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High impact leadership in regional, rural, and remote schools

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Research Brief

What is the problem?

Educational equity, access and quality in regional, rural, and remote centres have emerged as serious social problems in an age of economic and social disparity and instability. With ten per cent, or 392,559 students, attending schools in regional, rural, and remote Australia, a key challenge is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities.

- The further a school is located from a major centre the lower outcomes.

- Attracting and retaining high impact staff is harder in regional, rural, and remote locations.

- There is a need for new ways of thinking about high impact leadership in regional, rural, and remote schools.

What we did about it

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment, this project featured three phases: i) a series of scoping studies of empirical literature; ii) a workshop with major principals' associations; and iii) case studies (and then interviews due to the COVID19 pandemic) of identified principals.
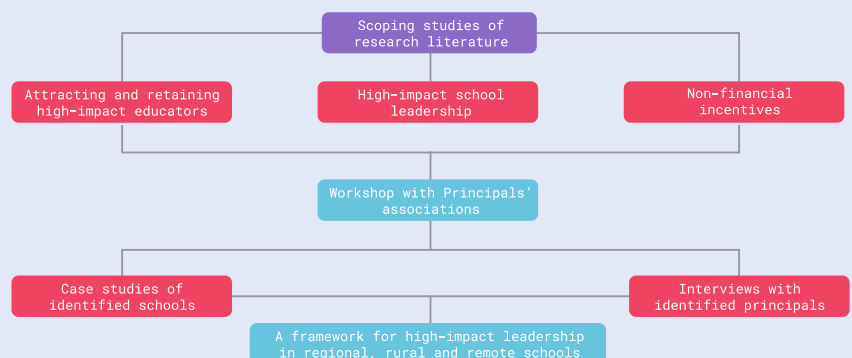
What we found

School leadership in different in regional, rural, and remote Australia. Analysis of the case studies and interviews enabled the establishment of a framework for high impact leadership in regional, rural, and remote schools built on four attributes: i) an innovation imperative; ii) collective responsibility; iii) a focus on teaching and learning; and iv) visibility in, and commitment to, the community.


An innovation imperative
- The status quo is not good enough
- A long-term perspective is required
- Funding alone is not enough to improve outcomes

School leaders need to be freed up to innovate and deliver the kind of schooling most appropriate to contexts and ultimately for regional, rural, and remote schools.

Collective responsibility
- High impact school leadership requires more than the principal
- Responsibility needs to be locally grounded not externally imposed
- Culture, within and across schools, needs to focus on collaboration not competition

To improve outcomes there is a need for collective responsibility from staff, students and communities – as part of a performance culture – to deliver high impact outcomes for all regardless of location.
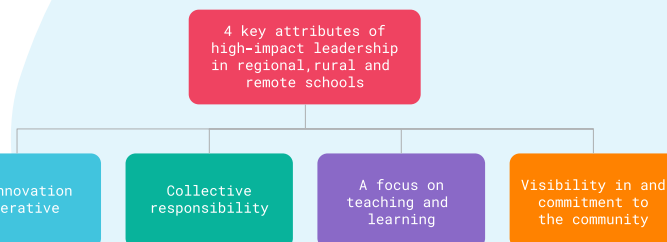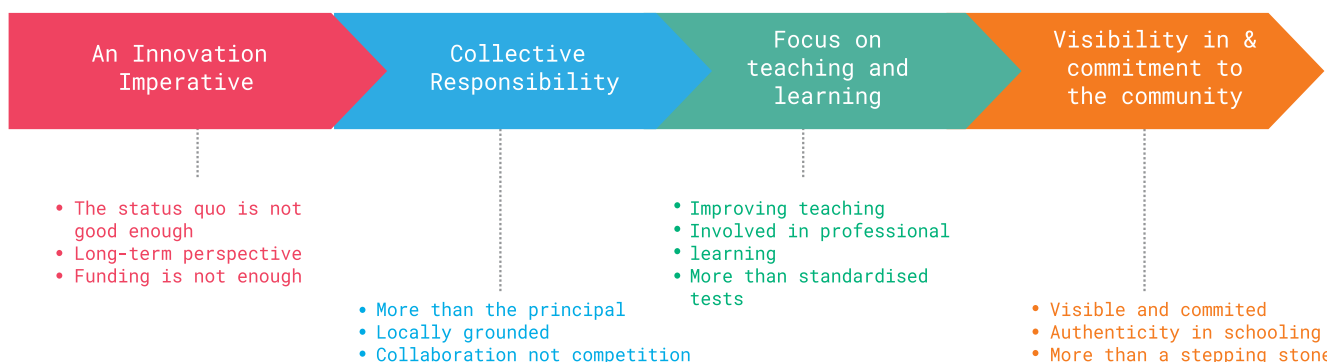
A focus on teaching and learning
- The priority should always be improving teaching
- Leaders need to be involved in professional learning with teachers
- Improvements are about more than standardised tests

A focus on teaching and learning is imperative for improving outcomes, but cannot be achieved without attention to the mental and physical health and well-being of staff, students, and community.

Visibility in, and commitment to, the community
- School leaders are not only visible but demonstrate a commitment to the community
- School programs reflect an authenticity in their engagement with surroundings
- Regional, rural, and remote schools are seen as a career path not a stepping-stone

Community support for initiatives, which is central to uptake and success, is only possible if leaders are visible in and perceived as committed to achieving the greatest good for the community.

An Innovation Imperative	Collective Responsibility	Focus on teaching and learning	Visibility in & commitment to the community
• The status quo is not good enough • Long-term perspective • Funding is not enough	• More than the principal • Locally grounded • Collaboration not competition	• Improving teaching • Involved in professional learning • More than standardised tests	• Visible and commited • Authenticity in schooling • More than a stepping stone

Why it matters?

- Rules, policies, and structures need to support the work of school leaders to generate innovative solutions targeting the enduring inequities of outcomes in regional, rural, and remote schools.

- Responsibility for maximising the impact of schooling is shared among leaders, educators, students, families, the broader community, and multiple agencies (e.g., health, infrastructure)

- Activities that do not add value to teaching and learning need to be reduced, enabling most educators (including leaders), most of the time to focus explicitly on improving teaching and learning for students.

- School activities reflect the distinctive histories of the communities in which they are located and explicitly recognise, value and advance that trajectory through context-sensitive schooling.

About the Researchers

Scott Eacott

Scott Eacott PhD, is a Professor in the School of Education | Research Fellow in the Gonski Institute for Education at UNSW Sydney and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. He leads an interdisciplinary research program that seeks to develop tools for educators, schools and systems to better understand the provision of schooling through relational theory. His distinctive relational approach that has led to invitations to run workshops and give talks in Norway, Canada, the USA, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, and throughout Australia. Scott has authored > 100 publications, led major research projects (funding $3.7M) and successfully translated his research into policy and practice. You can connect with him on Twitter @ScottEacott

Richard Niesche

Richard Niesche is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. His research interests include educational leadership, the principalship and social justice. His particular research focus is to use critical perspectives in educational leadership to examine the work of school principals in disadvantaged schools and how they can work towards achieving more socially just outcomes. He has published his research in a number of books and peer reviewed journals, and he is also the founding co-editor of the 'Educational Leadership Theory' book series with Springer.

About the Researchers

Amanda Heffernan

Amanda Heffernan, PhD is Senior Lecturer in Leadership in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Her research focuses on the contemporary challenges of principals' work, and what that means for how we can attract, support, and keep school leaders within the profession. As a former principal, Amanda's particular interest concerns leadership in complex school setting, including those in rural and remote areas, and the skills and knowledges that are needed to successfully lead those schools.

Tony Loughland

Tony Loughland is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales. Tony is an experienced educator who likes to work from practice to theory and back again. His research interests lie in teacher professional learning across the continuum from graduate to lead teacher.

Brad Gobby

Brad is a policy sociologist whose research examines education policies and programmes, with a focus on the areas of school autonomy and governance. His recent work also investigates policy and pedagogical responses to the climate crisis.

Brad is currently a Chief Investigator on an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded Discovery Project (DP190100190), School autonomy reform and social justice in Australian public education ($340,962), with Prof Amanda Keddie, Prof Jill Blackmore, A/Prof Jane Wilkinson, A/Prof Richard Niesche and A/Prof Scott Eacott. (2019-2022)

Tracy Durksen

Tracy is a Senior Lecturer in Educational Psychology. Her expertise falls in the area of educational psychology and the core theme driving my research and teaching is teacher education and development. Tracy is interested in preservice and practicing teachers' personal and professional learning and development across career stages and teaching contexts. Specifically, she aims to transform teacher attraction, recruitment and selection, development, retention, and promotion by focusing on psychological characteristics like motivation and adaptability. As such, her research includes exploring non-academic measures of classroom readiness through innovative methods (e.g., online scenario-based learning). Tracys' research interests also include site-based and outreach education programs in STEM for students and teachers.

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