

Leadership in schools

How school leadership affects student achievement and well being.



Everyone believes that school leadership is important but what difference does it make to student achievement and well-being? Which particular leadership practices have the most impact?

The Ministry of Education asked The University of Auckland to find out and the result was two very interesting findings.

“Firstly, leadership in schools where students perform above what is expected for their age looks very different from the leadership in schools serving students from similar backgrounds who are performing below the expected level. Clearly, leadership does matter,” says Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson, who led the project.

“Secondly, we identified the type of leadership that makes the most difference to student outcomes. In general terms, school leadership that is strongly focused on the core business of teaching and learning has two to three times the impact on students than leadership that is more focused on school management.”

These findings are particularly important for policy makers as there are high expectations, especially in systems where schools are self-managing, for school leaders to be both managers and educational leaders.

Distinguished Professor Robinson’s conclusions are the result of a systematic analysis of all published national and international research using an approach called Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES), which was developed by the Ministry of Education.

Distinguished Professor Robinson went on to identify the relative importance of five aspects of this work. The most powerful way that school leaders – whether principals, members of the senior management team or teacher leaders – can make a difference to student outcomes is to promote and participate in the professional learning and development of their staff. The second most powerful impact was through leaders’ direct involvement with the co-ordination and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum.

Distinguished Professor Robinson stresses that the synthesis delivers much more than a list of powerful types of leadership. “We also had to give clear explanations of why and how they worked. If practitioners understand why they work, then they can adapt our findings, in a principled way, to their own contexts.”

The results have already been used by groups of school leaders, policy makers and educational leadership researchers. The Ministry of Education has integrated the findings into the leadership development framework that guides its programmes for all principals.

The results also have an application in the First-time Principals Programme, New Zealand’s national induction programme for its newly appointed Principals. This programme has been delivered by The University of Auckland for the last ten years.

The need to strengthen both responsiveness and outcomes for New Zealand's diverse student population

Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson

Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson is an internationally respected educational researcher specialising in educational leadership, school improvement and the relationship between research and the improvement of practice. She is Academic Director of The University of Auckland's Centre for Educational Leadership, which has delivered New Zealand's national induction programme for new school principals, known as the First-time Principals Programme, for the last ten years. She is the author of five books and numerous chapters and journal articles. Viviane has consulted on leadership development and research to government agencies and organisations in England, Singapore, Chile, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.



THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Confirmed the importance of school leadership
- Identified the relative importance of different types of leadership for making an impact on student outcomes
- Showed that general leadership and management skills do not deliver the expected impact on student outcomes
- Clearly identified gaps and limitations in the research

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The Academy of Principals (Singapore) (APS) is a professional body that partners the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) to provide support for Singapore school principals as they lead schools into a new and exciting era of educational change. It also serves as a platform for our school principals to reach out to local and overseas colleagues from affiliated associations, institutions of higher learning, corporate and industry partners to share ideas, debate issues and discuss policy initiatives, all of which will contribute toward building sustainable leadership through strong and mutually-beneficial networks.

The Best Evidence Synthesis - Educational Leadership

THE RESEARCH BRIEF

- Determine whether leadership practice has a positive impact on student achievement and well-being
- If so, identify the elements or characteristics of those practices that lead to improved student achievement
- Identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions that leaders need to engage confidently in the identified practices

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

- Locate available research
- Analyse the quantitative findings to identify relative impact of various types of leadership
- Use qualitative findings to enrich and explain the quantitative results
- Identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to engage confidently in the identified leadership practices
- Engage with practitioners and policy makers throughout the synthesis process

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