

## System Leadership and School Leadership

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### Abstract

*This article describes research on system and school leadership from three perspectives. At the system level, leadership was evident at the senior levels of the central and regional systems, with principal network leaders having potential to exercise occasional leadership. Principals tended not to operate as system leaders because they had limited influence across multiple schools. At a regional level, it was clear that directors acted as system level leaders, exerting wide influence on clusters of schools to improve. At a school level, the work of the principal, other school leaders, and critical friends was more important to the improvement journey of the school than system leadership. It seems that whilst system leadership can be important, it needs to work in conjunction with school leadership to maximize influence on school success.*

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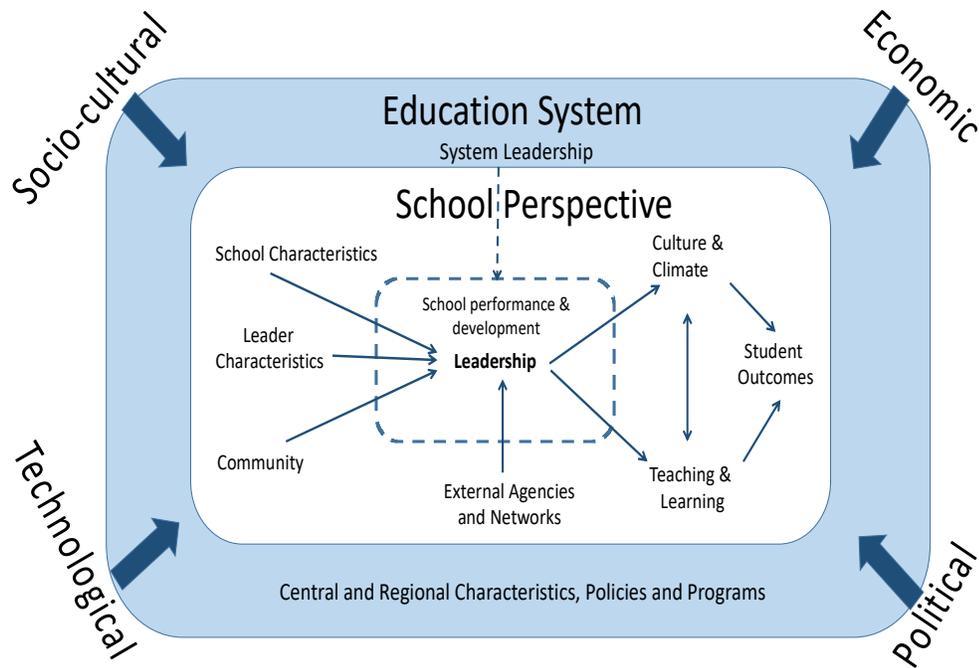
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## Introduction

Surrounding the work of schools are many contexts, from the local and school level through system and national contexts. We adapted Hallinger's (2018) contextual leadership perspective to construct a leadership-context framework that captures some of the complexity of the multiple contexts that influence the work of principals and schools (see Figure 1). The model identifies four general contextual factors that impact schools (i.e., economic, socio-cultural, political, technological) and indicates that the school exists within a broader educational system where central and regional system initiatives and system leadership can influence schools. Hallinger classifies these as the *institutional context*. Within the educational system context is the *school perspective*, and in the center of the school perspective is the school performance and development context with leadership as the central feature. Leadership influences school culture and climate, teaching and learning, with these impacting student outcomes. The model identifies four direct contextual influences on school performance and development: (a) nature and type of school, (b) personal characteristics of the leader, (c) surrounding community, and (d) external agencies, networks.

Figure 1

*School Leadership in Context (adapted from Hallinger, 2018, p. 17)*



In this article we describe the intersection of system and school leadership and show that whilst system and school leadership are important for school success, they need to work in a synergistic relationship to have the most impact. This article is a more concise version of a chapter we recently wrote on system leadership within the State of Victoria in Australia (Gurr & Drysdale, 2018). In the next sections we describe research that shows how leadership at the system, regional, and school level interact to promote school success.

### System Level Leadership

In a study on leadership in the Victorian education system, Butler (2014) described *system leadership* as “the ability to generate change across a system or nested system where this involves creating, utilizing or exploiting connections within the system” (p. 96). It is a modest definition in many respects. Whilst it captures the core focus to improve a system of schools, it lacks mention of the typical control/power mechanisms such as governance, fiscal and human resource management, direction setting, accountability and so forth (Nir, 2014). It is, however, an inclusive definition because it allows many people at different levels of a school system to demonstrate system leadership.

At the time of Butler’s (2014) research, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) had an organizational structure for schools that was headed by a Secretary, Deputy Secretary Office for Government School Education, nine Regional Directors, and many regional network leaders (RNL), who were generally former principals responsible for 20–25 primary and secondary schools and their principals. Butler (2014) was interested in how system leadership was manifested and how it contributed to school improvement—particularly the construction of the regional networks and the RNL role to supervise them (DEECD, 2008; Pike, 2008) and how this arrangement was influencing school improvement. RNLs served a new role in the Victorian sector: They acted in supporting principals and school communities to improve as well as in supporting the school accountability process as line managers for system initiatives and processes. There was, however, uncertainty about what the role could be, with conjecture and concern that it might be akin to the trust and control elements of the superintendent role in



the USA (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014). In a previous paper (Gurr, Clarke, Drysdale, & Wildy, 2014), we identified RNLs as having some of, but not all, the characteristics of superintendents. Butler (2014) described this as regulatory action “to deliberately construct a narrowly but explicitly defined system leader role within education” (p. 1). Butler’s study relied on system documents and individual interviews with four central senior managers (including the DEECD Secretary and members of the senior management team of the Office of Government School Education), three regional directors, 14 RNLs, and 23 principals to examine system leadership within the Victorian government education system.

Findings from the study indicated that senior managers in the Victorian system were clearly viewed as system leaders. There were also expectations and indications that RNLs could be system leaders, but many interviewees also viewed the RNL role as being more concerned with line management and compliance. The research indicated the potential of this role to enhance horizontal/heterarchical leadership. Principals were not generally viewed system leaders, primarily because of their single school focus competitive pressures not to support the work of other schools. The evidence that system leadership led to school improvement relied more on argued cases of indirect impact, rather than clear empirical evidence. The work of RNLs seemed to rely more on developing trust as they did not have sufficient power to exert control. Conversely, senior department managers relied more on control than trust, as they were too removed from schools to establish the type of relationships needed to promote trust. The exception was that of the regional director role. In the past, some directors established strong, positive relations with school principals and communities that allowed the directors to use both the trust and control to influence school direction, budgets, and

accountability. In the next section we present an example of this type of leadership.

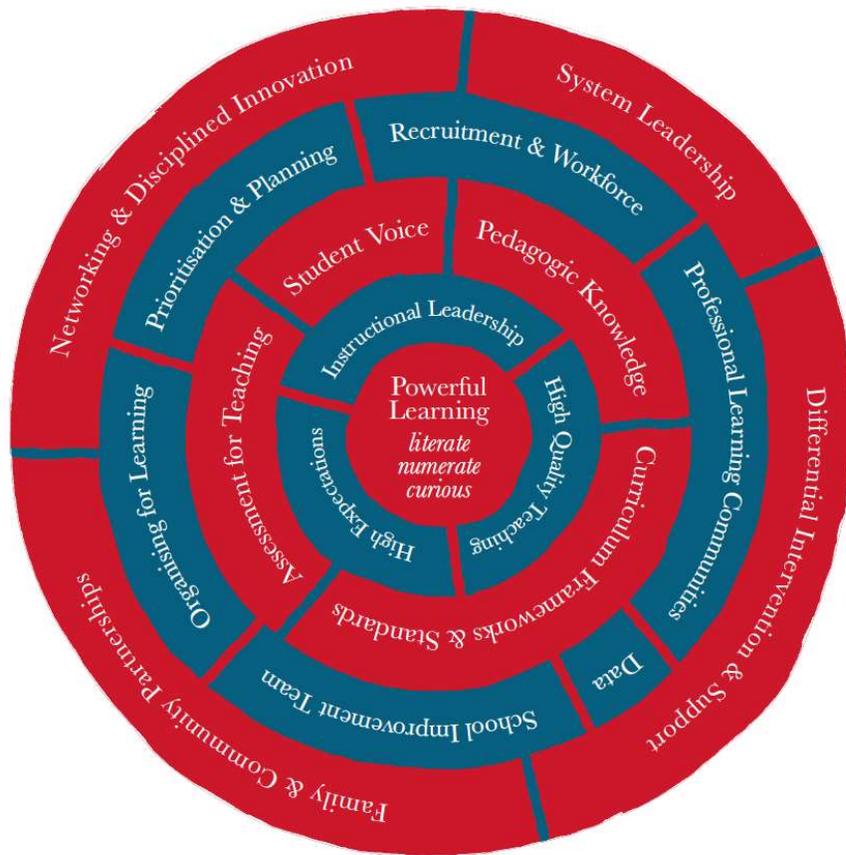
### **Regional Level Leadership**

The edited book by Hopkins, Munro and Craig (2011a) described the school improvement journey of the former Northern Metropolitan Region (Melbourne, Victoria) led by Wayne Craig as the Regional Director. The book tells the story of how Craig led improvement of this region through (a) development of a school improvement framework, *Powerful Learning*; (b) use of experts in literacy, numeracy, student welfare, and system leadership; and (c) support of RNLs, principals, and teachers in a collective effort to improve student learning.

At the time of the reform, the Northern Metropolitan Region included 195 schools comprising 137 primary schools, 36 secondary schools, 13 special schools, 7 primary and secondary schools plus one school that provided education from primary years to Year 9 as well as one school that only spanned Years 10–12. These schools collectively served 75,000 students and were located in areas that had some of the highest levels of social disadvantage in Australia. It was also one of the lowest performing in the state.

With the help of Hopkins (an expert on school improvement) and Munro (an expert on pedagogy), Craig constructed an improvement process centered on what they termed Action Improvement Zones or AIZ (Hopkins et al, 2011b). They enlisted support from Lewis (2011) for student welfare and Sullivan (2011) for mathematics. The booklet *Powerful Learning* (Northern Metropolitan Region, 2009) summarized the approach to the AIZ through a succession of circles of practice beginning at the center with the intention to develop students that were literate, numerous and curious. The model is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2  
 Northern Metropolitan Region Powerful Learning Model (Northern Metropolitan Region, 2009, p. 11)



This inner circle aligned with national statements about schooling, such as the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs, 2008). The next circle included three pre-conditions for school effectiveness: (a) high leverage learning improvement strategies of instructional leadership, (b) high quality

teaching, and (c) high expectation. The focus then was on the classroom by developing quality teaching and learning through pedagogic knowledge, curriculum frameworks and standards, assessment of teaching and student voice. *Schools supports* (organizational capacity) for improving teaching and learning then followed by focusing on professional learning communities, collection and use of data to inform action, school improvement teams, organizing for learning, prioritization and planning, and recruitment and workforce planning. The outer circle represents the systemic context through considering big picture and external supports for schools such as system leadership, differential school improvement intervention and support, family and community partnership, and networking with other schools and disciplined, evidence-informed innovation. For system leadership, whilst there was no formal definition given, the system leadership initiatives described in this outer circle focused on getting principals to influence the improvement of many schools and to support this work through system leaders (like RNLs). This framework was used to galvanize schools to create improvement climates. Through their research, Fraser, Glover and Craig (2011) found evidence of positive change by considering a range of school data collated at the system level (e.g., student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy, standardized tests, teacher judgements); survey data from students, parents and teachers; and student pathway and transition data (e.g., retention, student destinations on leaving school). Fraser and colleagues concluded that

*The overall conclusion to be drawn from the review of data in this chapter is that over the past four years there has been a quite dramatic shift in the metrics from a largely negative to a strikingly positive direction. In particular, literacy and numeracy measures for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are at or near state benchmarks with the data generally trending upwards. (p. 151)*



Whilst the performances in literacy and numeracy were particularly pleasing, other data sets were showing positive trends but without substantial gains by the time the chapter was written. So, in some ways, it is a generous conclusion. Nevertheless, they did make an argued case that the Northern Metropolitan Region improvement strategy compared favorably with best practice initiatives worldwide, noting in particular that there was

- *A clear and comprehensive model of reform*
- *Strong leadership at the regional level*
- *Substantive training related to the goals of the program*
- *Implementation support at the school level*
- *An increasingly differentiated approach to school improvement (Fraser et al., 2011, p. 152)*

Further, Fraser and colleagues suggested that the reforms would continue to show improved school outcomes. Unfortunately, the reform continued for only a few more years without any further major evaluations, and thus, it is difficult to judge the degree to which success was sustained. We now turn to the school level to describe the progress of one school within this region.

### **School Level Leadership**

This section reports the first six years of the improvement journey of Hume Central Secondary College (HCSC) and its principal, Glenn Proctor (real names). Proctor was appointed as the executive principal of HCSC in 2008, although the school was not officially opened until 2009. Three failing secondary schools were closed to allow creation of HCSC. The establishment of the new school was part of a government regeneration project in the Northern Region aimed at transforming educational opportunities and achievement levels for students in one of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia with 75% of

students from the bottom quartile of socio-economic advantage (Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

In analyzing and exploring the school's improvement, we use the school leadership framework depicted in Figure 1. We explore the school's perspective in the following order: education system context, contextual influences (i.e., school characteristics, leader characteristics, community), the school performance and improvement, and external agencies and networks. We acknowledge the importance of the general environment factors (e.g., socio-cultural, economic, political and technological), but do not discuss these, and instead limit ourselves to those contexts that directly influenced the school's improvement trajectory.

### **Education System**

The Victorian government system was an early adopter of school self-management and thus characterized by a high level of school autonomy and flexibility. In the case of HCSC, this allowed the school principal to undertake significant change. In establishing a new school from the closure of three failing schools, Glenn's mandate was to set about establishing a new school philosophy as well as new policies, processes, programs and practices. Glenn sought guidance from central and regional personnel. In particular, he relied on the Regional Director, Wayne Craig, to support decisions that were integral to the successful foundation of the school, such as extending the contract of key staff that were on loan from other schools and introducing a minimum attendance expectation on students to make them more personally accountable for their learning. Glenn had extensive experience working as a school principal, and his familiarity with the system was essential in understanding when he required the regional director's support and when he could utilize autonomy available



within a Victorian government school. From a system leadership perspective, the role of regional personnel was more to support Proctor's work than to intervene or control what was happening. So, it was a light-touch form of system leadership that highlights how successful principals often do not need close supervision from systems.

### **Contextual Influences**

As executive principal, Glenn was responsible for closing the campuses of three separate Year 7–12 colleges and establishing the new school. The three schools had suffered from decades of neglect, poor leadership, declining enrolments, low student performance (some of the worst in the state), negative school cultures, low staff morale, and disruptive and disconnected students. The schools' reputations were such that most families in the area passed by the schools to educate their children elsewhere. Glenn had to work with the existing staff and leaders from the three schools while simultaneously being himself responsible for the construction of three new campuses, with two situated on new sites. The new school was a Year 7–12 co-educational secondary school consisting of two Year 7–9 campuses and one Year 10–12 campus. The new buildings, completed in 2011, were in striking contrast to the previous school buildings that were outdated and poorly maintained. In 2009, there were 1,000 students enrolled at the three schools with enrolments projected to decline. Staffing included an executive principal, three campus principals, and 108 teachers. By 2015 the enrolment was 1,125 (508 girls and 617 boys) with projection for further growth, and there was an executive principal, six other principal-class personnel, and 131 teaching staff.

**Leader characteristics.** Glenn had more than 35 years' experience in schools, beginning as an economics and accounting teacher before moving into school leadership. Prior to arriving at HCSC, he was

principal of Mount Waverley Secondary College for 11 years, a high-performing school in an affluent suburb of Melbourne. However, Glenn was raised in Broadmeadows and thus had an affinity with the area and an intimate understanding of the context of HCSC.

Glenn demonstrated the characteristics of what we have termed the *post-heroic leader* (Drysdale, Bennett, Murakami, Johansson, & Gurr, 2014). Initially, he began as a directive leader and showed many of the characteristics of typical “heroic leadership” (Adair 1989, p. 227). He set clear improvement directions, challenged the status quo, and showed courage to stand up to any in power and authority who may have questioned the direction he was taking. Throughout his principalship, he had a clear social justice focus and demonstrated a strong commitment to improve the education of students in challenging circumstances. His general and educational values never wavered: He showed respect for others, strongly advanced social justice and equity issues, took personal responsibility for his actions, and held firm to the beliefs that every student could learn and wanted the opportunity to succeed. He showed integrity by modeling the way forward and putting duty before self.

After gaining some initial success (e.g., improving student attendance that increased from a low of 60% in 2009 to 89% in 2016, Glenn’s final year as principal), he changed to a more collaborative and post-heroic style of leadership that involved the leadership by many. An example is how he recognized early that there was a need to build the leadership capacity of his principal leadership team, which he accomplished through coaching (the *Coaching for Success* program), targeted professional learning opportunities, and using research that supported the school’s context and improvement trajectory. Glenn was able to adapt his leadership to the circumstances, sometimes serving



as a transformational and somewhat disruptive leader (Drysdale, Gurr, & Goode, 2017; Drysdale, Gurr, & Longmuir, 2017). He was effective in motivating, understanding, and developing staff and in looking for ways to promote innovation and change.

**Community.** The community of HCSC was composed of students mainly from the suburb in which the school was located. The initial observations of HCSC made by Glenn following his appointment was that there were many students walking past the school to go to other schools. The school enrolment numbers were low, and students experienced disruption to their learning due to misbehavior and poor attendance. Except for those parents who sat on the school council, there had been a history of little to no parental involvement in the three schools prior to amalgamation. The low level of parental engagement did little to support the vision of the college. As a result, Glenn identified the need for greater connection between the school and home to promote aspects that would help students succeed, such as coming to school, a challenge since some students' attendance was as low as 60% and one of the amalgamated schools had an average student absence rate of 35 days. Greater accountability for regular student attendance was implemented (e.g., minimum attendance requirements to ensure promotion to the next year level), along with clear structures for teachers to follow in the event of low attendance. Students were also expected to arrive at school on time and be punctual to classes. A system called *Time Counts* was developed and required students to be seated in their first-period classroom by 8:45am. If a student was marked as late three or more times in a week, they were required to work for 30 minutes of their lunchtime on missed learning. Staff members on monitoring duty at the beginning of the school day regularly announced "time counts" as a signal to the students to move to class quickly. This, along with the expectation of

regular attendance at school, quickly changed students' perception about the importance of their education and their accountable for their learning.

### **Performance and Improvement**

The historical context of a school and its improvement trajectory directly relates to school performance and continuing improvement. Hallinger (2018) notes that this context also defines the nature of the principal's challenge. Given that HCSC was the result of the closure of three failing schools, it was not surprising that the schools had a history of poor performance, inadequate facilities, and decades of neglect. An author of this article reviewed one of the three closed schools in the early 2000s and judged the school to be one of the lowest performing schools in the state. When HCSC began, there were extremely low academic standards, poor attendance, few students continuing to tertiary education, and limited aspirations among students: "They were at the bottom of the tables academically; nearly half the students weren't even turning up, and only 30 per cent finished year 12" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011).

One of Glenn's first priorities was to set about establishing a new history, direction, and culture for the school. His strategy for improvement was to engage students, build staff capacity, improve teaching and learning practice, raise staff and student expectations, develop a positive school culture, more effectively manage resources, and introduce a higher level of staff accountability for student learning. To engage students, he created Curriculum Design Teams (CDTs) to develop a guarantee and viable curriculum and to promote appropriate assessment practices, such as moderation between teachers. To set high expectations, he developed a 2:1 strategy in which the school tried to provide two years of learning growth for each



calendar year. To build leadership capacity, he invested significant resources in developing a high performing leadership team that included senior and middle-level leaders. To support the work of teachers to improve teaching and learning, Glenn focused on developing professional practice in general and purposeful teaching in particular. A key strategy was initiating a common instructional model and establishing peer coaching and classroom observation to build collaborative practices and a culture of relentless improvement.

### **External Agencies and Networks**

External agencies and networks played an important role in helping to influence the school performance and improvement context. The school acknowledged the support of agencies such as the charity organization, The Smith Family, which worked in partnership with the college to facilitate programs to support student learning, especially for those students who had difficult family circumstances. The school worked with the Technical and Further Education sector to provide vocational programs and facilities. The school partnered with several primary schools to ensure transition to secondary school was smooth and effective. Local business also supported the college with on-the-job training and work experience for students.

While these initiatives were important, the use of several critical friends was crucial to the school's improvement. Critical friends can provide professional support, advice, reflection, but also question and challenge assumptions and practices. It is not a formal role, such as a mentor or coach, but rather a professional relationship based on mutual regard, respect, and trust. Critical friends can offer a critical perspective and another lens through which to view the school. Huerta Villalobos (2013) explored the role critical friends played in the school's improvement.

*The role of the critical friend was found to be a dynamic one, requiring a high level of skill, flexibility, and professional judgement. Rather than following a checklist of scripted "technical assistance," it was about developing a repertoire of strategies and skills, and learning when and how to use them, taking account of the context. (p. 68)*

Two critical friends greatly influenced the school leadership team and the principal. Educational consultant Vic Zbar was engaged to work with the leadership team to implement a framework of school improvement based on his research on successful schools in educationally disadvantaged areas. He was employed on a regular basis to support the improvement agenda. Lawrie Drysdale, a co-author of this article, was voluntarily engaged as a critical friend from 2009 to 2015. He regularly attended senior leadership meetings and conducted a program for emerging leaders for five years. His insight into the role was captured by Huerta Villalobos (2013) who conducted a single-site multiple perspective case study involving interviews with 13 people (i.e., two critical friends, the executive principal, three campus principals, one assistant principal, six teacher members of the leadership team). Interview questions centered on participants' perceptions of the role and impact of the critical friends. She found the critical friends had a direct impact on the work of senior and middle level leaders, and through this, an indirect impact on the work of teachers and student outcomes. Further, the critical friends were considered by participants to be more important and influential in school improvement than would be the case if they were an internal coach or external agent working with the school. Their trusted and acknowledged expertise, combined with their close connection with the school, promoted a more influential role within the school. This study of the work of critical friends highlighted again the potential for



extensive control of improvement at the school level, and the lesser role of system players.

### Discussion

This article described several empirical studies within the one jurisdiction, with these studies going from system- to school-level perspectives. Using Butler's (2014) definition of system leadership, at the system level we saw that there were people that seemed to operate as system leaders; these worked at senior levels of the central and regional systems, with RNLs having the potential to exercise system level leadership. Principals tended not to operate as system leaders because they had limited influence across schools. At a regional level, it was clear that regional directors could act as system-level leaders, exerting wide influence on clusters of schools to improve. When we moved to the school level, we saw in the case of one successful principal that system leadership was helpful but not the most important influence on school success. Whilst it could be helpful and act as a support, the work of the principal, other school leaders, and, in the case study school, critical friends were more important to the improvement journey of the school. So, what the reader perhaps can see is that while system leadership can be important, but it needs to work in conjunction with school leadership. Without effective school leadership, the level of impact of system leadership is likely to be limited.

In a review of school leadership practices involving 22 country reports and 5 detailed country case studies, Pont, Nusche and Hopkins (2008) claimed,

*One of school leaders' new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about*

*and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way. (p. 9)*

The researchers cited Belgium, England, and Finland as examples of systems that have encouraged principals to cooperate with other principals. In our past research in the Victorian context, we saw little evidence of the presence of this type of leadership operating at the principal or school level. Despite various system initiatives over time to promote greater cooperation between principals in Victorian government schools, the competition between schools for enrolments (Bentley & Butler, 2017) and intense workload and high stress (Riley, 2017) work against such efforts.

When we consider our own extensive research on school leadership in Victorian schools through projects like the International Successful School Principalship Project, there has been very little consideration of the positive impacts of systems. Indeed, in our successful school leadership research, our principals have often described how they had to shape system behavior to ensure it did not impact negatively on their school. An example is the leadership of Jan Shrimpton (Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009, 2011; Goode, 2017) who had turned around two failing schools during her career. At her last school, she had raised the school to a level of performance that was above expected levels. Although there was a push from the system for her to achieve an even higher level of student learning performance, she resisted because further improvement in literacy and numeracy meant compromising other areas of the school's success. For example, further improvement in literacy might have required more time, compromising time for other curriculum areas. In the leadership models we have produced (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Gurr, 2015, and in our discussion of context and leadership (Gurr, 2014; Gurr, Drysdale,



Longmuir, & McCrohan, 2018, in press), we described how our successful leaders worked with and changed context to benefit their schools. Our aim is not that school leaders will be against system-leadership efforts of senior bureaucrats, but rather that school leaders modify and adapt the mandates to suit their school needs—and perhaps even try to influence the system to provide a climate more suited to what principals need to promote school success. This is activist and somewhat heroic leadership (Drysdale et al., 2014).

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