Performance-based leadership: knowing what to lead and how to lead for improved outcomes

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There is persistent pressure on school leaders to further improve student outcomes. How should a principal best act for a school to demonstrate a positive significant shift in outcomes, when there are so many variables involved and so much is at stake (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012)? This is a story about a principal who is dramatically improving student outcomes through intentional acts to address his school's achievement priorities. While improving student outcomes is hard work, and more so in some contexts than in others, ultimately leadership effectiveness in a school should be judged by its impact on the students rather than on the adults (Robinson, 2011). While you may agree, what is contestable is how a school principal should act to guide and direct the adults to get this impact. This principal's story is to promote further insight into which acts and activities work best when leading the tough work of school improvement.

The context and problem

Steve Lemos is Principal at St Mary's Primary School, Georges Hall, in the Catholic Education Office's southern Sydney region of 33 primary and 17 secondary schools. The school is two-streamed (two classes at each year level), culturally diverse, with approximately 375 children of whom 75% are designated as English Second Language. A priority concern since 2010 has been the weak performance of the school in mathematics. Data from NAPLAN and Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) assessments in mathematics showed that compared to 'like' schools serving similar socio-economic communities, St Mary's Georges Hall was clearly under-performing. In mid-2011 the Principal, then in his fourth year of leading the

school, realised that a more deliberate, co-ordinated and research-informed strategy would be necessary to better address this persistent achievement problem. The hard work of the teachers and their continuous efforts to lift outcomes in mathematics had been neither sufficient nor effective.

The mathematics achievement problem was further highlighted in the school's 2012 Cyclic Review conducted by the Catholic Education Office, Sydney. In addition, the Cyclic Review report recommended that the school's leadership team engage in professional learning to build its capacity to more effectively lead the improvement of student outcomes. Although the review also highlighted literacy as an area for improvement, it was

agreed by the school and the regional office that the mathematics problem was more serious and urgent. As well, that it was unreasonable to expect staff to successfully tackle two tough achievement issues (literacy and numeracy) simultaneously. Instead, a prioritised and focussed approach to address one tough issue at a time was more likely to produce the needed improvement.

The improvement and leadership strategy

The improvement strategy at St Mary's targeted four levels of coordinated effort to lift mathematics outcomes: system-wide leadership, school-based leadership, teacher professional learning, and

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parent engagement. The school's improvement journey started in late 2011 with a system-wide instructional leadership development program initiated by the Regional Director, to build instructional leadership capacity at multiple levels in the region and its schools (West-Burnham, 2004). A two-year development program involved system-level leaders (director, consultants and advisors), principals, other senior school leaders, curriculum and religious education coordinators, and future leaders, a total of approximately 325 participants. It was realised that a significant body of recent world-class school leadership research existed which could inform and guide this leadership capacity building, especially the empirical research which identified the specific leadership practices that are more likely to positively impact on teaching and learning (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009; Hallinger, 2011).

The Principal of St Mary's participated in the leadership development program, designed and delivered by David Eddy in collaboration with the regional office. The overarching purpose of the program was to support and challenge educational leaders at all levels within the region in their leadership of teaching and learning for the further enhancement of student outcomes (Fullan, 2009). For overall program coherence and alignment, each participating leadership group focussed their learning on a selection of the five leadership dimensions and three leadership capabilities most strongly linked to the improvement of student outcomes (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). For example, the principals developed aligned leadership performance and learning goals linked to their school's current Annual Improvement Plan (Seijts & Latham, 2012). In addition, they were introduced to the research on relational trust to help them understand why and how relational trust is a strong predictor of student success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The consultants and advisors focussed their learning on the quality of their conversations with school leaders to promote teaching and learning improvements (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Robinson, 2011).

The program's participants were each provided by the regional office with a copy of *Student-Centered Leadership* by Viviane Robinson. To promote the integration of leadership research into their daily practice, participants were given prior and post seminar reading from the book and supported with structured activities to apply research findings to current and real problems of practice in their schools (Levin, 2010). For example, Steve and his principal colleagues were introduced to the indicators of relational trust in schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002), they self-assessed the current level of relational trust in their schools against the indicators, and developed strategies to build and sustain trust in their schools. Another example was Steve and his senior leadership team quality assuring their school's mathematics goal, target and implementation plan against the three goal setting conditions explained in *Student-Centered Leadership* (gaining commitment, checking capacity and setting specific goals).

Leadership coaching and support

School-based leadership support was the second level of coordinated action to help St Mary's respond more successfully to its mathematics problem. This support was aligned to the leadership development program, to provide Steve with on-the-job guidance in how to apply what he was learning to the school's achievement problem. Support was provided by an instructional leadership coach (David Eddy) and a Regional Consultant (Mary L'Estrange). They each gave critical feedback to Steve about his intended actions to address the mathematics problem, with a balance of feedback and coaching to help lift his leadership performance (Goldring, 2010). For example, Steve and the coach together critiqued the Mathematics Implementation Plan to ensure there were sufficient robust measures to demonstrate the successful completion of each task (Levin, 2010).

The Regional Consultant worked with the Principal and senior leadership team to help them prioritise and plan how to address underperformance. This included ensuring the teachers would have the capacity to achieve the desired improvement in mathematics; an agreed approach to the teaching of mathematics; how teachers would work together to identify strategies to help a child or a particular group of children; and ways to promote a teacher culture to support the collective analysis of and accountability for children's achievement (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). In her work with the school's leaders the Regional Consultant used the open-to-learning conversation strategies (Argyris & Schön, 1974, Robinson, 2011) she had learned in the leadership development program, to critique their intentions and her own suggestions. An outcome of her critical inquiry process was the inclusion of two key teacher leaders, who were also participants in the region's leadership development program, into the leadership team to deepen its knowledge and understanding of the achievement problem and how best to make progress.

Leadership support was further experienced by Steve in his Principals Cluster Group, facilitated by the Regional Consultant. In this group which met each term, each principal was invited to bring a current problem of practice to share in confidence with the other participants. Steve, for example, shared and discussed his dilemmas as the school's mathematics improvement plan was being implemented, and received critical feedback and suggestions from his peers. As well, the Consultant identified with Steve other ways the regional office could provide targeted support to help bring about the improvement in mathematics, especially for the teachers.

Teacher learning and development

The principal's role in establishing the necessary conditions for the improvement of teaching and learning, and participating in teacher learning and development, is known to be highly influential in improving student outcomes (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). St Mary's is a striking example of how a principal can effectively lead teacher learning and development. To gain commitment to the mathematics goal and target, teachers were provided with multiple opportunities to engage with the relevant data, understand that there was an unacceptable achievement shortfall and the response could not be 'business as usual'. A Mathematics Professional Learning Team was established within the school to help decide how the shortfall could best be responded to. Led by a senior leader, with support from a Regional Maths Advisor, this team was entrusted to develop a specific and measurable performance goal and target, an implementation plan with tasks to guide how the goal and target would be achieved, and strategies

to build teacher capacity for making progress toward the goal and target (refer Figure 1).

Six step strategic leadership process

The priority goal, informed and decided by an analysis of the school's PAT Mathematics and NAPLAN numeracy data, was to improve Years 2 to 6 students' ability to manipulate whole numbers through the four operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, using a range of computational and problem solving strategies. The target was to improve the stanine average of the PAT Mathematics results for students in Years 2 to 6 from 3.85 (2011) to 4.85 (2012) and to 5.85 (2013). In addition, and although no additional specific targets were set, a desired outcome was to improve the mean scores in NAPLAN numeracy results for Years 3 and 5 students.

Collectively, it was decided to introduce and implement 'Instructional Rounds' as the preferred teaching model to address the goal and target. As Instructional Rounds were new to the teachers, several of them found its model of observation, demonstration and reflection challenging to successfully implement as a specific teaching practice of whole numbers. In response, Steve participated in the teacher development program and came to understand why some teachers were having difficulty with the new model. He went into several classrooms to model and demonstrate for teachers the 'how', he encouraged teachers to observe him and join him in post-teaching reflective discussions (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teital, 2009). His demonstration lessons were filmed and used in teacher meetings to help develop a shared understanding of how instructional rounds could be used to successfully address the mathematics goal and target. In turn, the teachers developed a greater willingness and increased confidence to engage in the teaching of mathematics lessons using the instructional rounds model.

To further build teaching capacity, through the region's Reading and Mathematics Project (RAMP) a Mathematics Advisor was engaged to plan with teachers during provided teacher release days. With this additional external expertise and time, the teachers learned how to more effectively differentiate within lessons, refine lesson content, observe and model new teaching practices, collaboratively plan, provide feedback to their students and inquire into mathematics achievement data to identify which individual and groups of children were or were not improving (Timperley, 2005). Through the teacher development program and external support, leaders and teachers increasingly developed their capacity to implement the specific teaching strategies that were necessary to make progress toward attaining the mathematics goal and target.

Parent engagement

St Mary's fourth improvement strategy was parent engagement, in the classroom and at home. Steve, his leadership team and the staff understood the critical importance of engaging their parent community to work with them if they were to attain the mathematics goal and target (Hattie, 2009; Robinson, 2011). A well-attended parent forum was held to explain the goal and target and to discuss ways in which the parents could support their children's learning. With a strong and positive parent response, the teachers provided parent workshops (attended by 64 parents) to demonstrate how they were teaching whole numbers and ways in which the parents could support learning at home. As well, parents were invited to

Six step strategic leadership process

Figure 1 Six step strategic leadership process

train as parent helpers in classrooms to assist the teachers, resulting in several parents participating in parent helper workshops. Frequent newsletters to parents kept them informed about these engagement opportunities and goal achievement progress.

Improvement success

End of year (2013) data from PAT Mathematics and NAPLAN Numeracy assessments affirmed for St Mary's that their aligned intervention strategies of leadership development, school-based leadership support, teacher learning and development, and parent engagement were having a positive impact on student learning in mathematics. The school exceeded its target to improve the stanine average of PAT Mathematics results for students in Years 2 to 6, achieving a stanine average of 6.35 (2013). An increase in the mean scaled score for overall NAPLAN Numeracy was also evident in Years 3 and 5, resulting in means above the State mean. Notable evidence of improvement was the increased Year 3 mean scaled score from 398.8 (2012) to 449.5 (2013), with 61.8% (2013) of those students performing in the top two Bands compared to 29.3% in the previous year.

The most dramatic improvement was in Year 3 (refer Table 1). For example, in 2010 20% of Year 3 students were in the bottom two NAPLAN Numeracy Bands, whereas in 2013 this was reduced to 2%. In 2010 36% of Year 3 students were in the top two NAPLAN Numeracy Bands, whereas in 2013 this increased to 62%. Although the Year 5 Numeracy outcomes are not as strong, they are nevertheless significant. For example, in 2009 25% of Year 5 students were placed in the bottom two NAPLAN Numeracy Bands, whereas in 2013 this was reduced to 8%. In 2009 17% of Year 5 students were placed in the top two NAPLAN Numeracy Bands, whereas in 2013 this outcome was increased to 34%. As well, staff surveys demonstrated an increased confidence by teachers in their teaching of mathematics, a shift from 82% (2011) to 94% (2013). Other comparative surveys conducted in 2011 and 2013 showed significant upward shifts in how the students experienced the teaching of mathematics. For example, their understanding of learning intentions, the co-construction of success criteria, their ability to articulate why they were doing a specific task, as well as their ability to work more independently and more interdependently with others.

Table 1 Percentage in Bands for NAPLAN 2011-2013 Year 3 All Students in Numeracy

	Band 1			Band 2			Band 3			Band 4			Band 5			Band 6		
	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013	2011	2012	2013
State All %	2.8	3.8	2.8	11.8	9.3	8.3	19.7	20.2	21.5	26.5	27.8	28.7	21.5	21.2	24.8	17.6	17.7	14.0
State (All Students) %	2.8	3.8	2.8	11.8	9.3	8.3	19.7	20.2	21.5	26.5	27.8	28.7	21.5	21.2	24.8	17.6	17.7	14.0
School (All Students) %	0.0	1.7	0.0	4.4	6.9	2.1	11.1	34.5	17.0	35.6	27.6	19.1	33.3	13.8	31.9	15.6	15.5	29.8
Number of students per band	0	1	0	2	4	1	5	20	8	16	16	9	15	8	15	7	9	14

Total student numbers			
	2011	**2012**	**2013**
School (All Students)	45	58	47

Main messages

There are no quick fixes to complex and deeply rooted problems in organisations (Gawande, 2007), and schools are no exception. School leaders need to know what works, how it works and why it works. In short, having a general knowledge about the what, how and why of school leadership work is no longer sufficient, you need specific knowledge (Robinson, 2011). Steve, the focus of this story, as the school's ultimate leader of learning realised he had to better address the school's underperformance in mathematics. Through his determined and open-to-learning disposition, he increasingly acquired the specific knowledge and developed the requisite skills to lead others and positively respond to the expectation of a significant lift in student outcomes at St Mary's Georges Hall.

Steve's story and his leadership learning journey reminds us of the complexity and multiple challenges involved in leading substantial and sustained improvements to teaching and learning in a school. It takes considerable amounts of time, perseverance and diligence to succeed. While there may be no silver bullet, there is a wealth of world-class research that helps and challenges school leaders to think about which acts and activities leaders should do less of because they hold people back, and which ones leaders should do more of because they inspire people to give their all. In a school, and as has already been stated (Robinson, 2011), this means that the benchmark to judge leadership performance against is a leader's ability to inspire and mobilise the adults to act in ways that make a positive and significant impact on student outcomes.

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