

Why Professional Learning Autonomy for School Leaders is Essential

School leaders are credentialed professionals who have earned their roles through demonstrated expertise, integrity, and vision. As stewards of educational communities, they are entrusted to make ethical and impactful decisions that shape the learning, wellbeing, and futures of young people. This trust must extend to their own professional growth. It is not only reasonable but necessary that school leaders are afforded agency over their professional learning.

Recent moves in some systems to standardise or curtail school leader autonomy in professional learning are not only counterproductive, they are presumptive, assuming that professional educators cannot determine their own learning needs. To prescribe a uniform approach to the development of highly capable professionals undermines their judgment, flattens innovation, and erodes the very leadership qualities we seek to foster. When the profession is esteemed, leaders are trusted to determine the learning that best supports them in meeting the evolving demands of education and the nuanced needs of their communities.

At its core, education is a learning profession. To lead a culture of learning, school leaders must themselves be learners. Ongoing professional learning is not optional; it is foundational. Principals must model what we teach our students, that learning never stops, that curiosity drives improvement, and that growth is possible at every stage of life. Lifelong learning is how we keep pace with change, deepen our practice, and refine our craft. As we know better, we do better, and school leaders deserve the autonomy to pursue learning that allows them to do just that.

Professional learning for principals must not be viewed as a transactional compliance task, but rather as a strategic, transformative, and deeply personal process. It is through diverse, novel, and often immersive learning experiences, particularly those beyond one's local context, that leaders cultivate the adaptability, creativity, and resilience essential for modern school leadership.

Research in positive psychology and leadership development reinforces this: novelty fuels cognitive growth, strengthens emotional intelligence, and enhances the capacity to lead through uncertainty. International and interstate experiences, such as those offered through APPA conferences, place leaders in complex, unfamiliar contexts that demand flexible thinking and amplify reflective practice. These opportunities build confidence in decision-making, encourage systems thinking, and enable leaders to bring fresh insight into their local communities.

Crucially, the leaders who seek out and participate in these experiences are deeply committed. They often contribute their own resources, time, energy, and money, to grow their leadership. Rather than being curtailed, these efforts should be recognised, supported, and celebrated. The return on this investment is significant: more innovative, capable, and connected school leaders who are better equipped to face the future.

The benefits extend beyond professional capabilities to emotional (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ). Immersion in different cultural, geographic, and sectoral contexts enhances empathy, communication, and open-mindedness, qualities vital for leading increasingly diverse and dynamic school communities. For principals in regional, remote, or small schools, these experiences can be particularly affirming and sustaining. A leader in regional Western Australia, for example, may find greater resonance with a colleague in rural New Zealand than with a peer in a metropolitan setting. We must honour these connections.

Moreover, professional learning does not end with the formal session. The deep learning happens in the conversations between sessions, on buses between school visits, over dinner with a colleague from another state, during quiet moments of reflection. APPA conferences and similar opportunities create the space for these moments. They offer rare and valuable time for leaders to think, reflect, and consolidate their learning.

These experiences align powerfully with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Principal Standard:

- **Leading Teaching and Learning:** Broader perspectives help leaders develop inclusive, future-focused learning environments.
- **Developing Self and Others:** Exposure to diversity fosters a growth mindset and supports the mentoring of culturally responsive practices.
- **Leading Improvement, Innovation and Change:** Engaging beyond the familiar enables strategic and creative problem-solving.
- **Leading the Management of the School:** Cross-contextual insights enhance communication, relational leadership, and conflict resolution.
- **Engaging and Working with the Community:** Deepened cultural awareness and empathy strengthen community partnerships and student engagement.

If we are serious about building leadership capability in Australian schools, we must trust school leaders to lead their own learning.

Empowering principals to select professional experiences that align with their context, aspirations, and growth areas is not a risk, it is a professional necessity.

Our children, communities, and country deserve no less.

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