

Kathy Deacon explains how leadership in schools should be a collegial, collaborative and collective practice . . .

There are public schools in every community across NSW and the reach of the work of teachers and principals is undeniable. However, many front line public services have been reduced or withdrawn completely from communities. This has been due to policy decisions of all governments determined to abandon their responsibility to support the cornerstone institutions of society, such as health and social services. As these provisions diminish, the impact on students is potentially harsh and enduring.

Public schools, with principals and teachers at the helm, work tirelessly for school communities driven by an inextricable belief that education can be transformational and that, through the collective efforts of staff, students can reach their full potential. The importance of the role of educational leaders in such a context is undeniable.

I believe dispersing leadership amongst staff provides opportunities for individuals and teams of teachers to utilise their skills and expertise to the full.

Relationships with staff, students and the community are central to a school leader's success and the overall accomplishments of that school. Working collegially collaboratively and collectively is crucial and is a prerequisite for dispersing leadership amongst staff.

Positive relationships with staff built on mutual respect and trust are vital. Time should be invested in explicitly supporting genuine associations with staff, to build teams and enhance the working environment.

There can be powerful foundations that underpin why individuals have chosen to enter the teaching service. One of the best ways to link with staff as an educational leader is to ask them to articulate why they became a teacher in the NSW public education system. The leader should reciprocate. This is not meant to be an abstract exercise. On the contrary, such narratives can create unfeigned connections for conversation and can be powerful initiators of motivation and sources of relevance.

Educational leadership can be dispersed amongst staff who are secure in the belief that what they do as teachers, day in and day out, is making a difference and is significant. Collectively supporting students to be the best they can be is an endeavour for a whole staff. It is a powerful notion that every child in the school is the responsibility of the whole staff, not just the purview of individual class or subject teachers.

Teaching should be a collective enterprise where the amalgam of a whole staff's motivations for choosing the profession converges and is expressed.

Leaders, too, should make every effort to model professional and calm modes of interaction so that teachers have mechanisms and processes to express their professional opinions for the mutual benefit of all. It is important that teachers have input and a tangible impact on the directions of their school. Committees within schools, stage and faculty teams, with degrees of autonomy for setting priorities and decision making, are fundamental to success.

Fatigue due to continued and unrelenting change and reform is problematic, and leaders in schools need to assist teachers, in fact give permission and authority to teachers, to make priorities within agreed parameters and set collective directions. It is better to do a few things extremely well than execute many initiatives and ideas poorly.

It is also important to identify and celebrate the strengths of each staff member. This should be the starting point for any professional relationship. Once trust is gained, then the ability to have a positive influence on staff to cultivate and improve areas for development is optimised. It is only natural for all staff to yearn for fulfilment from their role.

Teachers can feel a profound unity with colleagues in their workplace as they strive to improve student learning and enhance the congruence between home and school. Opportunities to celebrate successes and efforts of staff should be therefore optimised. The recognition of individuals and teams supports the building of whole staff resilience which is required as a bulwark against challenges that will arise throughout the school year.

Leaders need to make some decisions urgently or within constrained timeframes. Fortunately, however, the majority of decisions can be made in a considered manner and communicated in an opportune way. It is acceptable to let people know that time to think over matters may be required before advice is given or decisions finalised. This can allow for moments to consult others or research matters. Decisions made in haste, with less-than-desirable outcomes, can lead to long-term problems.

Following on from this, leaders will often identify an initiative they want a staff to pursue with the intention of propelling the staff in a new direction. If the necessary work has been completed to build trust and mutual respect with colleagues, then the idea can be given over to the staff to be washed through the consultative processes.

The initial proposal may come out of such a course of action completely transformed, barely resembling the original. In the end it is the staff members who implement changes and they should only be expected to accept and enact proposals that have a clear purpose, are reflective of their professionalism, and enhance student learning.

Teaching is a profession that has significant associated workload. The trick is to ensure that the work is relevant, necessary and effective. This is a challenge when juggling departmental compliance and policy demands while supporting 21st century learning.

Leading staff within the school is important but there is a need to extend this role to move well beyond the bounds of the school gate. The school principal and the staff have a significant responsibility to promote the accomplishments of the school to the wider community. This advocacy needs to reach those determining government policies. Collectively, educational leaders and teachers can advocate for their students and public education.

The narrative of school achievement can be recorded and regularly presented to local politicians and community leaders. The crucial role of public education and the importance of government support is perennial. Teachers are the link between the community and the policy makers, and having staff actively engaged at this level of advocacy is astute practice.



Lead but Let others Come First



It can be difficult to describe and quantify the complexities of issues and matters that leaders will encounter on a typical day. A staff working collegially towards collectively determined goals will better navigate those times when substantial challenges arise. A focused team will also capitalise on the moments when all is going to plan and use such opportunities to further propel learning for students in a positive direction.

So, before leaving school at the end of the day it is important to sit for a moment and think through all that has occurred. Celebrate the successes, consider how things may need enhancing and set the priorities for the next day. Most importantly, school leaders should take the time to be pleased with personal achievements and proud of the collective triumphs of colleagues.

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Kathy has extensive knowledge and experience in curriculum and professional matters and was previously the Federation representative on the NSW Board of Studies. She has contributed to the formulation and advocacy of Federation policies to promote and defend excellence and equity in public education.