

AUTONOMY OVER WHAT? RECLAIMING INTELLIGENT PROFESSIONALISM IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

ANNA HOGAN

Anna Hogan argues that the principle of autonomy for principals has not been as worthwhile or as empowering as promised. She suggests the use of “intelligent professionalism”...

In recent years, school leaders across Australia have been navigating intensifying demands. Principals are now routinely expected to manage not only teaching and learning, but also staffing, infrastructure, finances and community engagement, all within systems shaped by reform agendas that emphasise decentralisation and local autonomy. At the centre of these reforms lies a key question: autonomy over what, and for what purpose?

This essay reflects on the changing nature of professional autonomy in school leadership, drawing on research conducted across Australia, New Zealand, England, and Canada. It argues that while the principle of autonomy is often presented as empowering, in practice it has sometimes functioned to redistribute responsibility and delegate risk onto schools without the support required to realise its promise. In this context, an engagement with the concept of intelligent professionalism offers a useful framework for thinking about how school leaders might reclaim autonomy in ways that are professionally meaningful and educationally purposeful.

AUTONOMY AS A POLICY IDEAL

Education reforms in many OECD contexts, including Australia, have positioned autonomy as a desirable policy goal. Initiatives such as *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (LSDL) sought to give principals greater control over staffing, budgets and other operational decisions. The underlying assumption is that decentralising authority to the school level enables leaders to respond more effectively to local contexts and community needs (Macdonald et al., 2021).

Many school leaders welcomed these changes. In research conducted with principals across four different states in Australia, school leaders frequently described the benefits of being able to tailor decisions to their communities (Niesche et al., 2023). In a different study, in Queensland, principals similarly highlighted autonomy

as professionally affirming, offering opportunities to innovate, lead strategically and differentiate their schools within an increasingly competitive school choice landscape (Le Feuvre et al., 2023). For these leaders, autonomy was not only a matter of operational control, but also a way to enact their vision and build a strong, marketable culture within their schools.

This view was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. When school closures occurred and rapid shifts to remote learning were required, many principals used their discretionary powers to reallocate funds, purchase digital devices and implement local strategies to ensure continuity of learning (Cuskelly et al., 2024). In these moments, autonomy enabled timely and responsive decision-making. It also contributed to a sense of professional agency that allowed school leaders to draw on their local knowledge and relationships to support students and staff.

THE LIMITS OF AUTONOMY IN PRACTICE

Despite these examples, the practical enactment of autonomy has also raised concerns. In several studies, school leaders indicated that while autonomy was welcome in theory, in practice it was often accompanied by significant challenges (see Thompson et al., 2021; Keddie et al., 2022). A common concern was the absence of corresponding support and resourcing. Autonomy, in these contexts, did not always equate to greater professional freedom. Instead, it often meant managing increasing responsibilities in the face of declining resources.

A key example of this is how the financial responsibilities associated with autonomy have significantly reshaped the role of the principal. Research into school funding and the increasing reliance on private income in public schools has shown that principals are now required to engage in resource acquisition activities, including ap-

plying for grants, selling advertising space and partnering with external organisations in sponsorship arrangements (Hogan et al., 2023; Rowe & Di Gregorio, 2024).

While some school communities benefit from these opportunities, the process places additional expectations on school leaders to manage stakeholder relationships and align their goals with market-based principles. This shift signals a broader change in how educational leadership is understood: success is increasingly associated with financial management and market responsiveness, rather than solely with instructional leadership or community engagement.

These changes have placed considerable strain on principals, many of whom report working extended hours to meet operational and administrative demands. In recent research colleagues and I have undertaken in partnership with the Queensland Teachers' Union, principals described long workdays followed by several hours of tasks completed after hours (Thompson et al., 2025). Time spent on teaching and learning, through classroom observations and mentoring was frequently reduced. For many, this led to a sense of disconnection from the core purposes of their role.

RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

Given these challenges, it is important to reflect on what kind of autonomy is most valuable in public education. Autonomy itself is not inherently beneficial or detrimental. What matters is the nature of the autonomy being granted, the supports that accompany it and the purposes it serves. This is where the concept of intelligent professionalism (Thompson, 2021) offers a productive way forward.

Developed in the context of global advocacy for the teaching profession, intelligent professionalism resists the narrowing of autonomy to individualised managerial control. Instead, it positions autonomy as strategic, collective and grounded in shared responsibility, with teachers and school leaders actively shaping policy and practice. It recognises educators as insiders in education reform, whose expertise and contextual knowledge should drive decision making. This involves collaborative, profession led approaches to designing and enacting policies, supported by strong relationships between systems, schools and their communities.

From this perspective, autonomy is most valuable when directed toward the aspects of leadership and practice that have the greatest impact on student learning and school development. These include:

- Instructional leadership: the ability to lead curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in ways that reflect the needs and strengths of local communities.
- Staff development and team building: the capacity to mentor and retain staff, and to foster a strong, purposeful professional culture.
- Responsive planning: the discretion to make strategic decisions in response to emerging challenges or opportunities, supported by clear frameworks and adequate resources.

At the same time, intelligent professionalism recognises that not all responsibilities are best devolved. Certain functions, particularly those related to infrastructure, core staffing, student support services, and data systems, may be more effectively managed through central coordination. When these are centrally resourced and equitably distributed, they reduce unnecessary burdens on school leaders and create the conditions for genuine professional agency. This enables educators to focus their autonomy on the work that matters most; improving teaching, learning and equity in their schools.

A PROFESSIONALLY LED SYSTEM

As Australian education systems consider the next phase of reform, there is a timely opportunity to reflect on how leadership is understood and supported. Rather than continuing to devolve responsibilities without sufficient support, policymakers could invest in models of leadership that are sustainable, collaborative and grounded in professional expertise.

A professionally led system does not imply a return to rigid centralisation. Rather, it involves designing structures that balance flexibility with fairness, and that recognise the critical role of school leaders as both educational experts and system stewards. This means creating space for principals to lead learning, ensuring that baseline entitlements and infrastructure are guaranteed system-wide, and developing accountability systems that are transparent, collaborative and respectful of educators' time and expertise.

The principle of autonomy remains important in public education. But autonomy must be supported. It should enable school leaders to lead with purpose, not just manage scarcity. By reclaiming intelligent professionalism, we can reframe autonomy not as a burden, but as a tool for advancing educational quality and equity, led by the profession, in partnership with the system and in service of all students.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Anna Hogan is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests broadly focus on education marketisation, and the related issues of privatisation and commercialisation in public schooling. She currently works on a number of research projects, including: philanthropy in Australian public schooling, teacher and school leader time poverty, and how commercial curriculum resources – including GenAI – impact teachers' work. She works with education departments and teacher unions in relation to these issues. Anna has two recent books: *Teaching and Time Poverty* (2024) and *Commercialising Public Schooling: Practices of Profit-Making* (2025).

