

# School Leadership Institute

September 2021

## System Leadership in Action

A case study of Principal Facilitators from the Senior Leadership - Aspiring Principals Leadership Program

It has been widely evidenced that effective school leadership is a significant contributing factor in driving school improvement (Leithwood, et. al., 2020). Effective leadership preparation is the key to developing school leaders who are ready and equipped to take up the role of principalship (Heffernan, 2018) and drive school improvement. System leadership is a crucial lever in developing the capabilities of future school leaders in a structured and deliberate way to impact leader, teacher and student learning.

In NSW public education, system leadership is characterised by a shared commitment to foster collaborative networks within and across the system to generate improvement.

This paper focuses on principals as system leaders. It connects research about system leadership with five key themes that emerged from case studies of principals describing the impact on their leadership as a result of being a Principal Facilitator in the Senior Leadership - Aspiring Principals Leadership Program (SL-APLP - formerly known as the Aspiring Principals Leadership Program).

Principals, who through their actions and behaviours, influence others within and beyond their school and have a commitment to the growth and improvement of other school leaders, are system leaders. They demonstrate the ability to be outward looking, connected and forward thinking, driving sustained improvement and a shared responsibility at a local and system level.

Developing effective school leaders now and for the future presents an opportunity for large-scale education system improvement (Heffernan, 2018). System leadership is a key driver enabling improvement across the system through effective leadership development programs (Harris, et.al, 2021). This is because a focus on leadership development in the context of system leadership aims to improve the educational outcomes of all young people in a systemic and sustained way (Earley & Greany, 2017).

Leadership development programs supported by system leaders through mentoring, coaching and facilitation offer significant opportunities to drive a collective commitment to improve

teaching and learning across the system (Harris, 2010). System leaders who act as facilitators in leadership development programs are those who are committed to the profession and have a desire to engage, network and expand their sphere of influence. The impact of Principal Facilitators on the learning of aspiring leaders through leadership development programs is evident. Aspiring leaders describe Principal Facilitators as knowledgeable, inclusive and supportive, encouraging aspiring leaders to reflect deeply on their leadership learning, behaviours and actions.



### Principal Facilitators

Principal Facilitators support aspiring principals through coaching and mentoring. These learning conversations are designed to build personal support, confidence and expertise in leading school improvement.

To understand the impact of a Principal Facilitator across NSW public education within the context of system leadership, the School Leadership Institute (SLI) conducted a case study analysis of facilitators from Cohorts 1, 2 and 3 of the SL-APLP. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 Principal Facilitators who supported aspiring school leaders throughout their eighteen-month engagement with the SL-APLP.

As part of their engagement in the SL-APLP, Professional Leadership Teams were formed where each Principal Facilitator worked with the same 4-6 members of their team throughout the program. Principal Facilitators attended all SL-APLP leadership seminars, specific training and meetings, and engaged with members of the leadership team both individually and as a group between formal seminars.



### Professional Leadership Teams

Led by experienced principals as facilitators, aspiring principals form professional leadership teams with fellow participants to engage in deep and continuous learning through collaborative practice as they implement a Leadership Inquiry.

The following five themes are examined:

- Theme 1: desire to engage in a formal system leadership role to support the leadership development of aspiring leaders
- Theme 2: impact of the Principal Facilitator role on their own leadership learning.
- Theme 3: impact of the Principal Facilitators' learning on their colleagues in their own context.
- Theme 4: reflections on the Leadership for Learning Frameworks.
- Theme 5: development of professional networks.

### Theme 1: Desire to engage in a formal system leadership role to support the leadership development of aspiring leaders.

System leadership requires school leaders to develop leadership capacity in others by identifying, inspiring and enabling aspiring leaders within and across schools. This commitment to leadership development by coaching, mentoring, advising and building capacity across the system is what generates and drives sustained improvement (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). These system leaders are identified as having the capability and willingness to support other school leaders to enhance their leadership and school improvement (Harris, 2010). This requires a rigorous selection process to ensure the most effective Principal Facilitators are chosen to support aspiring leaders. This was the case for the SL-APLP.

The case study analysis showed that all Principal Facilitators believed passionately in the need for strong and effective educational leadership across the NSW public education system. They wanted all public schools to be great schools led by great leaders. They were enthusiastic about extending their own leadership growth and development as school principals widely, across the system. They believed the Principal Facilitator role in the SL-APLP would provide them with an opportunity to do so.

All Principal Facilitators were experienced principals<sup>1</sup> upon application for the role of Principal Facilitator for the SL-APLP. The Principal Facilitators that were interviewed expressed confidence in their experience and expertise in school leadership, prompting their response to the expression of interest for the facilitator role. In addition to their years as school principals, most Principal Facilitators noted that they continue to be very active in regional or state networks

<sup>1</sup> All Principal Facilitators must have had a minimum of 4 years' experience as a principal upon application for the role.

supporting curriculum initiatives and leadership development of colleagues across the state.

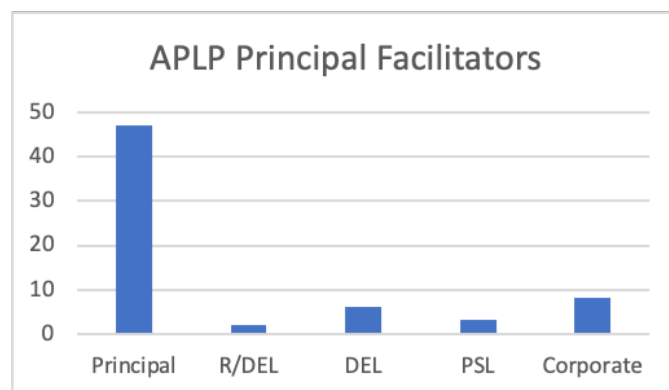
Subsequently, the career progression of 66 Principal Facilitators across the six cohorts of the SL-APLP indicates that 19 have moved into system-level educational leadership positions working closely with principals within the NSW Department of Education. Several Principal Facilitators noted during their interview for this case study that as a result of their involvement in the SL-APLP, they had been encouraged to become relieving (and then substantive) Directors Educational Leadership (DELs) by other respected leaders and this career development had strengthened their self-confidence to lead more broadly across the system.

#### Key Findings – Theme 1

Principal Facilitators believe every NSW public school should be great and led by great leaders.

Principal Facilitators work within and across the system to contribute to leadership development and to support other school leaders.

Principal Facilitators are committed to their own professional learning and view opportunities for leadership learning as a key part of their role as system leaders.



*N.B. Data collected in July 2021*

All Principal Facilitators had previously acted as mentors to colleagues, either formally or informally, and believed there would be opportunities to integrate their mentoring skills and experience into the facilitator role. Some Principal Facilitators had already undertaken postgraduate study in educational leadership and believed they had a sound working knowledge of current scholarship and research which they could share and discuss.

Principal Facilitators saw the SL-APLP as a developmental opportunity for themselves and for the aspiring leaders. Principal Facilitators noted their desire for formal opportunities to engage in the leadership development of others. They were delighted to see that the NSW Department of Education had established the School Leadership Institute in 2018 and provided opportunities for experienced principals to engage in their programs as facilitators of leadership learning. One principal who was interviewed stated that they felt “honoured” to be chosen as a facilitator but by the end of the program felt “blessed” because they realised then they had been “part of something ground breaking and world class.”



## Theme 2: Impact of the Principal Facilitator role on their own leadership learning

As a system leader, school leaders are researchers of their own and others’ practice. They possess the ability to learn, develop and share their expertise and experiences with aspiring leaders (Woods, 2021). Principal Facilitators interviewed for this case study indicated several ways in which the role of facilitator in the SL-APLP had impacted their own leadership learning. Of particular note was the high quality and calibre of presenters across all leadership seminars, providing opportunities for Principal Facilitators to reflect on and refine their own leadership priorities and practices.

First, Principal Facilitators commented specifically on engaging in learning opportunities with Professor Viviane Robinson and have taken this learning back to their own school context to set up collaborative teams. Principal Facilitators believed that the increased effectiveness of collaboration across the school was a result of the ‘sharper language’ they developed which enabled them to engage in more meaningful and focused discussions about the complexities of teaching, learning and assessment.

Second, Principal Facilitators believed the SL-APLP had refined their capacity to ask more strategic questions in future planning discussions regarding teaching and learning. Three Principal Facilitators commented that they had changed the way they conducted staff or team meetings especially after listening to “theories of action”. Their meetings and discussions are more focused on all aspects of best practice in student and teacher learning rather than on administrative matters.

Third, Principal Facilitators noted that challenging conversations with teaching colleagues in their own schools had shifted as a result of presentations from the speakers in the SL-APLP leadership seminars and also from discussions with their Professional Leadership Teams afterwards. They were consciously applying both the curious and courageous mindsets to potentially confronting situations.

### Key Findings – Theme 2

The role of Principal Facilitator in the SL-APLP is highly valued and the leadership of the facilitators’ own school was more effective as a result of their involvement in the program.

The learning gained by Principal Facilitators through the SL-APLP was implemented in their own school context effectively.

Involvement as a Principal Facilitator in the SL-APLP provided opportunities to understand school leadership in other contexts.

Finally, the Principal Facilitators spoke about the impact of the SL-APLP on their own leadership learning as they welcomed the very clear exposition about the moral dimension of leadership roles within NSW public education. The diversity of school contexts within their Professional Leadership Teams enriched discussions and reflections. The discussions and debates with their team members were valuable to their own leadership learning, especially when the experiences of the aspiring leaders differed from their own, or when challenging questions were raised in discussions which they had not considered.

Principal Facilitators referred specifically to their own growing confidence because several aspects of the sessions from the presenters confirmed or validated what they were already thinking and they found this powerful. The ongoing references

throughout the program to “reflective thinking” resonated strongly with facilitators.

### Theme 3: Impact of the Principal Facilitators’ learning on their colleagues in their own context

A key component in system leadership is the ability of a system leader to be outward looking, connected and forward thinking (Woods, 2021). They contribute to and work beyond their own school whilst bringing back their learning to support school improvement within their own context (Hopkins, 2008). It is this reciprocity of learning that generates sustained improvement in schools and across the system (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018).

All Principal Facilitators interviewed for this case study lead teams either within their own school context or across a number of schools. The Principal Facilitators believed that their involvement in the SL-APLP had influenced their own thinking and planning as well as that of their colleagues. They noticed shifts in language used by staff members which they believed was a direct result of sharing their own leadership learning with colleagues. Staff members in their school were now infused with the language of a student-centred approach as a result of the way the Principal Facilitator had restructured professional learning at their school.

The Principal Facilitators indicated that they shared research, articles and literature with their leadership teams and colleagues as a result of their facilitation in the SL-APLP. They highlighted that sharing information and research and the ensuing discussions, with colleagues in their own schools strengthened knowledge of some of the key concepts from the program including:

- student-centred learning
- leading learning
- cultural humility
- collective efficacy
- meaningful collaboration
- active listening skills
- openness to learning
- difficult conversations and strategies for engaging in those conversations.

Some Principal Facilitators referred to being more strategic and more focussed on the essentials with their school leadership teams as a result of presentations. Principal Facilitators noted that some colleagues in their schools who had been in middle leadership roles for many years, embraced recent research and articles that the Principal

Facilitators had shared with them and were now eager and well-prepared to invest in different teaching and learning approaches with students.



#### Key Findings – Theme 3

There are multiple and significant instances where the impact of the SL-APLP through the Principal Facilitators have permeated beyond the program.

Principal Facilitators applied their learning from the SL-APLP in their own context which has had a significant positive impact for their colleagues.

### Theme 4: Reflections on Leadership for Learning Frameworks

Integral to the SL-APLP are the three Leadership for Learning Frameworks utilised in the program:

- the Leadership for Learning Analysis (L4LA), which provides 360° feedback on five key capabilities required to lead effectively in NSW public schools
- the Leadership for Inquiry and Innovation framework (L4I&I), which articulates the key stages actions and guiding questions underpinning leadership inquiry
- the Leadership Mindsets as ways of thinking for school leaders to frame their approaches to school leadership.

Principal Facilitators now use the Leadership for Learning Frameworks identifying their increasing relevance to their leadership. Some Principal Facilitators noted the opportunities to embed the concepts underpinning the Leadership Mindsets into other leadership development programs in their context. One Principal Facilitator is

incorporating aspects of the Leadership Mindsets into a pilot program for new principals in their network. They articulated that exposure to the Leadership Mindsets had influenced their thinking and therefore that of their colleagues.

#### Key Findings – Theme 4

The Leadership for Learning Frameworks are drawn upon throughout and beyond the program.

The Leadership for Learning Frameworks are being reflected upon and embedded into Principal Facilitators' practice.

There was general agreement from all Principal Facilitators about the usefulness of the 360 L4LA as a tool for reflection on leadership impact and effectiveness. Principal Facilitators have the option of participating in the 360 Leadership for Learning Analysis for their own professional development finding the analysis and discussions to be most useful.



#### Theme 5: Development of professional networks

In NSW, system leadership is characterised by a shared commitment to foster collaborative networks within and across the system to generate improvement. As system leaders, principals and school leaders are committed and willing to “work for the success of other schools as well as their own” (Hopkins, 2008, p.22). It is through the development of collaborative professional networks and a willingness to work for the betterment of all schools that drives sustainable improvement within and across the NSW public education system.

In this case study Principal Facilitators were asked to reflect on the professional networks developed during their involvement in the program and their involvement beyond the program. All of the Principal Facilitators interviewed had maintained contact in various ways with the members of their Professional Leadership Teams, despite the impact of face to face meetings due to COVID-19 restrictions. They have engaged with Zoom meetings, emails and phone calls since the end of the program. Two Principal Facilitators visited all of their team members at their schools and have established an ongoing collegial relationship.

They all saw themselves as “lifelong learners” and characterised themselves in this way.

Several Principal Facilitators noted their sincere appreciation for the role of the program designers from the SLI. They valued the links between each of the leadership seminars and the overarching theme of “system and school leadership with moral purpose.” One Principal Facilitator believed that the most inspiring features of each leadership seminar were the references to student voice and aspects of the educational process which they believed were often overlooked.

All Principal Facilitators noted how much they “loved the leadership learning” and welcomed the opportunity for further involvement in the APLP and the SLI programs more broadly.



#### Key Findings – Theme 5

Principal Facilitators formed professional networks with aspiring leaders post program completion and strongly value the opportunity to continue to learn together.



## References

- Earley, P., & Greany, T. (Eds.). (2017). *School leadership and education system reform*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2018). Leading high needs schools. Findings from the International School Leadership Development Network. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 46(1), 147-156.
- Harris, A., Jones, M., & Hashim, N., (2021). System leaders and system leadership: exploring the contemporary evidence base, *School Leadership & Management* 1-22.
- Harris, A. (2010). Leading system transformation. *School Leadership and Management*, 30(3), 197-207.
- Heffernan, A. (2018). The influence of school context on school improvement policy enactment: An Australian case study. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 21(6) pp.621-632.
- Hopkins, D. (2008). Realising the potential of system leadership. *Improving school leadership*, 2, 21-35.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School leadership & management*, 40(1), 5-22.
- Woods, D., (2021). *The Nine Pillars of Great School Leadership*. Learning Community Trust.