

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

Focus areas to develop effective schools

The seven areas schools can identify and work on to create happier, collaborative and effective environments that foster student and staff satisfaction. Improving the system means: identifying and supporting the educational needs of individual students; ensuring the professional growth of teachers; developing the school as change element in the local community; and ensuring that teacher-student relationships are pivotal in the learning experience.

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The areas to focus on that make a difference

Clarkson Community High School in Western Australia has a very strong history of using seven areas of focus to foster student progress for every student, in every classroom on every day.

- Leader intentionality
- Collaboration
- Networked learning community
- Teacher thinking
- Data drives improvement
- Evaluative leadership
- A shared theory for learning

Leader intentionality

Leader intentionality is the capacity to have a vision for change across the school and to have a sustained focus on goals or initiatives to achieve that vision. An intentional leader is deliberate, has a plan that is clear and ensures that everyone shares and understands the plan. In short, an intentional leader knows what to do and why. The intentional leader motivates the school, because a lack of intentionality results in discouragement, confusion, lack of momentum and lack of group cohesion. A lack of clear intention means that things are reactive, important things do not get done and important goals are not achieved. The principal is only one key leader, the leaders of every area in the school must have intentionality if the school is to achieve excellence in all areas.

Collaboration

Having school leaders put theory into use is a significant part of school development at Clarkson and building a culture of innovation at the school is always a priority. Innovation may not be an action, for innovation comes from a growth mindset, and if it is an action it doesn't have to be on a grand scale. It is often incremental, made up of small steps, a practice of continuous improvement. Effective leaders invite and encourage collaboration to improve teacher efficacy and to maximize student performance.

Collaboration is the key to building an authentic performance culture across a system to enhance data analysis, create engagement with peer observation processes and encourage the appropriate listening to student voice. Critique of ideas (not people) is the essence of collaboration that moves us all forward. Collaboration helps educators feel competent, autonomous, and connected – the three universal needs for motivation. A significant driver of school reform is teachers' thinking, so a leadership understanding of intentionality is essential to build teacher capacity and professional capital in schools.

A networked learning community

Leaders' intentionality is demonstrated by how they work effectively within the wider educational community and the local community.

In the wider educational community Clarkson has always encouraged a focus on research-based improvement and we have a long-standing tradition of working with a range of university researchers on educational projects. This research-based improvement stands as testimony to the approach of promoting effective evaluative leadership in schools.

Being a part of a wider professional learning community is important to schools and helps scaffold and inform practice to deliver improved student outcomes. There are obvious benefits for students and staff to be involved in research projects. Professional discourse is at the heart of a networked learning community and staff have fostered this collaboration among the leadership group at Clarkson and across Western Australia as a system.

In the local community significant inequalities exist due to Index for Community and Socio-Educational Advantage and overcoming these disadvantages is impacted by on-going factors outside the influence of the school community. However, with intentionality we can mitigate factors such as low levels of literacy, numeracy and student behavioural concerns that impact on our students by seeking local context multipliers for improvement.

For example, Clarkson has strong, well-established Vocational Education and Training (VET) partnerships and the school has an excellent relationship with the Aboriginal community and has increasingly become a school of choice for the community. Neither of these things happened by accident – staff worked as a collaborative team to blend their school into the fabric of its community and the ability to do this in the local context is what intentional leaders bring to the broader context.

Intentionality in improving the social and emotional climate of the school assists academic achievement and significantly benefits struggling students the most. Our school's social and emotional climate is built upon the nature of teacher-student relationships and this has been found to be very beneficial in creating better networking within our local community.

Teacher thinking

There are some fundamental elements that apply in every context if we are to continue to improve teacher thinking: clear focus on addressing the educational needs of individual students; ensuring the professional growth of teachers; supporting the enhancement of the role of the teacher and school as an agent of social change; and ensuring that teacher-student relationships are pivotal in change and growth. Ensuring that teachers have the skills and abilities to lead a successful program and to be contextually relevant across a broad range of school improvement programs is a key dimension of intentional school leadership.

Teacher awareness of context within the school and a clear focus on shared vision are important keys when implementing successful change. School planning and professional development are pivotal in providing successful mechanisms to encourage staff self-reflection and ownership of improvement.

Data interpretation in context drives improvement

Vision is important, but it is essential that there is effective interpretation of data as evidence of progress. Teachers and students must have access to tools that support improvement and being able to track progress and improvement through data analysis is essential. The ability to create and lead significant change in a local context is what successful leaders bring with them and regular, effective data analysis is essential in driving school improvement.

Developing faster school-based tools for regular data-analysis by students will reap performance improvement. Improved technology is now more widespread across schools. New technology makes the teacher and student joint collaborators in analysing improvement areas. It eliminates a marks book and report being the feedback mechanisms. Collaboration will make student-based data analysis a driver for school and system improvement.

Evaluative leadership

The most common behaviours of effective school evaluative leadership are promoting cohesion, well-being, and an understanding of purpose among all people at the school and developing a shared vision of what the school might or can look like.

An evaluative leader will have the capacity to synergise school compositional effects to help maximise teacher impact that is contingent on the mutual interactions of (i) subject-matter, content knowledge, (ii) educational competence, (iii) social and emotional contributions, and (iv) didactic competence. Leaders will be more successful in assisting schools to use a broad range of strategies to drive context-specific improvements when they themselves enjoy working with collaborative teams. Hattie proclaims that evaluative thinking leads to continuous reflection thus building a learning culture, a desired school climate. This climate is based on shared interpretations of assessment, students, and teaching.

Evaluative leadership has a context where leaders have greater pattern recognition, are adept at checking assumptions, biases and constraints, able to monitor implementation programs and have an ability to seek alternative actions when meeting failure and/or resistance. Evaluative thinkers are measured, thoughtful, and erudite. They have clarity and act with intentionality of purpose. They continually ask the "So what?" question.

Evaluative leadership means understanding that teacher passion determines the educational approach within the school, that teacher competencies and attitudes are important and that subject matter in isolation cannot improve student achievement as it has to synergise with both educational, motivational, and didactic competence. Educational competence is the teacher's ability to build positive relationships and have high expectations for all. Didactic competence is the ability of the teacher to explain content. Teacher passion is essential because it determines the approach to implementing the competencies. Scaled into a broader context, these factors ensure competence can be developed successfully across school improvement programs.

Invitational Education Theory – a shared theory for learning

Invitational Education Theory provides a compelling framework for promoting meliorism (the belief that the world can be made better by human effort) in schools and ensuring that our educators thrive as well. Invitational Education serves as a framework for choosing 'doing with' school improvement strategies to help accelerate students' progress instead of 'doing to' strategies that send a control-oriented, judgemental message to learners.

Much like a Christmas tree provides a structure for placing the twinkling baubles and lights in a thoughtful way, Invitational Education provides a lens through which we can consider how learning is being received by the student. The practice-based evidence of Invitational Education synergises with evidence-based practice to make learning visible. See: <https://clarksonchs.wa.edu.au/index.php/news-1/principal-1/260-invitational-education-leadership-at-clarkson-community-high-school>

Hattie's work resonates with Invitational Education and emphasises the significant impact of teacher social and emotional skills on academic gains. Leaders who demand excellent teaching strategies need to consider the self-efficacy of the teacher, and the self-efficacy of the student as strategies are implemented. Mindframes also exemplify teacher qualities that are relationship related as opposed to content related.

Clarkson has a very strong history of using Invitational Education theory to shape leadership strategy, implement

value-adding processes across a broad system and create a focus on data that fosters student progress for every student, in every classroom and on every day.

Our view – the Clarkson learning journey

There are some fundamental elements that apply in every context. Improving the system means: identifying and supporting the educational needs of individual students; ensuring the professional growth of teachers; developing the school as change element in the local community; and ensuring that teacher-student relationships are pivotal in the learning experience.

At Clarkson we know where we are going. We engage in regular analysis of our current situation and from this target professional learning to enhance skills and reduce barriers.

Effective intentional leaders establish a performance culture that encourages all teachers to take collective responsibility for the impact of high-quality teaching and we encourage this at every level at Clarkson. This involves creating a set of norms where there is enough trust, ownership and openness for all teachers to consider how their teaching might be improved so as to reach more students, and all at higher levels of achievement.

To support this, we use The Visible Learning Mindframes to provide a conceptual framework to scaffold and underpin the concept of intentionality and WHY it is so important that teachers think. (See 'Mindframes at Clarkson – Know Thy Impact'. The video is available at <https://vimeo.com/470060476>)

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