



# High-Impact School Leadership

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# High-Impact School Leadership

Regional, rural, and remote schools



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High-impact school leaders: regional, rural and remote schools

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Cover image: Dr Amanda Heffernan

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# High-Impact School Leadership

## in regional, rural and remote schools

### Highlight

- School leadership is different in regional, rural and remote locations. The social and professional expectations on leaders differ from metropolitan centres.
- Four key attributes of high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools are: i) an innovation imperative; ii) collective responsibility; iii) a focus on teaching and learning; and iv) visibility in and commitment to the community.
- Leaders are most impactful when they are prepared through learning *to* and learning *for* such contexts and supported by systems, peers and communities.

Education has the potential to change lives. The social, cultural, and economic benefits of education contribute to every aspect of individual and community health and well-being. Achieving the vision of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration for ‘a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face’<sup>1</sup> requires explicit attention to regional, rural and remote schools. High-impact leadership in these schools, supported by rules, policies and systems is necessary for equitable outcomes.

### ***A relational framework for organising schools***<sup>2</sup>

Regional, rural and remote schools rely on social, spatial, cultural and political relations to impact on the lives of children, families and communities. To identify principals, this project drew on an organising framing of:

- **CLARITY:** Many debates about schools come down to differences in the purpose/s of schooling. In the absence of an explicitly identified purpose, others will assume one and make judgements. The first step towards high-impact is having clarity of purpose and being able to articulate that purpose to others.
- **COHERENCE:** An explicitly articulated purpose provides the basis for decisions regarding what activities to pursue (or not). What becomes of greatest importance is coherence between an espoused purpose and ongoing activity.
- **NARRATIVE:** An explicit purpose and delivering coherent activities enables schools to generate their own narrative of impact and the evidence to support that position.

Discussing the impact of regional, rural and remote school leadership requires attention to impact in context. This creates both a challenge, as it cannot be universally prescribed, and an opportunity to make impact locally relevant and yet significant for schools elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

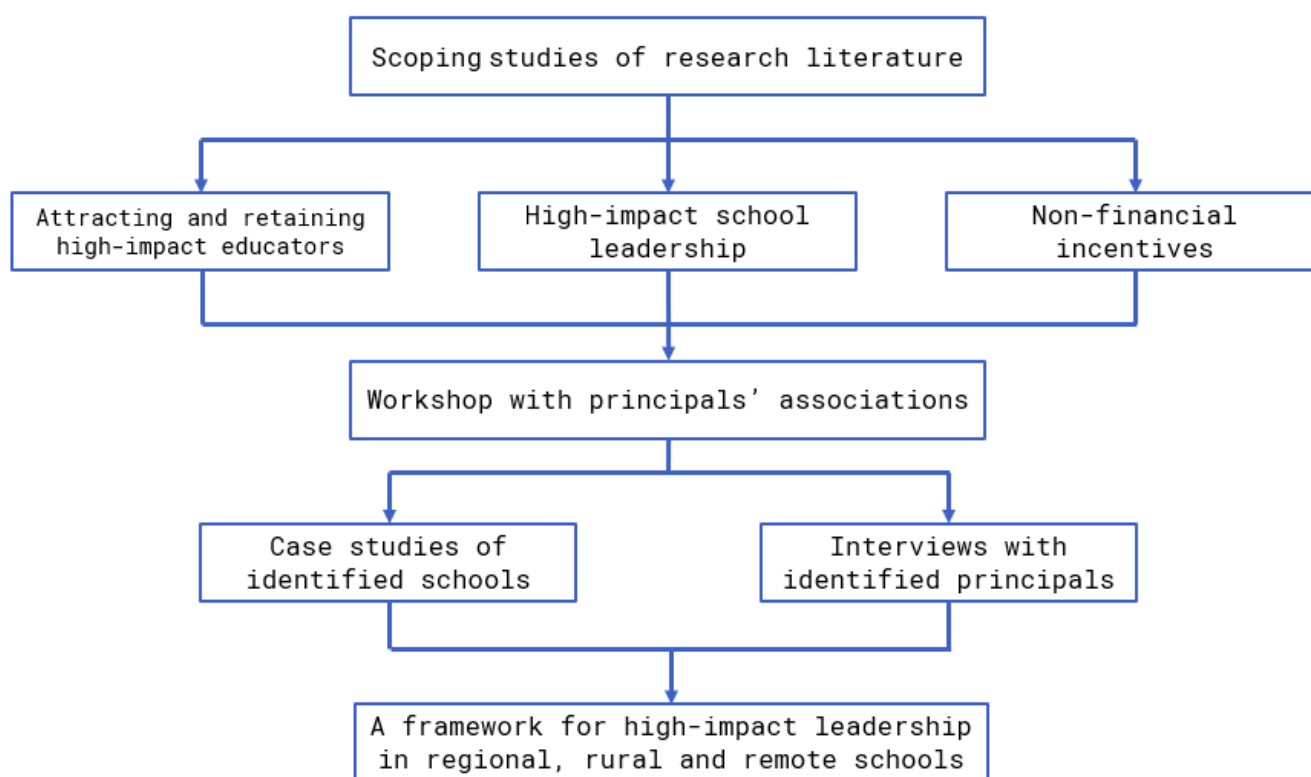
<sup>2</sup> Source: *A relational approach to organising education: school leadership reflection guide*

## The project

Educational equity, access and quality in regional, rural and remote centres have emerged as serious social problems in an age of economic and social disparity and instability. With ten per cent, or 392,559 students, attending schools in regional, rural and remote Australia,<sup>3</sup> a key challenge is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment this project featured three phases: i) a series of scoping studies of empirical literature; ii) a workshop with major principals' associations; and iii) case studies (and then interviews due to COVID) of identified schools/principals (see Figure 1). The goal was to deliver a framework for high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools.

**Figure 1.** Project design: High-impact leaders in regional, rural, remote and disadvantaged schools



Following the workshop with major principals' association and using the relational framework for organising schools as stimulus, the Associations nominated 30 principals for the project. These principals were then invited to participate in the study.

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

International research evidence has shown that while financial incentives are useful for attracting candidates into hard to staff areas, they do little to improve retention of high-impact educators. What is more likely to work in attraction and retention is a supportive and conducive working environment.<sup>5</sup> High-impact leadership is fundamental to the establishment and sustainment of such a working environment. This project sought to amplify leadership generating high-impact.

Four case studies were completed prior to COVID restrictions and a further 16 principals participated through online interviews. The data generated would become the basis for a **framework for high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools**.

Analysis of the case study and interview data led to the identification of four key attributes of high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools: i) an innovation imperative; ii) collective responsibility; iii) a focus on teaching and learning; and iv) visibility in and commitment to the community.

**Figure 2.** Four attributes of high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools

<b>An Innovation Imperative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The status quo is not good enough</li> <li>• Long-term perspective</li> <li>• Funding is not enough</li> </ul>
<b>Collective Responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than the principal</li> <li>• Locally grounded</li> <li>• Collaboration not competition</li> </ul>
<b>Focus on teaching and learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving teaching</li> <li>• Involved in professional learning</li> <li>• More than standardised tests</li> </ul>
<b>Visibility in and commitment to the community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible and committed</li> <li>• Authenticity in schooling</li> <li>• More than a stepping-stone</li> </ul>

In what follows, the four attributes are further articulated with examples from participating principals. This is followed by a series of 'Things to consider' in seeking to develop the rules, policies and structures necessary to support high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools. The report finishes with a short overview of the framework and mapping against the AITSL Australian Professional Standard for Principals.

<sup>5</sup> See: Huat See, B. et al. (2020). What works in attracting and retaining teachers in challenging schools and areas? *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(6), 678-697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1775566>



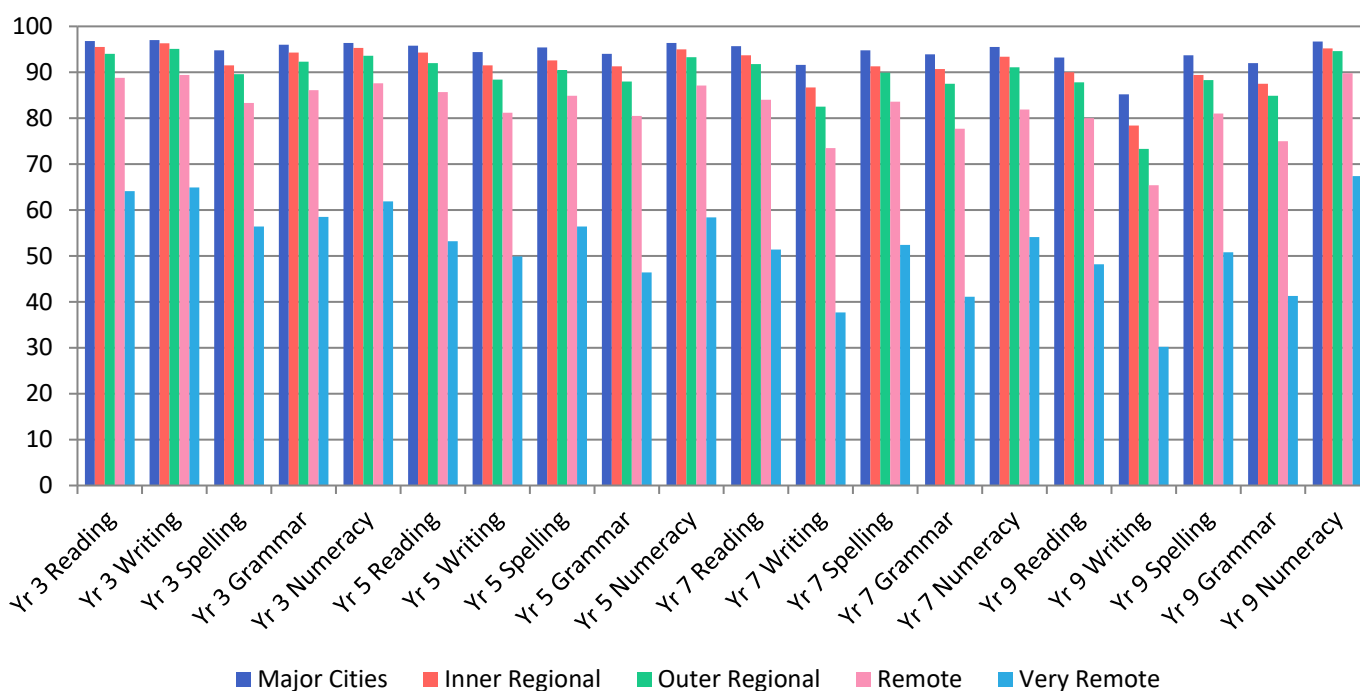
# 1. An innovation imperative

*There is something exciting about working in a school like this. You have permission to be a lot more innovative. You have permission to do something different because the status quo is not good enough.*

Primary principal, NSW

Student outcome data demonstrates that the further a school is located from a major city the lower the level of achievement (see Figure 3). Put simply, **the status quo is not good enough**. However, as a principal noted, ‘significant change almost always come out of crisis, and if the current performance of Australian schools is going to be challenged it will come from our regional, rural and remote schools not metropolitan centres’.<sup>6</sup> Improving the current situation requires thinking outside of the box. Not just getting better at what is currently done but doing things differently. To do this there is a need to take a **long-term and multi-agency perspective** to school improvement where activity and **not funding is the solution**.

**Figure 3.** Percentage of Australian students at or above national minimum standard in NAPLAN, by Geolocation, 2019



Data sourced from National Assessment Program, National NAPLAN Report 2019 (<https://nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2019-naplan-national-report.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=2>)

<sup>6</sup> Source: Principal 10, K-12 Independent School, Inner Regional NSW

## *The status quo is not good enough*

As Figure 3 shows, geography matters for student outcomes (as measured by NAPLAN). After more than a decade of such data being publicly available through the MySchool website,<sup>7</sup> results have not shifted. Something needs to change.

*If you walked into a hospital and they treated you with cancer like they did 20 years ago, you would be pretty aghast. So, we need to make sure that the way leaders in schools work with teachers and the way teachers work with students takes advantage of what we know now and putting that into play. I am not talking fads. I am talking about specific actionable things we know work. This is where leadership in education can actually make a huge impact.*

K-6 Government School Principal, Tasmania

School principals have a responsibility to be leaders for, and with, their communities. They are expected to try and do things that are in the best interests of those in the community, even if that goes against traditional ways of doing things.<sup>8</sup>

Flipping the question from ‘are children ready for school’ to asking ‘are schools ready for children’ helps school leaders, staff and communities to focus on high-impact strategies.<sup>9</sup> In addition to encouraging conversations about context-sensitive schooling, it also provides an opportunity for educators to ‘think outside the box for solutions’ that best meet the needs of students and communities.<sup>10</sup> The result is a shift from short-term to a longer-term perspective.

## *Long term thinking*

The use of financial incentives and service rewards has not had the expected impact on regional, rural and remote schools. There remains a constant turnover of staff leading to fragmented initiatives and schools, students, staff and communities are missing out.<sup>11</sup> As one principal noted, if someone is at a school for the financial incentives, to advance his/her career, or to do his/her time, you are not going to achieve the type of impact that students, colleagues and communities deserve.<sup>12</sup> Rather than encouraging innovative thinking, it is possible that incentives and rewards have led to short-term experimentation on some of the most vulnerable students and communities.

It takes time to initiate, embed and sustain improvements in practice and outcomes. Rather than thinking of initiatives in two- or three-year strategic planning cycles, there is a need to think through what they look like for a generation (six to seven years) of students.<sup>13</sup> To achieve this, a school must have clarity concerning its purpose. Not fancy slogans and mottos, but a clearly articulate purpose and coherence in activities. This provides a reference point for decision-making. If an activity is not explicitly supporting the school’s purpose, then there are grounds for not doing it.

<sup>7</sup> See: [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)

<sup>8</sup> Sources: Principal 11, P-12 Independent School, Remote Qld; Principal 3, K-6 Government School, Regional, Tas.

<sup>9</sup> Source: Principal 2, 7-12 Government School, Remote Western Australia.

<sup>10</sup> Source: Principal 3, K-6 Government Schools, Inner Regional Tasmania.

<sup>11</sup> See: Downes, N. & Roberts, P. (2017). <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/112>

<sup>12</sup> Source: Principal 12, K-6 Government School, Major City NSW.

<sup>13</sup> Source: Principal 14, P-6 Government School, Remote Queensland.



Working for the long-term goal is no fairy tale. There are challenges and hurdles every single day, even if the school is doing well.<sup>14</sup> Staying the course requires you to “work your butt off” and the social and professional expectations of visibility often mean school leaders work long hours and six to seven days a week to get things up and running. It is not too dissimilar to a start-up.<sup>15</sup> Funding is important to achieving long term initiatives, but it also requires a range of resources in communities.

## *Funding is not enough*

Simply increasing funds to schools is not going to solve the problems of regional, rural and remote education.<sup>16</sup> As with many schools serving disadvantaged communities, there is a lot of goodwill. Many groups offer money for programs and initiatives to solve problems, but they are not necessarily the same solutions (or problems) that schools or communities want or need. As a principal noted, ‘I do not want to fulfil someone else’s purpose’.<sup>17</sup> This may mean passing on some funding opportunities, even activities that could be fun for students, but if it is not helping the school achieve its purpose, then it is an add-on and takes staff, students and the community away from core activities.

This is not to say that funding is not a significant issue. Multiple principals spoke of the difficulties in accessing resources, particularly allied health for their communities. The additional cost for travel and accommodation was something that many families simply cannot afford. Even if professionals traveled to locations, families were required to fit into tight schedules meaning that help was not always available when it was most needed.<sup>18</sup> As one principal expressed, ‘you should not have to send your child to the city to get a high-quality education and life chances.’<sup>19</sup>

Generating high-impact is not just doing the same thing better. It is about disrupting the status quo to improve the outcomes – both educational and broader – for students, communities and educators in regional, rural and remote schools. This may involve re-thinking what it means to have impact or differentiating our expectations of schools based on the diversity of their contexts. It is not necessarily about lowering standards, but thinking about what schools, students, educators and communities need to not just survive but thrive. Funding is part of the equation but not the solution.

<sup>14</sup> Source: Principal 12, K-6 Government School, Major City, NSW.

<sup>15</sup> Source: Principal 3, K-6 Government School, Inner Regional Tasmania.

<sup>16</sup> Source: Eacott, S. et al., (2020). High-impact leaders in RRRE: Barriers and challenges scoping study.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Principal 12, K-6 Government School, Major City, NSW.

<sup>18</sup> Source: For example, Principal 1, P-10 Government School, Very Remote Queensland.

<sup>19</sup> Source: Principal 13, K-12 Independent School, Inner Regional NSW.

## Notes

- An innovation imperative is not an excuse to experiment with the schooling of some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable students and communities.
- Improving outcomes requires a multi-agency approach. Principals spoke of the need for better integration with allied health services to ensure that students and communities could access the help they needed to maintain health.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, issues with infrastructure such as quality of internet access, water, electricity, and public transport were impacting outcomes.
- You do not become innovative by copying what others are doing. It is possible to learn from others, but innovation comes from working with educators, students and the community.<sup>21</sup> This is how you build collective responsibility for outcomes.<sup>22</sup>
- School systems are only strong together. There is a need to move beyond competition models to better supporting neighbouring schools. One principal spoke of the responsibility, as a larger school, to support small sites as improving outcomes is not about building siloes.<sup>23</sup>

## Summary

High impact is leading the change that you want to happen. It is also about understanding that you have a responsibility to develop everybody, whether it is the office staff, the gardener, educators or students. It is about finding the talents and listening to other people when they are talking about the talents of others – fostering those talents through the school's culture.<sup>24</sup>

In many cases, school leaders spent time in further study (e.g., university post-graduate programs, professional association / systemic study tours) and visiting other schools and systems to learn ideas which they could bring back to school. Much like honeybees, these high-impact leaders sought out ideas from many sources and brought them back to be re-interpreted for local application. Not copying elsewhere but appropriating ideas and weaving those with local needs.

The pursuit of innovative ideas for local issues is only possible with an explicit clarity of purpose. In doing so, the work is done with not to staff, families and the community. It is this working with all that is the basis of establishing collective responsibility for the delivery of outcomes.

<sup>20</sup> Source: Principal 7, 7-12 Government School, Outer Regional Queensland.

<sup>21</sup> Source: Principal 13, K-12 Principal, Inner Regional NSW.

<sup>22</sup> Source: Principal 6, R-12 Government School, Outer Regional South Australia.

<sup>23</sup> Source: Principal 8, K-6 Government School, Remote Western Australia.

<sup>24</sup> Source: Principal 8, K-6 Government School, Remote Western Australia.

## 2. Collective responsibility

*You do not walk past anything. Every student and family belongs to every teacher – we are all in this together.*

K-6 Principal, NSW

Schools are complex organisations. Generating high-impact is not possible if only a single person or position is held responsible for outcomes. To establish and sustain a high-impact culture that fosters an innovation imperative, the responsibility needs to fall on **more than the principal**. Improving outcomes for regional, rural and remote students and communities takes a collective effort. Achieving buy-in for the work of the school and accepting responsibility is made easier when the work of the school is **locally grounded**. Making school activities locally significant while relevant to the contemporary world is a path to collective responsibility.

A high-impact culture built on collective responsibility requires a different way of working. **Collaboration and not competition** becomes central to the work of the schools. The overarching goal of what is best for students, families, and the community outweighs any individual educator or school purpose. If improving outcomes for regional, rural and remote students and communities is the goal, then they need to be central to all decisions and everyone held responsible for delivering those outcomes.

### *More than the principal*

Research has shown that school leadership has a greater impact if decision-making and responsibility is shared.<sup>25</sup> While this study focused on identified high-impact leaders, there was almost universal discussion about the role of the entire school staff and community in delivering outcomes for students. For some it meant working on school budgets as an entire staff, for others it was changing the way meetings run to ensure a diverse range of voices are heard and that decisions are always made in relation to how best they deliver for students and the community.<sup>26</sup>

Shifting from the principal to the collective requires raising the visibility of educators in the community. Beyond naming all staff on the school website, specific strategies include having school leaders out and visible in the morning and afternoon when parents and community members are about.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, having different staff write newsletter articles or social media posts – building the profile of as wide a range of staff as possible.<sup>28</sup>

Sharing responsibility has the dual purpose of creating a sense of ownership and building the capacity of others. A regional New South Wales principal spoke positively of the team at her school.

<sup>25</sup> Gurr, D.M., Longmuir, F. & Reed, C. (2020). Creating successful and unique schools: leadership, context and systems thinking perspectives. *Journal of Educational Administration*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2020-0045>

<sup>26</sup> Sources: Principals 2, 6 (Remote, WA), 15 and 16 (Inner Regional, NSW).

<sup>27</sup> Source: Principal 6, K-6 Government School, Remote Western Australia.

<sup>28</sup> Source: Principal 3, K-6 Government School, Inner Regional Tasmania.

She highlighted that when she is off-site at principals' events, she is the only one who does not get phone calls from school. This was attributed to having confidence in the team and them knowing that she had their back. The team has permission to make decisions based on the information available to them. This is part of the 'culture of we' at the school. The principal is not the only decision maker, but part of a team working for students, educators and the community.<sup>29</sup>

## *Locally grounded*

A 'culture of we' shares the responsibility for all students among everyone at the school. Importantly, it opens up responsibility to more than just academic outcomes. As described by one principal, 'you do not walk past anything, every student and family belongs to every teacher - we are all in this together.'<sup>30</sup> A staff that works collaboratively and visibly in the best interests of all students (and families) establishes and sustains the trust of the community. This trust leads to greater levels of support. The impact of working becomes evident in the community.

*... the kids that the school has produced have helped to make the community what it is. Everyone says hello, everyone is friendly, that is just the nature of the place and I think it has something to do with the school. It is the principal's legacy of learning and caring nature.*

Community member<sup>31</sup>

Working with communities in these ways often expands the role of educators. Many families in regional, rural and remote communities need support. Particularly when it comes to access to health professionals – including those directly related to school-based activities (e.g., learning). In multiple cases, principals spoke of facilitating access to doctors, counsellors, and specialists.<sup>32</sup> Doing so was, however, frequently made more difficult by systemic procedures and policies.

Most of the principals we spoke to had connections to living in regional, rural and remote locations. Past experience such as growing up in a regional, rural or remote community were considered an advantage to understanding the inner workings of communities. In a number of cases, principals had grown up in (or nearby) the communities in which they now worked. In one case, multiple staff commented that '[the principal] grew up in the town. She knows a lot of people in the community. She has connections and the trust of the community that she has their best interests at heart.'<sup>33</sup> For staff this meant that the principal often had histories and connections that could help them understand what was going on in a child's or family's life at any given time. And if she did not know, she arguably knew someone who could find out. These connections are pivotal for schools.

<sup>29</sup> Source: Eacott, S. et al. (2020). Case Study 1: Sandon Public School. High-impact leadership in RRR schools.

<sup>30</sup> Source: Eacott, S. et al. (2020). Case Study 1; Sandon Public School. High-impact leadership in RRR schools.

<sup>31</sup> Source: Eacott, S. et al. (2020). Case Study 2: Wollongbar Public School. High-impact leadership in RRR schools.

<sup>32</sup> Source: Principal 7, 7-12 Government School, Outer Regional Western Australia.

<sup>33</sup> Source: Eacott, S. et al. (2020). Case Study 1: Sandon Public School. High-impact leadership in RRR schools.

## *Collaboration not competition*

Connections within the school are as important as those with the community. Working together to find solutions and ideas on how best to meet the needs of students and the community is fundamental to collective responsibility. In many cases this involves opening up classrooms to colleagues.<sup>34</sup> Observing one another teach (with a specific observational framework), providing feedback, and basing the work on the impact on students is a key cycle of practice identified by high-impact leaders.<sup>35</sup> It is the 'culture of we' that enables this process to be less confrontational, or even competitive, and more about building and sustaining collective responsibility. The goal is to establish support structures to help teachers focus on the quality of their teaching and learning activities.

### **Box 1. Different not better**

A principal in a regional location spoke of the cross-school collaboration in the town. Despite there being multiple public primary schools, a Catholic school, and an independent school, the principal spoke of a level of sharing information and collaboration that was different to the usual approach reported. Specifically, she spoke of the motto of '*different not better*'. Rather than competing for students and wanting them all to attend your school, the principals in the town believed that they were all working to achieve the best outcomes for the students and families in the community. This may mean that their school is not the best fit at a particular time for a child or family. The task then becomes finding the school that will best fit the child or family and working to make that happen. Such an approach is only made possible by a cross-school understanding that working for the best interests of the town requires a shift away from competition based approaches to schooling and instead to collaboration and collective responsibility for the greater good.

There does remain a careful balancing act for school leaders. As one principal explained, 'when a plane is going down you need to fit your own oxygen mask before attending to others'.<sup>36</sup> His point is that we need to look after our teachers if we want them to be able to best serve students and communities. Collective responsibility demands that educators look after themselves and each other. A high-impact team cannot operate effectively if members are unwell. For regional, rural and remote locations maintaining personal health can be a challenge given the almost 24/7 nature of the job. A key strategy to support educators identified by principals was to encourage staff to think of their work as a job. That is, continuing to hold high expectations of the commitment and quality of work during school times, but actively supporting staff to disengage during non-work times.

<sup>34</sup> Source: Principal 14, P-6 Government School, Remote Queensland.

<sup>35</sup> Source: Principals 1 (Very Remote, Qld), 3 (Regional, Tas), 8 (Remote, WA), 15 (Regional, NSW).

<sup>36</sup> Source: Principal 3, K-6 Government School, Inner Regional Tasmania.

Taking care of one another also means not imposing a single version of what it means to work in the best interests of students and communities. Too often education is judged by single measures (e.g., standardised test results, attendance data) and pitting metropolitan against regional, rural and remote schools. However, if context matters then greater attention is needed to be paid to the histories and trajectories of schools and communities in understanding their impact. One principal spoke of the value of reading the history of the school (both school reports and the history) as a way of understanding where the school had been and how it had shaped what the school was today. Assuming that all schools share the same history and trajectory is highly problematic.

Similarly, educators are often compared with one another. Having an impact on students, colleagues, families and the community does not always look the same. However, if we want schools that acknowledge, value, and cater for diversity in students and communities then we should expect the same with teachers. Staff well-being is a key foundation for building a school culture of impact.<sup>37</sup> Rather than educators competing with one another, the focus for school leaders is how the collective are working to achieve the school's purpose(s). Working together rather than competing is central for a culture of we and delivering high-impact for students and communities.

## Notes

- Being open and transparent with decision-making, explaining why something was or was not done makes it possible for the largest number of people to understand – and speak to – decisions and how they contribute to the school's purpose.
- Scheduling emails and technology-based alerts / notifications so that staff are not bombarded with requests seven days a week. At the same time, recognising that not everyone engages in the same way is a key task for school leaders to establish protocols around.
- A culture of we means that everyone on staff can respond to queries and speak to the work of the school. All staff represent the school and actions impact of everyone related to the school (past, present and future).

## Summary

Generating high-impact for students, families, communities, and fellow educators, responsibility needs to be shared among the collective. Supporting an innovation imperative requires bringing people together. In doing so, the impact of the schools becomes visible in the community. Central to advancing a 'culture of we' is context-sensitive schooling where the work of the school is in a reciprocal relationship with the community. Achieving these productive relations is achieved through school leadership having a focus on teaching and learning.

<sup>37</sup> Source: Principal 11, P-12 Independent School, Remote Queensland



### 3. A focus on teaching and learning

*Instructional leadership is our main priority. You sacrifice other things to make sure that is the reality.*

K-12 Principal, Qld

Leadership is second to only classroom teaching of all within-school factors for improving outcomes.<sup>38</sup> While centred on the principalship, this leadership can also come from anywhere in the school (e.g., Head of Department)<sup>39</sup> and is supported through collective responsibility. This is why the focus is on high-impact leadership and not leaders.

As with teaching, not all leadership practices are equal in improving outcomes.<sup>40</sup> Research has consistently demonstrated that ‘instructional leadership’ or leadership focused on teaching and learning has the greatest impact on student outcomes.<sup>41</sup> This is because it focuses on **improving teaching** with leaders actively **involved in professional learning** and focuses on a broader range of assessments **more than standardised tests**.

#### *Improving teaching*

The quality of teaching is the single most impactful within-school factor in the improvement of outcomes. While it is easy to focus on many other matters, and they remain important and require addressing, the most impactful thing that school leaders can do is focus the educators in the school on improving the quality of teaching. This is only possible if there is an explicitly stated purpose of schooling and an articulation of what that looks like in teaching, curriculum and assessment.

Improving teaching requires opening up classroom practice. Put simply, you cannot improve teaching if educators close the door and work individually.<sup>42</sup> Working collaboratively, within a framework of collective responsibility, makes it possible to improve teaching against an agreed upon approach that seeks to have a high-impact on students and communities.

Shifting the focus from changing to improving teaching<sup>43</sup> and holding everyone to account leads to a high-impact performance culture. This does not mean that all educators teach the same. Teaching is complex. However, educators should be able to articulate what they do and how it impacts students’ (or community) learning.

<sup>38</sup> Source: Leithwood, K. et al., (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership and Management*, 40(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>

<sup>39</sup> Source: Grootenboer, P. Edwards-Groves, C. & Rönnerman, K. (2020). *Middle leadership in schools: a practical guide for leading learning*. Routledge.

<sup>40</sup> Source: Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analysis relating to achievement*. Routledge

<sup>41</sup> Eacott, S. & Niesche, R. (2021). Educational and instructional leadership. In S.J. Courtney, H.M. Gunter, R. Niesche & T. Trujillo (Eds.), *Understanding educational leadership: critical perspectives and approaches* (221-236). Bloomsbury.

<sup>42</sup> Source: Principal 14, P-6 Government School, Remote Queensland.

<sup>43</sup> Source: Principals 13 (K-12, Inner Regional NSW) and 11 (P-12, Remote Qld).

## *Involved in professional learning*

What flourishes in schools is that which you take an interest in and prioritise.<sup>44</sup> Research has stressed that school leadership that promotes and participates in teacher professional learning has a greater impact on student outcomes than that which just promotes teacher learning.<sup>45</sup> The principals in this study all spoke of the importance of professional learning and prioritising instructional leadership activities (in one case, two hours per day<sup>46</sup>). In many cases, this explicitly involved scheduling time in classrooms – non-negotiable time in classrooms working with teachers. Examples include observing lessons and providing feedback, team teaching, taking classes to let other teacher observe one another among others. The overarching purpose is working with teachers to refine and support their work.

### **Box 2. Embedding teacher learning**

A primary school in Tasmania sought to prioritise professional learning as a key strategy to shape staff practice, leading to changes in student behavior and ultimately outcomes. To deliver on this approach, the school needed to budget (time and money) towards embedding professional learning in day-to-day activities.

It started with **staff meetings**. Every meeting started with a positive primer – 10 minutes of sharing a successful idea / strategy from the classroom. This approach concerns generating a culture of sharing and collegiality built on teaching and learning. The next 80 minutes of the meeting was work. Tasks that impact teachers' work, not items that could be an email.

The school adopted a model of **instructional coaching**. Every single teacher at the school received two hours of individualised instructional coaching every five weeks. This included two-hours of planning either side of the coaching session. The sessions focused on two sets of data (chosen by the teacher) concerning their focus for the session. The data would feed into the improvement cycle between coaching sessions and stimulate discussion.

A key feature of the school's strategy is **learning sabbaticals**. These would involve two staff per term receiving intensive coaching on their teaching practice. Each teacher would get multiple days off class to work with the principal (or key instructional leader) on reflection, consultation, planning related to a whole school improvement agenda goal. In total, participating teachers received 16 days off class as part of the sabbatical. Teachers were expected to generate posters on their learning, report back to other staff, and demonstrate changes in practice and outcomes.

In summary, this approach to embedding professional learning in school activities was built on a serious commitment (time and financial) to building a performance culture focused on improving teaching and learning.

<sup>44</sup> Source: Principal 10, P-12 Independent School, Major City New South Wales

<sup>45</sup> See the work of Viviane Robinson and colleagues, e.g., <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60170>

<sup>46</sup> Source: Principal 8, K-6 Government School, Remote Western Australia.

Through active involvement in teacher professional learning, school leaders are demonstrating the collective responsibility for improving the impact of the school. The examples in Box 2 also show how professional learning need not be something that is done after school or to teachers. Instead, professional learning can be embedded in the day-to-day activities of the school and part of being a professional educator. Bringing an innovative approach to using school resources (time and financial) opens the path to new (innovative) ways of working and building a performance culture focused on teaching and learning.

By being explicitly involved in teacher professional learning, school leaders are also learning and advancing their skill set. It facilitates conversations between leaders and teachers based on what is taking place in the classroom and with students. Rather than being a distant figure, school leaders become central to teacher learning and the focus on teaching in the school.

### *More than standardised tests*

Impact is about student outcomes. But these outcomes need not be limited to NAPLAN or tertiary entrance scores. There are a diverse range of impacts that schooling can have on students and communities, each reflective of different pathways and opportunities. For some students and families, it is about further education (e.g., university, VET qualifications), for others it is getting them onto a pathway to something they want to achieve, and for some it is to be happy and healthy individuals.<sup>47</sup>

Regional, rural and remote schools frequently provide the opportunity to watch students develop throughout the schooling years (P-12) and then into the workforce or further study.<sup>48</sup> A key role of schools is to provide the best quality education, whether students stay in the area or leave. For students wishing to stay, there is a need to partner with local businesses and organisations to create learning opportunities – explicitly showing students what it means to be part of a regional, rural or remote community. This is not to dismiss the attraction of the wider world but is about valuing the people and opportunities around you. When children grow up loving their communities, they can go away and then come back and give back to that community or take that community with them into the wider world. Regional, rural and remote schools have that capacity – tough to measure but important none-the-less.<sup>49</sup>

What remains important is that, if a school is to claim impact beyond academic outcomes (e.g., standardised tests), then it needs evidence. This evidence is possible but requires attention. It is built on having clarity around the purpose of the school and its work, coherence in its activities and then generating the data to demonstrate how well the school is performing. In doing so, the school can generate the narrative around its impact on students and the community.

<sup>47</sup> Source: Principal 7, 7-12 Government School, Outer Regional Queensland.

<sup>48</sup> Source: Principal 9, R-12 Government School, Very Remote South Australia.

<sup>49</sup> Source: Principal 11, P-12 Independent School, Remote Queensland.

## Notes

- While stressing the importance of a focus on teaching and learning for high-impact, outcomes and impact cannot be de-coupled from other social, cultural, health, economic and geographic disadvantage. The goal is to minimise these disadvantages by optimising school-level activities to best meet the needs of students, families and communities.
- Although it is possible to argue that schools contribute more than just academic outcomes, if educators and communities can name these non-academic outcomes, they need to be able to generate evidence to demonstrate they have achieved them.<sup>50</sup> They may be more difficult to measure or require new forms of evidence, but if you can name it you can demonstrate it.
- School leaders' focus on teaching and learning cannot be taken for granted. Recent OECD data (e.g., TALIS 2018, see Table 1) shows that Australian principals spend a lower percentage of their time on curriculum and teaching related activities than other OECD or TALIS countries.

**Table 1.** Australian principals' work time – TALIS 2018

	Average proportion of time principals report spending on the following tasks													
	Administrative tasks and meetings		Leadership tasks and meetings		Curriculum and teaching related tasks and meetings		Student interactions		Parent or guardian interactions		Interactions with local and regional community, business and industry		Other	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
<b>Australia</b>	34	(1.8)	25	(1.2)	11	(0.5)	12	(0.7)	10	(0.4)	6	(0.6)	2	(0.7)
OECD	30	(0.3)	21	(0.2)	16	(0.2)	13	(0.2)	10	(0.1)	6	(0.1)	4	(0.1)
TALIS	28	(0.2)	21	(0.1)	17	(0.1)	14	(0.1)	10	(0.1)	6	(0.1)	3	(0.1)

Source: The Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018. Australian Report Vol 1: Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners<sup>51</sup>

## Summary

Delivering high-impact in schools is dependent on school leaders' ability to focus the work of all on the core business of schooling – teaching and learning. This is achieved not by focusing on teachers but instead on teaching by developing systems and structures that allow educators to focus on their classroom practice. It is about making decisions that optimise the amount of time and effort that is dedicated to teaching and learning tasks, while reducing activities that distract from that focus. It is also about being visible in the commitment to and prioritising of teaching and learning.

The greatest impact is achieved when school leaders explicitly schedule time in their week/day to work with teachers on their teaching. Not only does this build relations but it demonstrates to all involved that school leaders value and prioritise what goes on in classrooms.

<sup>50</sup> Ladwig, J.G. (2010). Beyond academic outcomes. *Review of Research in Ed*, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X09353062>

<sup>51</sup> Source: Thomson, S., & Hillman, K. (2019). The Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018.

Australian Report Volume 1: Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=talis>

## 4. Visibility in and commitment to the community

*When you are in a regional school, as principal, you are the face of your school, everywhere you go and everything you do is scrutinised.*

K-12 principal, Qld

The social and professional expectations on school leaders in regional, rural and remote schools differ from those in metropolitan centres. More than just working with communities, there is an expectation that leaders are both **visible in and committed to the community**. Irrespective of a leader's previous achievement, there is an expectation of **authentic engagement** with community. This makes the role much larger than just a school-based one.

Attracting and retaining high-impact leaders and educators remains an ongoing issue for regional rural and remote schools.<sup>52</sup> For communities, this creates a sense of caution in welcoming new educators and leaders. Credibility and trust take time to build and there is an expectation that high-impact leaders can demonstrate they are in the community as **more than a career stepping-stone**.

### *Visibility and commitment*

Principals spoke of the importance of being seen. Going out and having a meal, watching the football, or even having a drink at the pub so that the community can see you as a person and not just an educator.<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to have the community care about you and your work if they only know you as a role. At the same time, there is a fine line where you need to sustain very strong professional standards in everything you do.<sup>54</sup> As a regional, rural and remote school leader you are more than just an educator but an important figure in the community and people's lives.

Commitment to the community is more than just being visible. Volunteering for and leading local organisations such as sporting or social clubs and getting involved in community activities is always welcomed. Whether it is fair to school leaders, there is a social expectation in regional, rural and remote communities that they take on a larger role than their metropolitan colleagues. More than just leading a school, there is an expectation of playing a leading role in the community.

A controversial issue regarding visibility and commitment is whether school leaders should live in the same community as their school. In many cases, there was little choice but to live in the town. While experiences were mixed, principals who lived in the community spoke positively of the level of support from the community – but it does amplify the feeling of always being on the job.

<sup>52</sup> Source: Eacott, S. *et al.*, (2020). *Attracting and retaining high-impact educators and leaders in regional, rural and remote schools: A scoping study*. Commonwealth Department of Education, Australia.

<sup>53</sup> Source: Principal 3, K-6 Government School, Inner Regional Tasmania.

<sup>54</sup> Source: Principal 4, P-12 Government School, Outer Regional Queensland.

## Authenticity in schooling

Context is important in education.<sup>55</sup> The experiences of students, educators and communities are very diverse. It cannot be assumed that a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum will work in all contexts. Regional, rural and remote locations provide the ideal grounding for building context-sensitive schooling. In doing so, it demonstrates a strong commitment to context.

### Box 3. Connecting to Country

Multiple principals spoke about engaging with their local communities, especially Indigenous Elders, to enrich the curriculum and connection to country. This usually involved working with, and employing, local Elders to **teach their traditional language to students and the stories of their people and Country**. Rather than an add-on, or one-off event, these activities and engagements were embedded in the day-to-day work of the school.

At one regional primary school in New South Wales, **the Indigenous community at the school designed an alternate school shirt**. While not the official school uniform, many (if not most) students wear the shirt to school most days. Many staff also wear the shirt. It has a widespread appeal and an important symbol of the connection between school and Country. The shirt features an Acknowledge of Country, the local totem, and is in the school colours. It has become an unofficial school uniform. Aunty Lesley, a local Elder and part-time Aboriginal Assistant at the school, describes the shirts as acknowledging Country, acknowledging the school, and that people want them. The impact is demonstrated beyond the school gates as well. It is common to see local community members wearing the shirt around the town. The shirt is helping to break down any boundaries between the school and community.

Consistent with contemporary models of pedagogy<sup>56</sup> and past reforms aimed at connecting school learning with real world and local problems<sup>57</sup>, impact is achieved through making content relevant to context. Making learning come to life and increasing students' passion is more likely if they can see what is at stake – including their future – and the opportunity to have an influence even if small.

A remote South Australian principal<sup>58</sup> spoke of the importance of getting students involved in significant projects impacting on their community and the environment. This included having senior students participate in local government decision making committees on re-designing / re-imagining their town. After all, they are the future generations for the community and their voice needs to be part of the conversation. Having showcase events where students present their ideas and designs for improving facilities or the profile of the town was another opportunity to make schooling relevant.

<sup>55</sup> Eacott, S. (2019). High-impact school leadership in context. *Leading & Managing*, 25(2), 66-79.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see Quality Teaching Academy (<https://qtacademy.edu.au/>)

<sup>57</sup> For example, see the New Basics Reforms from Queensland (<https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/bitstream/handle/11343/115452/scpp-00433-qld-2000.pdf>)

<sup>58</sup> Source: Principal 9, R-12 Government School, Very Remote South Australia.



Similarly, regional, rural and remote locations provide an ideal opportunity for students to become custodians of the environment, courtesy of opportunities to learn about sustainability and its importance for the community in ways that have direct observable impact. A remote school principal<sup>59</sup> spoke about the number of specialists (e.g., scientists) who visited the area and engaging with them to create opportunities for students. In one particular example, students became involved in a project monitoring a threatened species in the area. Children as young as six and seven years of age were learning about going out at nights, installing cameras, recording footage and studying footage for evidence. Bringing this level of expertise into classrooms and students' (and family's) lives is enriching and part of a high-impact context-sensitive approach to schooling. Importantly, these authentic experiences make learning about more than the individual.

### *More than a stepping-stone*

There is little doubt that many educators use regional, rural and remote positions as career stepping-stones.<sup>60</sup> Financial incentives and service reward schemes support such an approach.<sup>61</sup> Education and particularly schooling is about more than just the individual. Even the innovation imperative is about generating sustainable improvements in outcomes for many not just something to include on a resume. The stakes are high as, even if educators leave, the community remains.

Despite lower outcomes in major standardised tests, regional, rural and remote schools do not need saviors to rescue them. They need educators open to working with and for them to achieve better outcomes.<sup>62</sup> The stakes are high. In many communities there is only one school. Apart from sending children off to boarding school or relocating the entire family, parents cannot vote with their feet if they are unhappy. As a result, school leaders and educators need to work hard to connect with their communities.

Trust and credibility within the community are built upon others knowing that you are working in the best interests of the community. This does not mean that every decision makes everyone happy.<sup>63</sup> But there needs to be confidence that you are working for the community. In many cases, the school connects with (and in some cases employs) a large proportion of the community. Securing the trust and support of the community, including the educators in the school, takes time. Actions speak louder than words. Actively participating in community life is the shortest path to demonstrating visibility and commitment to the community.

<sup>59</sup> Source: Principal 9, R-12 Government School, Very Remote South Australia.

<sup>60</sup> Source: Principal 13, K-12 Independent School, Inner Regional New South Wales.

<sup>61</sup> Source: Principal 12, K-6 Government School, Major City New South Wales.

<sup>62</sup> Source: Principal 11, P-12 Independent School, Remote Queensland.

<sup>63</sup> Source: Principal 1, P-10 Government School, Very Remote Queensland.

## Notes

- Schools are often described as the 'heart of the community'.<sup>64</sup> For educators, and especially school leaders, there is an expectation of being heavily involved in the community. This frequently includes roles such as volunteering for community groups, sporting clubs and attending social and cultural events. Visibility among the community helps to break down the barriers between the school and community and build a sense of collective responsibility.
- Principals spoke positively about living in rural communities. The sense of belonging and being part of something much bigger than a school was considered exciting, challenging, and rewarding. While the boundaries between professional and personal life are frequently blurred in rural communities, principals saw the benefits as far outweighing the costs and the sense of achievement as both professionally and personally satisfying.
- Visibility in the community can look different in different contexts. While in some cases it is about the community seeing your car in the carpark all day and on weekends / holidays, in other cases it is about buying a house (or property) in the area to demonstrate a commitment and investment in the community. In short, there is no single version of what it looks like. To understand what is expected requires understanding of the contribution of the school and educators to the community.
- It is important to remember that school staff are community members as well. They face the same pressures as school leaders with the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life. Empathy for that tension and how it plays out for staff and families is important for managing staff well-being.

## Summary

Regional, rural and remote school leaders have more expansive roles than their metropolitan peers. The professional and social expectations on school leaders require a level of visibility and commitment to the community that is uncommon in larger centres. These expectations do not look the same in all communities, but they do contribute (positively and negatively) to principal well-being. At a time when principal well-being is of great concern,<sup>65</sup> understanding the expectations of visibility and commitment to communities is vital to delivering high-impact school leadership.

Working with and not on communities makes it possible to generate the types of innovative activities needed to improve outcomes. Collaboration with communities, without de-valuing the expertise of educators, makes it possible to deliver context-sensitive teaching and learning that meets the immediate and long-term of needs of students. In addition to demonstrating a concern for the community, collaboration facilitates a sense of collective responsibility and working together for something much bigger than the self. Being visible in and demonstrating a commitment to the community makes it possible to harness the collective to improve outcomes for all.

<sup>64</sup> See: <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

<sup>65</sup> See: [https://www.principalhealth.org.au/reports/2019\\_AU\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.principalhealth.org.au/reports/2019_AU_Final_Report.pdf)

## Things to consider

*You cannot prepare for a small, small community. You become very much part of the community. You have to experience it.*

K-12 Principal, SA

The research presented in this report has laid the foundations for policy discussions on how best to delivery high-impact leadership in schools at scale. **For far too long regional, rural and remote schools have been left waiting for a heroic leader to arrive in town and turnaround outcomes through their individual charisma and tenacity. Such an approach is indefensible given these schools serve some of our most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.**

There are considerable inequities in Australian education. Addressing this issue requires innovative solutions. Not more of the same, or getting better at existing approaches, but new ideas.

### **To deliver on the *innovation imperative*:**

- Rules, systems and structures need to support school leaders to generate, implement and evaluate the impact of innovative solutions to enduring problems.
- School planning cycles need to capture and reflect a long-term vision for the purpose of education and the systematic planning of activities to deliver on that vision.
- Government, systemic and school funding (both money – including incentives – and time) should be directed to activities with the greatest impact on improving outcomes.

The greatest impact can only be achieved collectively. This impact can only deliver the desired outcomes if everyone acknowledges needs and accepts responsibility for addressing them.

### **To generate *collective responsibility*:**

- Decision-making processes need to be participatory to build capacity and embed responsibility in more than the principal for delivering on initiatives.
- Educational impact needs to be understood as the outcome of and responsibility of a partnership between educators, agencies (e.g., government, health) and families.
- The culture of education, within and across schools, needs to shift from competition to collaboration and best meeting the needs of all Australian students and families.

Of all within-school factors, teaching has the greatest impact on outcomes. Creating the conditions so that teaching and learning is the focus of educators has great potential for shifting outcomes.

**To optimise school leaders' focus on teaching and learning:**

- Simplification of programs, processes, and systemic structures to reduce the volume of non-teaching and learning related activities being undertaken at the school level.
- Role responsibilities should allow for the scheduling of non-negotiable time to participate in teaching and learning related activities as part of their day-to-day work.
- A range of data (appropriately generated) should be recognised and valued in the demonstration of the impact of activities on students, staff, families and communities.

Generating trust and credibility, which are vital for initiatives and impact, requires school leaders to be visible in and demonstrate a commitment to the long-term best interests of the community.

**To ensure visibility in and commitment to communities:**

- The professional and social expectations of leaders need to balance the well-being of educators and their families, while advancing the interests of the school.
- School activities, core and extra-curricular, need to meaningfully connect to students' lives to make schooling locally relevant while opening up opportunities.
- Attraction and retention strategies need to address the professional (e.g., working conditions) and personal (e.g., living, health) to make regions attractive to educators.

Delivering on the above agenda requires a re-think of the way we prepare, develop and support school leaders for regional, rural and remote locations. Working across schools, systems, universities, professional associations and private consultants, with a core focus on optimising the impact of leadership provides the greatest opportunity to improve outcomes in regional, rural and remote schools.

**To appropriately prepare, develop and support school leaders:**

- Systems/Schools provide comprehensive preparation and induction focused on learning to lead in regional, rural and remote schools.

Further study (e.g., masters, professional doctorates) become compulsory and focus on learning for leadership in regional, rural and remote schools and communities.

Professional associations (e.g., principal networks) initiate formal and ongoing support programs (e.g., peer mentoring, coaching) for leaders at all career stages.

Taken together, the above represents a coherent and comprehensive basis for policy discussion and actions aimed at improving the impact of leadership in schools.

# A framework for high-impact school leadership

## What is it?

School leadership is different in regional, rural and remote Australia. Given the powerful relational dynamics among students, staff, communities and systems in delivering high-impact schooling, a relational approach<sup>66</sup> is a very useful lens through which to understand and support these schools. Figure 4 provides a visual overview of the four attributes that constitute high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools. The purpose of the framework is not just limited to identifying the relations associated with high-impact school leadership; it also provides a pathway for preparing, developing, and supporting high-impact leaders in regional, rural and remote locations to achieve the best outcomes for students, staff and communities.

**Figure 4.** The four attributes of high-impact leadership in regional, rural and remote schools



## Why high-impact school leadership

School leaders need to be freed up to <b>innovate</b> in order to deliver the kind of schooling most appropriate to contexts and ultimately better outcomes for regional, rural and remote schools.	To improve outcomes there is a need for <b>collective responsibility</b> from staff, students and communities – as part of a performance culture – to deliver high-impact outcomes for all regardless of location.	A <b>focus on teaching and learning</b> is imperative for improving outcomes, but it cannot be achieved without attention to the mental and physical health and well-being of staff, students and community.	Community support for initiatives, which is central to uptake and success, is only possible if leaders are <b>visible in</b> and perceived as <b>committed to</b> achieving the greatest good for <b>the community</b> .
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<sup>66</sup> See: *A relational approach to organising education: school leadership reflection guide*

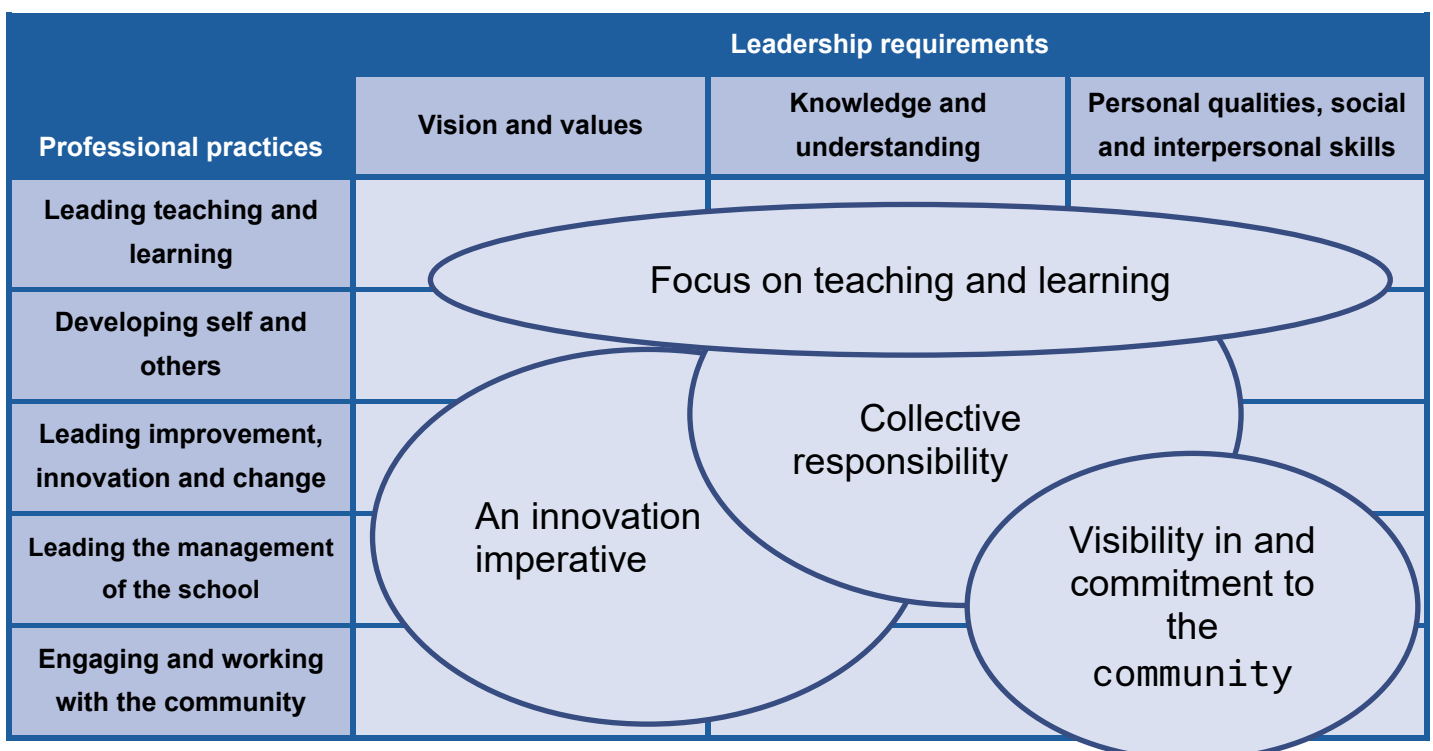
### *It is most effective when:*

Rules, policies, and structures support the work of school leaders to generate innovative solutions targeting the enduring inequities of outcomes in regional, rural and remote schools.	Responsibility for maximising the impact of schooling is shared among leaders, educators, students, families, the broader community, and multiple agencies (e.g., health, infrastructure).	Activities that do not add value to teaching and learning are reduced, enabling most educators (including leaders), most of the time to focus explicitly on improving teaching and learning for students.	School activities reflect the distinctive histories of the communities in which they are located and explicitly recognise, value and advance that trajectory through context-sensitive schooling.
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### *Map against the AITSL Australian Professional Standard for Principals*

The Framework for High-Impact School Leadership for Regional, Rural and Remote Schools presented in this report is consistent with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP).<sup>67</sup> Figure 5 below maps the four attributes of high-impact leadership against the three leadership requirements and five professional practices of the APSP. In short, high-impact leadership as described in this report meets the requirements of the APSP and is therefore fundamental to the day-to-day work of school leaders.

**Figure 5.** Mapping High-impact leadership against the AITSL Principal Standard



<sup>67</sup> See: <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/understand-the-principal-standard>



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