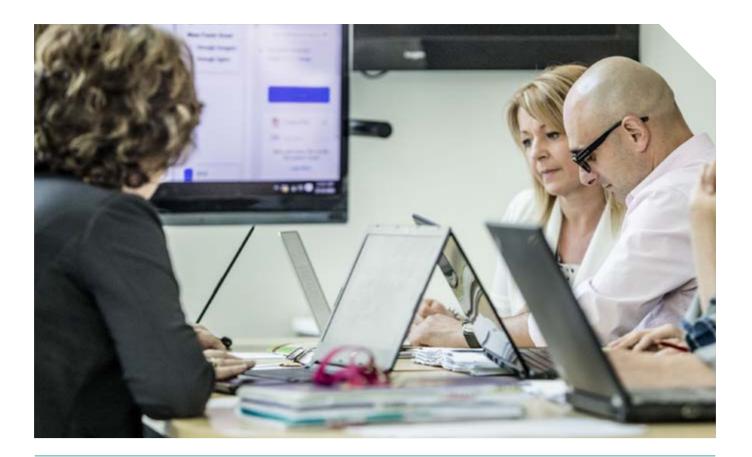
There are five key recommendations in the report:

1. Take a systematic, standards-based and coherent approach

2. Identify and nurture talent

3. Match learning to an individual's capabilities, career stage and context

4. Use evidence-based adult learning techniques

5. Evaluate programs for impact.

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At a glance

- Education systems and sectors can support new principals with information resources and professional learning

- Prioritise preparation supports that add the most value.

Principal associations and education systems and sectors can support aspiring principals to understand the necessary policies and procedures and the various resources, networks and professional learning opportunities that are available to them. However, a new principal needs to be discerning about what aspects of this support will be most helpful and prioritise those that add the most value to their capabilities and to their school.

Systems and sectors can play their part in helping principals prepare for their new role and manage wellbeing. Encouraging participation in quality preparation programs can be an important strategy for strengthening the capacity to lead (Wallace Foundation, 2015). Australia has a number of programs dedicated to creating a pool of aspiring principals ready to take on the role. Other programs target particular strategies and leadership qualities required of school leaders at a range of career stages (Watterson, 2015).

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At a glance

- School principals play a key role in improving student learning

- Vital support is available through professional learning and from peer networks

- Successful school leadership hinges on building relationships in the school community from the outset

- New principals should focus their efforts on activities that support the school's strategic goals.

Conclusion

Research consistently finds that school principalship is a significant element in improving student learning. Principals often cite this positive impact as an important factor in their job satisfaction, which is found to be higher than that of other professions.

Despite this sense of achievement, it will be necessary to navigate some of the common challenges school leaders face, which can be particularly difficult in the early days.

Aspiring principals can equip themselves with appropriate professional learning and peer networks to familiarise themselves with strategies that others have used successfully. Newly appointed principals can prioritise building new relationships in their school community and engaging in professional conversations with experienced colleagues or joining career networks to minimise the isolation that can be a feature of starting out.

Taking up opportunities to extend their skills will help aspiring principals to build a strong foundation of experiences they can draw on in meeting the broad range of tasks required when they become a principal. Support at the education system and sector level is important and can include encouragement to participate in quality formal programs that have been properly evaluated. New principals who can master the art of prioritisation, including in the supports they access, will be well placed to become effective leaders.

It may not be possible to prepare completely for the complex environment that modern principals operate in. However, learning more about what lies ahead and being proactive about accessing appropriate resources early can make the demands less daunting and the pathway to progress far smoother.

AITSL's Leadership Scenarios include a series of videos, user guides and additional tools for aspiring and new principals.

They provide:

- support for new principals to address common challenges
- insights into real-life experiences of school leaders
- practical strategies for new leaders.

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