

Fact-File 23: Leading Learning Schools – Revitalising for School Renewal



Extracts from our Guide - Leading Learning Schools

Leading Learning Schools



In *Schools that Learn*, Peter Senge, populariser of the learning organisation, turns his attention to the concept of *learning schools*.

While all schools, says Senge, see themselves as being in the business of learning, our:

- ❑ current model of schooling isn't built on sound principles of organisational learning
- ❑ schooling concepts are still locked firmly in to 'industrial age' principles

"Schools may be the starkest example in modern society of an entire institution modelled after the assembly line. This has dramatically increased educational capability in our time, but it has also created many of the most intractable problems students, teachers, and parents struggle with to this day." Peter Senge, *Schools That Learn*

Senge says school innovation is made harder because overall they've preserved a more purely industrial-age model than has business. But there's now growing support to adopt processes, principles and leadership practices of learning organisations in schools to:

- ❑ Build their own internal capacity to *change* - relying less on centrally imposed reforms
- ❑ Encourage more *learner-centred* learning
- ❑ Strengthen the role of '*teacher-leaders*'
- ❑ Foster new forms of organisation learning to strengthen sustainable school change
- ❑ Expand students' learning agility through *thinking/emotional literacy, making connections* and seeing systemic relationships not discrete subject areas

"The concept of schools as learning organisations is a promising vision... Organisational learning applied to schools appears to be able to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of successful school change. Evidence suggests higher performing schools are (already) functioning as learning organisations." *Organisational Learning in Australian High Schools*, Silins, Zarins, Mulford

As the hub of potential learning communities everywhere, schools need to constantly re-invent and revitalise themselves to keep relevant – 'not

through regulation' as Senge reminds us, but rather through 'changing the way we think and interact together'.

What is a Learning School?

All schools have pockets of excellence in terms of management practices or curriculum creativity – it's just that we don't seem able to share this learning and exploit its full potential.

"The idea of a school that can learn has become increasingly prominent during the last few years. It is becoming clear that schools can be re-created, made vital, and sustainably renewed not by fiat or command and not by regulation, but by taking a learning orientation... if we want the world to improve, then we will need schools that learn." Peter Senge *Schools that Learn* pp. 4-5

There's no one correct formula for a learning school. Here's a string of things that help to distinguish a learning school...

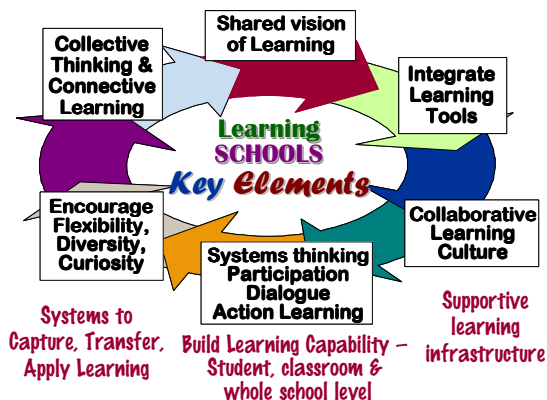
1. *A shared vision* – and a will to translate it into tangible learning principles and teaching practices with commitments to take action
2. *A team-based learning culture* featuring collaborative conversations and dialogue both in staff-room and classroom
3. *Flexible learning approaches* to encourage diversity, innovation, intellectual curiosity, experimentation and new ways of thinking
4. *Learning centres on students* not teachers, and on real diversity not uniformity
5. *Teaching strategies develop* thinking skills, cognitive challenge and build learning capacity
6. *Learning tools like the 5 Learning Disciplines* (see below) integrated into all classroom activities, across all subjects, as well as in other facets of school management
7. *Connective learning* – recognition that knowledge is not bound by artificial subject barriers promotes systemic thinking to help people learn by making connections
8. *Established systems to capture learning*, share information and learn from experience - including sharing learning with other schools
9. *Staff communicate in open ways* - actively share information to improve their work.

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10. Staff see their role as teacher-leaders, involved in all aspects of school running with a readiness to undertake systemic whole school reform – oriented towards learning and renewal



- involve everyone – teachers, students, parents – in shaping shared visions
- cultivate critical reflection and emotional competence through personal mastery
- promote robust conversational skills and exchange ideas on practice improvements
- build thinking literacy, challenge mindsets

“In my 6 years as a classroom teacher, I used the 5 Learning Disciplines to create an environment that nurtured and energised my students and myself. The Disciplines gave me an intentional, explicit framework that expanded many of my existing teaching practices and made the classroom into more of a space of learning, respect and creativity. I have discovered that these Disciplines are effective in any and all classrooms....The 5 Learning Disciplines, when tailored to the classroom, are invaluable for the thing I care most about: imbuing a passion for learning.” Carole Anne Kennerson in *Schools that Learn* pp. 111-114

The 5 Learning Disciplines

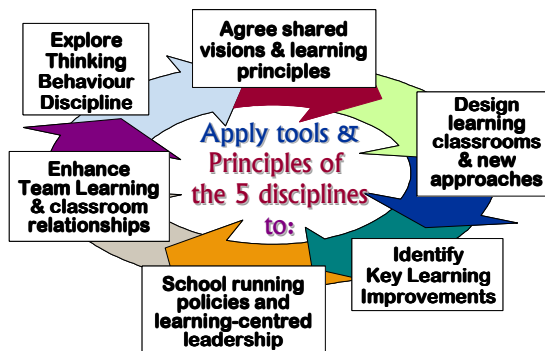
Central to Senge’s Learning School concept are the 5 Learning Disciplines – *Shared Vision, Mental Models, Personal Mastery, Team Learning* and *Systems Thinking*. They’re:

- A set of principles and practices to build learning capacity and curriculum creativity
- Tools to apply to tackle real problems and change issues all schools grapple with.
- Not conventional educational ‘reforms’ or plug-in programs to be imposed on people.

The 5 Disciplines can support schools:

- At whole-school level* – to shape shared visions, plan change, and forge effective school management teams.
- In the classroom* – by broadening learner-centred flexibility and providing integrating tools no matter what the particular subject.
- At a personal level* – helping people manage their own thinking and learn new skills, tools and approaches that extend their effectiveness as learning leaders.

The 5 Disciplines provide a framework for teachers and school leaders to work better together. They can also be integrated into classroom teaching practices – either as discrete ‘skill-sets’ (eg. thinking literacy) or as ways to explore set curriculum topics. They provide a means to:



Teachers as Learning-Leaders

Schools don’t accidentally become learning organisations. It takes vision, guiding principles and commitment to action - and individuals who can mobilise people and get them moving – in other words, it takes leadership.

There’s a big emphasis now on leadership, not just conventional management skills. And the same goes for schools. Not just principals, but all teachers, are being called on to:

- Extend their current leadership capabilities – keep learning new leadership skills/tools
- Take on new roles as *learning leaders* that differ dramatically from old mental models of classroom management and teaching.

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- ❑ Model sound leadership behaviour and values and develop these in their students.
- ❑ Find new ways to rekindle commitment to revitalise schools, create learning classrooms and get better outcomes

The connection between leadership and learning on the one hand is deceptively obvious in schools, because *teachers lead people in learning* as the core part of their job.



On the other hand, while teachers may lead in their own classroom, their ability to extend the role outside of it into school running is more difficult.

Schools have lots of *potential teams* and team activities they could profitably work on together – school management teams, teaching teams, not to mention classes. Yet many principals and teachers complain of feeling isolated, working separately instead of together, not being included in school decisions, feeling disenfranchised, stranded in classrooms or so overloaded they never get time to get together and build real teams.

“Collaboration rather than isolation, unfortunately, is a foreign practice to many educators. For most teachers, the adult in the next classroom is not someone they confide in about matters of teaching practice because it is too threatening. There is no time for teachers to collaborate even if they want to. In most schools, teachers do not see each other teach; they do not know each others' disciplines. Therefore, it is difficult for educators to even imagine the far-reaching possibilities of collaboration.” *Organisational Learning in Australian High Schools - Nature and Practices*, Halia Silins, Silja Zarins and Bill Mulford

Research shows that collaborative approaches - where teachers are seen as partners in school running and students have a say in what goes on in their classrooms - better support the development of learning schools. Here are things teachers say they need to take on the role of learning leaders...

- ❑ *Support from the principal/administration*

- ❑ *Active involvement in decisions* - feeling empowered in areas that matter to them
- ❑ *Learning in teams* – mutual support to reflect on teaching/management practices
- ❑ *Opportunity to build leadership capacity* – principals include *all* staff in leadership activity and encourage them to exercise it
- ❑ *Broad-based participation* - structures that promote participative decision-making, distributive/parallel leadership, encourage empowerment and autonomy

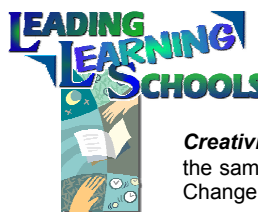
The **Change Forum** conducts a 2-day program for leadership teams who want to:

- ❑ Clarify the change challenges of being a school that leads through learning
- ❑ Revitalise school learning culture and cultivate greater curriculum creativity
- ❑ Refresh their approach and apply new tools to create a more learning-centred environment for students and staff
- ❑ Break with the administrator/teacher mould and extend learning leader roles
- ❑ Work more collaboratively in school management teams that think together
- ❑ Encourage the use of the 5 disciplines throughout school and in classrooms
- ❑ Promote self-responsibility and team effort for school transformation

For a full brochure on **Leading Learning Schools**...

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This Fact-file is taken from *Leading Learning Schools: Applying the tools of the 5 Disciplines to School Revitalisation and Curriculum Creativity* - the guide to the workshop of the same name © Copyright Bill Cropper, The Change Forum 2004-6.

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