

# Trust them to lead



Jason Borton



Canberra principal builds sustainable success by developing professional confidence.

By Madeleine Regan

“Leadership is about developing more leaders,” says Jason Borton, in his fourth year as principal at Richardson Primary School in Canberra.

Borton has been a school leader for 12 years and writes a blog on educational leadership, reflecting on his experience about the practice of leading a school.

He says leadership is about developing professional trust. As principal, he provides the conditions for staff to lead in areas of passion and skill. He gives support and allocates resources to allow them to succeed. Borton adds, “Then I get out of their way and watch them thrive!”

## FOR EVERY STUDENT

Richardson Primary is one of four low-socioeconomic ACT schools that were part of the Smarter Schools National Partnership. There are 167 students in K–6 and a further 63 students in the preschool. About a quarter come from families where English is not the first language, and 21 per cent are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. A preschool on the site provides early childhood education for mainstream students as well as a Koori program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait children aged 3–5.

One of the major challenges for teachers is the lack of readiness of some students who start kindergarten. A high proportion of beginning students have developmental delays with speech, vocabulary and social skills. Borton decided to focus on early intervention in the first years of schooling and runs small classes with significant support. This approach was initially funded through the National Partnerships. Borton acknowledges it is an expensive model. “It’s high impact and a matter of prioritising teacher capacity, supporting effective student learning and enabling success.”

## PLANNING AND STRATEGIES

In his first year as principal at Richardson, Borton worked with staff to develop the next four-year strategic plan. All ACT schools are required to complete a four-year cycle of review. Borton recalls it was excellent timing to take up the new role and work with staff to set direction for the school. The external review, in which schools demonstrate evidence to an independent panel, informs the focus of planning. Data collected for the recent External Validation Report on Richardson showed that student, parent and staff satisfaction is at or above average overall satisfaction for all primary schools in the ACT. One of ↻

the most prominent items students reported on was their high level of satisfaction with feedback on progress.

**CLASSROOM WALKTHROUGHS**

Teachers at Richardson are involved in classroom walkthroughs. The idea is based on the former Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ACSD) model designed as a formative tool for principals and teachers to support and increase student achievement. The purpose is to gather qualitative data about teaching and learning. This deepens understanding of student performance and stimulates professional conversations about instructional processes. Over the past three years, teachers have developed a set of four agreed 'scoreboard statements' to identify and record teaching and learning practices in walkthroughs. The four scoreboard statements are: 'peer- or self-assessment strategies are being used'; 'students can explain what they are learning rather than what they are doing'; 'teachers provide think time for questions and use a range of strategies to check for understanding'; and 'feedback is timely and directed towards the learning target'.

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Each term, four teachers form a group with a member of the executive team. They decide on their schedule for undertaking four walkthroughs each fortnight. Executive team members cover classes when teachers undertake the classroom visits. Each teacher participates in walkthroughs that last 20–30 minutes to gain a snapshot of how specific instructional strategies are implemented across the school. Over a term, there are 60 walkthroughs. Teachers record observations on iPads during visits.

The observation template enables observers to record the frequency of each scoreboard statement. This information is automatically collated into Google Sheets, which generates tables and graphs. The data from the walkthroughs are gathered and shared both informally and formally. Immediately after a walkthrough, teachers place Post-it notes highlighting evidence or best practice on the appropriate scoreboard statement on a board in the staffroom. Data are critically analysed and discussed at staff meetings. Borton explains: “The information we collect provides a good picture over a term, and heightens our collective accountability for student learning. The data speaks for itself and we can see when effective teaching is taking place.” The walkthroughs were recognised in the recent External Validation Report as highly significant in achieving strategic priorities.

**WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T**

Stop, Start, Continue is an audit procedure Borton introduced to enable staff to examine operational activities once a term. Staff can look at the impact of activities on teacher practice and student learning. 'Robust staff discussions' test out what works. Borton explains: “We ask if we need to continue all the activities we are involved with. We want to focus on class teaching time and strive to de-clutter our days. We don't want to keep adding things to

teachers' workloads. We scrutinise our commitments and weigh up what is useful to improving student learning.”

What changes have come from this? Staff examined weekly assemblies. Instead of 10 staff meetings, there are now four administration meetings, and information about operational matters is circulated online. Staff also agreed to reduce student reports to a one-page snapshot of learning each semester. Borton says the audits have freed up teachers to concentrate on learning and the classroom. “I want teachers to have time to focus on curriculum initiatives, to be accountable, and provide opportunities for students to be at their best,” he explains.

Borton says he believes in providing opportunities for teachers and empowering them to lead. “I have a philosophy that I can support teachers to take on leadership outside the classroom. This is an approach that gives teachers leadership and professional trust. For example, the literacy and numeracy field officer has taken on leadership of a school-wide project. With an allocation of funds and time, the leader managed resources, attended a coaching conference, and organised release of teachers for training. As a result, she developed a coaching course in the

school to assist five other teachers in the project team. The sense of ownership was evident and results showed in improved practices and outcomes across the school.

The focus on instructional coaching reinforces the partnership approach. The coaching is not about fixing problems;

it is about supporting a culture that articulates the principle that everyone can improve and build their practice. Borton says, “The coaching framework flattens structures ... Even highly experienced teachers are coached because we are all clear that improvement happens at every point of a career.” He thinks it is important to embed the model and take time to get it right and build it into the reality of the school so it is not dependent on one or two teachers.

**INFLUENCES**

What has helped shape Borton's leadership? He acknowledges it has been a mix of professional reading, mentoring and experience through roles on education bodies. The ideas of researchers and practitioners such as Michael Fullan and John Hattie have been persuasive for developing his approach to leading learning. Borton has also learned from watching other principals. “I've had some inspirational leaders and I've learned good lessons,” he says. However, he has observed that some of them have taken on too much. He has watched some principals “drive themselves into the ground ... and take on too many tasks that could be more effectively completed by others.”

He considers it important for him to contribute to the debate about education and have a voice in national matters. He's co-president for 2014–15 of the ACT Principals Association. He has also been a representative on the national body of government school principals.

Borton also says there is an imperative to build leadership succession as part of his commitment to leading in partnership. He wants to ensure that Richardson Primary will maintain its direction even if he is not there. As he says, “I believe the work in schools is driven by teachers who understand the needs of students. It should not be contingent on one leader.” ■

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