A fair go? Reviewing schools and leaders



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How skewed has the school improvement agenda become when we have lost the art of engaging our school leaders in a strategic conversation about their performance? What can be done in the quest to promote a continuous improvement agenda in schools?

We are now confronted with a new approach that, far from the strategic conversation required, instead puts all our non-IPS sites through an Expert Review Group (ERG) process, regardless of their level of risk as a school.

The ERG was originally established to identify those schools that were at risk; to highlight the findings of an expert group and then swing in the support mechanisms required to bring the at-risk school back up to a level of competency; in short, to deliver a reasonable school improvement strategy.

However, the actual process as it is currently conducted can actually weaken the school leader's credibility and capacity to lead an improvement agenda post ERG.

This is because a public report, which only contains the school's failings, works to undermine the principal in his or her efforts to address the identified issues.

The report is generally silent on the system support necessary to improve the school; almost formulaic in the prescribed improvements and produces no final public report to say the school is now considered to have met the prescribed improvement threshold.

The new ERG approach has all non-IPS leaders who have endured a problematic Principal Performance Agreement (that in the main has meant no face-to-face conversations with a line manager and no external accountability review process for six years) suddenly confronted with an intensive review of not only their school, but of their leadership.

When school leaders have a policy imperative to have at least two face-to-face meetings a year with their staff on performance and accountability, there is a clear anomaly in what is expected for them by the layers of leadership within the system.

Yet we all operate within the same Public Service Performance Management Standard that should apply equally across our system.

It is hard to dismiss the argument that a two-tiered system exists when there is such an obvious difference in the performance management and school accountability mechanisms as currently operate between IPS and non-IPS leaders and schools.

In the context of no professional learning, but a trial of a handful of schools that have little choice but to consider the option of the new ERG process, it is no wonder that many of our non-IPS principals feel isolated and threatened by a new process they have no knowledge of.

There is enough evidence from ERG reports over many years – not to mention international research – identifying school leadership as a critical factor in school performance, such that all schools are expected to seek and deliver an improvement focus to the way they operate.

Yet we now have a professional learning model that allows only IPS leaders to have access to certain models of quality leadership training; including access to programs such as the Harvard Fellowships, as well as being able to receive quality feedback that identifies how a school could improve and acknowledges those things that are working well and should be maintained.

There is no justification for this. If the goal is to provide the best quality education possible for all of our students in a public system, then all leaders are entitled to the best quality professional learning.

Continuing down this path of excluding a significant number of school leaders, will surely further entrench the two-tiered system.

It is time to return to a fundamental philosophy of performance development that is based on helping school leaders and schools improve, with positive, open and authentic processes that engage school staff, rather than blame and shame them publicly.

It is time we looked at performance development from a collective and collaborative perspective, with and by school leaders, with system support for those schools that need the extra support and resourcing that can’t be provided at the local level.

Read more articles from the September edition of Western Teacher here.

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