

IT'S TIME FOR SYSTEM LEADERSHIP

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Despite some impressive research on the role of the school leader and a sturdy knowledge base about the links between leadership and learning, school leadership is in a parlous state, especially in the public sector. Applicants for promotion to the principalship are declining and there is now serious concern about the future of the role as incumbents approach retirement. The paper provides a critical examination of the issue and outlines a proposal for action that will secure success and sustainability. The focus is on system leadership in two senses: leadership of a system of education, and leadership in a system of education.

What will education be like 40 years from now? I can't tell you. Nobody can. But I can tell you that it must be totally different because if it is the same as it is today, we're dead. Current approaches will be irrelevant, marginalised, the world will be different. You may want it to be the same, but it can't be the same.

This is a dramatic if not startling way to begin. It is a paraphrasing of the remarks of Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong at a national day rally in August 2005, highlighting the need to 'remake Singapore – our economy, our education system, our mindsets, our city'. It was a remarkable call to action, especially to leaders in education, given that Singapore students rank first in the world in mathematics and science in Grade 4 and Grade 8, as revealed in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). However, as cast above, it could well be a call to action for education in other countries, including Australia.

The same statement could have been made 40 years ago. Who could have imagined in the mid-1960s what schools would be like in the mid-2000s? Regrettably, in some circumstances, the architecture might be recognisable, but the pedagogy has changed dramatically, especially in the use of information and communications technology. In the past, public schools were operating within a more-or-less hierarchical arrangement with few synergies outside their immediate communities. Notions of a knowledge society or globalisation were virtually unknown.

The next 40 years will be different – dramatically different -- for we are in 'fast forward' mode. Even the next 10 years are likely to see breathtaking change and leadership of the highest order will be required. There is surely a need to re-imagine educational leadership. You have a stake in this, and it is important that you are engaged in the processes.

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Hitting the wall

If further evidence of the need to re-imagine is required, it may be found in surveys of principals, either of their views about the role or, in simple statistical terms, about the number of vacancies and the paucity of applicants. In Victoria, for example, *The Privilege and the Price* (Department of Education and Training, 2004) reported on the workload in government (public) schools and its effects on the health and wellbeing of the principal class (principals and assistant principals). The report contained disturbing evidence of a burdensome distraction from the core functions of educational leadership.

It is fair to conclude that educational leadership at the school level has ‘hit the wall’ in many settings and that, while incremental improvements may be achieved, nothing short of transformation is required.

In general, it is my view that recent efforts at reform are unlikely to strengthen let alone sustain public education, especially at the secondary level. In terms of the landmark scenarios developed by OECD (2001), we are still locked into the ‘status quo’ scenario rather than moving to one of two ‘re-schooling’ scenarios, and efforts to incrementally improve the way things are done will not make much of a difference even if we are spending more money on schools than ever before. We need a manifesto for system reform. The ‘first cut’ of such a manifesto is presented in the final section of the paper.

The good news lies in the experience of leaders who have transformed their schools, or have made a commitment to do so: they are exhilarated by their work. In *Re-imagining Educational Leadership* (Caldwell, 2006) I describe how this has been achieved and make recommendations for policy and practice.

Self-management affirmed

Some observers, including those who have been critical of the approach from the outset, might argue that there should be a re-centralisation of authority and responsibility, that is, abandonment of the concept of the self-managing school. However, this is not the preference of principals. *The Privilege and the Price*, while reporting high workloads and serious levels of stress, included a powerful statement of support for self-management. Surveys conducted from time to time in England and New Zealand, where there have been similar patterns of decentralisation, have yielded the same point of view. This is understandable, not because principals have sought or seek to maintain a high level of personal power, but because they recognise that there must be local decision-making to ensure that the unique mix of learning needs in each school is addressed. This educational argument is supported by findings in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and TIMSS that there is a strong association between school level decision-making and results on these international tests of student achievement (Schleicher, 2004; Woessmann, 2001).

The new enterprise logic of schools

On concluding my term as dean of education at the University of Melbourne, I decided to investigate what principals had achieved in self-managing schools. In one sense this was an opportunity to extend and update our previous work on self-managing schools (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; 1992; 1998). A review of developments in several countries, notably Australia, especially Victoria, and England found that the best practice of self-management had far outstripped its initial conceptualisation and that the shape of schools in the future and the roles of their leaders were starting to take shape. Further information was gathered in nine workshops conducted over nine weeks in four countries (Australia, England, Chile and New Zealand).

We found that the changes were so deep that they amounted to a ‘new enterprise logic of schools’. The concept of ‘new enterprise logic’ was taken from the work of Zuboff and Maxmin (2004) who found that profound changes that went deeper than structure and function were underway in education, health and a range of enterprises in the public and private sectors. As described and illustrated in *Re-imagining Educational Leadership*, six major elements in the new enterprise logic of schools are as follows:

1. The student is the most important unit of organisation – not the classroom, not the school, and not the school system.
2. Schools cannot achieve expectations for transformation by acting alone or operating in a line of support from the centre of a school system to the level of the school, classroom or student. The success of a school depends on its capacity to join networks to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources.
3. Leadership is distributed across schools in networks as well as within schools.
4. Networks involve a range of individuals, agencies, institutions and organisations across public and private sectors in educational and non-educational settings. Personnel and other resources are allocated to energise and sustain them.
5. New approaches to resource allocation are required under these conditions. These take account of developments in personalising learning and the networking of expertise and support.
6. Intellectual capital and social capital are as important as other forms of capital.

The first element is fundamental. The student must be the most important unit of organisation if the aim is to achieve transformation, that is, significant, systematic and sustained change that results in high levels of achievement for all students in all settings, thus contributing to the wellbeing of the individual and society. Schools must be self-managing if there is to be transformation along these lines.

Five more workshops were conducted in late 2005, one in Queensland and four in Victoria, to explore a phenomenon that was evident in the nine workshops that gave shape to the new enterprise logic: those who had led the transformation of their schools were exhilarated by the experience. We asked three questions in the second series of workshops: What aspects of your work as leader are exhilarating? What aspects are boring, discouraging, depressing and dispiriting? What actions by you or others can shift

the balance to exhilaration? The findings suggest a way forward if a new and more rewarding role for leaders is to emerge (see Caldwell, 2006 for a detailed account).

The Way Forward

There is no one best way to proceed that will suit every setting and, even when one is determined, it is certain to change in a relatively short time. This is what Bentley and Wilsdon (2004, p. 16) called ‘the adaptive state’ – ‘we need new systems capable of continuously reconfiguring themselves to create new sources of public value’. One thing is certain: ‘the era of the large, slow moving, steady, respected, bureaucratic public services, however good by earlier standards, is over’ (Barber, 2004, p. 115).

Support

In the developed economies, the centralised arm of the public service must henceforth be conceived of almost exclusively as an agency of support – deep support – for schools. Small parts of the agency will help develop the framework within which schools in the system will operate. The framework will be largely concerned with standards, mechanisms for resource allocation to schools, and accountabilities. Increasingly, if best practice is a guide, deep support for schools from a central agency is likely to be just one of many sources of support. A central role ought to include support for schools as they endeavour to locate and deploy support from other agencies. As the former head of the public service in Australia has declared: ‘the goal of government should be to build stronger communities, not bigger bureaucracies’ (Keating, 2004, p. 5).

Hyman (2005) expressed it another way in *1 out of 10: From Downing Street Vision to Classroom Reality*. Peter Hyman left 10 Downing Street after many years as speech writer and advisor to the prime minister to work as an assistant to the headteacher at Islington Green School. ‘For lasting change to occur in public services, politicians need to show more humility and bring on board the professionals’ and ‘governments must take the need to let go more seriously, and to empower the frontline. It must produce a climate where frontline public servants do not become risk-averse. This means less dictating, less putting up pots of money to be bid for – ambitious targets yes, accountability yes, but also back creativity and imagination’ (Hyman, 2005, p. 390 and p. 385).

It was clear in the workshops described above, and others conducted recently for the Australian College of Educators², that school leaders everywhere resent the mountain of paperwork they are required to deal with. It goes without saying that this must be reduced to an absolute minimum. Part of the deep support to be expected of centralised services is to furnish every school and every leader with a state-of-the-art computer-based system to assist every aspect of school operations, including curriculum, pedagogy, accounting and accountability. Some schools are doing this well from their own resources but it is a

² These workshops were organised by the Australian College of Educators and were held in July and August 2006 in 19 locations around the country, including the capital city and at least one regional centre in every state and territory. The theme was ‘Re-imagining Educational Leadership’, drawing on ideas in the author’s book with that title (Caldwell, 2006).

capacity that ought to be built for all. School leaders are lagging far behind their counterparts in health care and airline services when it comes to managing information about the individual. How much more important it is in schools where the focus is on personalising learning. The school leader's office ought to be a paperless office.

A related issue is the amount of support for principals. There can be few enterprises as large as a typical secondary school where the chief executive does not have a personal assistant and several managers to deal with business and finance. Why not such support for principals? It is inexplicable that such support is not included in the basic package of support for leaders of schools in the public sector, when it is taken for granted for their counterparts in the independent sector. The notion of a 'package' is stressed, because the way in which the resource is used will vary from school to school. As assistant principals, you are part of such a 'package' but I have no doubt that the size of the package is a critical factor in determining whether you will seek appointment as a principal.

Networks

Some governments or systems of education have failed to come to terms with scenarios for the future of schools such as those formulated in OECD's Schooling for Tomorrow project (OECD, 2001). Take-up is limited to barely a handful of countries. Most are still determined to ensure that 'bureaucratic systems continue' when it is patently clear that they have reached a plateau in what they can achieve, despite the best efforts of highly committed people. Such systems have literally 'hit the wall'.

Networks are central to the logic of the preferred scenarios. Networks are not simply bureaucratically organised clusters of schools for geographic convenience in disseminating information and securing compliance. They are powerful learning communities in their own right, sharing knowledge, solving problems and pooling resources.

The notion of 'system leadership' is emerging in England where networking is proceeding apace through the networked learning communities of the National College for School Leadership and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. System leadership calls for leadership to be distributed across schools as well as within a school. This is an element in the new enterprise logic. This might be leadership in a network of schools, or across a system of schools, in a particular area where a leader, or her or his school, has expertise, as in the twinning of schools in efforts to raise the achievement of one. At first sight there is a contradiction, or at least the potential to add to the workload or stress levels of already fully engaged principals. This was not the experience of leaders in schools where transformation had been achieved. However, it is important that system leadership be supported by other approaches described above.

Profession

One of several factors accounting for the success of Finland in PISA is the quality of its teachers. Finnish teachers are highly valued and well paid professionals who are expected

to have high levels of pedagogical expertise and flexibility in order to achieve learning success with all students in heterogeneous groups. Applications to tertiary education studies are so high that just 10-12 percent of applicants are accepted in teacher education programs (Linnakylä and Välijärvi, 2003). Only students who demonstrate outstanding academic ability and personal qualities are accepted. All teachers are required to have a master's degree in either pedagogy or the subject that they wish to teach.

It will require leadership of the highest order at every level of government and in universities to achieve an expectation that all teachers should hold a masters degree before taking up their appointments. In addition to such a qualification, and the assumed capacities that follow, schools must also become powerful learning communities if teachers are to be at the forefront of professional knowledge. They should remain so, even when these standards of initial teacher education are achieved.

Schools should have the capacity to attract and appropriately reward the best of professional talent, reflecting a conceptual shift from a 'workforce' approach to a 'talent force' approach (Rueff and Stringer, 2006). Local sourcing should give way to global sourcing. These ideas have only now hit the headlines in education, as some schools have engaged in robust approaches in their search for talent. Strategic outsourcing to achieve transformation is a powerful strategy that poses no risk to top-class professionals who hold ongoing appointments (Linder, 2004).

Infrastructure

One of the most distressing aspects of the educational scene are the structural constraints on schools that seek to address the new enterprise logic and achieve transformation ('high levels of achievement for all students in all settings'). This refers to the deplorable state of school buildings in many nations. For the most part these reflect the judgement of David Hargreaves that schools are 'a curious mix of the factory, the asylum and the prison' (Hargreaves, D., 1994). While some improvements have been made since he made that statement, it is nigh on impossible for some schools to personalise learning using appropriate technologies in a pleasant environment for students and staff. England, Scotland, and Singapore have, to their credit, declared a national priority on the replacement, refurbishment or re-design of schools, but there is little evidence that a commitment has been made in most nations, including Australia.

Implications for policy and practice

What are the implications of these matters for policy and practice in educational leadership? There are many, but it is important to bear in mind that schools and school systems will continue to change, albeit at a faster rate, in the decade ahead, and that approaches to leadership will change accordingly. What follows is based on current practice in several nations where transformation has been achieved and leaders are exhilarated by the experience. The intent is to provide a framework that can help all schools and all leaders achieve these outcomes at the same time that new practices emerge and the nature of schools and leadership changes.

Government and the public service

Governments and ministers for education should immediately prepare a scenario to transform the way the system supports its schools. While a small part of the system will be concerned with setting policies, allocating resources, determining standards and ensuring accountability, the overwhelming majority of staff should be engaged unambiguously and unrelentingly in the support of schools. This support may be deployed from a central office, or it may be dispersed in a geographic sense, close to schools.

Schools should be self-managing, with most moving as close to autonomy as possible while still operating within a system that prides itself on good governance. Governments will be comfortable with the notion that the public service or centrally employed staff are just one agency of deep support for schools, who ought to be encouraged and supported to draw assistance from a range of sources, public and private, in education and other fields. Central authorities will appreciate that their chief role is to provide this deep support, and to help build powerful communities rather than larger bureaucracies. ‘Whole-of-government’ approaches will be reality not rhetoric, and there will be no place for those who cannot operate in this manner.

The best systems of knowledge management will be set up in schools. The aim is the support of personalised learning and a profession at the forefront of knowledge. Those at the centre shall play their part in ensuring that the leader’s office is a paperless office. A support package will ensure that principals and other school leaders have appropriate executive and management support.

Ministers and public servants will be accountable for ensuring that most schools are replaced or re-built to make them proper places for learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching in the 21st century. Leaders will be courageous in the true sense of the word, brooking no ideological opposition to the use of all of the resources of society to achieve this end. The failure to involve the private sector in this aspect of education has done grave harm to the working conditions of staff and students in many settings.

There will be acknowledgement in reality and not just rhetoric that transformation across the system will not occur with top-down and bottom-up approaches. Powerful networks to support the lateral transfer of knowledge will be nurtured and supported. They will not be another mechanism for the distributing information and ensuring compliance. These networks shall be resourced in substantial and not trivial ways. System leadership by school leaders will be encouraged and rewarded. Creative entrepreneurial risk-taking leadership shall be nurtured in the early stages of a career. These qualities shall be a normal expectation for those appointed to the principalship.

Schools and their leaders

There are implications in the foregoing for those who take up leadership positions in schools, especially at the level of principal or assistant principal. Each of the capacities specified above will be taken up at the school level, including the deployment of a wide range of mechanisms for support, tailoring to the needs of the school an advanced capacity for knowledge management, building a powerful learning community to ensure that staff are at the forefront of knowledge, participating in and sharing the leadership of networked learning communities and in other ways serving as a system leader, and accepting and utilising a support package to ensure that the balance is on leadership rather than management. Distributed leadership shall be taken seriously so that most staff take on a leadership role of one kind or another. Principals and their leadership teams shall actively seek and accept a higher level of authority and responsibility as the school moves closer to autonomy.

Creative entrepreneurial risk-taking leadership is nurtured and staff who demonstrate such attributes should be appointed to senior positions. Personal health and well-being are priorities. If either suffer, then re-consider the role or make adjustments to approaches to leadership and management in the light of the above, insisting on and utilising support from outside the school as necessary.

Leaders at the system level and in all kinds of schools are strategic, following Mintzberg (1995) in 'seeing ahead, seeing behind, seeing above, seeing below, seeing beside, seeing beyond, and above all, seeing it through'. They are comfortable with, although inevitably challenged by, their role in one of the most significant transformations of society in the history of humankind.

Universities and other providers of professional education

Bodies responsible for professional standards in teaching shall seek the transformation of initial teacher education, with serious consideration to approaches that have proved successful in Finland, where a master's degree is required before appointment. Programs for the preparation and ongoing professional development of leaders will be transformed, drawing more heavily than ever on the work of leaders who have transformed their schools and school systems. Master classes will be a major feature. Much of the professional literature will be discarded. This in no way detracts from its value in the past.

Higher priority will be given to research on leadership, as exercised by those who are succeeding in transforming their schools and who have helped make the link to learning. Current research along these lines is robust and it needs to be supported and expanded.

A manifesto for serious reform and an exhilarating role for school leaders

A manifesto for serious reform and an exhilarating role for school leaders takes shape in the light of the foregoing and other themes canvassed in *Re-imagining Educational*

Leadership. The following is a ‘first cut’, with further refinement to follow the report of the Australian College of Educators on the recent series of workshops around the country.

1. The majority of schools should be re-built to ensure their design is relevant to curriculum and pedagogy in the 21st century and that they meet standards for attractive and satisfying workplaces for high-level professionals. Such schools will be consistent with a ‘re-schooling’ rather than ‘status quo’ scenario (in the OECD formulation of scenarios for the future of schools).
2. There should be substantial increases in salaries for leaders of the largest and the most challenging of schools, reflecting the demands of the role and the need to attract top-class applicants. A package of the order of \$250,000 per year, as is currently available for principals in London, is a reasonable benchmark.
3. Schools should have the capacity to attract and reward the best of professional expertise from anywhere in the world in a landmark shift from a ‘workforce approach’ to a ‘talent force approach’.
4. Schools should adopt strategic outsourcing where particular short-term needs must be addressed in efforts to achieve radical transformation. Such an approach poses no threat to the security of staff whose high-level professional services will be required on a continuing basis.
5. One piece of strategic outsourcing, urgently required at the system level, is for high-level work-flow specialists to determine how the mountain of inappropriate paperwork and compliance requirements in schools can be reduced and appropriate ‘packages’ of leadership and management support for school leaders can be designed.
6. The overwhelming majority of staff who are not employed in schools should have a service role in support of schools. New standards of professional support from system-level personnel are as important as standards for school leadership.
7. Such system level support should be seen as just one source of support in a market of providers which shall include support generated within networks of schools and private companies, many of which shall be established by outstanding practitioners, either currently serving or in new career mode.
8. The notion of ‘system leadership’ as currently evolving in some school systems shall be embraced, providing an opportunity for outstanding school leaders to support a number of schools, while retaining appointments in their own schools.
9. A priority should be placed on building partnerships between schools and other enterprises in educational and non-educational settings, in the public and private sectors. Public and private funds should be provided to support the work of trusts

or other non-profit entities whose role it is to forge such partnerships so that the task does not fall exclusively on school leaders, especially those in disadvantaged settings

10. Every school leader should have the opportunity to learn at first hand how transformation has been achieved in different settings. In addition to visits to such settings, a range of approaches utilising state-of-the-art technologies shall be utilised. Master classes by outstanding school leaders shall be employed in professional development and graduate programs.

Can such a manifesto be implemented in the next five years? I am optimistic, but it will require all stakeholders, especially governments, to recognise the scale of the problem and at least set in place a plan that can provide a foundation for optimism. Promising incremental change will not suffice. The outcome will be a richly rewarding, if not exhilarating role for school leaders who are critical to success in the transformation of schools.

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