

Evaluation of the School-based Executive Class Principals Initiative

26 June 2024



Executive Summary

The Victorian Department of Education (the Department) commissioned the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) in August 2020 to evaluate the School-based Executive Class Principals (SBCEP) initiative.

Introduced by the Department in 2012, the SBCEP initiative has two main purposes: to place experienced, high-performing principals in complex and challenging settings to significantly improve school performance; and to incentivise principals to lead 'hard-to-staff' schools, such as those in remote areas or with traditionally low applicant rates for the principal role.

The evaluation was conducted over four years (2020-2024) and focused on assessing its implementation, variations across schools and regions, and factors influencing its success to inform adaptation and improvements to the initiative regarding the recruiting, onboarding, in-school support for SBCEPs, and policy decisions regarding the SBCEP program more broadly.

Findings

Initiative Implementation

Resourcing

- Funding has supported SBCEP appointments but issues with remuneration were reported.
- Central supports, including professional learning and network meetings, were valued, though regional support varied significantly, with inconsistencies in departmental responsibilities.
- Limited documentation and materials related to the initiative resulted in a lack of shared understanding and inadequate promotion of the SBCEP role among professional networks.

Set-up

- There is a need for coordinated and strategic recruitment with clear role messaging, and while most SBCEPs understood their role expectations, engagement with regional personnel varied, leading to mixed feelings about autonomy and accountability.
- The initiative effectively identifies capable principals, positively impacting schools, though many SBCEPs were reluctant to recommend the role or pursue other system roles.

Supports

- There was a lack of structured or consistent induction, with many SBCEPs reporting informal or no induction and insufficient information about their school context before starting.
- Although the need for regular, ongoing regional support was acknowledged, provision was inconsistent, with some SBCEPs citing a lack of support as detrimental and expressing a need for more autonomy and support to address unique school challenges.
- The professional learning program provided was received with mixed views, with some SBCEPs satisfied while others desired more tailored coaching.
- Some SBCEPs engaged in broader leadership activities, however, more could be done to recognise and leverage their expertise and celebrate their successes system-wide.

SBCEP Activities

- Upon their appointment, SBCEPs commonly prioritised understanding their school's historical and cultural contexts, setting strategic goals using feedback and school data, engaging the school community to encourage buy-in and cultural change aligned with their vision for school improvements.

- SBECs established strategic frameworks and improved structures, focussing on instructional leadership, building staff capability and quality teaching, promoting collective efficacy and community partnerships with high expectations.
- SBECs aimed for sustainable change by developing their own and others' leadership, supporting staff development, engaging the community, and planning for succession which, they stressed, requires time and focus on building leadership capacity.

Outcomes

- The initiative was found to have a positive impact on school outcomes, including improvements in school culture, leadership capacity, financial health, resources, infrastructure, community perceptions, and student learning and wellbeing.
- SBECs engaged in leadership activities beyond their schools, although some felt underutilised and faced uncertainty about future roles, needing clearer pathways and support.

Further considerations

Many SBEC appointments led to improved student outcomes, school culture, staff development, financial health, reputation, and enrolments and SBECs valued the role's challenges and opportunities. However, experiences varied suggesting several areas for future consideration:

Recruitment and onboarding

- improve communications about the initiative and the SBEC role
- ensure consistent and transparent recruitment processes
- provide transparent salary guidelines
- develop clear career pathways to attract and retain SBECs in the system
- develop a coherent induction approach across regions
- set consistent expectations and accountability measures for the SBEC role
- establish protocols for communication and support levels with regional staff

Ongoing support

- develop resources addressing challenges faced by leaders of complex schools
- share best practices for ongoing support at the regional level
- leverage the expertise of SBECs within the initiative
- invest in resources and platforms for SBECs to share their expertise and successes
- engage SBECs in system-wide initiatives to utilise their expertise for broader reforms

Further consideration and investigation

- examine effective practices in different contexts, considering perspectives of teachers, students, and parents
- apply SBECs' experience and expertise in different system roles, ensuring a career path beyond the initiative
- disseminate SBECs' effective practices to school leaders across the system
- investigate the initiative's long-term outcomes and identify practices contributing to enduring positive changes
- assess the initiative's value using a Value for Investment (VFI) approach.