

# Why effective leadership in every school matters

## Empowering teachers and inspiring confidence in public education

### Introduction

Teachers' ability to support every student to learn and grow is shaped by the leadership and support structures around them. Teachers do their best work in school environments that enable teaching excellence, collaboration, sustainable ways of working, and professional growth. Strengthening teaching practices, teacher wellbeing and retention is a shared priority across the Australian public education system and a core goal in Our Plan for NSW Public Education.

Evidence consistently shows that school outcomes depend not only on individual teacher capability, but also on the conditions shaping teachers' day-to-day work and collegial practices. Impactful school leadership plays a critical role in creating these conditions, including through setting clear expectations for teaching and learning and fostering inclusive school climates that enable a culture of excellence to flourish.

School leaders also powerfully influence how this work is experienced and understood by parents and communities, inspiring confidence in schools and maintaining enrolment share in a competitive education landscape.

Investing in strengthening school leadership, particularly quality principal preparation and ongoing development, is a non-negotiable, cost-effective and scalable way to support positive school cultures, strengthen teaching quality, and sustain teacher retention across the system. Strengthening leadership development is therefore a practical, evidence-informed and high-value strategy for empowering teachers, inspiring excellence and public confidence, and advancing equity and excellence at scale.

### Executive summary

Effective leadership in every school is essential to empowering and supporting teachers and inspiring excellence and confidence in public education. Evidence highlights that:

- Teacher capacity to support student learning is shaped by school conditions.
- School leaders create the conditions for effective teaching and inclusive school cultures.
- Leaders drive community engagement and school communication, influencing parent and carer confidence and school choice.
- Leadership development is one of the most cost-effective and scalable system strategies to support teachers, inspire excellence and equity, and build confidence in public education.

Every public school is unique in the school community it serves, but all great schools have one thing in common. They have an effective school principal working with leaders and teachers at all stages of their careers, supporting a collective deep commitment to giving every student in their care the opportunity to learn and thrive.

# Why leadership matters for teachers, students and communities

Research shows that effective leadership has benefits across the school community. It shapes the culture, structures and practices that enable teachers to do their best work, students to thrive, and parents, carers and community members to engage meaningfully in partnership with schools.

## For teachers

Leadership influences how schools organise teaching and learning, support professional growth, and sustain positive working environments. These organisational conditions, in turn, influence teacher engagement and decisions to remain in schools (Kraft et al., 2016) and underpin high-quality teaching and improved learner outcomes and experiences (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Teachers enter the profession with a deep commitment to their students and desire to deliver high-quality teaching and learning (Friedman et al., 2025). This commitment is closely connected to teachers' professional expertise, including their curriculum knowledge, pedagogical skill, and capacity to make informed decisions about student learning. Australian research highlights that maintaining teacher commitment and retention requires attention to both the broader context of the profession and the relational and workplace conditions within schools (Arnold & Rahimi, 2025).

When teachers feel valued, empowered, and connected to their school's purpose, they are better able to sustain their enthusiasm for teaching, invest in school improvement, and contribute to excellence in teaching and learning across the school (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2025).

**“Ensuring that teachers have the support and resources they need to maintain their professional wellbeing is essential for fostering a positive, effective learning environment and promoting the overall health of the educational community.” (AITSL, 2025, n.p.)**

For teachers, effective leadership is experienced through clear direction, supportive relationships, coherent expectations, inclusive decision-making and meaningful professional learning. Effective school leaders enable collaboration, protect time for teaching

and learning, and translate system priorities into practices that make sense in local contexts. When leadership is effective, teachers are better supported to focus on their core work. Moreover, empowering teachers as instructional leaders and decision-makers is linked to positive school cultures and improved teacher retention (School Leadership Institute, 2024).

## For students

Increased leadership effectiveness is associated with meaningful improvement in student outcomes. Researchers have estimated that students with highly effective school leaders can make the equivalent of up to 3 additional months of progress in numeracy and reading over a school year. Leadership also positively impacts outcomes that matter for students' long-term success, including attendance, engagement and behaviour (Grissom et al., 2021).

**“Students learn substantially more in both math and reading in schools with more effective principals. Principals also have effects on students beyond achievement.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 43)**

## For communities

Beyond the school gates, leadership also shapes how schools are perceived and experienced by families and broader communities by inspiring excellence, sustaining positive school engagement and advancing equity.

Parents and carers place a high value on quality leadership and teaching, and on school environment, culture and reputation (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Willis et al., 2021). By driving this work, school leaders play a key role in building confidence in public education and influencing school choice and enrolment stability. Effective school leadership fosters collaborative school environments where parent, carer and community voice are actively sought, valued and used to inform and refine school strategies and practices.

**“Parents considered the attitudes, communication and leadership practices of school principals to play a crucial role in fostering and maintaining relationships between parents and schools.” (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 491)**

Leadership is also central to advancing equity across a public education system. While every school requires effective leadership, leadership effects are strongest in schools serving communities with higher levels of disadvantage or undertaking significant improvement efforts. Leadership quality helps explain why schools serving similar communities can experience differences in staff stability, professional cultures, and teaching quality (AITSL, 2019). Ensuring that every school has well-prepared and well-supported leadership is therefore a powerful equity strategy.

## Leadership development as high-value public investment

Leadership development is one of the most practical and cost-effective ways to support teachers and schools at scale. Effective leaders influence large numbers of teachers and students over time, by shaping improvements in working conditions, professional culture, and teaching quality across entire schools and networks (Grissom et al., 2021).

Strengthening leadership capability also supports teacher retention. Teachers are more likely to remain in schools where effective leadership fosters stable and supportive environments that build teachers' practice and sense of efficacy, sustain their professional commitment, and nurture their leadership aspirations (School Leadership Institute, 2025). In this way, leadership development functions not only to build teaching quality, but also as a workforce retention strategy.

Leadership development can be considered a risk-mitigation investment. Australian research highlights increasing pressures on school leaders and the importance of supporting them across the full breadth of their complex roles (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020). Leadership development, across the career continuum for teachers, school leaders, and system leaders helps reduce risk and promotes consistent leadership quality across schools (School Leadership Institute, 2024). There is also a clear need for leaders to be equipped to enact the responsibilities and expectations outlined in their role descriptions, ensuring they can lead effectively in increasingly complex educational contexts.

Principals have a particularly powerful role in shaping teachers' work, school culture and community confidence. Research consistently demonstrates that principals contribute to student and school outcomes through their influence on teachers, school climate, and instructional organisation (Grissom et al., 2021). Because principal effects extend across entire school communities, strengthening principal preparation and leadership offers one of the highest-return opportunities for system improvement.

Importantly, leadership development can also support increased diversity across the profession. Public education systems are strengthened when the teaching and leadership workforce reflect the communities they serve. Investing in inclusive and accessible development pathways helps ensure that a diverse range of educators are supported to teach in and lead schools effectively for equity and excellence (Acton & Hennessy, 2023; AITSL, 2022).

High-quality leadership development supports leaders to enact system priorities while also strengthening broader capabilities such as relational leadership, operational management and community engagement. Research shows that leadership learning is most effective when it includes evidence-informed role preparation and induction as well as ongoing development, is tailored for local contexts, and is designed to support collaboration and learning at scale (Harris & Jones, 2025; Munby, 2020).

## Conclusion

Supporting teachers to thrive is essential to the success of public education and ensuring the best outcomes for our students and communities across NSW. Evidence consistently shows that effective school leadership creates the conditions that enable high-quality teaching, teacher wellbeing, and retention, while also shaping the confidence that families and communities place in their local public schools.

Investing in leadership development at every stage of teachers' and leaders' careers, particularly principal preparation and ongoing development, is a cost-effective and evidence-informed approach to supporting teachers at scale, advancing equity and excellence across schools, and sustaining improvement across the NSW public education system.

**“Given not just the magnitude but the scope of principal effects..it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 43)**

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