

## **Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) Response to the National School Reform Agenda Interim Report Productivity Commission**

### **Background: A history of ACEL's role in advancing educational leadership in Australia**

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) is a not-for-profit professional association, the largest in the education sector in Australia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. It has a growing network of more than 5,000 members and over 55,000 educators with branches in each state and territory. Membership of ACEL is drawn from all sectors and levels of education, contexts, jurisdictions, and geographies and covers broad school leadership roles and endeavours.

For almost 50 years, ACEL has actively promoted the development of educational leadership capabilities across Australia through its leadership-focused opportunities available for classroom teachers, middle level leaders, school principals, and system leaders. ACEL's work supports the spirit of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) and the more recent *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), both of which are strongly committed to improving the educational outcomes of students. ACEL's agenda is to develop, support, and enhance the work of leaders so they will be well-equipped and well-placed to lead a world class educational system "that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face" (Education Council, 2019, preamble).

An important role of ACEL is its partnerships with like-minded organisations to further enhance the richness of its portfolio of programs and resources to ensure that educational leaders as well as teachers get access to most current research and best practice in their field.

### **Introduction**

ACEL welcomes the breadth and depth of research and consultation that is evident in the Productivity Commission's Review (PCR) (Australian Government, 2022a). It highlights the complexity and demands of leadership and recognises the pivotal role school leaders play regarding student outcomes, wellbeing, community building, innovation, and school reform. While the Productivity Commission (Australian Government, 2022a) has identified four overarching and interrelated policy challenges facing school systems, the focus of this submission lies with the first of these that relates to "constraints on the effectiveness of teachers and leaders" (p. 9). In particular, this submission addresses Information Request 6.1 (p. 177) that identifies four questions related to the preparation and professional development of school principals. Because of the long-standing involvement of ACEL in helping to prepare, support, and provide ongoing professional learning and development to school leaders across Australia, it is well-placed to provide this submission.

**PCR Question 1: *Do principals have the resources, support and professional development opportunities required for their demanding roles?***

**ACEL's Response: Yes, with some caveats. There are many professional development opportunities but access is not universal and there is variability.**

According to a large survey of over 2, 200 principals across Australia carried out in 2020, Riley et al. (2021) pointed to the importance of both professional support and professional development for principals. Not only is professional support “a strong predictor of coping with the demands of the role” (p. 11) but also it is connected to principals’ wellbeing and mental health. In 2021, this same survey was completed this time by over 2500 principals and one of the findings was increasing professional support was required by younger and less experienced principals. These principals reported “higher levels of stress from work demands” (p. 10) than experienced principals. The authors concluded “that more focused support for aspiring and early career principals is critical to ensure they transition smoothly into an experienced principal” (See et al., 2022, p. 10).

There are many avenues through which school principals and other formal leaders in schools can access resources, support, and different forms of professional development that can equip them for their demanding roles. Universities, professional associations, school systems, and other providers constitute some of these different avenues. In some cases, the support is provided by the system in which principals work; in other cases, individual principals seek out short courses, workshops, or seminars which may be paid by themselves or by their school budgets. Support and professional development can also be informal, unstructured, and idiosyncratic depending upon the individual principal and their context.

Opportunities for professional development for school leaders have increased exponentially over the past 20 years and generally speaking tend to be of overall respectable quality. Universities across Australia provide post-graduate degrees that focus on educational leadership as a specialisation. There is evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in enrolments in masters programs (educational leadership) as a result of partnerships with school systems. One example is the NSW Department of Education that provides full scholarships for students to complete postgraduate degrees.

As Australia’s premier national association for educational leaders, ACEL provides support and professional development opportunities for its members as well as non-members. It does this through its annual conferences and workshops, leadership programs, in-house publications, online resources, and bookshop. Feedback from members through national surveys, conferences, and professional learning events held at state and regional levels, indicates that the support and learning opportunities provided by ACEL are meeting their needs. ACEL’s ability to personalise curation and target use of resources and professional development is a contributing factor to its effectiveness. Another key factor is ACEL’s cross-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional sharing of resources and learning.

It seems the most effective, well-received, or high demand resources or professional development opportunities are those that are needs-based, time-sensitive and involve opportunities for collaboration/connection and sharing of experiences with colleagues. Even when the focus of professional development does match principals' needs, other barriers to access include hefty workloads that prevent them from taking time away from school to engage in professional development; budgetary constraints; and accessibility issues if principals work in rural or remote areas. Large public schools and wealthy independent schools tend not to be impacted by budgetary constraints to the same extent as smaller schools located in low socio-economic or rural/remote areas where professional development funding is more likely to be restricted. The use of the internet and e-learning for professional development has helped to alleviate some of the limitations imposed by geography.

An important source of learning and support for principals to manage the challenging demands of their work is provided by their colleagues, peers, and superiors (Riley et al., 2021). Three examples include professional networks, distributed leadership approaches within schools, and mentoring/coaching. For all of these supportive activities, time needs to be allocated for principals to work with and alongside their colleagues/peers. Riley et al. (2021) make a strong argument for the establishment of professional support networks that are locally and contextually relevant and designed to provide principals with collegial support. Support can be experienced also when principals embrace the notion of "distributed leadership" by working closely with other leaders within their own school. The advantage of working on-site is it requires far less resourcing than some formal professional development programs and it is likely to have important benefits especially in terms of sharing leadership and building leadership capacity in others such as middle leaders and teacher leaders. Yet this access is not universal and much is dependent on the size of the school, its geographical location, and the willingness of other leaders within the school to share leadership.

The final area of support is mentoring/coaching. According to Watterston (2015), mentoring and coaching are viewed highly by principals as a form of preparation for the principalship. Mentoring relationships can emerge organically, be developed within individual schools to support teachers and leaders, or be planned by systems. Regarding the latter, some systems within Australia (including Government, Independent schools, and Catholic education) as well as professional associations (e.g. ACCEL, Queensland Education Leadership Institute Inc [QELi]) provide mentoring programs or access to mentors/coaches for school principals to support their growth and development. Sometimes mentoring/coaching is part of induction or leadership development programs provided by systems. The advantage of mentoring programs is they help new leaders become socialised into the role, and the advice and guidance provided is needs-based, time-sensitive, highly contextual, and relational in focus. A recent example is being offered by the ACT Department of Education called, PCM – Principal Coach mentor – which is an opt-in for school principals, compulsory for some, and part of a full training program.

**PCR Question 2: Are policy efforts to identify and prepare potential leaders effective?**

**ACEL's Response:** At both a national and state/territory policy level more needs to be done to identify and prepare potential leaders. While the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* is a foundational document, there is no alignment to the leadership elements within the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* and therefore no seamless transition to leadership pathways. Each of the States and Territories has policies pertaining to the identification and preparation of principals in public schools, but better coordination at the State and Territory level is required so that principal preparation is understood within the context of a comprehensive leadership development strategy.

Since 2011, the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (APSP) (AITSL, 2014) has provided a clear and public statement as to the roles and tasks school principals should be able to achieve to succeed in their work. It is a comprehensive document that considers three leadership requirements and five areas of professional practice. A fairly recent addition to the APSP is the inclusion of a set of leadership actions that demonstrates levels of proficiency (known as "the profiles"). As identified in the policy, the APSP can be used as a form of talent development and succession planning. Not only does the APSP help aspiring principals to better understand the nature of the principalship, but it also provides a framework of targeted professional development opportunities for aspiring principals to prepare them for the role. From this perspective, the policy has value and provides essential information for aspiring or potential leaders.

With this said, however, there is little alignment between the APSP and the leadership elements identified in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2017). *The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* do not reflect the transition from teaching to the principalship or teaching to middle leadership positions and may in fact work against a seamless transition.

There are variations in policy and practice within and across States and Territories, sectors, and jurisdictions regarding the process of attracting and then preparing aspiring leaders for the principalship that are reflective of diversity and contextual needs. Systems, professional organisations, and universities have developed leadership programs targeted at aspiring leaders. Three recent examples of system-wide approaches to leadership preparation are considered here. The Victorian Aspiring Principal Assessment ([VAPA], Victoria State Government, (n.d.) identifies and prepares Victoria's future school principals. VAPA evaluates readiness for the principal role against a framework aligned with the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (AITSL, 2014) and identifies professional learning needs for aspiring principals of both primary and secondary schools, including emotionally intelligent leadership competencies. Since 2021, it has become mandatory for all aspiring principals to undertake the VAPA before being appointed to the role (Victoria State Government, n.d.).

The *Futures Leaders Program* is a pilot partnership program developed between Teach for Australia and the Australian Government and is being implemented over 2021-2022. It targets high performing teachers with aspirations for leadership who are working in remote, rural or regional schools. Approximately 100 students are expected to complete the program over the two years (Australian Government, 2022b). The NSW Department of Education (DoE) established the School Leadership Institute (SLI) in 2018. Its work is underpinned by a Leadership Development Continuum that includes induction and leadership development for leaders at each stage of their career. The Senior Leaders – Aspiring Principals Leadership Program (SL-APLP) for aspiring principals or those leaders who are seeking to enhance their leadership impact is the flagship program that started in 2018. It has a highly rigorous selection process and a strong alumni program. The most recent data showed that 57% of participants from the first three cohorts are now principals. Additionally, this year, SLI launched a program for middle leaders who are interested in senior leadership positions or seeking to enhance their impact in their current role. In the aforementioned examples, systems have targeted both teachers and middle leaders for the principalship. Based on recent experience, ACEL has noted an increasing demand for and popularity of events targeted at middle leaders. This is a promising sign given that middle leadership is often an intermediate step between teaching and the principalship.

According to an environment scan conducted by Watterston (2015), it was found that each of Australia's eight state and territory government education departments delivers principal preparation programs and these systems have common priorities. Among these are planning and implementing more effective succession planning activities; preparing aspirants to work with greater autonomy; and enabling aspiring principals to manage the complexity of schooling including increasing accountabilities. In the scan, Watterson (2015) noted that across the systems of principal preparation were inherent weaknesses and these included:

1. Inadequate funding for programs and initiatives, resulting in differentiated levels of support provided to participants.
2. A fully cohesive, systemic approach to leadership development is lacking where collaboration between school sectors was minimal.
3. A lack of transparency regarding the mechanisms to identify and develop effective leaders early in their careers is lacking.
4. Processes of selection for entry into programs are not being sufficiently rigorous.
5. Inadequate tools to measure program effectiveness and evidence of impact after a person becomes a principal (Watterson 2015, p. 3)

A further avenue to strengthening the pipeline to leaders noted in Watterson's (2015) environmental scan rests with current school principals who can and do identify, support, and recommend potential staff to consider leadership roles including the principalship. She gave examples of how some principals were involved in providing mentoring and shadowing opportunities for staff who expressed an interest in leadership. Yet, her research found that not all potential leaders with ambitions, however, were afforded the sponsorship or support of their principals (p. 18).

**PRC Question 3: Are there alternative sources of school leaders, including from outside the teaching profession?**

**ACEL's Response: Seeking personnel from outside of teaching/education for school leadership positions is not recommended. What makes educational leadership unique is that its success is defined by how young people learn in educational environments. Successful learning outcomes require specialised knowledge rooted deeply in pedagogy as opposed to managerial practices. Alternative sources of leadership from outside the teaching profession can support and complement educational leadership, but should never replace it.**

The review rightly acknowledges the primacy of the role of school leadership on teacher effectiveness, student outcomes, wellbeing, school strategy/culture, innovation, and reform. This has been borne out by an extensive literature review and recent empirical research by Leithwood et al. (2020) that found “school leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning ... This effect is vital to the success of most school improvement efforts” (p. 5). We would argue, then, that central leadership authority is best provided by those who understand the complexity of learning, and who have developed the professional experience and skill set through the career progression, as outlined in the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* (AITSL, 2014). Teaching and leading education are evidence-informed professions which require key personnel to draw upon their unique knowledge and skill base to interpret and use the evidence.

Educational leadership is unique and distinctive from other forms of general leadership. For this reason, education cannot and should not be separated from educational leadership. Educational leadership is not only about techniques and skills; it has a moral dimension and concerns values-based decisions in the pursuit of educational aims. If teaching and school leadership are seen as simple technical exercises, then non-educational leaders may be marginally adequate to lead schools. However, schools are complex adaptive learning organisations that require wise and moral judgements by professionals; those persons who hold specialised knowledge and expertise developed through training and qualifications in teaching. This is explained by Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) as “decisional capital” which is based on the idea that professionals (both teachers and leaders) acquire and accumulate capital through experiences, practice and reflection. It is this capital that enables them to make those wise judgements in curriculum, pedagogy, and leading. Educational professionals in the field, therefore, are best placed to act in “the best interests of students” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) and lead their educational organisations.

Robinson (in press) claims that what makes educational leadership distinctive is that it is dedicated to the pursuit of the purpose of education. Three main purposes include preparing young people with the skills and competencies they will need to lead productive and fulfilling lives; helping young people be socialised into a community and culture; and helping young people develop autonomy. Given these three purposes of education, Robinson argues that educational leadership requires “substantial educational knowledge and teaching experience.



Generic leadership knowledge and experience will not build the virtues that are required for excellent educational leadership” (p. 9).

While school principals with a teaching and education background are the ideal persons to lead schools, there is a recognition that they require knowledge in allied fields such as finance, IT, the law, and human resource management. Our position is that this knowledge, while important, is secondary to teaching and learning, which is the core of schooling and educational leadership. Rather than employ specialists from these fields or other professional fields to be principals or deputy principals, it is recommended that school principals have access to this expertise by partnering with experts from these and other professions or having advisors or specialist professionals who are part of the educational leadership team. This advice can be filtered through the learning lens of the professional experienced teacher/school leader so that the strategy decisions privilege learning outcomes. It is recommended that policy efforts could be directed to enhancing the capability of school principals to access, communicate with, and discern strategy from a wide range of experts in supportive fields.

Rather than deploying personnel from non-education backgrounds to lead schools in the future, perhaps part of the solution is to make the principalship and teaching more attractive to both teachers and educational leaders. Addressing some of the fundamental constraints and conditions impacting upon leaders’ work including rising workloads, an increasing focus on standardisation, accountability, compliance, and reporting (Australian Government, 2022a; Riley et al., 2021; See et al., 2022) and addressing the poor public profile of the profession (promoted by biased media) might be steps in the right direction.

**PCR Question 4: *What are the relative merits of a nationally coordinated approach to supporting a pipeline of future leaders?***

**ACEL’s Response: A nationally coordinated approach is an over-simplified solution to State, Territory, and local contexts which contain significantly different challenges regarding the identification and preparation of future leaders. Coordination is best undertaken by States, Territories, and other jurisdictions. What does have merit is a national policy proclamation drawing attention to the importance of a highly qualified talent pool that is available to lead schools.**

As the Productivity Commission (Australian Government, 2022a) has indicated, there is no nationally coordinated approach to identifying or developing leadership talent in Australia. While it may be desirable and efficient to pursue a national approach, it is unlikely to be feasible in a country as large and diverse as Australia. School leadership needs are context sensitive, culturally responsive, and community based. Priority equity cohorts and other complex and uncertain contexts are key considerations that point to the need for an approach that is customised to the system it supports. There are fundamental differences between Australia and Singapore (Australian Government, 2022a, Box 6.6, p. 176) and there is a real danger in transplanting one country’s approach to teacher and leader pathways onto another’s such as Australia’s. As Learning First (2016, p. 5) remarks, any pipeline strategy for school

leadership “will only be effective if it is tailored to the system in which it will be implemented ... Local context and major policy reforms must be integrated into the [State or Territory] leadership strategy.” (p. 5)

The best-performing systems around the world are mostly unitary states; they are not federations. This applies to Canada where the federal government has no role in school education; the provinces act like unitary states. For this reason, it might be best to create a pipeline at the level of the jurisdiction, or school in the case of independent schools. Hence, it is argued that more can and needs to be done at the state and territory level to address the pipeline of future leaders.

A cautionary example of a national approach can be understood via the limited take up / effectiveness of the Australian Certificate of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALT) endorsed by the Ministers of Education in 2012. If a national approach is not well-understood or supported by key stakeholders or becomes too entrenched in bureaucracy, it can operate outside of, rather than be supportive of, the initial intention. This seems to be the case for this national certificate.

Development of a leadership pipeline is not effective if it is not aligned to other measures that support teachers or retain and develop current principals; there is a risk of a standalone initiative. The leadership initiative needs to be seen as intrinsically dependent on the development of the teaching profession and considered part of a comprehensive approach with linkages between different components of leadership development. As Learning First (2016) suggests, any leadership strategy framework needs to include and begin with system objectives, then involve processes for preparing the principalship including talent identification and recruitment, hiring, and selection strategies. When in the principalship, key components within the strategy include transition and induction, ongoing development and training and performance management. The two final components that go beyond the principalship include succession planning, retention and engagement, and developing principals as system leaders (Learning First, 2016, p. 4). In summary, ACEL’s position is one that sees little merit in a national approach to principal preparation; rather it considers that States, Territories, and other jurisdictions are better placed to do this work. At the same time, it acknowledges that within States, Territories and other jurisdictions, there is room for improvement in both policy and practice.

## **Summary**

ACEL applauds the Productivity Commission Review for seeking broad and public commentary on its findings and key themes. The issues the report raises are critical for the improvement of educational leadership in Australia. ACEL stands ready to work with Federal and State and Territory Governments and local leaders to improve the efficacy and effectiveness of our schools, educational institutions, and the leaders who work in them now and into the future.



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