

Autonomy and School Leadership:

An Independent Schooling Perspective



Discussion Paper
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ISQ's Leadership Expert Advisory Group

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) Executive Director, David Robertson, established the Leadership Expert Advisory Group in 2015. The primary purpose of the group is to provide ISQ with advice on the content and structure of ISQ's Leadership Programs. This group provided feedback which shaped the development of this paper. Members of this group are:

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Disclaimer

Watterston Consulting has undertaken preliminary research as part of the activity of Independent Schools Queensland, Leadership Expert Advisory Group. Independent Schools Queensland commissioned this paper to promote informed debate on autonomy, school leadership and governance in independent schools. Watterston Consulting accept full responsibility for the views expressed herein.

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Foreword



Independent schools celebrate their autonomy. Autonomous decision making is regarded as fundamental to independent schooling. It enables educators to work in partnership with community to create unique and tailored schools designed to meet the specific needs of children. It is autonomy that contributes to the diversity that more than 120,000 young people educated in Queensland independent schools enjoy.

The current educational landscape requires schools to communicate the benefits of choosing an independent school more actively than ever before. Therefore, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) regarded it as timely to reflect on this core element of our approach to delivering educational outcomes. To that end, Dr Barbara Watterston, a member of ISQ's Leadership Expert Advisory Committee, has worked in partnership with her colleague Dr Dahle Suggett and ISQ's Josephine Wise to investigate autonomy and school leadership.

This paper examines current literature, and the lived experiences of those responsible for autonomous educational delivery in Queensland independent schools. The paper challenges ideas about the impact of autonomy and its role in school success. It argues that an effective relationship between governance and school leadership is essential to autonomous schools being able to leverage their autonomy to the greatest effect.

ISQ hopes that the paper has resonance beyond the independent schooling sector. It is anticipated that by sharing independent school leaders' and governors' professional experience, this may contribute to informing and stimulating thinking and strategies for colleagues in other education sectors.

ISQ thanks the school leaders and governors who spent time contributing to the development of this paper.

DAVID ROBERTSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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1. Purpose and Context

Autonomy ensures those who know the most about the school are empowered to collaborate and make the key decisions to guide progress within their community by considering the complexities, challenges and local features. It is the exploration of these behaviours in the independent school context that provides the focus of this paper.

Much commentary regarding autonomy and school leadership has focused on system-level reform. The purpose of this insights paper is to consider how autonomy is used in the context of independent schools including the relationship between the school leader and the governing body. The paper includes a snapshot of current national and international literature about school autonomy with commentary that explores findings through the lens of the independent school sector. Within the independent sector, schools and their governing bodies are highly varied, with differences in their formation and the ways they support school leadership. Finally, this paper will directly and positively position the school leader as central to autonomy that leads to school improvement.

Interviews were conducted with five independent school leaders operating in a range of schools with diverse governance structures. In each school, the leaders perceived themselves as having autonomy and that the schools are regarded as “successful” on a range of measures including NAPLAN. Each leader was asked to reflect on how they navigate their role in a highly autonomous context, and more specifically, how they effectively utilise the levers of autonomy for high impact.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) is committed to supporting all schools to develop the most effective and impactful leadership and governance practices. Autonomy is a hallmark of independent schooling. Understanding autonomy and its impact on the relationship between the school leader and school governors can provide insight to the kinds of behaviours, attributes, values and practices that enable some schools to continuously grow and improve. ISQ seeks to share learnings from independent schools to grow the broader educational understanding of autonomy and its relationship to school improvement.

The schools selected as case studies were chosen to represent the diversity of independent schooling in Queensland. They include schools within mid-to-high socio-economic status (SES) communities and schools that specifically support disengaged young people from some of the lowest SES communities in Queensland.

The themes and questions derived from the literature informed the conversation with the school leaders. Responses were collated to provide a series of insights and reflections contributing to the broader discussion on school autonomy, school leadership and quality schooling.

The paper concludes with four key questions to consider:

1. Autonomy is not suitable everywhere; are there opportunities for support and guidance for those environments that are not flourishing and fully using the autonomy they have?
2. Are schools through their boards, school leaders and leadership teams using the autonomy they have to change practices to innovate and improve?
3. Do these studies reveal a new perspective on independence and leadership?
4. Would the impact of the autonomy that independent schools have be enhanced by a more active “middle layer” for those who need additional support or stimulus; is there a case for mutual support?

2. School Autonomy: A Focus on the Independent School Perspective

Autonomy for schools in all educational sectors is a strong international trend in the governance of schools and the design of education systems. Advocates refer to autonomy opening up opportunities for increasing high-quality education offerings that are responsive and carefully tailored to individual and local needs.

The themes in the literature revolve around the pros and cons of autonomy in terms of whether it is an important component in improving school performance, or whether it is of little consequence and, if it is an important factor, under what conditions does it advantage school performance. The discussion applies to all schools irrespective of whether they are independent with high degrees of autonomy or government-run with varying levels of autonomy.

Whilst significant performance benefits can be achieved from school autonomy, the national and international literature indicates that it is highly variable in how it is applied and gains achieved (Suggett, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to consider how autonomy is used in the context of independent schools including the relationship between the school leader and the governing body.

This section discusses the literature and subsequent sections explore the key issues via interviews with five independent schools with a focus on how a school leader sees that they effectively utilise the levers of autonomy for high impact.

2.1 What is school autonomy in the research literature; is it effective?

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides insight into what is regarded as school autonomy in the research literature and the contexts in which student performance benefits are derived.

The OECD defines autonomy as decentralisation of various degrees of authority because of the transfer of responsibility from central education authorities to schools in systems of public education. An autonomous school has the authority to make its own decisions about how it operates (Jensen et al, 2013). More specifically, non-systemic, non-public (independent) schools have a high level of autonomy in matters related to curriculum, pedagogy, personnel and resources without reference to a system authority (Caldwell, 2016, p. 1). But the concept of autonomy can be somewhat misleading because no school, either government, Catholic or independent is fully autonomous – all schools have some accountability to a range of authorities and communities – and while this varies across sectors, it is a key issue to understand.



The OECD has identified two key indices as characterising autonomy: these are autonomy over resources and autonomy over curriculum and assessment (OECD, 2014).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: characteristics of autonomy

OECD has two composite indices: an index of school responsibility for resource allocation, and an index of school responsibility for curriculum and assessment. These are used to survey teachers alongside the PISA tests.

Resource autonomy is estimated according to a school's autonomy over the following:

- selection of leaders
- selecting teachers for hire; terminating teachers' employment
- establishing teachers' starting salaries; determining teacher salary increases
- formulating the school budget; deciding on budget allocations within the school.

Curriculum and assessment autonomy is estimated according to autonomy over:

- establishing student assessment policies
- determining course content; choosing which textbooks are used
- deciding which courses are offered.

The relationship between these aspects of school autonomy and school performance is, however, variable (OECD, 2013). Autonomy alone is no guarantee of good performance, and if the capacity for decision making is not carefully tailored to the environment, and the needs of students, there is little gain over a highly-centralised system.

The OECD proposes the following conditions for maximising the benefits:

Autonomy over curriculum and assessment matters

Schools that can define, elaborate and contextualise their curriculum and assessment policies have better school performance than those who cannot (or do not) exercise the full scope of their decision-making capabilities.

Intelligent accountability is needed

Autonomy over curriculum and assessment has the most impact when autonomy and accountability are "intelligently combined". This is when accountability includes systematically providing results in a public domain; using data that people find useful; and generally pursuing a policy of openness and transparency for a wider audience.

Standardising curriculum also helps

Autonomy also pays off when system accountability takes the form of standardising the essentials of a curriculum as in specification of the achievement standards expected in

mathematics, providing frameworks to assist planning and leaving schools with all the decisions about how to structure the day-to-day curriculum and teaching.

Collaboration in a school enhances the impact of autonomy

The impact of school autonomy on performance is also enhanced when there is a culture of collaboration between teachers and school leaders in managing a school. This, then, is the "glue" for what makes autonomy work in terms of smart use of resources and intelligent accountability. It involves collaboration at all levels.

The benefits of a school having autonomy over resources are slight in some contexts

Autonomy over resources does not seem to have as important a role in improving school performance, although when the accountability system is strong, the impact is slightly positive. This may be because in the end, it is what you do with those resources that matters. It may also be how resources are distributed which may benefit individual schools – but not a system's overall performance.

The findings show that improved performance emerges from a complex interconnection among a range of factors. There is a strong body of evidence that a balance of autonomy, accountability and choice contributes

2. School Autonomy: A Focus on the Independent School Perspective

The Grattan study concludes that autonomy alone does not appear to be a mechanism or a stimulus to change teacher development, appraisal and feedback, which they conclude is generally poor in the education sector compared to other areas of the government and independent sectors. The question is what would be a stimulus for change?

to high levels of achievement – providing schools have the capacity to be self-managing (Woessmann et al. 2007 cited by Caldwell 2016, p. 39).

The core message is to continue to be focused on the changes that actually matter – some of these are directly influenced by exercising autonomy; some are just good practice. For example, what does curriculum autonomy really mean for schools? If we don't understand this then it impedes our ability to make significant improvements, especially for the role of the system and then for the role of ISQ.

2.2 Autonomy in the independent school context

The OECD results show that independent schools tend to have higher degrees of autonomy than government schools on the above two indices. However, it is particularly more pronounced on the index of school responsibility for resource allocation (OECD, 2014, p. 414). It is also important to note however, that the degree of autonomy of independent schools significantly varies between countries. Jensen et al. (2013) highlight an interesting point of difference in relation to perspective, in that Australian school leaders, for example, “often cite autonomy over staffing – including the power to hire and fire, and set salaries – as the most important

domain of decision-making in which they need autonomy. Yet across the OECD, it is this area where there is often the least amount of autonomy” (Jensen et al., 2013 p. 24).

It is therefore preferable to refer to relatively high or low levels of autonomy or self-management while specifying the functions over which schools have secured authority and responsibility. This approach enables a more nuanced discussion of benefits and challenges and opportunities arising from autonomy for a school leader.

Independent schools have a lesser degree of accountability to central government authorities, but will have accountabilities via their school communities, local authorities and/or government legislation.

In the independent schooling context, the arrow in Figure 1, was developed to provide a visual representation to enable school leaders to reflect on their organisational context and determine where they would situate themselves on an autonomy continuum.

The continuum reflects increasing levels autonomy experienced within the education sector. It was a tool to prompt and provide a point of reflection to inform interviews with case study school leaders and governors.

The level of autonomy has an impact on the relationship between the school leader and the governing authority. A lower level of regulatory authority increases the responsibilities of the school leader. The ways school leaders and governors navigate their responsibilities and relationship was articulated as both a key challenge and an enabler in the experiences of the case study school leaders.

Understanding best practice and the main influencers on school improvement and success is a goal of all school leaders and systems in Australia, irrespective of the sector. The autonomy dimension brings into focus the role and importance of choices that leaders make within their unique local or system governance structures.

Independent schools are governed, managed and are accountable at the individual school, council or systemic level. Some groups of independent schools with common philosophies or values operate within small systems with varying degrees of direction from the system.

In almost all cases the individual school governing body is autonomous, while having a range of compliance requirements under legislation and accountabilities to state and federal governments. These accountabilities vary throughout Australia but generally range across student outcomes, adherence to curriculum and assessment standards, transparency

Figure 1: Continuum of autonomy



with the community, registration of teachers and consideration of national teaching standards.

Whilst acknowledging that variability exists across the independent school sector more broadly, some of the main defining features of autonomy across the range of independent schools include:

- ability to select local school leaders and appoint teachers
- relationship with parents/families as partners
- capacity to enter commercial partnerships
- freedom to set long-term strategic goals and resource allocations for the school
- setting the school's achievement targets
- opportunity to exercise independent views in a political context.

In some independent schools, parent, alumni and school community funding is greater than the combined contributions of governments. Consequently, strong accountability to parents and the broader school community is a significant and additional responsibility for independent schools.

2.3 Getting the best from autonomy

The positive story is that autonomy does open the door for more contextualised decision-making and management, but it needs to be aligned to a range of strategies that research shows are linked to gains in student achievement – such as improving teachers' classroom capability and building leadership skills.

Caldwell describes what he sees as an important distinction between structural and professional autonomy. Where structural autonomy refers to "policies, regulations and procedures that permit the school to exercise autonomy"; professional autonomy refers to the capacity to make decisions and exercise professional judgement (2016b, p. 4). To get the greatest benefit from autonomy, both structural and professional autonomy is required.

Schools may have the structural ingredients of autonomy; however it is the implementation and execution, through the capacities and judgements of school leaders, that the impact of autonomy will be maximised. It is this high level of professional autonomy within a framework of accountability that will yield as described by Caldwell, the autonomy premium.

Developing teaching quality

Grattan Institute investigated the extent of influence of autonomy on strategies to improve teacher quality (Jensen, 2013). Their analysis of schools' approaches to teacher professional development through OECD TALIS data (teaching practices and beliefs) shows only a minor difference between Australian autonomous independent schools and a group of more centrally controlled government schools. In general, while highly autonomous independent schools perform slightly better than centralised government schools on teacher development, appraisal and feedback, the differences are not stark.

For example, in both school categories, less than 10% of teachers report that they would receive recognition (monetary or non-monetary) for improving the quality of their teaching. In both categories, a majority of teachers report that teacher evaluation is not linked to what actually happens in the classroom (66% in centralised government schools compared to 56% in high-autonomy, independent schools).

A similar tendency is evident in other studies in the United States of America and in England where the opportunity to significantly change human resource practices can be more or less ignored (Betts & Tang, 2011). In the face of broadened autonomy many schools tend to stay as they always

2. School Autonomy: A Focus on the Independent School Perspective

A question emerging from this study is where does the responsibility lie to support independent school leaders and governors to fully exercise their autonomy so that students, families and communities benefit?

have been and show reluctance for tailoring services to their environment and re-shaping their schools for the 21st century.

The Grattan study concludes that autonomy alone does not appear to be a mechanism or a stimulus to change teacher development, appraisal and feedback, which they conclude is generally poor in the education sector compared to other areas of the government and independent sectors. The question is what would be a stimulus for change?

Good leadership – how much is tied to degrees of autonomy?

The most recent research argues that blanket autonomy for school leaders does not by itself lead to improved student performance. Hargreaves in “think pieces” for the National College for School Leadership in England (2010, 2012) has linked the two very closely and considered the capacity for school self-management to be a prerequisite for self-improvement.

Caldwell (2014) cites management studies in education (Di Liberto et al., 2013) that find only when schools are well-managed operationally and strategically do students benefit from decentralisation and that autonomy in badly run institutions can worsen students’ outcomes.

Similarly, while autonomous government schools in England appear to have significantly higher ratings on measures of management effectiveness than ordinary government schools and independent schools, their better performance is not linked with autonomy per se but with how autonomy is used (Bloom et al., 2014). Having strong accountability of school leaders to a board/external authority and exercising strong leadership through a coherent long-term strategy for the school appear to be two key features that account for a large fraction of the superior management performance of such schools.

In a review of the evidence of the impact of autonomy on student achievement, Caldwell (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of the influence of leadership factors on school performance. While the work of school leaders and others in leadership has the most important mediating influence on school performance, not all the most important practices and behaviours are dependent on autonomy. Staff selection, performance appraisal, professional development, strategic planning, use of data and the like, can be developed in settings where there may be only moderate levels of school autonomy.

“PISA 2015 offers a nuanced picture of the relationship between greater school autonomy and student’s performance, which seems to develop not only on the particular areas of

school management delegated to principals and teachers, but also on how these areas are related to certain accountability measures and to the capacity of local actors” (OECD, 2016, p. 230).

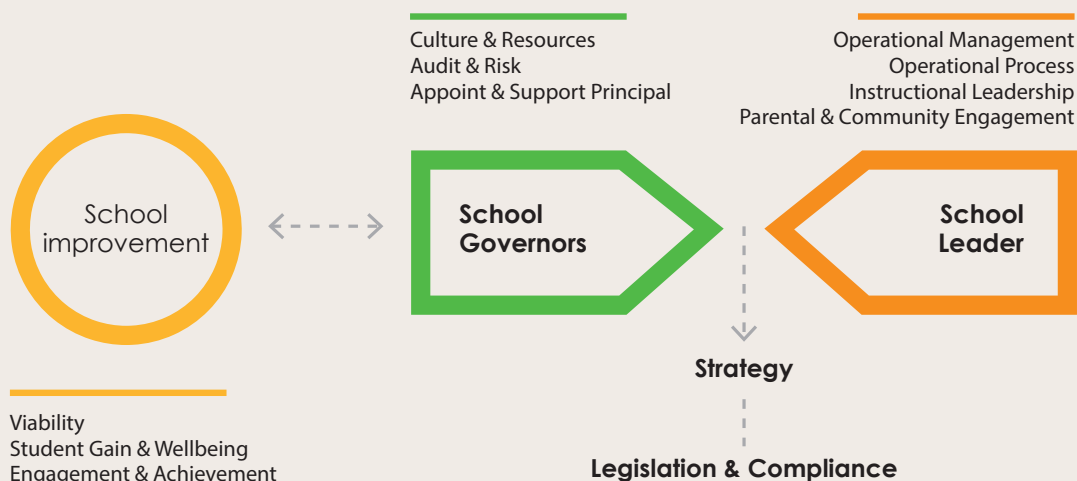
Caldwell (2016a) describes this capacity as the professional know how, regarding the way autonomy is used by adapting the curriculum, setting priorities, selecting and supporting talented staff, strategically targeting their resources, and engaging parents. He asserts that this “calls for a high level of professional autonomy” when schools have these capacities and know how to use them.

In a think piece that looked at the development of confident school leadership in high performing systems Jensen & Clarke (2013) highlighted that empowering leaders with the autonomy to act on their abilities can bring considerable results, giving school autonomy a role in developing effective leadership in schools:

“Confident and effective school leaders will take advantage of any autonomy they are given, lifting the performance of their school... some will do amazing things, extending the boundaries of how we had previously considered the role of the principal” (Hargreaves in Jensen and Clark 2012, p. 4).

In short, structural autonomy alone is not adequate without the effective exercise for professional autonomy.

Figure 2: Accountability framework for independent schools



Good governance – autonomy demands more of boards

Autonomy ensures those who know the most about the school are empowered to collaborate and make the key decisions to guide progress within their community by considering all of the complexities, challenges and local features. The success of school autonomy in improving school outcomes is not automatic but is primarily dependent on being balanced by an effective system for accountability. While this includes internal and external accountability, research stresses that external accountability is the strongest influence on performance in an autonomous environment.

But as schools have become more accountable for their performance, and the instruments have become available to measure and compare student performance, the philosophy driving school boards has shifted from being a means for participation or representation by parents and stakeholders to a means for strategic accountability. With this focus, boards are expected to have developed the skills for strategic planning, improvement and managing accountability (Cole, 2010).

This means school boards need to have in place systematic processes like the collection of summary performance data; a strategic planning process; a self-evaluation process for the

school; and an annual monitoring and improvement cycle plan that establishes milestones.

The link between autonomy and accountability can be addressed through voluntary benchmarking; independent schools could voluntarily compare themselves to “like” schools. Shared standards and targets could be set and reviewed in the interest of transparency and measurement and ultimately accountability.

Independent schools have strong accountability to their parents and their school community and are subject to continuous improvement as technology opens new avenues of communication.

ISQ commissioned research and reports focused on exploring effective school governance; with a view to identifying the elements and provoking discussion as to whether there are links between “successful school governance” and a “successful” school. In their final paper in the series Independent School Boards: Taking the Good School Governance Pledge (February 2016) ISQ promotes the idea that the way in which a school board is structured and operates, can make a significant impact on school success in partnership with the leadership of an excellent school leader. The proposition being that independent school boards can drive enhanced school success through driving improved board effectiveness.

Figure 2 represents the areas of responsibility for school leaders and governing authorities in independent schools. Underpinning the decision-making of effective governors and leaders is the intent to achieve continuous school improvement. The figure also highlights the interactions with a governing authority that shape a leader’s perception of autonomy. School leaders in this research judged their level of autonomy by the quality of their interactions with governors about the overarching school improvement agenda, the strategy to achieve key targets and the extent to which there was shared responsibility for legislative and regulatory compliance and meeting external accountabilities. All the leaders interviewed for this study associated perception of autonomy with their ability to achieve the desired school improvement.

A question emerging from this study is where does the responsibility lie to support independent school leaders and governors to fully exercise their autonomy so that students, families and communities benefit?

3. Autonomy in Practice: Perspectives of Independent School Leaders

Conclusions for most studies in this area are prefaced by the proposition that there is a very complex relationship between school governance and education outcomes at both the level of the school and the school system. They are therefore not definitive, but more broadly indicative of the qualities of an environment where autonomy might assist or impede effective change.

3.1 Key questions for school leaders

A series of questions were posed to the leaders of five Queensland independent schools to better understand their sense of the organisational and institutional levers or “freedoms” available under “school autonomy” and the degree to which they enhance or inhibit school performance. The purpose being to focus on those with the greatest local information – school leaders – (Jensen & Clarke, 2013), to articulate how they respond and make decisions that address the contextual needs of the students in their schools.

The interviews provided a practical lens through which to view autonomy in practice in a range of independent school contexts. The discussions included an exploration of the

characteristics of the leader which enabled them to exercise autonomy effectively.

The interview questions focused on “What is school autonomy and what does it enable you to do?” with an emphasis on:

- resource allocation and accountability
 - autonomy and developing teaching quality – links to accountability and managing resources
- leadership and governance
 - what is autonomy for a school leader navigating a governance structure that involves boards/ councils to deliver quality schooling?
 - what is required of leadership going forward?

TABLE 1 – QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

1	How do you as a leader use the levers of autonomy to ensure your school achieves and /or continuously improves?
2	How does the governance structure work to support success (or otherwise)?
3	How do you keep your workforce refreshed? Utilise professional learning? Develop people?
4	A. Collaboration – how do you work beyond the school gate? If you do, what is good about it? B. Support – what networks/ partnerships do you draw on to enhance the outcomes of the school?
5	What leadership qualities and attributes are essential to success within autonomous schooling environments in the independent sector?



The questions outlined in Table 1 provided a guide for the semi-structured interviews with each school leader in addition to the sourcing of contextual information around context, accountabilities, and school community demographics.

3.2 Case studies: independent schools

The schools selected as case studies were chosen to represent the diversity of independent schooling in Queensland. They include schools within mid to high SES communities and schools that specifically support disengaged young people from some of the lowest SES communities in Queensland.

Each school has a unique governance structure. There are schools that are affiliated with faith-based systems and schools that operate with an independent corporate board. There is also a school that is a member of a broader organisation that includes education within a range of social services it provides for young people, their families and communities.

These schools were also selected because they would be considered successful or effective on a range of measures including NAPLAN achievement and/or gain, student engagement, staff wellbeing and community engagement.

Despite significant variation in governance or organisational structures, the leaders in these schools share a common perception, that is, that they have significant autonomy over one or more of the key OECD characteristics.

Finally, some of the leaders interviewed have also had leadership experience in both independent and government settings which gives them a unique perspective about leading in centralised government schools compared with schools with high levels of localised autonomy.

Each school leader was interviewed for up to an hour by an ISQ staff member. The resulting interviews were transcribed and shared with each leader who consequently has given permission for the de-identified information to be shared within this paper.

To mitigate the potential bias of an ISQ interviewer, further questions were asked by the authors of the paper to test the validity of the comments and investigate some of the key ideas raised in the initial interview more fully.

All the leaders who contributed to the five case studies identified the relationship between the school governing body and the school leader as key to their perception of professional autonomy. Experienced governors were also invited to reflect on the draft paper. Specifically, to guide these reflections, governors were asked to consider and respond to the following questions:

- Do the definitions of autonomy and accountability ring true to you as a board member?
- Does this paper reinforce any of your own thoughts about the relationships between boards/ governing bodies and school leaders and autonomy?
- Is there anything missing in this discussion?

Despite significant variation in governance or organisational structures, the leaders in these schools share a common perception, that is, that they have significant autonomy over one or more of the key OECD characteristics.

Governors too identified similar linkages between leadership capacity and governance experience with the levels of autonomy. One of the governors who reviewed the conclusions drawn in this paper stated:

“In my daily role I work with a lot of school leaders, and I believe there is a significant factor in relation to autonomy that is rarely spoken about, possibly out of respect for anyone that has attained a school leadership role. That factor is the level of competence to exercise autonomy. For any leader, the level of competence will be a function of many things including experience and capacity. Any governing body would therefore be foolish to grant a level of autonomy well beyond the leader’s competence. However, there is always a need to grow leaders and again that same governing body would be foolish to deny autonomy in case there might be a lack of competence. Like anything then, there is a balance to be found that challenges leadership by allowing levels of autonomy beyond a perceived level of competence while still managing any associated risks. As that leader develops and grows in competence, the beneficiaries are the student learning outcomes, which is the very purpose of the school.”

3.3 Case studies: Snapshot of their characteristics

Table 2 provides a snapshot of five schools’ different interpretations and use of the autonomy their independent status confers (Appendix 1 has the full case study reports). The following section discusses the main themes that emerged.

3.4 Themes from the five case studies

Autonomy enables responsiveness and agility

A defining feature of independent schools is their wide discretion for autonomous decision-making in most aspects of how a school plans and operates. The case studies illustrate that independent schools place high value on their autonomy and the freedom from what is often seen as over-burdensome regulation and prescription.

While schools inherently value their independent status, they also acknowledge that it is their capacity to choose an informed strategic direction that ultimately matters in improving performance. One school refers to its capacity for independent decision-making only being effective when it is closely **“harnessed to a commitment to improvement and excellence”**.

Improvement and quality performance are achieved through precise analysis of the context, performance and needs of a school and through choosing evidence-informed practices that meet its needs. If the independent school’s autonomy is not purposefully applied to improvement, the prime benefits will be elusive.

Each of the case study schools has adopted customised strategies specific for their context and culture and has nominated different improvement levers. There is wide diversity.

- School A has selected curriculum leadership and the leadership of a performance and development process and setting teacher standards as the main strategic direction for improvement
- School B has selected a focus on teaching and learning and tracking value-add to student achievement and progress
- School C has selected the goal of building a mindset in the staff to ensure there is a strategic and effective use of resources
- School D has selected the development of deep understanding of student needs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- School E has selected the lever of staff selection so that staff are closely matched to the school’s direction and priorities.

TABLE 2 – OVERVIEW OF CHARACTERISTICS OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

School	Autonomy and improvement	Governance and accountability	Workforce initiatives	Collaboration (with others beyond the school)	Essential leadership attributes (the school leader)
A. Multi campus; religious framework; consistency across affiliated schools	Autonomy enables two key levers: curriculum leadership and implementation of teacher standards	Whole school board and local boards; 4 years to clarify KPIs for school leader and local boards	School leader has full control over staff development; driven by explicit performance and development framework	Not strong; closely managed by the boards	The school leader has operational role and interprets the board's vision
B. P-12 single-sex; high SES; metro with boarding	Innovation to respond to needs is crucial; autonomy is valuable as it enables agility and speed	Religious affiliation but independent; corporate style; board sets targets/ KPIs with school leader; KPIs shared but do not flow through directly to staff	Strives for a collaborative environment; developing leadership aspirations and skills is a strong focus	Collaboration in resource sharing with like-minded schools; now extends to curriculum sharing	Strong and directive leadership – need to balance with teacher personal autonomy
C. Non-denominational Christian; outer metro; P-12; mid-high SES	Challenge to use autonomy for strategic analysis and decisions rather than for resource use	Close daily relationship between school leader and chair; results in a strong stable vision	Role modelling and systematic targeted professional learning	Values connection with other sectors and leading thinkers; values ISQ initiatives	The school leader is an enabler; greater freedom
D. Alternative schooling over 4 campuses; low-mid SES; non-denominational Christian	Used with precision to focus on what vulnerable students need; school needs this flexibility	NGO board; part of range of services; school leader role is programs, leadership and staff not business matters	Recruitment is crucial; use and professional supervision model	Active community engagement model	Leadership of community partnerships is crucial to inspire relationships
E. Church affiliated: Years 7-12; high SES; inner metro	Use autonomy to build shared ownership by stakeholders –using recruitment ensures consistency of vision	Highly collegial; 50% of board are teachers and leaders; co-generation of strategy	Flat structure; “dialogue meetings” to explore ideas; extensive support for professional learning distributive leadership	Strong endorsement of collaboration as an organising principle	Value honesty, trust and mutual respect as essential ingredients

3. Autonomy in Practice: Perspectives of Independent School Leaders

A defining feature of independent schools is their wide discretion for autonomous decision-making in most aspects of how a school plans and operates.

As one summed it up, **“autonomy is agility and speed”**; a school should use its decision-making freedom and capacity purposefully to identify what is most needed for improvement and then act decisively.

When all schools are striving to meet changing expectations from the transition in the economy and new patterns in social life, the capacity to tailor responses to need is highly valuable – more of the same will not suffice.

Governance and accountabilities: balancing support and challenge

Research shows that the clarity and strength of accountabilities are key for enabling school level autonomy to deliver superior outcomes. Accountability is both external to the wider community and government and internal to a school's families and to the governing bodies or boards. Good accountability processes set up the checks and balances to drive good decision-making.

Accountability is strengthened by clear and reasonable governance arrangements that embody qualities such as a commitment to transparency; trust in the value of performance measurement and benchmarking; and systematic and fair processes.

A challenge is ensuring that governance arrangements achieve the right balance between supporting the leader and staff's judgement and challenging them through the effective use of the board's expertise. This balance is achieved through responsiveness and support shaped by the growing competence of the school leader and the board as articulated by one governor: **“The other factor that strikes me is that over time school leadership changes, as indeed does governing body membership. Each new person brings with them their own levels of experience and expertise, and so the level of autonomy may need to be adjusted accordingly. For example, a school governing body seeking a slightly different direction as a long-term leader moves on, may be prepared to take on a new leader with less experience but with a real affinity for the proposed direction and the promise of the potential to grow into a fine leader. In such a case it may be necessary to limit autonomy in the initial stages and provide higher levels of support to promote that growth, and then as competence increases, provide greater levels of autonomy.”**

The diversity of accountability and governance models in the case study schools indicate that processes are varied and evolving. Governance arrangements range from a democratic and co-design process to corporate style models and a “system” model with a co-ordinating board supervising

local boards. Some boards include educational experts, others do not; some have a more ‘organic’ decision-making process while others are more procedural. Some are grappling with how to become strategic in their intent. Each has its strengths and challenges.

Some of the strengths include speed in decision-making and the ability to be responsive and agile; taking advantage of minimal regulatory obstacles to establish their own ethos; and their high visibility and in-built accountability to their parent communities.

Some of the challenges include delineating responsibilities between board and school leadership; agreeing on the degrees of autonomy for the leader; and building trust. In school A, the leader faced a complex scenario – a context with a hybrid governance regime and, on the surface, it is unclear what the decision-making limits are. One would expect that the roles and responsibilities for exercising decision making would need to be very clearly spelled out. **“The decision-making roles and responsibilities were not always clear, and often changing depending on the board members, this was one of the great challenges.”**

In an organic and integrated governance model where staff and board members are close, is there a need for an independent “umpire” or source of counsel and advice from an external standpoint?



3. Autonomy in Practice: Perspectives of Independent School Leaders

Strategies to manage these complexities include engagement in facilitative bodies such as ISQ, in the same way that competitive businesses cooperate on common problems within an industry association framework.

A fundamental challenge is how to use the combined abilities of leadership, staff and board to the best advantage. As one school leader highlights:

“The relationship with the Chair is a good one as it is for all members of school council. It is characterised by trust and openness (I detail the good and the bad and they are prepared to learn more about how school operates; I also need to learn more about how corporates operate and they share that with me). The Council Chair does not interfere with the operations of the school and therefore, as long as everything is going well and I meet my KPIs, I have a lot of autonomy – although working in parameters set by Council around budget, strategic direction and ethos.”

Key strategic decisions cannot just be left to the “professionals” nor should professional educational advice be ignored. Rather, educational expertise needs to be enlisted to support the board to understand what matters and what to look for.

Questions that could be helpful in designing governance arrangements and clarifying and strengthening accountabilities include the following:

- What type or level of performance indicators is most useful (e.g. student data – including academic performance, perceptions of teaching and learning, indicators of wellbeing and engagement; parent opinions; and teacher opinions)?
- What is communicated externally; are there benchmarks that make sense in the community and would strengthen external accountability (e.g. common measurement tools among “like” independent schools)?
- Does the school leader’s accountabilities go beyond academic success to embrace aspects with metrics such as staff satisfaction levels; workforce development; workforce stability or restructure (depending on the priorities); parent satisfaction; and community relations?
- Is it clear how the strategic direction for the school is set and how it is implemented? Strategy is one arm of change but without an implementation plan progress is problematic. What are the respective responsibilities and accountabilities for both strategy and its implementation?

A study from the United Kingdom of school governance concluded that good governance is when a board has the knowledge to “challenge the school, understand its strengths and weaknesses and contribute to shaping its strategic direction” (Ofsted, 2002).

Queensland independent school governors questioned further about this highlighted that **“a governing body provides the appropriate frameworks, guidance and support to school leadership, and then gets out of their way to allow them to do the job for which they were employed”**.

Collaboration in a 21st century organisation

Collaboration and networking are central to how 21st century organisations grow and flourish. Having the freedom to collaborate with those outside of your organisation and being open to innovation and challenges to the status quo are typically seen as advantages that flow from freedom in decision-making.

Schools value collaboration in a number of ways. Case study schools welcome the opportunity to collaborate with other organisations to strengthen capacity and expand what is on offer in a school. Collaboration might also refer to networking to bring in new ideas. Some see the value of international and professional collaborations for broadening perspectives, engaging with leading thinkers and being in a position where goals can be questioned.

One school refers to the importance to school improvement of exercising their autonomy to collaborate with others. They quote British educationalist David Hargreaves who said, “You can’t improve by yourself; each school must develop connections outside of itself to improve.” This puts the spotlight on developing the skills for collective reflection.

Other schools express reservations about collaborations as there are a number of complexities to be managed. Some schools operate within a well-delineated value framework and engagement outside of that is not welcomed. Others are not comfortable developing collaborations with other schools in the competitive environment of the independent school marketplace.

Strategies to manage these complexities include engagement in facilitative bodies such as ISQ, in the same way that competitive

businesses cooperate on common problems within an industry association framework. This might involve use of common planning tools and mutual support in implementation or jointly establishing parameters for benchmarking and improvement. Other approaches involve collaborations with non-school organisations in the community – non-government bodies, charities, businesses, and higher-education providers.

It is apparent that collaboration, networking and partnerships are key contemporary strategies for innovation and improvement in any sector or business and independent schools are exploring their options. It will be important to consider what is likely in the future and what the pre-conditions would be for effective collaborations.

Innovation and managing risk

An organisation that is pursuing high performance is likely to be innovative and supportive of change. A high performing school would also have these qualities. In an innovative organisation, one would expect to see a parallel process for establishing and managing the organisation’s appetite or comfort level with risk. This enables a leader to confidently pursue an agreed level of change and improvement and be accountable for the outcomes.

One view is that the central authorities in government schools essentially establish and regulate for managing risk through rules, the level of resources, accountability and culture. But in independent schools this would be done at the school level. If the limits for decision making are not clear (e.g. with IT expenditure or changing the structure of the curriculum) a leader’s capacity to act decisively and be accountable is arguably curtailed. How this is achieved is linked to culture and governance but it seems to be an area that is relatively undeveloped in independent schools and warrants attention.

A few of the case study schools refer to the “journey” and challenges in building common understanding and trust between board and leadership. Others refer to the challenge a multi-layered governance arrangement presents when trying to determine who sets the limits.

One school with a strong board indicated that this enables the school leader to be freer to concentrate on educational priorities. Another refers to a board having confidence in the leader “to get on with it” while staying within the limits of performance indicators.

4. Concluding Comments

Autonomy is enacted differently across the case study schools. While school leaders highlight the advantages of their own approaches they also recognise that other features might deliver gains for school improvement.

The independent sector's emphasis on autonomy and strong leadership is not misplaced.

School leaders in independent schools hire their own staff according to their school's unique criteria to ensure the best fit between students and teachers; they shape a school's professional development programs in consultation with individual teachers; and they enjoy the flexibility to attract and retain the best candidates from throughout Australia and overseas.

Governors and leaders of independent schools are engaged in a dynamic relationship that is affected by external forces including the requirement to remain viable, competitive and high quality. These factors may influence the nature of interaction between governors and leaders. However, the involvement of the leader and the quality of the relationship between the leader and governing body does impact on the effective operation and strategic direction of the school. Qualities of effective relationships between leaders and governing bodies include openness, trust, regular communication, meaningful involvement of both parties in setting strategic direction.

Responses from governors and school leaders highlighted the dynamic nature of roles and responsibilities and the way changing expectations occur as a governing body and leader's relationship matures. From a governor's perspective, this may involve finding a balance that challenges leadership by allowing levels of autonomy beyond a perceived level of competence while still managing any associated risks.

A school leader's perception of professional autonomy comes with a deep sense of personal accountability to the outcomes for the school. Together with the agency and freedoms to activate change, leaders cited examples where autonomy had been used to exercise agility and flexibility to advantage.

An interesting observation made, is that autonomy in independent schools is frequently expressed through using discretionary resources to solve a problem or innovate. Government schools may exercise similar autonomy but have restraints on the level of resources they can allocate to a problem. Case study leaders emphasised that autonomy was more than the discretionary use of resources. Whilst resources and the ability to hire or fire staff were key differentiators, regardless of setting, they acknowledged the importance of highly effective leaders and the ability to assess the landscape and look at all possible avenues and means for improvement.



Governors highlighted the dynamic and complex relationship between leaders and governors and the challenges of standardised thinking when it comes to defining autonomy. As expressed by one governor, there is no one size fits all formula to the way in which autonomy is realised, **“There are complexities around the whole question of autonomy, and thus the difficulty in formulating any singular approach. Indeed, I think it was apparent that each situation needs to be approached according to its own characteristics.”**

4.1 Questions for consideration: what next?

An independent school leader holds a unique managerial role combining the jobs of chief executive, human resources manager and lead educator. They are invested with an immense responsibility but are also directly accountable to schools and stakeholders.

The challenge is how to maximise the benefits and open pathways for all schools to continue to grow and provide excellent outcomes for students and the community. As expressed by one governor, **“Autonomy is not a static thing, but is quite organic and dependent on circumstances. It is also clear that there are potential benefits in allowing school leadership to have higher levels of autonomy.”**

Some key questions for future consideration might be:

Question One

Autonomy is not suitable everywhere; are there opportunities for support and guidance for those environments that are not flourishing and fully using the autonomy they have? For example, are there strategies for redressing under-performance for those independent schools that may not be gaining the full benefits of autonomy; what would be the equivalent of institutional supports for independent schools?

Question Two

Are schools through their boards, school leaders and leadership teams using the autonomy they have to change practices to innovate and improve? The assumption is a higher level of autonomy should serve as a trigger for other improvement factors, not otherwise possible, to come into play. If so, does the school take action to bring more strategic decision-

making into play, or does it simply have the autonomy but not use it? Does the school not use it because it does not have the capacity to do so? How is an environment established for best practice and reflection on improvement opportunities?

Question Three

Do these studies reveal a new perspective on independence and leadership? Is it worthwhile for independent schools to consider the qualities of outstanding leadership in their environment and not assume that good leadership and autonomy are necessarily coupled? Case studies of schools where leadership has purposefully exercised their autonomy to explore successful innovative models would be very valuable.

Question Four

Would the impact of the autonomy that independent schools have be enhanced by a more active “middle layer” for those who need additional support or stimulus; is there a case for mutual support? One perspective might be to collaborate to share resources and de-clutter roles in smaller schools; another might be to collaborate for development of leadership teams; or to provide support and training for boards and to benchmark governance with other sectors.

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Appendix One Case Study Summaries



School A

School A has approximately 400 students (primary and secondary) across several sites. The school leader has worked in state schools and TAFE as well as the independent sector, as teacher, middle leader, program manager and principal. The school demographic is mid-high SES, with all students drawn from the same conservative religious background. A notable increase in NAPLAN scores led to UNITAS research on that increase, while the school has also been the focus of research into teacher performance processes (AITSL) and as early adopters of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA). Governance is exercised at multi-levels – Community Board (each campus; local financial responsibility), Whole School Board (WSB; all four campuses; overall budgets and ethical issues) and national organisation. The leader reports to the WSB, with responsibility for professional development and control of the curriculum. Success of the school was in partnership with the WSB, in an atmosphere of “mutual trust and aligned vision”.

Question 1

The school leader saw two levers as being key to school growth and success: curriculum leadership and implementation of teacher standards through performance and development. Both presented their own challenges. The most important autonomous activity of the leader was to work with teachers to unify the campuses and staff. As the school is spread across several campuses, there was a tendency for the campuses to consider themselves as separate silos, rather than as a unified school with a single direction. Given that the local board members and school teachers lived and worked in the same close-knit community, the local social network impeded the autonomy and ability of the school leader to manage staff performance, recruitment and dismissal. In particular, this affected dealings with staff with long-standing appointments and poor or stale performance, to the detriment of the school as a whole.

Question 2

There were two levels of governance: local school boards (Community Board), responsible for financial management and with a human resources role at individual campuses; and the Whole School Board (WSB) with higher authority, responsible for overall budgets and ethical issues. The strategic plan for the school was developed and set by the school leader, although approved by the WSB. The leader was held accountable for the achievement of the strategic plan, which was monitored by a report at every board meeting. Key performance indicators were set by the WSB; however, these were initially unclear and the leader worked with the WSB to give them structure and clarity. Achievement of autonomy was a four-year journey. The leader was afforded greater operational and strategic responsibility and independence as the WSB members began to trust in the school leader's ability, understand the plan and see progressive improvement data. The improvement agenda was driven and led by the leader. As the relationship with the WSB grew closer, the school leader experienced more autonomy.

The leader also noted, from experience in both state and independent school as well as TAFE, in a teacher–middle leader–school leader progression, that in state/TAFE systems there is more accountability for the sake of accountability, which “slows things down and gets in the way of innovation and change”.

Every school leader's role, but especially in the independent sector, requires not just an adaptability to change, but recognition of the need to engage in and with change and continuous improvement – "every day is change and context is changing all the time".

Question 3

"A big win" for the school leader was full control over staff development, whose focus was to build cross-campus collaboration and development "to enhance a professional collaborative school culture". Annual staff development events were held. The design of the residential development was structured to "mix staff, break down silos, create cross-campus, year-level and subject-area focus groups, complete collaborative curriculum planning and whole school moderation", with the intent of building multi-level bonds. The leader also developed and implemented an explicit performance and development framework, aligned directly to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (rolling out over two years).

The leader rewarded teachers who embraced change through providing extended professional learning opportunities. While the approach of rewarding "staff earlier in the process" did not initially have WSB support, this was later mitigated by school improvement data. The school leader also implemented a school restructure, creating smaller teams with more positions of added responsibility (PARs) being a reward/responsibility approach. The PARs had responsibilities both within and across campuses, requiring collaboration between staff, with regular moderation and monitoring by the PARs.

Question 4

Engagement with the ISQ school improvement process (Self-improving Schools; SIS) – enabled the leader to get a group within the school working together on continuous improvement – "SIS helped the school to begin to ride that wave". The school leader's own professional development was through PhD study, and WSB covering the cost of global and national conferences to "network and get that big picture view of where education is going – going beyond the parochial view".

Question 5

Authenticity is a common theme, where genuineness is both valued and necessary. There is a need to have "a real belief in what you are trying to achieve" along with "a really strong sense of moral compass". These qualities have a significant impact on staff relations, through a sense of humility, where you are one of the staff rather than a dictator. This also entails having a clear sense of personal leadership strengths and qualities, and to engage staff who complement and add to those strengths and qualities. The WSB plays a crucial role in a school's success, through relations between the school leader and WSB. The WSB provides the overall vision, which the leader interprets for in-school practice. The WSB can be subject to 'sway' and 'influence' on educational matters, but it is a negotiation rather than a fight. There is more autonomy in the independent than the state sector, due to the responsibility to lead the WSB's direction. The WSB agenda is not necessarily set in stone – it can evolve, have undertones and is not always easily read. The school leader's role is to tailor the school's direction to achieve the WSB's aims – "you have to be able to share that in order to be authentic".

School B

School B has 860 students covering preparatory–Year 12, at a single-sex boarding school in a metropolitan area. The school leader started teaching in state schools before moving into the independent sector as a middle leader, senior leader and school leader. The school demographic is exclusively high SES and is located in an affluent and “traditional” neighbourhood. School achievements include excellent NAPLAN gains, global exchange program and outstanding sporting and cultural performances, in addition to strong relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and students. Governance of the school is tied to affiliation with a religious order, which provides philosophical advice and support, but the school is regarded as religious independent. The board sets the targets and KPIs for the school leader, in a consultative process. The School Council has a focus on managing risk. The leader is accountable to the Order, with both staff and student expectations to achieve. The leader feels that the strongest accountability is to the parents.

Question 1

The question challenged the school leader’s thinking in terms of what it meant to be independent and collaborative where autonomy enabled flexibility in terms of time and responsiveness “autonomy is agility and speed... one person’s innovation becomes everyone’s activity tomorrow”. Within the response there were, however, indicators of the process of adoption of another’s innovation – “I think we share with each other but more often we are looking at each other, and it has led to a ‘facilities arms race’”. In this context, innovation is structural, that is, related to the facilities the school offers, yet the school leader also acknowledged that a focus on “capital campaigns” limits educational innovation. There is a need to innovate within the system, rather than follow another’s path and “a rigorous focus on teaching and learning is key to this”. Innovation should be embedded within the frameworks for teaching and learning, which can be monitored to demonstrate that the innovation is “making a difference”. An example given is the school’s focus on “value-added measures”, whereby student performance is tracked across years and against standards, to ensure growth of performance.

Question 2

The school, while affiliated with a religious order, is religious independent. The Order provides philosophical advice and support but has delegated trust to the board and has faith in the School leader. The corporate-style board sets explicit key performance indicators and targets, including stretch targets for the leader, developed in consultation with the leader. There are two board sub-committees: Ethos and Finance/Risk. The school operates in line with the Order’s ethical and behavioural expectations, but is otherwise largely free of the regulatory stagnation of ‘system’ schools – “regulatory controls slow you down, the more you have to communicate your planning and collaborate with a system the slower things are” – there is less ability for real innovation and change in response to the environment takes longer. The school’s governance structure is, thus, positioned as a distinct advantage, in that it is faster to get things done. The board’s approach permits the school leader to “get on with it”, with key performance indicators providing a focus to “stay on track”.

With credibility comes the ability to effect change in others, while enabling staff autonomy in their areas of expertise.

Question 3

Although subject to KPIs, the school leader does not set them for the school's senior leaders. The leader's KPIs, however, are shared. This creates a collaborative environment, where the senior leaders are aware of their roles in co-contributing to the school's success through their assistance and ownership of those roles. In turn, there is a strong commitment to leadership development throughout the school. Leadership development is an aspiration process that "encourages aspirants to try new things, remain open and growing". While expressing a commitment to leadership development in all its forms, the school leader challenged the value of one-off instances of professional development. All staff are encouraged to reflect on their work, as well as contribute to school and professional research and practice publications and into networks beyond the school.

"The annual review includes a goals setting program aligned to key APSTs, but it also includes other contributions to the school."

Question 4

The school leader expressed a strong accountability to parents. This may well be the driver for establishment of a close relationship with another religious independent school, covering Years 1–12 and sharing similar attributes, located on the other side of the same city. This partnership works because of the common goals and strong professional relationship between school leaders. There is also an efficiency benefit, as the schools share: business manager, finance team, HR manager, cleaning contracts and event venues, while staff act in roles in either school and shadow each other. The benefits of the partnership extend beyond the financial and extend into sharing of extension curriculum between schools and development of shared online learning for staff and students.

The School Council has enabled overseas sabbatical travel for the leader resulting in multiple partnerships with academics and schools. The school participates in ISQ's Self-improving Schools and Middle Leaders programs, and encourages and facilitates research in schools.

Question 5

An extensive list of leadership requisites was specified, key to which were interpersonal skills, including: "interested in people ... Be flexible, have self-awareness, show wisdom in judgement"; "good communication skills, and be prepared to act ... need to understand all stakeholders"; "be able and willing to learn from those around them, enabling them to lead"; "have the qualities of a statesperson – and be thinking about 3rd and 4th consequences of actions and decisions". Good interpersonal skills are foundational skills for all effective leadership positions. While a pastoral background would be common, leaders in independent schools also need a curriculum background. As a school leader, because that leadership role includes being a teacher of teachers, the leader needs teaching credibility. With credibility comes the ability to effect change in others, while enabling staff autonomy in their areas of expertise. The latter aspect also relates to the leader's role of supporting other staff to attain higher expertise and understanding. The other side of the equation lies in dealing with the board. School leaders and boards do not always agree, but it is the school leader's role to ensure that they are knowledgeable about the school's situation, particularly in curricula and other educational aspects, to both address issues with the board and interpret the board's recommendations for staff.

School C

School C has 1,350 students covering early learning–Year 12, situated in an outer coastal suburb. The school leader started teaching in state schools, becoming a middle leader, senior leader and principal before moving into the independent sector as the school leader. The school is a non-denominational Christian school whose demographic is mid-high SES, in an area with a stable population. Achievements include awards for school innovation, being in the top 10 schools in the state for Literacy and Numeracy, in the top 50 nationally, as well as being in the top 10 schools in terms of graduate scores. Governance is characterised by a close relationship between school leader and board, with near-daily contact between the leader and board Chair/Deputy Chair. The board itself is comprised of corporate experience, with no school educators, and is stable. The leader's main accountability is to the board, but is largely autonomous. The close relationship between school leader and board promotes a single vision and unity of purpose.

Question 1

The school does not have external religious affiliations or associations with other schools, except through sport associations and IT. Perhaps because of this, the school leader identified considerable autonomy already existing, both for the leader and senior team. The leader, who was previously employed in the state system, considered the contrast in degrees of autonomy. The state system had autonomy but required creativity to make the system work, whereas in the current independent school “we control time, we control what we use, resources, we control the budget, the board usually accepts our agenda and proposals and improving education”. The creativity necessary in the state system largely related to finances. In the state system, due to limited resources and system constraints, there was a mindset of “making things happen” and thinking through approaches to problems. In contrast, at least initially, in the independent school solutions were resolved by adding “more money” (e.g., new appointment, more coaches, bigger building), “rather than working through what existing practices and processes could be improved first”. One of the school leader's challenges upon appointment would have been to move the mindset from being “money” focused to better utilisation of existing resources.

Question 2

Having experience in both state and independent contexts, the school leader contrasts the two situations. In state schools, the principal is the leader and the level of school success can fluctuate with a change of leader, that is, a new principal can change direction and/or emphasis. In independent schools, the school leader works in tandem with the board. The shared vision is robust enough to cope with a change in leadership, because the leader is only one piece of the puzzle, albeit a crucial one for educational direction. The shared leadership provided by the board enhances “community responsibility for success”. The shared leadership of the leader and board also extends into staff relations, through the leader's communication and interpersonal skills. Goals are clearly communicated, reinforcing key themes and direction. Appraisal is formal, yet without the “big stick” approach – “practicing best practice helps ‘best practice’ become normal practice”. Workplace agreements, a balance between staff requests with the needs of commitment to school ethos and practice, also rely on effective interpersonal skills, both to recognise needs and to negotiate a fair response.

Rather than being the sole driver of change, the school leader is an enabler for others to be drivers and leaders.

Question 3

A productive environment for teachers to make an educational difference needs to be driven by the school leader and the leadership team. Their role to enable school teachers and other staff to work toward the school's goals by building on personal strengths. The enabling process itself is built on a combination of role modelling and targeted professional learning. The school's leadership team "promote a collective belief in ourselves" to realise school goals. This transfers into positive self-belief for other staff. That self-belief becomes entrenched when partnered with professional learning that targets strengths and goals. Professional learning needs to be inherently tied to the school's goals, which are agreed with the board. This school's foci include literacy, numeracy, pedagogy, dimensions of learning (DOL) and technology integration, so professional learning is targeted toward these themes. The associated development of strengths assists a process of growing autonomy, from the leadership team to other staff. Throughout the development system there needs to be a recognition of the value of staff, as well as when there is a disconnect – "good people are gold, underperforming people need to be managed out, not transferred on".

Question 4

Connections with other sectors, whether state or independent, and overseas contexts is crucial for context. Utilising connections with friends and other leaders gives insight to both a bigger picture and future directions and aspirations. Integral to this is being able to attend and present at overseas events, by access to leading thinkers and leading schools in the field. This can both inform direction and provide validation of current direction toward aspirational goals. The support and advice of ISQ is invaluable, along with the school's lawyer and board. ISQ's Self-improving Schools is noted as an innovation, but as one which does not go fast enough for the school, where the feeling was "we could move change forward faster than the process outlined in the program".

Question 5

The school leader acknowledged common standards for effective leadership between state and independent schools, including: driven, entrepreneurial, having and displaying pride, and the ability to 'harness' the resources available. Independent schools, however, were positioned as being less bound by imposed structures, with more freedom to "instigate workplace reform, change organisational structures, establish more commercial partnerships". The autonomy of the independent system allows a wider range of opportunities to be leveraged. But autonomy still needs direction, harnessed to "a commitment to improvement and excellence; and the ability to set aspirational goals; aim high". The school leader, then, needs to deal with a range of issues and depth of concerns, in a complex process that is facilitated by developing leadership teams and trusting others to lead in their area of expertise. Rather than being the sole driver of change, the school leader is an enabler for others to be drivers and leaders.

School D

School D has 225 students across four campuses, existing within a non-governmental organisation, rather than an educational one, and providing an alternative schooling context. The demographic is low-mid SES, catering for students with backgrounds that include trauma, disadvantage and anxiety. The school is non-denominational Christian, guided by secular Christian values, providing specialised and individual education. As part of an NGO the school is a component of a wider range of services offered to the young people and their community. The school's governance is multi-layered: NGO board, with CEO; School Advisory Sub-committee, comprised of educational and vocational specialists); and Group Manager, supervisor of school leader and liaison between the leader and other governance layers. Strategic planning belongs to the governance layers, in line with the NGO's mission and vision. The school, as a part of the wider NGO, works in conjunction with the NGO's other services.

The leader works with those other services and external partners to support the organisation's work through the school. In the shared services model, the school leader's foci are: development and leadership of instructional programs; and leadership, care and development of the instructional teams (teachers and trade trainers).

Question 1

The school needs to be flexible in structures and expectations for its vulnerable students. With this in mind, the focus of autonomy is to address student needs. To do this, the school leader demonstrates a willingness for self-improvement and leading change of educational programs. In turn, staff engagement with the organisation's mission is fostered.

Question 2

In key ways the governance structure operates just like a "regional office in the department". That compartmental structure, where the school leader is free of 'business management' responsibilities – which is not necessarily the case in other independent schools – allows the leader to focus on key education targets and the teaching and learning agenda. The shared services model, from the school being part of a non-governmental organisation, enhances the school's ability to tailor services through access to multidisciplinary resources.

The school needs to be flexible in structures and expectations for its vulnerable students. With this in mind, the focus of autonomy is to address student needs.

Question 3

On-boarding is a fundamental factor, with a focus on the recruitment pipeline. At the initial interview, potential staff need to have an understanding of the specific context of the school and its students' varied and, sometimes, demanding needs. That understanding is subject to development through induction and beyond and exists within a professional supervision framework. There is a balance to be maintained between being supportive of staff and holding staff accountable for outcomes in delivery of educational services. Central to the whole process is maintenance of a focus on student wellbeing.

Question 4

Collaboration is necessary within the organisation and beyond. The processes and services of the organisation, external referrers and associated parties who support the wellbeing, academic and vocational needs of students are non-exclusive, in that each informs the other. The school also has an active engagement process with community stakeholders (including parents, carers and partners) to enrich educational provision.

Question 5

A leader in this environment needs to be able to develop strong relationships within the community and take leadership of community partnerships. There should be a sense of vocation around supporting young people who are seeking to find a new pathway beyond the dysfunction, disadvantage and trauma of their lives, all of which is aimed at addressing "the heart thing". In order to do this, the leader must 'lead' and inspire collaboration, among staff and community. The staff engagement model is driven by the school leader, who is first and foremost a proud staff member, while leading the pedagogical agenda for teaching and learning.

School E

School E has 720 students covering years 7–12, situated in an inner-metro suburb. The school leader has worked exclusively in the independent education sector, first as a teacher, then middle leader before becoming school leader. The school is a non-diocesan church-affiliated school, with a high SES demographic. It has highly regarded academic, outdoor education, sustainability and cultural programs, with 65% of students under OP 10. The school is a registered company, with a potentially unique board make-up that includes six of the twelve board members being teachers and school leaders, going well beyond the token educator. This structure also means that the board has a consistent educational focus. The leader considers multiple accountabilities, to board, school, staff, parents and students, in a “truly collegial” environment.

Question 1

Autonomy is not school leader specific, rather, an autonomous school inculcates ownership by stakeholders, whether students or staff, by engendering fulfilment and connection to the school. Control should not be viewed as analogous to autonomy, however, as this suggests that good ideas are only passed down from above. In an autonomous school all stakeholders can have an input role, with associated responsibility for and ownership of its success – “school structures need to amplify good ideas not close them down”. Within that context, a key lever for the school leader is to have a significant role in selection of staff, to match the individual with school direction. For the right person, perspective and attitude to teaching and learning can trump qualifications – “changing the perspective of an adult is harder than supporting them to develop new skills”.

Question 2

At the twice-yearly board strategy meetings parents and non-board staff are invited to discuss school strategy and innovations. From these discussions, reference groups are formed to guide programs and develop ideas. Through this process new ideas are co-generated by the board and school community with the school leadership team as the fulcrum. The co-generation mirrors the school’s distributive model of leadership, where at each meeting a board member is designated as “critical friend” to provide critical input on the board’s functioning. Each member of the board is also required to undergo annual professional development.

Independent Schools Queensland, in particular, offers great support in professional development and their programs and ISQ staff are highly valued, for both processes and staff professional development.

Question 3

The school has a very flat organisational structure, with a notable absence of faculty heads. Subject coordinators are the focus, providing multiple leadership roles in the school. Following the school's distributive model of leadership, the school adopts the principle of balance as being fundamental, with the aim of sustainable long-term change and growth for both school and individuals. The change framework has Appreciative Inquiry as a central tenet, with whole-staff input welcomed. Open discussions, or "dialogue meetings", are held where "everyone takes responsibility for identifying and exploring possible futures and what could be" without the expectation of an immediate solution. Over time this builds ownership and makes for better solutions. Professional learning is a valued resource, just as are the staff members themselves. Indeed the school is "more of a community than an organisation". Within that community, individuals are in control of their own professional life, where there is extensive support provided for both further study and professional learning. Provision is made for all staff to have access to study leave, as a recognition of the value of both staff and professional learning, with the expectation that the learning is transferred to classroom practice.

Question 4

According to Hargreaves, an individual (teachers) cannot fully develop their skills in isolation. Extending this concept to a school, there is a necessity for a school to develop external connections in order to fully develop as an educational community. The school leader is a member of a 'best practice' group comprised of six leaders from across the state who meet quarterly. Each meeting lasts a day and is a vehicle for resource sharing, discussion and development of approaches. Being part of a system also works against isolationist approaches, with active efforts to support and identify high-quality processes for improvement within the system. ISQ, in particular, offers great support in professional development and their programs and ISQ staff are highly valued, for both processes and staff professional development. The school's staff are actively part of professional networks like ACEL and various professional bodies.

Question 5

Honesty, creativity, humility and a sense of trust and respect are essential. With these traits in mind, there is a constant need to be aware of the power endowed in the school leader's role, whether explicit and implicit forms. That awareness will help avoid undue negative influence on behaviour and idea expression in favour of autonomy, which is a "ground up" process. While the leader is ostensibly at the tip of the school's hierarchy, that hierarchy is, itself, an outmoded concept – "when it comes to generating ideas, everyone can lead", just as there will be different areas of expertise among staff. Valuing of staff input and expertise helps align staff with the organisation's values, providing a solid grounding for school direction and success.





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