



Department of  
Education

Public education  
A world of opportunities

**EXPERT REVIEW GROUP**

# PERSPECTIVES ON EXEMPLARY SCHOOL PRACTICE



# INTRODUCTION

## EXEMPLARY: WORTHY OF IMITATION; COMMENDABLE; SERVING AS A DESIRABLE MODEL.

**For the past eight years, the Expert Review Group has worked with more than 200 schools.**

Approximately 20 per cent have demonstrated exemplary practice. While the remainder have been reviewed for various other reasons, many have shown evidence of satisfactory practice. Further, the Expert Review Group is now seeing evidence of schools that were previously of concern moving toward 'exemplary' status.

This paper provides a snapshot of the performance of the exemplary schools. The information presented capitalises on the knowledge and skills of those working in these highly effective schools. It has been prepared to share insights about what works in them.

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## EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS:

- know what they are meant to do and are audacious in their pursuit of excellence
- are deeply empirical and intellectual, but also highly intuitive
- know good management amplifies leadership
- are passionate, know what they are good at and believe they can make a difference
- are characterised by the leadership X-factor – humility trumps personality on every occasion.

# CULTURE



## TEACHING

In exemplary schools, beliefs about teaching and how students learn best are shared readily.

A school-wide approach to teaching and learning creates the conditions for student achievement to exceed expectations.

A culture of high expectations and high standards applies to students' work ethic and behaviour.

Staff focus on achieving success for all students through the use of a range of effective strategies that meet the needs of diverse populations.

They create contemporary learning environments through the use of learning technologies.

Rhetoric and reality are aligned to add value to student learning.

Professional exchanges between staff take place at every opportunity

## LEADERSHIP

There is a constant pursuit of a culture of personal responsibility, public accountability and professional obligation, culminating in widespread ownership of a school's vision and purpose.

The depth and breadth of leadership are tangible.

Executive teams are cohesive and develop safe and supportive learning environments that are orderly, friendly, welcoming and inclusive.

Once understood and accepted by all, guiding values are not negotiable.

Proactive problem solving, structure, predictability, consistency and staff commitment are key components.

Leaders ensure that high expectations for student learning and behaviour are explicit, identifiable, and understood by staff, students and parents.

Leaders have confidence in staff and apply expert instructional leadership skills and strategies, complemented by highly developed relational, interpersonal and emotional intelligence.

Leaders understand that schools are not only places for children to learn but, importantly, are adult workplaces.

A spirit of 'can do' is complemented by a determination to confront the challenging realities of leading a complex organisation.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

High performing schools are orderly, with mutually respectful relationships that provide safe and positive learning cultures for students and staff.

These relationships characterise interactions between staff, parents and the broader community.

Programs designed to address student engagement, alienation, remediation and emotional issues are considered carefully before adoption. Programs that have reached the end of their useful lives are terminated in favour of those that meet the contemporary needs of students.

Combined with whole-school pastoral care processes, effective 'wraparound' support is provided for students at risk to strengthen, energise and motivate them to improve.

# CULTURE



## RELATIONSHIPS

A diverse range of valued partnerships supports school programs and pathways to further education. These partnerships enhance learning opportunities for students and, in many instances, provide additional resources to schools.

A set of norms and values focuses everyone's attention on what is most important and encourages them to work toward common goals.

Positive school climates, good relationships with communities and strong parent support are powerful factors in school success. These schools mobilise parents and communities with aspirational goals for improved student performance. Positive relationships fostered by leadership teams contribute to high staff morale and job satisfaction.

Improved student learning is the overriding priority.

A collective sense of responsibility for school improvement leads to a culture in which everyone works together to improve student learning and achievement.

## RESOURCES

Leaders are passionate and creative, with a strategic approach to the development of staff capacity and the deployment of financial, physical and human resources.

As highly competent and committed instructional leaders, leaders support cultures of shared responsibility and accountability.

School self-assessment is highly effective and ensures strategic and operational plans are aligned closely with budget deployment and human resource management.

The principal's position is unambiguous when it comes to providing the best conditions for students to flourish.

Human resources are deployed in the manner most likely to achieve the best possible student outcomes.



# COMMUNICATION



## TEACHING

There is unanimity of purpose that is communicated unremittingly to the point that it becomes an integral part of a school's 'playbook'.

A highly developed sense of ownership and commitment to continuous improvement is advocated by existing staff to those who are new to the school.

Committed and competent teaching and support staff know their students extremely well: the consistent message from all staff is that they believe in them.

Staff command respect from students, and lead welcoming and inclusive classroom environments.

Effective curriculum differentiation, with targeted and sustained intervention and support, feature strongly and staff accept responsibility for the achievement and care of all students.

Importantly, through words and actions, staff demonstrate their willingness to go the 'extra yard'.

## LEADERSHIP

Leaders are decisive and have a clear vision and direction for the future.

There is a strategic approach to building and distributing leadership capacity across the school: leaders deliberately establish authentic relationships among staff, students and parents. They define individual and team accountabilities.

Staff understand their roles clearly, recognise what they are responsible for and demonstrate accountability.

Staff enjoy a strong sense of team cohesion and delegated authority.

This means that the constant flow of information between staff is not confined to the students directly in their care.

Staff place a premium on explaining desired teaching practice through collaboration, modelling and timely feedback.

Leadership teams exhibit high quality data analysis skills, focus on solutions and provide clarity in planning that is monitored and evaluated regularly. They are acutely aware of the aphorism... 'It's not what you say ... but how you say it'.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Responsibilities for pastoral care are shared.

Leadership teams and staff are highly responsive; incidents and complaints are managed promptly and effectively.

Thorough and effective case management approaches address the needs of all students.

Inclusive partnerships with parents are a feature.

Early intervention strategies are well embedded, with teachers and support staff focusing on individualised approaches to meeting student needs. These are implemented with the support of families and specialist interagency staff.

These schools build an intimate knowledge of family histories and networks.

The quality of respect and trust between school staff and community members engenders such a strong belief in the school – and therefore in education – that attendance rates are superior to those in like schools and, as a result, levels of student achievement improve.

# COMMUNICATION



## RELATIONSHIPS

Embedding a set of values and beliefs about how people should be treated – be they students, their families or staff – is obvious.

This is enhanced by effective communication and the proactive development of partnerships that create positive school identities and a sense of belonging.

Parents express high levels of satisfaction with the quality of communication relating to the progress of their children, options for student support and opportunities to become involved in school life.

Decision making is collaborative, open and highly transparent.

Structures are provided to enable staff, students, parents and community members to make valuable contributions to school management and decision making.

Purposeful, well researched and highly valued educational partnerships are implemented to enhance the school context.

Parents, families and the wider community are seen as genuine partners and endorse strongly all that the school provides.

## RESOURCES

Partnerships between leaders and office management teams are strong.

A school-wide focus on the use of technology is received enthusiastically by teachers and adds diversity to strong teaching practices. Teachers design tasks built on prior knowledge to engage students in challenging and meaningful ways.

The benefits of using budget management practices that ensure funds are used for the right reason at the right time and for the greatest effect are well understood.

Resources are used strategically to assist collaborative planning, moderation, reflection and review, with the needs of the students always driving decision making.

# CHANGE



## TEACHING

Effective schools are adept at dealing with change. Staff adjust their instructional practices and strive collaboratively to meet the challenge of change.

Their adaptive capacity is enhanced by their understanding of the change process which includes generating options and ensuring that decisions are based on evidence.

As their curriculum programs are well integrated, coherent and sustained across all phases of schooling, they are able to accommodate curriculum changes easily – such as the introduction of the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline.

## LEADERSHIP

Leaders understand that, for change to have an enduring impact, implementation must be based on having a big picture perspective, an ability to motivate staff (even a little of ‘what’s in it for me?’) and mutual trust.

Leaders encourage innovation and model the pursuit of innovative practices through research-based initiatives. They engage proactively with local communities and are advocates for public education, happy to be judged on the three pillars of visibility, communication and organisation.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

School-wide approaches to attendance and behaviour management focus on improving student engagement.

Each issue is dealt with in fair, flexible and genuine ways, always with a focus on improving learning through engagement.

Schools do not allow external factors to define them. Attendance issues, challenging behaviours and students at educational risk are seen as incentives/opportunities for improvement.

There is a hunger for change for the better, staff push boundaries and make sacrifices to put children first.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Schools accept that change is a legitimate feature of organisational growth and development, and that the greater good is more important than personal agendas.

Staff are not put off by the thought that change can be risky.

Vibrant, relational leadership, with an unrelenting focus on student needs, is evident. This is augmented by the highly developed talents and instincts for instructional and emotional support among leaders who are alert to the changing needs of others.

Genuine relationships between staff and with students are built on trust and mutual respect.

These schools are identified as places where students learn and adults work. The focus on adult learning is a key driver in staff willingness to change.

## RESOURCES

Schools use their resources to address current and future needs to optimise student learning.

Any changes are considered carefully after cost-benefit analysis.

Astute management of resources provides opportunities for staff to obtain funding for special programs and to keep pace with advances in technology that enrich classroom learning environments.

New and innovative funding streams are sought.

Open and transparent communication processes underpin budget management which is tight, targeted and transformational.