AHISA's Model of Autonomous School Principalship

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AHISA's model of autonomous school principalship is derived from discussion within AHISA's membership. It aims to obtain some clarity around what is entailed in autonomous school leadership as perceived by those who do the job. It is conceived of as a living model, one that encourages reflection and which AHISA members can continue to shape as the leadership role develops in response to the evolution of school education.

The first iteration of the model, in a format suited to dissemination beyond AHISA's membership, was published in February 2011.

This version incorporates feedback received in the six months ending 31 August 2011 and references more research in the area of school leadership and school effectiveness.

AHISA welcomes comment on the model. Please email enquiries@ahisa.edu.au.

Leadership matters

Recent international research conducted by the OECD has shown that effective school leadership plays a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as school climate and environment.[1] A research project on school leadership commissioned by The Wallace Foundation found that the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership are second only to teaching among school-related factors in their impact on student learning, and account for around 25 per cent of total school effects.[2] The project's researchers note that in the six years of the study not one single instance was found 'of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership'.[3] In school improvement, 'leadership is the catalyst'.[4]

School leadership is now a focus of education policy development in Australia and there is increasing interest by our federal and state governments in adopting models of autonomous school leadership to drive school improvement and gains in student achievement in government school systems. These models tend to be limited to giving principals the right to advertise for and hire teaching staff, or allowing principals to manage aspects of the school operational budget, such as infrastructure maintenance or aspects of staffing allocation. More recently there has been interest in allowing principals, in conjunction with their school board, to determine the scope of and to manage federally funded capital projects.

At the same time, there have been attempts by state education departments, principals' organisations and other education bodies and, most recently, by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to produce leadership frameworks and professional standards for principals.

AHISA is concerned that a view of autonomous school leadership based solely on the operations of school systems must lead to only a very limited view of autonomy and the capacity of principals to drive and lead school improvement. AHISA has therefore attempted to map the role of autonomous school leadership in its members' schools to create an aspirational model for schools in all sectors.

Mapping the principal's role

Some 50 models of school leadership have been identified as currently in use in Australia by state and territory governments, school systems, professional associations, education bodies or education providers. Each model serves a specific purpose and is intrinsically valuable.

AHISA acknowledges that no one model will capture the complexity of school leadership. AHISA's model is of necessity a simplified, generic map of autonomous school leadership in terms of the principal's activities and responsibilities in AHISA's members' schools. The model is descriptive, not prescriptive.

Successful leadership, as we aim to illustrate in the model, takes account of context.

While not specifically designed to relate to other frameworks or standards, AHISA's model does link with and inform them. It comfortably aligns with major components of AITSL's National Professional Standard for Principals.[5]

Research evidence

Self leadership and personal autonomy are essential elements of AHISA's model of autonomous school leadership. Some school leadership frameworks deliberately avoid mapping disposition as a leadership domain. However recent research undertaken for the International Successful Schools Principalship Project (ISSPP) shows that the principal is critically linked to a school's success and that the personal qualities, attributes and attitudes of the principal are very much a part of how that success is generated.[6]

The ISSPP focuses on the knowledge, qualities, skills and capabilities that principals exhibit in successful schools. In this research project, a successful school is defined as one offering rich student and teacher learning experiences and high levels of school and student achievement.

Drawing on case studies of principals in successful schools in England, USA, China, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Canada and Australia, the project found the principals shared common attributes:

- The principal was a crucial driver/enabler in school improvement.

- The principal was passionate and genuine in his/her commitment to educating the students and for the school community.

- There was a strong moral, ethical imperative underpinning the passion and genuine commitment of principals in their role that emanated from their values and beliefs.

- Improvement in the quality and type of

School improvement cannot occur without good leadership. When principals have the autonomy to build a culture of learning and to align the available human and material resources to support that, then students have the opportunity to flourish.

Andrew Barr, AHISA National Chair, 20011-13

student learning was the focus of all the principal's endeavours.

- The principal was able to involve all stakeholder groups, that is, the whole school community in support of his/her vision and direction for the school.
- The principal could balance external accountabilities with the needs of his/her own schools and sustain his/her improvement in the face of outside (government and societal) challenges and issues.

The ISSPP's findings are consistent with those of recent research commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education on the link between school leadership and student outcomes.[7] A 'key message' derived from this research is that school leaders' capacity for relationship building is necessary to 'engender and sustain improvements in teaching and learning': 'Leaders who show regard for others and treat them with respect, and are seen by them as competent and having integrity, are trusted. Such leaders can foster the levels of inquiry, risk-taking, and collaborative effort that school improvement requires.' [8]
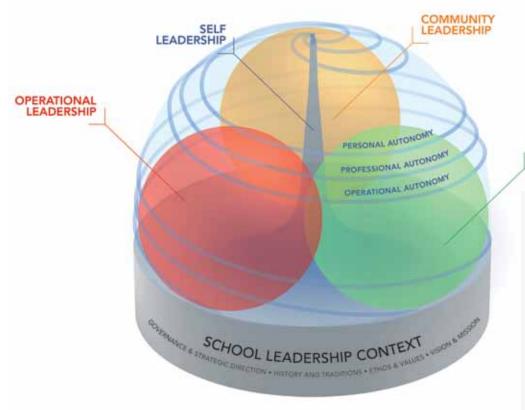
Symbiosis and synergy

As part of the ISSPP project, a case study of principal leadership in an independent school in Victoria was undertaken.[9] In addition to confirming the attributes listed above, the case study found further aspects of principal leadership linked to success in independent schools:

- Formation and ongoing development of principal leadership capabilities.
- The importance of the principal's compatibility and affinity with the school.
- The principal's awareness of the part played by school community groups (such as the school council and the alumni association) in the sustainability of a successful independent school.
- The independence required by principals in their role of principal in an independent school to be able to lead and manage effectively.
- The self-development of the principal personally, professionally and pedagogically to (a) serve the school and students more effectively and (b) follow their own learning.

- The reciprocal influence between the principal and the school. The independent school case study indicated that as the principal influenced the school community, the principal was, in turn, influenced by it.

ISSPP research on successful school leadership confirms the anecdotal evidence of AHISA's members on which AHISA's model of autonomous school principalship is based. AHISA's model reflects the importance of personal attributes and attitudes in school leadership, the inter-relationship between the principal and the school's culture, ethos and traditions, and the overarching role of school governing bodies in setting the strategic context for leadership in independent schools. It also links to these factors three strands of school leadership autonomy that support principals' attributes, capabilities and actions: operational, professional and personal autonomy.

As the ISSPP research indicates, there is an organic wholeness to successful school leadership and a symbiotic relationship between the school and the principal in

SELF LEADERSHIP
COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP
OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP
PERSONAL AUTONOMY
PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY
OPERATIONAL AUTONOMY
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP CONTEXT
GOVERNANCE & STRATEGIC DIRECTION • HISTORY AND TRADITIONS • ETHOS & VALUES • VISION & MISSION

There are no 'silos' in autonomous school principal leadership. Everything is inter-related and serves to build a successful learning community. That is why in AHISA's model of autonomous school principalship management functions are under the umbrella of what is termed operational leadership. Management is a practical manifestation of and support for educational leadership and community leadership.

which the personal attributes and attitudes of the principal are as important as the principal's skills and capacities.

This view of school leadership is supported by The Wallace Foundation's research project into educational leadership. The project's researchers note: 'Most school variables, considered separately have only small effects on student learnings. To obtain large effects, educators need to create synergy across the relevant variables. Among all the parents, teachers, and policy makers who work hard to improve education, educators in leadership positions are uniquely well positioned to ensure the necessary synergy.'[10]

AHISA's model of autonomous school principalship

In AHISA's model the symbiotic context and synergistic nature of leadership is illustrated by the inter-linking of the central status of personal authenticity of the principal, the foundational status of the school's ethos and culture, the leadership context as defined by the school's strategic direction and the principal's key roles of operational, educational and community leadership.

The diagram of the model attempts to show: (1) the inter-relationship between the school's governance and strategic direction, the school's culture and ethos and the four domains of leadership; (2) the inter-relationship between each of the domains of principal leadership; and (3) the drawing together of all these inter-related elements through the three strands of principal autonomy that support successful leadership and generation of a dynamic learning community. The authentic self of the principal, expressed through the domain of self leadership, sits at the core of the model, representing its pivotal link to successful school leadership.

The elements that comprise each leadership domain are described in detail on the following pages.

Autonomy and accountability

The education of young people is recognised as a primary task to ensure national wellbeing as well as the development and wellbeing of individuals. The community therefore has an interest in the effective leadership of schools.

To build successful schools principals need three kinds of autonomy delegated to them from the school:

Operational autonomy
The freedom to effectively implement the school's shared vision within the strategic framework determined by the school's governing body.

Professional autonomy
The freedom to demonstrate and apply expertise to effectively lead and manage.

Personal autonomy
The freedom to learn, grow and develop self as well as develop professional expertise.

It is AHISA's view that educational accountability is most effective when it is based first and foremost on a relationship of integrity between schools and the students and families they serve. Within the context of autonomous school leadership, principals must be accountable to their school community through the school board.

Notes

1. Pont, B., Nusche, D. and Moorman, H. (2008) *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice.* Paris: OECD.

2. Leithwood, K., Louis, K., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004) *How leadership influences student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation.

3. Leithwood, K., Louis, K., Anderson, S., Wahlstrom, K., Mascall, B., Michlin, M., Strauss, T., Gordon, M., Moore, S. and Thomas, E. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* New York: The Wallace Foundation; page 9.

4. Leithwood et al (2004), page 5.

5. The National Professional Standard for Principals was released on 8 July, 2011 and is available at http://www.aitsl.edu.au/national-professional-standard-for-principals.html.

6. Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Swann, R., Doherty, J., Ford, P. and Goode, H. (2006) The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP): Comparison across country case studies. In Smith, L. and Riley, D. (eds) *Australian Council for Educational Leaders Handbook 2006: New waves of leadership.* Armidale, NSW: The University of New England.

7. Robinson, V., Hohepa, M. and Lloyd, C. (2009) *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why.* Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

8. Robinson et al (2009), page 47.

9. Doherty, J. (2008) A study in successful leadership. *Independence,* 33 (2):70-73.

10. Leithwood et al (2010), page 9.

About AHISA

AHISA is a professional association for principals of independent schools in Australia and overseas, primarily NZ. It aims to maintain high standards of professional practice and conduct among its members by fostering a collegial and professional environment of mutual understanding, trust, respect and pastoral care to optimise the opportunities for the education and welfare of Australia's young people.

To achieve its aims AHISA works both nationally and regionally through its state and territory Branches to help principals build excellence in school leadership through expert advice, shared wisdom and formal and informal professional networks and development opportunities.

AHISA's Model of Autonomous School Principalship

AHISA's model is derived from discussion within AHISA's membership. It aims to map the attributes, capabilities, activities and/or responsibilities that are entailed in autonomous school leadership as described by members.

The model is not prescriptive. Successful leadership takes account of context, and there is great diversity among the schools AHISA members lead, in terms of enrolment numbers, affiliation, location, socio-economic disadvantage and staffing structures.

While AHISA's model is of necessity a simplified, generic map of autonomous school leadership, it aims to provide the means for more informed discussion about school autonomy and the role of the principal.

Elements of AHISA's model of autonomous school principalship

LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

AHISA's model acknowledges that the context for autonomous school leadership is defined by the school's strategic direction as determined by its governors, and shaped by the school's unique ethos, culture, history, vision and values. The principal's operational, professional and personal autonomies are delegated – and must be supported – by the school's governors.

SELF LEADERSHIP

Self knowledge
- Aware of personal strengths, weaknesses, prejudices and passions

Values & beliefs
- Prioritises values
- Has moral purpose
- Acknowledges spiritual dimension of human life
- Contributes beyond the school including mentoring of and collegial arrangements with fellow principals

Vision
- Fosters shared vision for students, staff and school
- Leads change – innovation and improvement
- Is entrepreneurial
- Is willing to take calculated risks

Personal leadership
- Has integrity and authenticity
- Lives out values
- Is ethical in approach and practice
- Has presence, courage and resilience
- Is reflective
- Values own health and wellbeing

Professional capacity
- Builds an executive team – distributed leadership
- Stays abreast of theories and practice – learning, change and leading
- Deals with complexity, paradox and ambiguity
- Models excellence in teaching and learning
- Has a passion for learning
- Models stewardship
- Applies analytic and emotional intelligence
- Capable of self-direction and management
- Draws on previous experience
- Regularly reviews leadership practice

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Teaching & learning
- Has indepth knowledge of teaching and learning
- Fosters common language and approach to holistic development of the child
- Is educationally strategic – fosters culture of success
- Provides teacher leadership
- Sets and adheres to teaching standards
- Monitors and reviews student learning
- Monitors teachers' professional learning needs
- Stays abreast of cognitive research – how children learn
- Fosters culture of inquiry and reflection
- Supports development of emotional intelligence and resilience
- Is able to evaluate learning methodologies and practices – including digital pedagogies
- Seeks alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting
- Aligns resources to educational goals
- Mediates between school and external influences – protects teaching time
- Creates structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate
- Seeks to create optimal learning environments

Curriculum
- Determines optimal subject mix, focus and content
- Promotes academic excellence
- Seeks best student outcomes – including students with special needs
- Oversees timetabling
- Oversees resource provision and renewal
- Ensures educational compliance

Pastoral care
- Provides for development and wellbeing of the child, including spiritual development
- Ensures safe school environment
- Provides student leadership opportunities
- Stays abreast of developments in pastoral care models
- Encourages community contribution
- Provides parenting guidance

Co-curriculum
- Develops strong co-curriculum for student engagement, including music and performing arts, sport and outdoor education
- Provides for service learning

OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Governance
- Understands theory and know how of best practice
- Develops chair-principal relationship
- Practices professional board management
- Manages risk
- Oversees legislative compliance
- Operationalises strategic planning and undertakes related business planning
- 'Future proofs' the school
- Is accountable to the school board

Financial
- Assesses financial statements including cash flow, recurrent expenditure, profit & loss, balance sheet
- Oversees budgeting and reporting
- Applies effective auditing practices
- Ensures fiduciary and legislative compliance, eg ASIC

- Oversees capital management and debt servicing
- Ensures adequate resourcing – develops income streams
- Ensures effective and efficient use of resources
- Uses benchmarking
- Resources students with special needs

Leadership of people
- Understands dynamics of organisations
- Shapes school climate and culture
- Builds a collaborative culture
- Builds and rewards excellence
- Builds commitment and capacity with individuals and teams
- Encourages creativity and innovation
- Employs conflict resolution
- Ensures staff wellbeing
- Is responsible for recruitment, selection, separation and staff induction and appraisal
- Creates staffing structures across year levels and subject areas
- Strategically deploys staff
- Oversees compliance – HR, IR, OH&S
- Oversees employment contracts
- Oversees security and safety issues

Facilities & assets
- Oversees campus master planning
- Oversees space utilisation and design to optimise learning, reinforce culture and create the desired aesthetic
- Oversees asset management – equipment maintenance, replacement

Strategy
- Understands elements that impact on strategy including global shifts in knowledge building and sharing, economy and the nature of work, cultural participation and communications
- Develops strategy and provides a strategic focus

- Manages and leads change
- Manages school improvement

Development & marketing
- Oversees enrolment levels
- Responsible for brand positioning, advertising and promotion
- Oversees fundraising – including the work of foundations and capital campaigns
- Identifies stakeholder needs
- Manages external parties
- Mitigates risk
- Oversees communications and media management

Policy
- Uses data to inform policy
- Undertakes policy development and review
- Ensures policy implementation and practice
- Oversees project management
- Manages multiple projects simultaneously
- Attains outcomes with optimal use of resources

Technology
- Provides for IT infrastructure
- Enables use of technology in education
- Oversees information management

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP
Building community
- Supports partnership with parents – including regular feedback on the progress of their child/ren and assistance in their role
- Provides measures to deal with concerns and complaints
- Elicits and responds to feedback
- Creates the 'virtual village', with attention to school climate and culture
- Acknowledges history and traditions of the school community
- Engages school community in shared vision and purpose
- Models and promotes the school's values

- Models responsibility and accountability
- Builds trust and fosters respect
- Oversees the teaching, pastoral care and discipline of students
- Manages conflict
- Values diversity
- Builds relationships with and between alumni
- Actively articulates and promotes the position of the school in the broader community context
- Uses school's resources to support the local community and uses local community resources to support the school
- Builds multiple channels of communication, including intranet and portals

Community service
- Enables contribution of the school to broader community good
- Enables active student contribution via school based and other programs

Networks, alliances & collaboration
- Builds alliances and relationships for the school and the individuals within it
- Develops own professional networks
- Mentors leadership capacity in others
- Engages in representation – in professional, educational and school associations
- Understands local and global context of school education
- Understands the politics of schools and education