

# Leading towards excellence: A model for implementing effective school-wide change

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**T**his article provides a brief outline of the steps undertaken by an educational leader in moving a small remote school towards excellence, with a particular focus on the style of leadership required and the necessary managerial practices and strategies...

Isolated Primary School\* is a small remote school with three full-time teaching staff (a principal and two teachers), two casual teaching staff, and a part-time administrative assistant. It is a unique school as all permanent staff members have limited tenure – the principal has three years, teaching staff two years. All staff members are appointed following a process of merit selection. Paradoxically, the staff changes are a stabilising force.

## Moving towards excellence

The establishment of clear aims against which plans can be developed is usually seen as an essential precursor to school improvement; so, too, for effective leadership, is it essential to have a vision.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, if our school was to move towards excellence, we needed a systematic and explicit vision. (See Figure 1.)

Due to the extremely high turnover of staff at the school, it was imperative that the vision be a collaborative effort between the school staff and the local school community. This collabora-

Figure 1

### What is the vision (desired future state) for the school?

That Isolated Primary School will be widely recognised and acknowledged for:

- Excellence of its learning programs;
- The professional growth and quality of staff; and
- Pride exhibited by the entire school community.

\* a pseudonym

tion empowered the school community to feel ownership of the vision. By empowering both staff and parents, the school better reflects local priorities in the curriculum and is required to use resources more efficiently and effectively.<sup>2</sup>

However, while the vision provides direction, it is the style of leadership that allows for initiative and innovation within the school.

## Styles of leadership

Using the school's vision as a guiding force, the principal developed a personal contextual model of leadership in moving Isolated Primary School towards excellence. It is a symbolic leadership model that communicates a shared vision. It also develops an organisational culture of participatory leadership at Isolated Primary School. Figure 2 demonstrates the model.

The school's vision has an impact on three different, yet interrelated levels within the school.

### The organisational level

At the organisational level, the school vision is the guiding force behind all strategic planning, curriculum and pedagogical frameworks, self-assessment and monitoring procedures, and budget and decisions made by the school regarding resources. At this level, leadership is primarily task oriented. Planning at the organisational level attempts to initiate changes in the school rather than be responsive to problems already present within the school. This is proactive educational leadership, as it involves diagnosing and solving pedagogical and curricular problems.

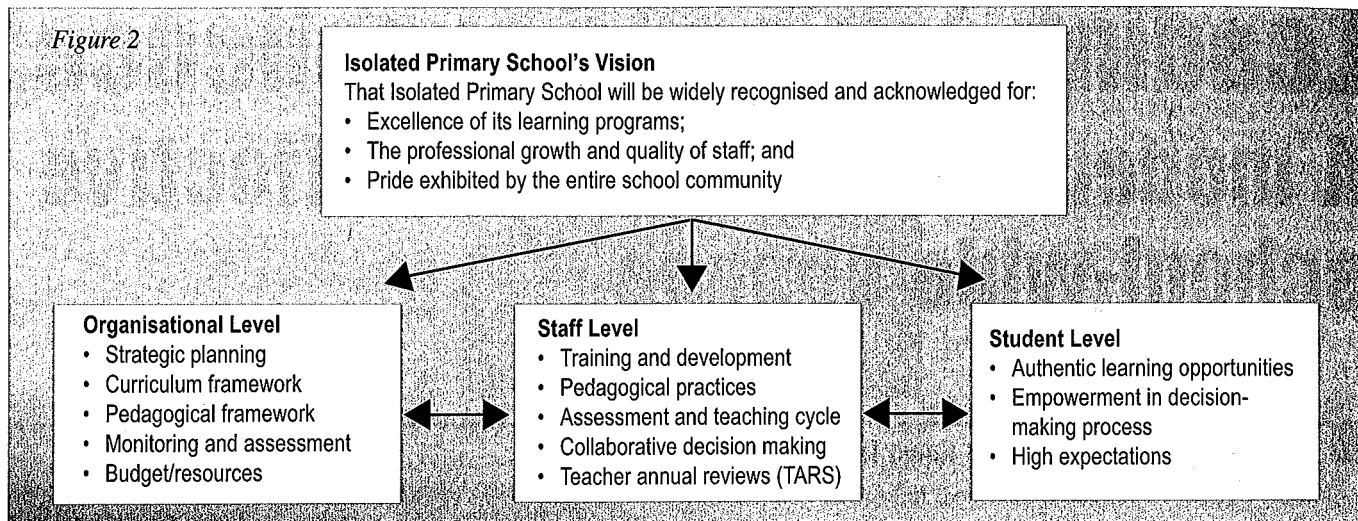
### The staff level

All staff members use the school's vision as their guiding principle for pedagogical practices, decision making with students, annual reviews, and training and development goals. Within this leadership framework, staff members are considered to reflect the characteristics of McGregor's Theory Y<sup>3</sup> – motivated to improve the school, prepared to face challenges, creative, and willing to place the school's needs above their own self-interests.

### The student level

By adhering to the school's vision, the staff ensure that students are engaged in authentic learning experiences, empowering them to make decisions regarding themselves and have

Figure 2



high expectations of themselves and others within the school. At this level the leadership is very much based on relationships, the fostering of a positive relationship between staff and students and empowering students in their own learning.

The leadership demonstrated is primarily transformational. It remains the most complete and relevant view of leadership in education.<sup>4</sup> Transformational leadership is necessary to motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible.

It is the most appropriate leadership style for Isolated Primary School for two reasons. Firstly, the high rate of staff turnover at the school requires the school to have a strong organisational structure, as the school's organisational culture is fragile. Secondly, as the community and the students are at the school for a far greater length of time than the staff, it is important that they are empowered in the formation of the vision and decision-making processes of the school. This empowerment provides a greater sense of ownership by the community.

The style of leadership can often be merely symbolic if actions do not support it, which is why the choice of managerial practices and strategies employed by the leader communicate far more about the leadership style than any label.

## Managerial practices and strategies

The managerial strategies and practices in bringing about this change process proceeded through four separate stages. (See Figure 3.)

1. *The visionary stage.* During this stage, all of the school community was involved in authoring the school's vision.
2. *The strategic stage.* Here the school's staff and governing body (School Council) were involved in strategic planning for the implementation of the school's vision and its impact on the school at the organisational, staff and student levels.
3. *The implementation stage.* During this stage, the staff members implemented the strategic plan.
4. *The assessment stage.* At this point, the school community assessed the implementation of the strategic plan, identified successes and failures during the implementation process and outlined future directions for the school. At this point the cycle returned to the strategic stage to begin again.

Research demonstrates that school leaders in highly innovative primary schools show more vision, more teaching reforms, better delegation, more joint responsibility and a more collaborative culture than those in less innovative schools.<sup>5</sup> This is evident in the visionary stage of the change process, as the entire school community was involved in the formation of the school's vision and its implications for the school as an organisation. This portrays a strong symbolic and cultural awareness.

Research on effective schools has shown that parental involvement in school [organisational] level decision-making and activities motivates both the students and the staff.<sup>6</sup> If parents are involved in the decision-making processes, they are more likely to be satisfied with their child's school and provide greater support to that school and to their child's learning. This validates the reasons behind the collaborative nature of the change process.

The success of a school is strongly associated with the principal's strategic leadership. The strategic stage of the change process is, however, still collaborative. If there is a problem with student learning at the school, it only makes sense to ask the people closest to the problem for solutions, as teachers provide crucial insight into the teaching and learning process. The educational leader, acting as the chairperson for the team, needs to ensure that all strategies (short-, mid- and long-term) are matched to the overall goal of school excellence. During the strategic stage, the school gains an understanding of the current state of the school, finds an opportunity for improvement, studies the current situation, and analyses the causes.

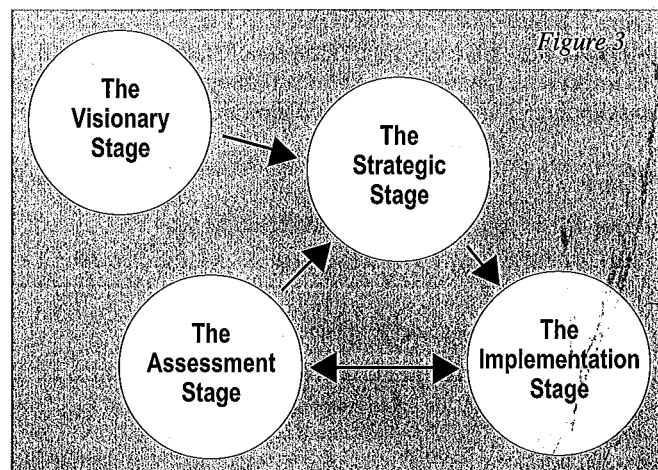


Figure 3

This leads to the development of a plan for improvement.

Participation by professionals is positively correlated to job satisfaction, morale, and building trust and confidence in leadership.<sup>7</sup> Meaningful involvement is limited by the fact that teachers' workloads are not infinitely expandable. However, due to the small staff and small class sizes, Isolated Primary School is in a unique position to allow for meaningful involvement of all teaching staff in school wide initiatives.

Because all the school community was involved in the visionary and strategic stages, the staff will be more committed to implementing the programs effectively. Throughout the implementation stage, the staff implement the strategic plan and at the same time collect data to determine the effectiveness of the change process.

During the assessment stage, the data collected during the implementation stage is studied. The school team needs to determine whether it provides a short- or long-term solution. The analysis of this data forms the focus for the next stage of the change process where the staff and school council revisit the strategic stage to plan future moves towards excellence for the school, and so the process continues.

By establishing this model of continual school improvement, it is anticipated that Isolated Primary School should always be able to meet the needs of the local community and achieve excellence.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate the process undertaken

by an educational leader in moving a small school towards excellence. Due to the unique staffing situation at the school it was important that the leadership style be collaborative and future orientated. This has been achieved by allowing the school community to be involved in the planning and assessment of school based improvement. It establishes a culture at the school that should be easily supported by new staff as they in turn serve students and community at this isolated school. ■

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