



Collaboration, development and parental engagement are among principal Leonie Falland's keys to success.

By Madeleine Regan

When Leonie Falland was asked about her motivation for teaching and working in schools for 38 years, her response came easily: "I loved learning right from the time I was a toddler. When I was nearly 3, I packed a bag and went off to school. My parents had to call the police to find me!" Falland loved the journey of learning throughout her school years and it was clear that her ambition was to teach.

"As a young person, I was told to reach for the stars, and for me this always meant being an educator," she says. "I didn't take the path to business, which was my parents' world, and although I was interested in the law, I chose teaching. The role of teacher meant the freedom to be successful."

As a young teacher, Falland worked with exemplary senior teachers and mentors. She asked herself if she could be a role model for others. "From early on in my career, I wanted to help others improve in the profession. I wanted to inspire others," she says.

After a stretch of nine years teaching overseas, including posts in East Africa and Japan, Falland was appointed to a large high school in Adelaide. She became a member of a health and physical education faculty, a large group that was not in her teaching area. She worked with talented teachers and soaked up opportunities to operate in teams achieving good outcomes for students.

Since 1995, Falland has had leadership roles in seven area schools in South Australia, including Mintabie, nearly 1000kms north-east of Adelaide. In the state, there are 51 area schools, which educate students from kindergarten to Year 12. They are usually in small country towns where the cost of separate primary and secondary schools cannot be sustained. Falland's commitment to area schools developed when she was a student management adviser in the Murraylands area.

"I loved what I saw in terms of understanding the whole spectrum of schooling," she says. "There are great possibilities for flexibility in cross-sector education when teachers work across junior primary, middle and secondary schools. I love the family wellbeing approach. You watch small children grow into confident, young school leavers over time."

Taking on a number of roles in the South Australian Area Schools Leaders Association (SAASLA) has provided her with comprehensive understanding of the context of area schools, and their common and diverse issues. Falland has been on the executive committee for a decade, and treasurer for five years. She has also been involved in planning and co-ordinating annual conferences, which bring professional learning opportunities, attract overseas educational experts and facilitate collaboration with interstate colleagues. Falland has been a representative and voice of area schools on Department for Education and Child Development committees and working parties, particularly for school improvement and literacy and numeracy.

Falland is now in her second year as principal of Carlton Reception–Year 9 School at Port Augusta. She is happy that the enrolment is

sitting at 101 to start 2016. Last year, 189 students moved in and out, and it was a challenge to manage teaching and learning.

The school is one of 16 government education sites in the regional partnership, and while Carlton is seen as an Aboriginal school, it is not exclusively.

"It's a school for all students," Falland says. "Our school has a long tradition of creating a safe learning environment where people care for others."

This is no small achievement, given that school was not a positive experience for many Aboriginal parents. Carlton has a strong focus on engagement with parents and families. Falland sees signs of progress: "We believe our school can help parents be successful. I see parents becoming more courageous in asking questions about the progress of their children."

Leadership structures are as important in a small school as in a large one. For Falland, it's essential to encourage leadership beyond the classroom, so teachers can acquire more experience and responsibility. Together with her staff's senior leader, Falland generates options to encourage leadership in the group of nine teachers. There are different ways of doing this. For example, staff can organise events such as school concerts or sports activities. These are finite roles with opportunities for discussion and reflection on the experience, and for asking questions to evaluate: What have you discovered about structures for running sports day? What might work differently next time? Additionally, there is support for the state's 'Step 9' professional development process, which encourages teachers to mentor others and share successes with all staff.

Carlton provides birth-to-8-years programs through a Children's Centre. There are play groups, outreach parenting programs and opportunities for parents to engage in study. For example, some women gain a Women's Studies Certificate. The kindergarten has grown from four to 20 enrolments in the last two years. Two Aboriginal community education officers foster partnerships between the school, homes and communities. Nine student support officers, some part-time, assist students with learning.

In 2015, the school's wellbeing program provided new structures for engaging parents. The SA-based Schools Ministry Group funded two outreach staff, and new opportunities to engage emerged from intensive work with two classes. Parents attended 'wellbeing luncheons' and other events that brought families to the school to interact.

Parent engagement is linked to many challenges. One of the most obvious at Carlton is maintaining student attendance and ending the cycle of transience. It's not easy for teachers to witness the impact of missing school on students, who can fall up to four years behind their cohort by the end of Year 7. Working with parents and families is critical for scaffolding learning. In 2016, with the employment of a second education community officer, structures will be strengthened to build even stronger connections with families. The breakfast program and healthy tuckshop assist students and parents; literacy packs are provided for parents to use at home. These programs have the support of the Aboriginal community education officers and volunteer parents.

Another challenge is retaining a stable team when, as the school advised last year: "There is a regular turnover of staff". It is important to Falland that staff stay and are known in the community. In what ranks among the school's longer tenures, one teacher stayed for six years and taught the same group of students from Year 3 to Year 5.

"It makes a difference for students and their families to know the teachers," Falland says. "It's important for our whole community that the same people work with kids over a period of time. Perhaps my biggest goal is to support teachers to stay long term – between five and 10 years would be great!"

She has a number of longer-term objectives. She wants to focus on the growth of years 8 and 9 and consolidate middle schooling. This would provide a stronger grounding for students to make the transition to Year 10 and beyond. Another aspiration is to develop resources and share arrangements with the high school. This could help teachers and students gain access to laboratories, IT and tech studies suites, and provide exposure to high school. Other benefits would include sharing teaching expertise. For Falland, there is more to develop in what she sees as probably her last school leadership role.

Falland is a recipient of the 2015 Principals Australia Institute John Laing Award for Professional Development. She is passionate about the work of schools. "I believe teachers and educators create every other profession," she says. "The best teaching in schools produces successful young adults who step into all sorts of careers. The role of teachers and principals is vital for the development of our economy, our health and cultural life." ■

Madeleine Regan is a writer at Principals Australia Institute.

The VET Development Centre is an Australian leader in developing the expertise of VET professionals.

The VET Development Centre has designed a range of professional development programs to support the on-going development of professionals working with vocational education and training (VET) in secondary schools. The programs focus on ensuring compliance, delivery, quality assessment and productive partnerships.

For more information:

www.vetcentre.vic.edu.au

