



National Excellence in School Leadership Initiative

2018 YEAR OF WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

WHITE PAPER

INTRODUCTION

Female school leaders and aspiring leaders face a multitude of challenges and barriers in Australian schools. While women have achieved modest progress in terms of attaining more school leadership positions over recent years, they nevertheless continue to be inordinately underrepresented and disadvantaged in gaining leadership positions in Australia's schools.

In particular, whilst 80.0% of Australia's primary teachers are female, only 57.5% of primary principals are female; and whilst 58.4% of Australia's secondary teachers are female, only 41.7% of secondary principals are female¹. While the causes for this disparity are complex and multifaceted, the situation inevitably results in insufficient leadership opportunities and support for women, and a paucity of role models for female aspiring teacher leaders and students. This White Paper outlines some of the problems currently faced by women in school leadership in Australia, and offers ways in which the National Excellence in School Leadership Initiative (NESLI) can contribute to reducing inequality and providing greater support and education for our current and aspiring female school leaders.

PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN AUSTRALIA

The challenges faced by women in attaining and advancing in school leadership positions in Australian schools are extremely complex and it is often hard to identify the exact causes for this inequitable situation. However, although some of the causes remain elusive, it is widely acknowledged that women remain disadvantaged and underrepresented in leadership positions in our schools. As noted above, there is a huge disparity between the percentage of Australia's teachers and principals that are female. While we know it is challenging for women to gain positions of leadership in male-dominated workplaces, it is baffling that this situation continues in our schools, given that the teaching workforce is and always has been a predominantly female workforce and the role and identity of teachers is often perceived as 'female'.

In addition to the numerical underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in our schools, women face a number of other challenges associated with ultimately attaining and maintaining leadership roles in schools. Some of these challenges include:

- **Women are less likely to identify leadership aspirations:** Female teachers are far less likely than male teachers to aspire to becoming school leaders in the future. For example, in a recent survey, 24% of male primary teachers indicated they were likely to apply for a leadership position in the next 3 years, in contrast to 6% of female primary teachers².
- **Women are less likely to have female mentors and role models:** It is well established that aspiring leaders need role models with whom they can identify and who will encourage and champion their career path. Females have always been underrepresented in school principal positions so it is far more difficult for women to find suitable mentors.
- **Women are less likely to receive recognition and rewards that assist with them in gaining promotion:** Academic Deborah Towns notes that not only are women less often selected as school principals, they

¹ Sourced from *Staff in Australian Schools 2013* report, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education and conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

² Sourced from *Staff in Australian Schools 2013* report,

are also less likely to be invited as representatives on state and national organisations while receiving fewer professional and public awards than men³.

- **Women are less likely to have an uninterrupted career path, which disadvantages them in gaining promotion:** A recent ACER survey⁴ indicates that women still encounter many more interruptions throughout their careers, which makes it more challenging to gain leadership positions. The results show that 73% of male teachers have uninterrupted careers in schools, compared to only 46 % of female teachers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE BY SCHOOL SYSTEMS TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?

Below are some general directions and principles that schools, school systems and education authorities might implement to address the problems raised above:

- Raise awareness of the value, needs and challenges of women leaders and aspiring leaders through advocacy, promotion, education and networking;
- Build the leadership capability of women leaders and aspiring leaders;
- Ensure women leaders and aspiring leaders have access to appropriate mentoring and support structures, programs and resources;
- Address the barriers and disadvantages faced by women leaders and aspiring leaders through policies and practices for the development, recruitment, selection and promotion of school leaders; and
- Build the evidence base about the needs and challenges faced by women leaders and aspiring women leaders by developing a strategic research agenda and commissioning targeted research.



³ Sourced from 'Independent Schools' by Deborah Townes, published in *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in 20th Century Australia*,

⁴ Sourced from *Staff in Australian Schools 2013* report

HOW HAS NESLI ALREADY BEEN ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE?

NESLI is proud of its many achievements and the strategies it has implemented to address the problems faced by women school leaders and aspiring leaders. In addition to the well-known Women's Leadership Symposiums offered in every capital city in conjunction with its sister brand Women & Leadership Australia, for the past 3 years NESLI has been offering the Advanced Leadership Program for women in education. This program has been specifically designed for women in school settings and features:

- 5 modules oriented around contemporary leadership themes and challenges;
- A 5-stage Adaptive Leadership challenge project;
- Peer coaching;
- Fully online delivery, with both live/synchronous in-person interaction in small groups with other women to promote a supportive community of professional inquiry, as well as asynchronous video tutorial libraries for self-paced application;
- Flexible delivery hours that do not unduly interrupt school hours or family commitments; and
- A direct credit-bearing pathway into Monash University's high-quality Master of Leadership or Master of Education programs.

The results of this rigorous leadership program have been extremely encouraging:

- More than 1400 women across Australia, New Zealand, Asia and North America have completed the program, across all school systems, including women working in schools in urban, rural, regional and remote locations;
- Average satisfaction from participants has been 9.3 (out of 10);
- More than 9 in 10 participants successfully complete the program;
- An increasing number of graduates are going on to complete Master-level leadership qualifications at Monash University; and
- Participants report significant to life-changing progress in their leadership capability as a result of the program, with many either gaining promotion or finding newfound confidence in their ability to lead and manage from an already senior position in the school.



HOW WILL NESLI CONTINUE TO WORK TOWARDS ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE?

NESLI wishes to announce an exciting new strategy to address some of the challenges faced by women leaders in schools. NESLI will institute a 2018 Year of Women in School Leadership initiative to provide a vital platform to launch activities for women school leaders such as:

- Harnessing NESLI's experience, capabilities and resources to provide thought leadership on these challenges and solutions;
- Commissioning targeted quantitative and qualitative research on women's leadership challenges in schools;
- Hosting significant events for women leaders and aspiring leaders in schools, such as Women in Schools Leadership Symposiums in various capital cities;
- Providing new opportunities for women to participate in NESLI's women's leadership programs;
- Establishing a National Steering Committee to guide NESLI's 2018 Year of Women in School Leadership initiative; and
- Engaging with significant K-12 stakeholders including government, Catholic and independent schools and education authorities, and principal and teacher professional associations and unions.

It is anticipated that NESLI's 2018 Year of Women in School Leadership strategy will lead to the following positive changes:

- An increase in the number of female leaders who hold formal qualifications in leadership (NESLI's Advanced Leadership Program is approved for 12 credit points (25%) towards a Master of Leadership degree at Monash University). Currently in Australia only 34% of primary school leaders and 35% of secondary school leaders hold formal qualifications for leadership⁵;
- Better provision of support and professional learning communities (PLC') for current and aspiring female leaders in schools; and
- Increased awareness of issues and knowledge of strategies for developing women leaders in Australian schools, through the commissioning and publication of targeted research.

CONCLUSION

Gaining equitable representation and support for women in leadership positions in Australian schools remains a great challenge. Finding innovative ways to increase the number of women in key leadership roles in our schools will produce benefits for teachers, students and the overall culture and diversity of the school. NESLI's **2018 Year of Women in School Leadership** initiative will assist with the challenges identified here and particularly will offer high quality programs and events while producing significant research to increase the leadership opportunities and support for women leaders in Australian schools.

⁵ Sourced from *Staff in Australian Schools* 2013 report

Some references:

Australian Government Department of Education and Training, *School Teacher Workforce Data Reports (including Staff in Australia's schools)*:

<https://www.education.gov.au/school-teacher-workforce-data-reports>

Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Schools Australia 2016*:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02016?OpenDocument>

Australian Government Department of Education, *Staff in Australian Schools 2013* report, conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER):

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/sias_2013_main_report.pdf

Janet's story

It is a great pleasure and privilege to lead NESLI's **2018 Year of Women in School Leadership**, as I sincerely believe this initiative will improve the educational, wellbeing and leadership outcomes for women school leaders, aspiring leaders and their students.

From a personal perspective, leading this project continues one of the most significant threads woven throughout my life and vocation. The poet William Stafford says, "There is a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change". Whilst the focus of my concerns about gender in education has changed over time, my passion for improving the gendered outcomes for students, teachers and school leaders has not changed. The first three schools I taught at were single-sex public high schools. Teaching in these schools was a seminal experience as I became acutely aware of the defining role that gender plays in a student's education, wellbeing and learning outcomes. It was also apparent that a teacher's gender has a major impact on their leadership aspirations and outcomes.

As a result of my growing concerns about the role that gender plays in education, I completed a Masters degree focusing on girls' education, and a PhD exploring the impact of gender on a teacher's work and identity. Later, as an academic and leader in higher education, these same gendered threads continued to weave through all of my teaching, research and experience. I am very excited to see the positive impact that NESLI's 2018 Year of Women in School Leadership will have on our schools, leaders, teachers and students.

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JANET SMITH, PHD**

Dr Janet Smith is NESLI's Program Director and will lead the 2018 Year of Women in School Leadership Initiative. Janet is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Education at the University of Canberra, where she has taught and researched for the past 25 years in Educational Leadership, Gender and Teacher Education.



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I really enjoyed the NESLI Advanced Leadership Program. I learnt to stop and take time for myself and importantly to reflect on my practice as a school leader. I really enjoyed getting to know the other participants and having meaningful learning discussions with the group. As a result I now consider others' personality traits and learning styles. Ultimately, the course enabled me to grow as a leader and be proud of who I am. Thank you for my new knowledge and the comfort that I feel in my personal, professional skin.

SUE CANNON, PRINCIPAL, Theodore State School

ENQUIRIES

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