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## Leading Literacy: Professional Learning

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## Summary

Instructional leaders build and develop a collaborative learning environment where learning is the motivation of all school staff and the school community. Principals and school leaders who participate in the Leading Literacy: Professional Learning course aim to develop this culture as they lead by example.

In this course, developed by the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), principals and school leaders develop deep understandings about literacy as they explore contemporary theories and research. Their understanding of pedagogical practices that support differentiated curriculum design and implementation is furthered and they improve their evidence-based leadership capabilities to support teachers developing literacy practices and pedagogy.

The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership is part of DEECD (Victoria). Schools contributed \$330 for nominated course participants. The course has five units that are delivered in a blended way, combining face-to-face, digital and collaborative learning. Throughout the course, participants develop and implement a research project specific to their context with the support of course facilitators and experts in the field.

This is the best PD I have done in my career. It has totally changed me as an educator and as a school leader (not just in literacy).

## Target student group

Primary and secondary school principals and leaders, across a range of settings, were the target for this professional learning experience. Self-nominated and therefore highly motivated, their definitive goal is to improve the literacy skills of all of their students by focusing on developing teacher practice.

## Method

Across 2011–2102, two Leading Literacy: Professional Learning courses were provided for 78 principals and school leaders on a weekly basis over an eight-month period; each course consisted of eight workshops and five peer learning group meetings. Blended learning occurred in workshops with pre-reading, an online discussion forum facilitated by three literacy experts, and peer learning groups.



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The aim of the course was to improve and sustain literacy outcomes for students in these schools, beginning with developing the capacity of the principal and school leaders to apply their knowledge, understanding and skills when working with teachers, school staff and the community to improve literacy teaching, learning and monitoring.

The course is developed and delivered by experts and outlines five goals (specific to the five modules), which are the overarching frame of reference for participants to develop and apply their knowledge when working in schools, these are:

- Understanding Goal 1: Participants will develop an understanding of how students acquire the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening – How has evidence-based research advanced our understanding of literacy processes?
- Understanding Goal 2: Participants will understand the pedagogical structures and models that underpin exemplary literacy teaching and learning – What are the research-based structures and models for instruction that result in best-practice teaching and learning of literacy?
- Understanding Goal 3: Participants will understand how to lead high-quality school-based professional learning – What are the key principles of professional learning that result in enduring change in teachers?
- Understanding Goal 4: Participants will understand the nature of formative and summative assessment and how these assessments best inform instruction and learning – What are the unique features of formative and summative assessment and what distinctive role does each play in instructional decision-making?
- Understanding Goal 5: Participants will understand the characteristics of effective schools and the role of professional leadership, particularly when working with teachers on the whole-school professional learning strategy – How can leaders build the capacity of all teachers to implement their school's literacy plan?

A distinctive feature of the course is the development of a school-based collaborative practitioner research project. Participants evaluate existing school-based practices and professional learning processes and apply new learning from the course to demonstrate the application of theoretical perspectives and evidence-based literacy practices in action.

After completing the Leading Literacy course, participants will be better placed to promote inquiry and reflection, and to shape pedagogy. They will have gathered a range of practical tools. They will have developed new knowledge and improved leadership capacity, which will enable them to lead change with confidence.



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## Results

The course providers and facilitators used questionnaires completed by participants, during and at the end of the course, to gather data about the relevance of the course content to each context and the school's literacy improvement agenda.

The participants strongly agreed that the overarching frame for the course was helpful in setting high expectations for their learning and supported their engagement with the modules.

Participants agreed that the module delivery across eight months supported cumulative and progressive learning, enabling them to share the learning journey with their staff.

I am enjoying the fact that we have so much to take back to our schools after each session, on both the leadership agenda and classroom teaching.

Participants highly rated the blended learning opportunities and support from expert facilitators.

...effective professional learning requires sustained attention, study and action to deepen professional understandings, transform beliefs and assumptions that in turn change habits and affect practice to support improved student learning outcomes. (Sparkes, 2003, as cited in DEECD, 2007, p 2)

Interviews, online surveys and focus groups with participants, teachers and students gathered data about how the outcomes of the research project shaped and supported school-based planning and implementation to improve literacy instruction.

Participants indicated that their capacity to collaborate with colleagues and to lead significant change to improve student outcomes was enhanced as a result of participation in the course. The course content was relevant, appropriately pitched to the audience, well organised and set high expectations.

The participants agreed that feedback they received from course facilitators enabled them to reflect on their practice. They noted that the strongest feature of the course is sustainability, when learnings about literacy and leadership are fully realised as school-wide action plans and put in place.

Assessment of student groups' improved literacy achievement levels due to the project was measured using selected tools, identified by participants in their research projects.



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NAPLAN and locally identified literacy assessment measures such as the [English Online Interview](#), suggested varying degrees of improvement in student literacy outcomes. The course has longer term potential and the impacts are likely to be greater as participants apply and develop their understanding in longer term plans for school improvement and implement professional learning with their staff.

## Lessons learned

Potential challenges for schools include ensuring that processes are in place to create and sustain the climate and conditions that lead teachers to review and improve their literacy practices. It is important that participants understand that they will have to dedicate and plan for time to complete professional readings, personal reflections, peer learning groups, workshops, online forums and coaching sessions to fully engage with and complete the course.

## Next steps

There is a high demand for the program and many inquiries from potential participants wishing to enrol in the course. Courses are being planned for 2013.

While the design of the workshops works well for both primary and secondary participants, it was recommended that, as much as possible, peer learning groups be made up from either primary or secondary participants.

## Research base

While most would agree that instructional leadership is critical in the realisation of effective schools, it is seldom practiced. For example, among the many tasks performed by principals, only one-tenth of time is devoted towards providing instructional leadership. (Stronge 1988)

DEECD has contributed to and learned from international research on school improvement, leadership and teacher practice (listed in the accompanying resources list for this project. See below).

The literacy focus for this course was selected after review of longitudinal performance data analysis of student outcomes, and the finding that performance across the system had not improved as expected (DEECD 2012). This impetus was coupled with the imperative that students develop foundational literacy skills to support all future learning and the centrality of literacy to learning areas.



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## Further reading and links

DEECD 2007, The Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders,  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/profdev/developmentallearn.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/profdev/developmentallearn.pdf) 

DEECD 2012, Towards Victoria as a Learning Community,  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/learningcommunity.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/learningcommunity.pdf) 

Halverson, R, Grigg, J, Prichett, R, Thomas, C 2005, 'The new instructional leadership: creating data-driven instructional systems in schools',  
[www.academiccolab.org/resources/documents/HalversonGriggPrichettThomas%20NCPEA.pdf](http://www.academiccolab.org/resources/documents/HalversonGriggPrichettThomas%20NCPEA.pdf) , New Instructional Leadership, NCPEA 2005.

Stronge, JH 1988, 'A position in transition?' *Principal*, 67(5), pp 32–33.

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