



"We are assisting students who will be living in the future, not the past. We need to look at things globally," says Wilma Culton, principal of Serpell Primary School near Melbourne, Australia.

VICTORIA'S LEADING EDGE

AUSTRALIAN STATE PUTS HUMAN CAPITAL AT THE HEART OF ITS IMPROVEMENT PLANS

By Valerie von Frank

Pincipal Wilma Culton's professional development in the last few years has had her setting out for Singapore, conferencing in Canada, and bopping over to Berlin to check out what experts and the best educators around the world know about helping kids learn.

The head of a primary school just outside Melbourne, Australia, Culton is a prime example of the State of Victo-

ria's emphasis on improving education by looking to the world for answers — and its own people to learn them.

"The government encourages us to reach out and look at global trends and context," Culton said. "We are assisting students who will be living in the future, not the past. We need to look at things globally."

For the past decade, Victoria's blueprint has put human capital at the heart of its plan for improvement. Investing in educators' professional learning and benchmarking student achievement against the highest-performing nations in the world are hallmarks of that effort.

The best systems achieve their goals, writes Martin Dixon, minister for education in Victoria, “through a highly professional and networked workforce: a community of professionals where the best make everyone better” (State of Victoria, 2012).

Victoria’s commitment to developing educators’ knowledge over the long term led Richard Elmore, Gregory R. Anrig Professor of Educational Leadership at Harvard University and director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, to say that the state “is on the leading edge of policy and practice in the world” (Elmore, 2012).

‘LEARNING BREAKS OUT’

In remarks at the Learning Forward Annual Conference in 2012, Richard Elmore pointed out that Victoria is a system with more than 1,500 schools and over a half million students, yet “there are just two people between you and the person running the system.” By removing layers of bureaucracy, Elmore said, the Australian state “cashed out overhead to spend on professional development.”

Through not suppressing what people within the system already know, he said, “learning breaks out.”

Victoria’s model is distinctive, according to Elmore (2007), because it:

- **Focuses on creating human capital:** “Investing thoughtfully and coherently in the knowledge and skill of educators” and changing past practices “through collective, concerted, and sustained learning on the part of everyone in the system.”
- **Has broad agreement:** Policy-makers and practitioners agree that investing in the knowledge and skill of people will bring about the desired change. “In most settings outside Victoria, there are very costly gaps in understanding between policymakers and practitioners around the central imperative of human investment,” Elmore wrote.
- **Uses data to make decisions:** Professional learning decisions are based on data — student achievement, and teacher, student, and parent attitudes toward their schools. “Throughout the system, in my experience, people talk about the data as a means for focusing attention on improvement, rather than as a mark of status and a trigger for sanctions,” Elmore wrote.
- **Views accountability as part of developing human**



Richard Elmore

capital. “In many other systems, including all state accountability systems in the U.S. and the U.S. national policy (No Child Left Behind), accountability for performance is considered to be the leading instrument of policy, and human investment is considered to be a collateral responsibility of states and localities, which can be exercised according to their preference,” Elmore wrote.

- **Makes leaders the “carriers of the new culture of school improvement”:** Elmore said most large-scale improvement efforts recognize the importance of leadership, work to develop new leaders, and support leaders’ learning, but in Victoria, “the leadership strategy is essentially the leading instrument in the cultural transformation of the enterprise.”

SYSTEM-LEVEL APPROACH

Victoria creates a system that expects classroom teachers will “have access to sustained professional development over the entire course of their careers,” Elmore said, and their learning coordinates with organization and system goals for student learning growth. Leaders create the conditions for continuous learning in schools, developing teachers’ leadership capacity and being learners themselves.

A system-level approach to supporting leaders is based on Tom Sergiovanni’s five dimensions of leadership: technical, human, cultural, educational, and symbolic — “creating a common language for analyzing and discussing the leadership function in school improvement,” Elmore said.

School leaders get together in regional networks, for professional learning, and on the Big Day Out, a statewide professional learning day that draws leaders from throughout the system to learn from experts from throughout the world. In addition, Elmore noted, principals have individual learning plans through which “the language and expectations of the leadership model and its use as an instrument of school improvement are made explicit in accountability relationships.”

While the U.S. has brought federal and state pressure to bear on increasing student performance, government left local districts to make decisions about professional devel-

Victoria’s school system

87,645	square miles (the size of Minnesota, the U.S.’s 12th-largest state)
1,137	primary schools
75	primary/secondary schools
245	secondary schools
76	special schools
4	language schools
546,499	students
40,730	teaching staff (including principals)

Source: Government of Victoria.

opment. “(T)he states and the federal government exert increasing pressure on schools to perform, but they have essentially defaulted on their responsibility for human investment, leading to an increasingly large number of low-performing schools that continue to operate at low capacity,” he wrote.

Victoria, on the other hand, emphasizes using school data to determine what educators need to know to better help students.

The early implementation stage included “developing the idea of a comprehensive strategy of school improvement reframing the role of the department around that strategy, reorienting the state and regional offices around a new mission, and beginning the long, laborious job of connecting the broader framework of improvement to the daily work of people in schools.”

Victoria’s culture has begun the shift to improve educators’ daily work, changing the culture from one of individualism to a system of collaboration. “Networks are beginning to form increasingly ambitious ideas about what collaboration means,” he wrote.

Elmore cautioned that, as the system begins its shift, it faces challenges, including staying the course as large-scale improvement invariably increase disparities among schools in student achievement before decreasing the differences as schools — and staff — gear up at different rates.

SERPELL PRIMARY SCHOOL

Culton has been head of Serpell Primary School for 15 years. Located in Templestowe, about 15 kilometers (about 9.3 miles) outside Melbourne, Serpell is one of the largest primary schools in the state, with 960 students in 42 classes. Culton is directly responsible for the school’s \$6 million budget, employing staff, maintaining the building and grounds, and deciding how to improve student learning and staff professional learning.

Despite being an award-winning leader in Victoria, despite the accolades from Elmore, Culton can’t rest. “Systems in Asia have been passing us,” she said. “While we have some outstanding schools and classes and students, we still have some low-performing students, particularly our indigenous students.”

She is continually questioning, continually seeking best practices that she can implement in her school. Victoria’s change model, filtered to the school level, plays out in several ways at Serpell.

Data-driven accountability

While the system is decentralized, there is a balance with accountability. “It’s a system of targets,” Culton said.

The school council (school board) reviews school data every four years to create an improvement plan. The school then lays out targets and goals against which the principal and staff are assessed.

Staff base their individual performance plans on the school’s strategic plan. Staff members review their progress twice a year

toward meeting those targets, and every six months, the leader of a regional network of schools meets with the school principal to talk about progress based on evidence and international testing. Schools doing poorly get a full state review plus extra support and funding to help them out of that position.

Serpell’s leadership team, comprising the principal, three assistant principals (in charge of curriculum and student welfare; day-to-day management; and building teacher capacity and extending accelerated learning), and a teacher leader from each grade level representing six or seven sections of that grade, meets weekly to review class data.

“We look at patterns,” Culton said. “We try hard to collect diagnostic data rather than just performance assessment data.”

Having data online can show immediately where teachers may need support. “We can look at the variations among classes, for example. We’ve only been back to school eight weeks and already there are differences in the data,” she said.

“Teachers like to say, ‘Well, we have different kids.’ I know that when we placed the children, that didn’t happen. So looking at the trends and what people might need is part of our ongoing work. Although we have a fantastic model of observation, the question is, how do we move from that, from having our classrooms open and a discourse of discussing professional practice — how do we move everyone to the next stage of being a champion? That is a problem to be solved.”

Research-based professional learning

Culton said she has always connected with faculty at nearby universities to offer staff members professional learning, bringing experts into the school weekly during the workday over the course of at least a year or two so the work is sustained. One, for example, taught about attachment theory — why people behave as they do, how they learn, how they organize themselves, and how to move them forward.

Every two weeks, the staff as a whole engages in professional learning. They have examined New Zealand professor John Hattie’s research around instructional practices that make a difference, such as higher-order questioning, time teachers wait for student response, who talks the most in class. They have looked at positive ways to manage student behavior, goal setting, giving students feedback on how they are learning, student engagement, and best ways to organize the classroom.

While teachers have 2.5 hours a week of administrative planning time, they meet for an hour a week in professional learning communities. In addition, the school has instituted lesson studies after Culton observed them in China.

For lesson studies, special subject teachers, including art, physical education, library, and reading support, take the lead in classrooms, allowing teachers to plan together and then observe a lesson. Teachers meet afterward to discuss the lesson outline, the intention or target, and to reflect on student learning.

The effort is to connect the research to practice and really

home in on teachers' instruction, giving teachers time during the workday for professional learning.

"If it's not systematic, it's not going to work," Culton said. "We have to allow time for people to reflect, to look at someone teaching in the same culture. We don't want cardboard cutout teachers, but we want consistency in practice of the things we think are really important."

Culton's regional network of schools now engages in instructional rounds after learning about the practice from Elmore, and leaders regularly visit one another's classrooms to support teacher learning.

In instructional rounds, school leaders define a problem of practice and meet regularly to observe in classrooms in teams, gathering data on different parts of the lesson with a focus on what students are learning and what a good classroom looks like.

Leadership development

While the focus now is on drilling down into the classroom, Victoria also supports leaders. "We have a vibrant professional learning community," Culton said.

Leaders within the local government area network meet monthly for the regional director to talk about emerging issues and to listen to keynote talks. Annual conferences bring together 300 schools in the Eastern region to learn from world-class experts over three days of sessions focused on school improvement.

Leaders from throughout the state gather for the annual Big Day Out, in which experts from around the world — such as Andy Hargreaves, Michael Fullan, Elmore, Hattie, Tony Barber, and Yong Zhao — work "from a systems view on how to reduce the (achievement) gap and make all schools into great schools," Culton said. The leaders discuss the national agenda, international achievement data, and best practices in breakout sessions.

"The government is developing us as international leaders," she said. "Australia has been isolated, very parochial. We have had very egocentric ways. Now we're being encouraged to reach out, look at things globally."

Culton helped form a sister relationship between Serpell and a school in Singapore to learn more about that country's strategies for improving achievement. She and a school team spent 10 days in Singapore immersed in the culture and school practice, studying the other country's instructional practices while the team from Singapore wanted to learn from the Australians more about building student voice, creativity, and developing the whole student.

"All the principals in my network have traveled widely," she said.

RESULTS

Highlights of results from Australian students' performance on the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Thomson, et al., n.d.) show that as a na-

tion, Australia has some ways to go to catch the international leaders in student achievement. Forty-eight countries participated in the PIRLS, and 52 countries participated in TIMSS Year 4 exam and 45 in the Year 8 assessment. Yet Victoria had some successes:

- Students in Victoria scored significantly higher than students in most other Australian states on Year 4 math and reading. (Students in the Australian Capital Territory did better in reading and science.)
- In Year 8, Victorian students did significantly better than students in two of the seven other states in math and were comparable in science to all others except the Australian Capital Territory.

According to Elmore (2007), systemic change requires long-term commitment to transform the culture. "The Victorian improvement strategy has taken the most powerful ideas in good currency around school improvement and has put them into a coherent form that is distinctive and that defines the leading edge of improvement strategies internationally," he said. "Its primary focus is transforming the system by transforming its human capital. Everything else is instrumental.

"It is not about making schools more accountable for its own sake. It is about using accountability as a mechanism to support and improve practice. It is not about telling people in the field what to do. It is about setting overall expectations for performance and quality and putting the resources and supports behind those expectations," he said.

For Culton, out in the field, the viewpoint is even more focused. "We're trying to work out what we can do to improve opportunities for children," she said. "In the end, that's what it's all about. It's about giving children an edge that's going to help them be successful and confident and worthwhile, contributing members of society — to be the best they can be."

REFERENCES

- Elmore, R. (2012, December).** *How schools learn to improve: Some lessons from clinical practice and research.* Remarks made at Learning Forward's Annual Conference, Boston, MA.
- Elmore, R. (2007).** *Educational improvement in Victoria.* Melbourne, Australia: State Government of Victoria, Department of Education, Office for Government School Education.
- Thomson, S., Hillman, K., Wernert, N., Schmid, M., Buckley, S., & Munene, A. (n.d).** *Highlights from TIMSS & PIRLS 2011 from Australia's perspective.* Melbourne, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- State of Victoria. (2012).** *Towards Victoria as a learning community.* Melbourne, Australia: Author.

•
Valerie von Frank (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an education writer and editor of Learning Forward's books. ■