Preparing education business leaders for Australia’s autonomous schools: Work-in-progress report

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Abstract

Education authorities across the Australian states are pursuing school autonomy policies to varying degrees, including ‘default autonomy’ and ‘independent-public schools’ initiatives. Underpinned with neoliberal and free market values, these policies deliver greater authority to education leaders and governing councillors to decide on all aspects of a school’s operations independently of bureaucratic controls.

This research interrogates the rationale for school autonomy policies and the outcomes policymakers hope to achieve, while examining the effects on school leadership, business management and governance. It investigates how education leaders perceive and experience change in their role as a result of school autonomy policies, and explores conditions that enable or challenge effective school autonomy. In particular, the research focuses on new imperatives for education business leadership preparation, as schools face new demands, expectations and accountabilities around business stewardship.

One consequence of autonomous schooling is that school business managers are gaining prominence and importance as critical members of education leadership teams. Every education decision has a business implication, and education business leadership encompasses expectations that resources will be targeted to learning and teaching to produce measurable student achievement improvements.

This Australia-wide research is an exercise in grounded theory building based on semi-structured interviews. The work-in-progress report here discusses the first stage of the project conducted in Western Australia and interviews with school business managers.

Education business leadership is an emerging field where very little research exists. The initial phase reported here paves the way for further research activities across Australia, including interviews with policymakers, school principals and governing boards. This research will be the first of its type in Australia at a time when education business leadership is gaining credence as a vital component of education leadership preparation and ongoing professional learning. The report also canvasses the understandings required for effective education business leadership.