



Australian Primary  
Principals Association

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## The Principal as a Leader of Learning

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The latest research in OECD countries demonstrates that successful schools are schools where the principal is a leader in teaching and learning. In my role as President of the Australian Primary Principals Association, I have been supported by an executive which recognises this fundamental and essential role of the principal. Consequently our association initiated a pilot project at the beginning of 2009 called *Principals as Literacy Leaders*.

The pilot is a joint venture with three universities; Australian Catholic University, Edith Cowan University and Griffith University. Each of the universities have taken the lead in developing five modules as part of a professional development program for principals.

There are 60 principals in the program from three states (South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland) and one territory (Northern Territory) with 15 principals involved from all sectors in each of these states and territory. In between the training activity, principals are supported by Literacy Achievement Advisors who are highly experienced principals who have retired and are now giving something back.

This pilot is an excellent example of the need for principals to not only lead learning but it also demonstrates that in order to do this, principals themselves must be learners. I am going to use part of this pilot project to provide the evidence from the latest research of the need for a principal to continue their own growth as a leader.

All principals need to have at the centre of their work a moral purpose that is shared and agreed to by their communities. There has to be a foundation for the direction and actions in a school. The moral purpose for our pilot project is to improve the literacy achievement of the students who are in the schools that are in the project. In order to do this, the pilot is designed to develop the capabilities of principals as effective literacy leaders. It is focussed on the need for principals to develop capabilities in both literacy and leadership.

For professional development to have an impact it must have a clear purpose. The research that looked at the question, "What makes an effective leader in learning?" was carried out in five countries and the factors that were common from all this research are as follows:

- A deep knowledge of learning.
- Practical strategies to help teachers.
- Evidence on which to base your actions.

In the area of literacy, we decided that reading was to be the key focus area as the ability to read was fundamental. The research identified 5 broad areas of development required for reading which are all underpinned by early literacy experiences. The *big rocks* in reading are:

1. Early literacy experiences
2. Phonological awareness
3. Letter sound knowledge (phonics)
4. Vocabulary
5. Fluency
6. Comprehension

The principals in this pilot project will be undertaking professional development activities which link the leadership capabilities with the literacy knowledge base. However, professional development only has an impact for principals if it leads to the improvement of student achievement. The key link in this pilot is how principals can engage their staff in analysing and reflecting on their teaching practice. Principals will be learning how to conduct disciplined dialogues with their teachers which start from an evidence base and focus on the work that each teacher does in a classroom. These dialogues are more than performance development because they require the principal to be an active participant and a learner in the discussion.

Professional development is not just a conference or a one-off activity where the principal goes off and engages in a learning activity although conferences and workshops do have a real place and purpose. The best professional development that can take place is what occurs on a daily basis in a school where people learn from each other and openly look at what is happening in the classroom now and what can be done to improve. Keeping up with all the latest knowledge is essential if the principal is going to take a lead in learning.

The feedback from the learning that is taking place with the principals in the *Principals as Literacy Leaders* project has been quite exceptional. Even at this early stage of the pilot, comments that have been received include, "I am now having very different conversations with my teachers", "I knew I wanted to lead learning but I felt I didn't have the knowledge and this program is excellent", "My whole staff is learning together and it is great".

I could add many quotes but what the pilot program has shown is the power of principals learning with their staff.

In conclusion, the latest OECD report considers that principals learning with their staff is a significant factor in schools that are successful.

If I can leave you with a challenge, it would be to reflect on how much learning you do with your staff.

**Leonie Trimper**  
**President**  
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