Everyone believes that school leadership is important but what difference does it make to student achievement and well-being? Which particular leadership practices have the most impact?

The Ministry of Education asked The University of Auckland to find out and the result was two very interesting findings.

“Firstly, leadership in schools where students perform above what is expected for their age looks very different from the leadership in schools serving students from similar backgrounds who are performing below the expected level. Clearly, leadership does matter,” says Professor Viviane Robinson, who led the project.

“Secondly, we identified the type of leadership that makes the most difference to student outcomes. In general terms, school leadership that is strongly focused on the core business of teaching and learning has two to three times the impact on students than leadership that is more focused on school management.”

“...leadership in schools where students perform above what is expected for their age looks very different from the leadership in schools serving students from similar backgrounds who are performing below the expected level.”

These findings are particularly important for policy makers as there are high expectations, especially in systems where schools are self-managing, for school leaders to be both managers and educational leaders.

Professor Robinson’s conclusions are the result of a systematic analysis of all published national and international research using an approach called Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES), which was developed by the Ministry of Education.

Professor Robinson went on to identify the relative importance of five aspects of this work. The most powerful way that school leaders – whether principals, members of the senior management team or teacher leaders – can make a difference to student outcomes is to promote and participate in the professional learning and development of their staff. The second most powerful impact was through leaders’ direct involvement with the co-ordination and evaluation of teaching and the curriculum.

Professor Robinson stresses that the synthesis delivers much more than a list of powerful types of leadership. “We also had to give clear explanations of why and how they worked. If practitioners understand why they work, then they can adapt our findings, in a principled way, to their own contexts.”

The results have already been used by groups of school leaders, policy makers and educational leadership researchers. The Ministry of Education has integrated the findings into the leadership development framework that guides its programmes for all principals.

The results also have an application in the First-time Principals Programme, an initiative where the University is playing a key role, and the Principals Development Planning Centre.
The need to strengthen both responsiveness and outcomes for New Zealand’s diverse student population

Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson

Viviane Robinson is a Distinguished Professor in the Faculty of Education at The University of Auckland and Academic Director of its Centre for Educational Leadership. She specialises in school improvement, leadership and the relationship between research and the improvement of practice.

She is the author of five books and numerous chapters and journal articles. Her latest book entitled “Student-Centred Leadership” was published by Jossey Bass in August, 2011. In this book she presents a compelling account of how school leaders can make a bigger difference to student outcomes and the knowledge and skills they need to do so.

Viviane has consulted on leadership development and research to government agencies and organisations in England, Singapore, Chile, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. She has received awards from national and international professional organisations including the Australian Council for Educational Leaders and the New Zealand Secondary Principals Association. In April this year she was made a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association for sustained excellence in educational research.

The challenges

• Determine whether leadership practice has a positive impact on student achievement and well-being
• If so, identify the elements or characteristics of those practices that lead to improved student achievement
• Identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions that leaders need to engage confidently in the identified practices

Benefits

• Confirm the importance of school leadership
• Identify the relative importance of different types of leadership for making an impact on student outcomes
• General leadership and management skills do not deliver the expected impact on student outcomes
• Clear identification of gaps and limitations in the research

Academy of Principals (Singapore)

The Academy of Principals (Singapore) (APS) is a professional body that partners the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) to provide support for Singapore school principals as they lead schools into a new and exciting era of educational change. It also serves as a platform for our school principals to reach out to local and overseas colleagues from affiliated associations, institutions of higher learning, corporate and industry partners to share ideas, debate issues and discuss policy initiatives, all of which will contribute toward building sustainable leadership through strong and mutually-beneficial networks.

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