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No school experience required - government considers outside principals

The state government is investigating hiring principals from outside the education system, focusing more on general management skills than in-school experience.

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Coldstream Primary School principal Peter Donaldson is responsible for rigorous paperwork, management and accountability to the Education department, teacher performance and development reviews and leading the school's education program.

Oh, and in the past few weeks, he's been picking up one of his students nearly every morning to ensure he attends school. Mr Donaldson estimates 70 per cent of his job requires teaching experience and qualifications, and he doubts a principal without teaching qualifications and experience could steer such a ship. Yet teachers drawn from outside the ranks of teachers is an idea being investigated by the state government.





President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals Frank Sal says experience running a "McDonald's or a hardware store" does not equip people to run schools. JOHN WOODSTRA

"If you just want someone to do the finances, the paperwork and the administration, fine, but I can't see that that's necessarily a leader," he says. "You'd be employing other people to do that."

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has contracted consulting company Synergistiq to provide an evidence-based talent identification and management system for Victorian government school leaders, in part to increase the quality and supply of future principals.

Synergistiq has been asked to consider the efficacy of recruiting leaders from outside the teaching profession to join the senior leadership ranks in roles including the principalship (which comprises principals and vice-principals).

Some in the education sector, such as Frank Sal, president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, are sceptical about such a proposal.

"The people who come in to lead the school have a good education background and ... a strong handle on what educational leadership is about," Mr Sal says. "They have a strong handle on the inter-personals and the team-based cultures that are necessary to achieve positive outcomes for kids. And that doesn't come from having run a McDonald's or a hardware store."

Synergistiq wouldn't comment on details of the contract but Synergistiq partner Patrick Lyons did offer his opinion on the present base of evidence to propose or oppose the argument for non-teacher principals.

"There is limited international evidence about the effectiveness of leaders from outside education becoming principals," Mr Lyons says.

He adds that if the right questions are asked, there's a case for conducting more research into the efficacy of recruiting principals from outside the teaching profession.

"What are we examining? For what purpose and what do we aim to learn? Once

these are clear, then I would welcome more focused research into the topic.”

Professor Brian Caldwell, founder of Educational Transformations and former dean of education at the University of Melbourne, says it would be hard to test the value of recruiting non-educators to lead schools as there are so few worldwide who have become principals without having taught before.

“I think it would be extremely difficult to find any jurisdiction with significant numbers of people who are principals who don’t have an educational qualification,” he says.

More effective research would involve looking at what high-performing countries are already doing, he says. “Because this is all in the context of policy documents of the Victorian government trying to lift Victoria into the top-ranked nations around the world and the top nations around the world don’t do this.”

"From New Directions to Action: World Class Teaching and School Leadership", a 2013 paper released by the Department of Education and Early Childhood states that one of the Victorian government’s medium to long-term priorities to improve Victoria’s education outcomes is to create pathways for expert leaders from outside the teaching profession to join the leadership structure within schools.

It follows a consultation with members of the public, peak organisations and schools, in which various concerns about the prospect of enabling non-teachers to become principals were raised.

“This agenda has only arisen under the Liberals,” says Sal. “It hasn’t arisen, I don’t think, in any other countries that are performing in any positive way.

“The conservative philosophy tends to go down the track of any competition being good; therefore let’s bring in outside principals.”

Synergistiq is required to advise the department on the characteristics of high-potential leaders and the standards to measure them against, and they are contracted to identify methods to gauge the preparedness of high-potential leaders to assume school leadership roles.

This entails defining what leadership actually is. According to Sal, teaching qualifications and teaching experience are inherent to educational leadership.

“The main game of a school is educational outcomes for kids,” he says. “As a leader, if you don’t have a good handle on that, then all you’re doing is asking subordinates and people down the chain what ideas they have to actually improve the school.”

Dr David Gurr, a senior lecturer in educational leadership within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, adds that leaders

from outside the teaching profession lack the pre-existing commitment to education that teachers can evidence through their career experiences.

“I’m not sure why a non-education principal would even want to be a principal, to be honest,” Gurr says. “If you’ve got no passion for education, I’m not quite sure why you’d want to do it.”

The Bastow Institute’s flagship Principal Preparation program has been designed to prepare high-potential leaders close to applying for their first principal job to perform effectively in a climate of growing autonomy, and to manage the complexity, onus and expanding expectations of the principalship. The growing demands imposed upon contemporary principals are highlighted in the 2009 paper "Issues in Reinventing School Leadership: Reviewing the OECD Report on Improving School Leadership from an Australian Perspective".

The paper illuminates that advancing the quality of leadership in Australian schools requires a shift in the managerial expectations imposed upon school leaders. Governments now acknowledge that strong leadership is a central tenet of successful educational outcomes for schools and the paper cites research concluding that school leadership is second only to teaching in influencing student learning outcomes within the school environment.

The paper also shows that the type of leadership a school adopts has a significant impact on student learning outcomes. Instructional leadership (leadership in teaching and learning) is considered to have a significantly positive impact on student education outcomes. In 2008, Teaching Australia found that leading and influencing student learning is considered most central to principal quality.

Meredith Peace, president of the Australian Education Union’s Victorian branch, says that opening up the principalship to managers and leaders outside the teaching profession is not a solution to improving principal performance.

“They’re trying to find a solution to a problem by looking outside the system, rather than being prepared to support the existing system and address the significant issues that have been raised about the lack of support for the profession as a whole.”

Peace says the AEU (Vic) has expressed various concerns about the present government’s policy planks.

“They’re often based on a very thin research base,” says Peace. “They selectively choose sections out of research to support their views, when there is widespread and significant research – not only in Australia, but worldwide – about educational leadership.”



