

**International School Leadership Development Network  
Study Summary  
Prepared by David Gurr, September, 2018**

**1. Research team members' names and affiliations.**

David Gurr, The University of Melbourne  
Lawrie Drysdale, The University of Melbourne  
Fiona Longmuir, Monash University  
Kieran McCrohan, Wesley College Melbourne, and The University of Melbourne

**2. Which project area does your research study address?**

Leadership for social justice  
 Leadership in high-need schools

**3. Briefly describe the study setting, participants, data collection instruments, and dates of the investigation.**

We have completed three cases of underperforming schools and are currently completing a fourth case study. Two of the schools are in educationally advantaged contexts and two are in an educationally disadvantaged contexts. All four schools have been created from the remnants of other schools. One school resulted from the amalgamation of three failing schools, another from the resurrection of a closed school in an inner-city community, and two come from the re-birth of schools that were heading for closure as the communities had lost trust with the schools. All schools have been underperforming, but all were on improvement journeys when we conducted the research. Two schools were in advantaged communities and the research was conducted by Fiona Longmuir for her PhD (awarded in 2017; Longmuir, 2017). Two schools were in disadvantaged contexts and the research was, and is being, conducted by Kieran McCrohan for his PhD.

Table 1: Melbourne underperforming schools as part of the ISLDN.

| School | Type                 | Enrolment at the time of study | Staff (full-time equivalent)   | ICSEA       | Language Background other than English (%)<br>Indigenous students (%) | Per student expenditure |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|---|-------------------------|
| A      | Government secondary | 629                            | 44 teaching<br>25 non-teaching | 1079 (2015) | 27<br>0   | \$12,640 (2015)         |

|          |                      |      |                                 |  |         |                 |
|----------|----------------------|------|---------------------------------|--|---------|-----------------|
|          |                      |      |                                 | (highest 20% of all schools)                   |         |                 |
| <b>B</b> | Government secondary | 537  | 39 teaching<br>25 non-teaching  | 1089 (2015)<br>(highest 20% of all schools)    | 22<br>1 | \$12,512 (2015) |
| <b>C</b> | Government secondary | 1112 | 132 teaching<br>48 non-teaching | 886 (2016)<br>(lowest 16% of all schools)      | 74<br>2 | \$17,320 (2016) |
| <b>D</b> | Government secondary | 236  | 33 teaching<br>11 non-teaching  | 969 (2017)<br>(second quartile of all schools) | 14<br>3 | \$18,435 (2017) |

The research involved multiple perspective observational case studies. In each school, the principal, senior and middle level leaders, teachers, parents, students and school council members were interviewed individually or in groups. As well, relevant documents were collected and key events in the life of the school were observed. The focus of the research was on:

1. What are the characteristics and practices of principals leading underperforming schools and what influences these?
2. Who else contributes to the leadership of these schools and what are their contributions?
3. How does the context influence the performance of these schools?

#### **4. List key findings of the study.**

Findings from schools A, B and C have been summarised in Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir & McCrohan (2018; 2018 in press) and full findings from schools A and B reported in Longmuir (2017). Earlier research on School C is reported in Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke & Wildy (2014) and Huerta Villalobos (2013). The following is from Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir & McCrohan (2018).

Principals were able to engage with and utilised the multiple contexts to improve their schools. This was a feature of the successful school principals in the ISSPP and it seems that the principals in these underperforming schools were operating in similar ways. Now, of course, these schools were on an improvement pathway, and one of the principals had been a successful principal previously, and so

perhaps this finding is not surprising. But it does reinforce that idea that whilst context matters, perhaps it matters less than is commonly claimed. Indeed, successful principals, and the three principals described here, seem to not be constrained by context.

Leithwood and colleagues have for more than a decade described a four element leadership framework that includes practices associated with building vision and setting direction, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing the teaching and learning program. We see these elements in the cases described in this paper, although how the principals exercised leadership was somewhat different across their different contexts. For example, principals in schools A and C could introduce more rapid and directive change as their contexts were dire. The principal of school B was building upon an established school direction and so was slower and perhaps more considered in what changes were introduced. However, it wasn't only that they responded to their contexts, all three principals purposefully leveraged certain contextual elements. The principal of school A used a closure crisis, and perceptions about the system not catering for individual student need, to support his approach. The principal of school B also used the focus on individual student need to continue her school's trajectory. The principal of school C used poor academic history as the stimulus for major change. These choices both played to and aligned with the needs and culture of the three communities. The high-advantage communities wanted alternative approaches that recognised and supported the individual needs of students. The low advantage community wanted their students to have a chance to achieve more, and they wanted a local school that they could trust to deliver this. All three principals had clear direction, two were focused on developing staff (Robyn and Peter), they were all able to redesign their schools, and there was a clear focus on improving teaching and learning. So, contexts do matter but not so much in terms of the core leadership practices that lead to success, but rather in the way these practices are employed.

The ideas of best practice and next practice are useful to consider the leadership of the schools. Best practice is an approach to addressing improvement needs by identifying, codifying, familiarising and adopting strategies that have proven successful in other settings, while next practice are emergent innovations that may open up new ways of working. School A demonstrated an almost consuming passion for seeking out next practice ideas. Nothing was sacred, and since the principals arrival, new ideas were introduced continuously, driven by the overarching desire to meet individual student needs. School A has now become a best practice school, with the school's key approaches being replicated in other schools. School B had been established as a next practice school focussed on the latest ideas about middle-schooling. By the time the principal was appointed, these ideas had become best practice and were increasingly being adopted by mainstream schools. The principal, however, was interested in next practice and so introduced new ideas, but in a careful and considered manner so that they had a good fit with the school's established direction. For the principal at school C, his approach was to draw on best practice to construct a school that would meet the needs of the local community. There were some next practice elements, but most of what the principal implemented were drawn from well-known and proven ideas.

## 5. Presentations and publications reporting the study.

Publications include:

- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Longmuir, F., & McCrohan, K. (2018 in press) Successful school leadership that is culturally sensitive but not context constrained, in E. Murakami, E., D. Gurr, & R. Notman (Eds) *Leadership, Culture and School Success in High-Need Schools* (Washington, DC: Information Age Publishing).
- Gurr, D., Murakami, R., & Notman, R., (2018 in press) Making World Connections: Educational Leadership in High-need Schools, in E. Murakami, D. Gurr, & R. Notman (Eds) *Leadership, Culture and School Success in High-Need Schools* (Washington, DC: Information Age Publishing).
- Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2018), Improving schools in Victoria, Australia: System, region and school perspectives, in H. Shaked, C. Schechter, & A. Daly (2018) *Leading Holistically: How States, Districts, and Schools Improve Systemically*. (London: Routledge), pp. 217-235.
- Gurr, D. & Drysdale, L. (2018) Leading High Need Schools: Findings from the International School Leadership Development Network, *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 46(1), 147- 156.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Longmuir, F., & McCrohan, K. (2018) Leading the improvement of schools in challenging circumstances, *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 46(1), 22-44
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Clarke, S., & Wildy, H. (2014) High Needs Schools in Australia, *Management in Education*, 28(3), pp. 86 - 90.
- Huerta Villalobos, M. (2013). *The role of the critical friend in leadership and school improvement*. M.Ed thesis (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne).
- Longmuir, F. (2017) *Principal leadership in high-advantage, improving Victorian secondary schools*. PhD thesis. (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne).

We have made regular presentations directly about the cases or drawing upon them and including:

- Drysdale, L., Gurr, D., Longmuir, F. (2017) Innovative Leadership in underperforming Schools, AARE, Canberra, December.
- Drysdale, L. Gurr, D. Goode, H. (2017) Disruptive Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances, European Council for Educational Research (ECER) Conference Copenhagen, Denmark, from 22 to 25 August. University College UCC.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Goode, H. (2017) Leading the rebuilding of schools through disruptive innovation and leadership, International Community Symposium, UCEA, Denver, 13-19 November, Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L. Goode, H. (2017), Leading the rebuilding of schools through disruptive innovation and leadership, ISSPP Research and Practice Conference, April 21-25 San Juan, Puerto Rico.

- Drysdale, L & Gurr, D. (2016) Contextual Issues and Challenges for Principals in High Needs schools (Symposium), UCEA Detroit Nov 2016 Detroit Marriott Renaissance Centre, November 17-20.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Goode, H. and Longmuir, F. (2016). Engaging with the International Successful School Principalship Program. New Zealand Education Administration and Leadership Society Conference. Dunedin, New Zealand, 20-22 April 2016.
- Longmuir, F., Gurr, D. Drysdale, L. (2015) Transformation, innovation and success in Australian schools, Leading Low Performing Schools Symposium European Education Research Association (ECER Conference,) Budapest, Sept 2015
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Goode, H. (2015) Leading Low Performing Schools, International Community-Building Session, University Council of Educational Administration Conference, San Diego, November, 2015.
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Goode, H. (2015) Leading for Success in Challenging Australian Educational Contexts, International Summit, University Council of Educational Administration Conference, San Diego, November, 2015.