## Professional leadership RESEARCH evidence base

Research supports the central role that school leaders, including principals, assistant principals and middle leaders play in driving school improvement. Strong leadership forms the basis for school improvement and is a vital enabler of successful implementation to drive enhanced student outcomes. Principals and other school leaders enhance their school’s organisational capacity for change and develop structures that support evidence-informed learning with strong relationships that support achievement. This evidence base provides a snapshot of contemporary literature which supports the high impact professional leadership has on school improvement.

**Vision, values and culture**

The alignment of school visions, values and goals is a core component with which school leaders build a positive school culture that sustains work towards improvements in student outcomes. A shared school vision, shapes both the educational and functional operations of schools. Successful education systems are those that promote leadership at all levels, encouraging teachers and principals, regardless of the formal positions they occupy, to lead innovation in classrooms, schools and across systems (Browning, 2018, Day et al., 2016; Schleicher, 2015).

The capacity to develop and enact a shared vision in conjunction with stakeholders, including teachers, parents and students, is a significant characteristic of a successful school leader. The development of shared vision and values provides organisational direction, strengthens relationships and can enhance the quality of teaching and learning which is central to school improvement (Day & Sammons, 2013; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Reynolds, 2016, Tuytens & Devos, 2017).

**Strategic resource management**

Professional leadership requires leaders to invest in strategic thinking, planning and resource management. The most effective way for school leaders to drive substantial improvement is through focusing on a small number of high-leverage initiatives they can achieve, pursuing them resolutely and optimistically staying on message (Breakspear, 2017; Fullan, 2013; DEECD, 2009). A litmus test for an effective school improvement plan lies in the number of goals and strategies included, with too many indicating a lack of focus (Mausbach & Morrison 2016).

Leaders who strategically manage resources recruit the expertise required to achieve student learning goals and develop the school timetable to reflect pedagogical and professional learning priorities. They secure and allocate resources to pedagogical priorities, as opposed to non-priority issues and ensure that teachers have the necessary resources and development opportunities to teach their classes (Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2009).

**Building leadership teams**

Building leadership teams through distributed leadership is widely acknowledged as an effective approach for implementing school improvement plans. School leaders play a central role in establishing distributed approaches to leadership and developing middle leaders who can offer valuable insights into implementation challenges and sustain ongoing improvement. Distributed leadership also has the additional indirect benefit of supporting principal wellbeing (Leithwood, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Riley, 2017; Sigurðardóttir & Sigþórsson, 2016).

Expert teachers play a key role in supporting other teachers to improve their practice as peers can have large impacts on shifting behaviours and teachers such as learning from other teachers (Walker et al. 2019; Goss & Sonnemann, 2020). Teacher leadership increases engagement in school improvement activities as it encourages teacher ownership and greater communication across the school (Bauman, 2015; Sebastian et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018).

**Instructional and shared leadership**

Strong leaders understand their explicit role as instructional leaders in monitoring and improving teaching practice to impact student outcomes. They know what effective pedagogical, curricular and assessment practices look like and keep themselves and their staff informed of current research (Karagiorgi et al., 2018; Marzano et al., 2005). A Victorian study of effective school leaders found that they can raise student learning outcomes by as much as two months in a year (Helal & Coelli, 2016). Effective leaders observe and discuss teaching and learning with staff, including achievement standards, students’ results, choice of pedagogical methods, and teachers’ development needs. Student outcomes are higher when teachers report that their school leaders are leading and participating in teacher learning and development (Robinson et al., 2009).

Effective professional learning for school improvement needs to be aligned with school goals, priorities and values, and address both individual staff and student needs. Professional learning is not limited to formal packages and training, and includes communities of practice, leaders coaching and mentoring and open classrooms in which teachers learn collaboratively from each other (Bouchamma, et al., 2019; Glen et al., 2017).

### Case studies of schools excelling in building and sustaining strong leadership:

* [Brauer Secondary College](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/LandingPage?ObjectId=0f88156c-009c-4b62-a575-26116e0a3e3a&SearchScope=All): Strategically managed resources to transform its traditional school library into a popular 'Maker Space' where students can learn new skills and work collaboratively to expand their curiosity, critical thinking and problem solving
* [Carnegie Primary School](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/LandingPage?ObjectId=a2e2421a-3dc5-4c3f-abc7-34c6a2db11f8&SearchScope=All): Changed its pedagogical practice from a traditional classroom approach to a whole-school approach working in open learning environments, sharing responsibility for student learning and care, and planning at point of need using data
* [Katandra School](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=4dc70722-8f9a-46b0-9a00-791afbb06a89): Developed and implemented a coaching and mentoring program to increase confidence and capacity of teachers to support students with additional needs enrolled in mainstream schools
* [Nichols Point Primary School:](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/LandingPage?ObjectId=a6f63a76-fa0b-4bd0-9c6b-74774c9253b0&SearchScope=All) Developed a tiered leadership approach to build teacher capacity and encourage emerging leaders to be able to drive key programs at the school
* [Surf Coast Secondary College](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/ResourcePackage/LandingPage?ObjectId=b3acabb3-0423-42ba-934c-9ff133e3cf7e&SearchScope=All): Developed a shared vision of practice that is documented, supported and implemented by all staff

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