Leadership Builds Professionalism and Management Capacity

A discussion with Chris Presland, Principal Liaison Officer with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

Having forged a career path in some of the state’s most difficult schools, Chris Presland says it can be a challenge keeping staff focused and motivated amid ongoing crises. He believes a key to implementing successful educational strategies is being able to clearly articulate the things that hold the team together, and to define the parameters through which people can make complex decisions. He says in spite of what he affectionately calls the daily “chaos” it was possible to get through every day, week and month in the knowledge they were making progress beyond simply crisis management. Most importantly, the team was making a positive, quantifiable difference in the lives of the students.

It was a process which involved creating a values platform and a learning platform to inform all school’s activities. The process included extensive consultation with students, parents, staff and other stakeholders. He says in his school’s case, the 5 values from the values platform became the 5 chapters of the school management plan, ensuring a genuine integration between values and the reality of day to day school operations. “So in essence we were able to show exactly how we were intending to breathe life into those espoused values statements, and how we would measure our progress.”

As Presland acknowledges, even the best structures require review and ongoing maintenance. He says it’s unfair to ask people to deliver without giving them the tools to do so. “You have to ensure that the people you’re working with actually do have the capability to deliver on what should be happening – and teacher professional learning is central to that.” Further he says it’s critical to be realistic about a school’s limitations. “In my experience, most people in most schools are working very hard most of the time. It’s not for a lack of effort that some schools, especially low SES schools, struggle to succeed in the public eye. It’s not because they’re not trying hard – I think that the central challenge for leaders in those sorts of environments is to know how best to use the limited resources, both physical and emotional to achieve their goals. They need to be very specific and very strategic in what they do.”