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Opinion Piece: Efficiency: A Much Neglected Leadership Virtue

 In this opinion piece, Academic Director Viviane Robinson invites feedback on the role of school leaders in ensuring efficient use of teacher and student time in the pursuit of improved teaching and learning.

In all my leadership work, whether in academic writing and research, or in professional development, I seldom hear discussion of the importance of efficiency. Perhaps that is because it is assumed to be a technical matter of far less moral and educational importance than the more common preoccupations of leadership academics and practitioners. At present, we have a national preoccupation, and rightly so, with learning what is required to help *all* our students, not just middle class ones, to succeed on intellectually challenging curricula. The Faculty of Education is heavily involved in research and development projects that are addressing this broad goal. But one of the things we are learning as we go is that making progress takes sustained, intensive and highly focused cycles of inquiry and intervention. We are also learning that a great deal of what happens in schools, makes it hard for teachers and leaders to find the time to learn how to do this work. If we are to succeed in our national goals around, for example, Ka Hikitia, and reduce the large within school variance in achievement that we have in this country, we need to create the space for teachers and leaders to learn how to do this work in ways that have a high probability of success. For me, the central efficiency question for leaders is "What can I do to ensure that the time and efforts of my teachers are used in ways that maximise the probability that we achieve our student learning goals?"

Rather than engage in an abstract discussion of the implications of this question, I use the following anonymous but real example as an anchor for the remaining discussion. The example reflects an improvement project being undertaken by the leadership group of a Year 1- 12 college. My role was to provide 15 minutes of critical feedback to the project leaders.

My first step in critiquing this project was to summarise the presentation in diagrammatic form so that leaders' implicit logic about how to achieve their goals was made explicit. Figure 1 (right) represents this logic. Efficiency requires leaders to ensure that the projects, innovations, action research, new initiatives and other school-based changes over which they have discretion, are tightly aligned to their intended outcomes. If they are not, they are inefficient and waste school resources, the most precious of which is teacher and student time. While the college had discussed the project at length, the discussion had been in terms of practicality (how can this be done) and acceptability to teachers (will teachers commit) rather than critical scrutiny of the causal logic of the project.

Having made the logic explicit, the next step was to ask critical questions about its causal assumptions. Table 1 (overleaf) provides some examples of the questions I asked – or should have asked - about Figure 1.

These questions are likely to highlight a number of ways in which this project is inefficient – i.e. it includes too many activities that are not directly focused on the target and thus takes more time and effort than a more direct approach to improving student achievement would require. First, the student outcome goal is vague and so it will be hard to know what progress is being made in achieving it. Second, the project has multiple strands each of which involves a considerable amount of work, and the causal links between this work and the intended outcomes are indirect at best. Third, the critical questions suggest that project leaders need to learn from empirical research about how to design their strategies in order to increase the probability of success. In short, achieving the performance goal (improved student outcomes) requires prior achievement by the leadership of relevant learning goals and if strategies are designed without this prior leadership learning, it will be take more time and more effort to get it right than it should (Latham & Locke, 2006). For example, while it is reasonable to assume that deprivatised practice is an initial step in improving teaching practice, we know that only particular types of collegial discussion and reflection will deliver improved teaching and learning (Timperley, 2011). The WoW routine required teacher release rosters and numerous meetings and yet I know of no evidence that giving teachers three pieces of positive feedback after a classroom observation completed by a colleague of their choice, does anything to improve the quality of learning and teaching. When challenged on this point, the leaders indicated that they chose this as the initial strategy in order to ensure that "teachers were comfortable". While accepting that no improvement strategy works without gaining teacher commitment, the leaders of Evergreen College are in danger of gaining commitment to a process that bears little relationship to the one that is required to achieve their goal of improved learning and teaching. Rather than integrating their objective of building a collegial culture *and* improving student outcomes, they have privileged the first objective in ways that do not serve the second. Their more indirect strategy adds a year or more to the time it will take to achieve improvements that benefit their students.

Eleven years ago Helen Timperley and I reported a study of one Auckland high school in which we linked the problem of multiple simultaneous initiatives and change projects to teacher stress and burnout (Timperley & Robinson, 2000). Our case analysis, somewhat controversially, explained the presence of these multiple uncoordinated initiatives in terms of three features of school organisation: leaders' limited strategic thinking, leaders' desire to support the voluntary efforts of their staff and norms of professional autonomy. Our argument was that while an incoherent policy environment (Hess, 1999; Honig & Hatch, 2004), contributes to teacher burnout and stress, these three features of school organisation are also major contributors. ***In today's environment, where change and innovation are mistakenly assumed to be the equivalent of improvement, leaders need to take a strongly strategic approach to both internally and externally generated change ideas.*** In this context, being strategic means having rigorous discussions with Board members and teachers around such questions as:

· What is the problem for which this [new resource, routine, strategy, innovation, curriculum package] is supposed to be the solution?

· What assumptions are we making about the causal relationships between our proposed change strategies and our goals?
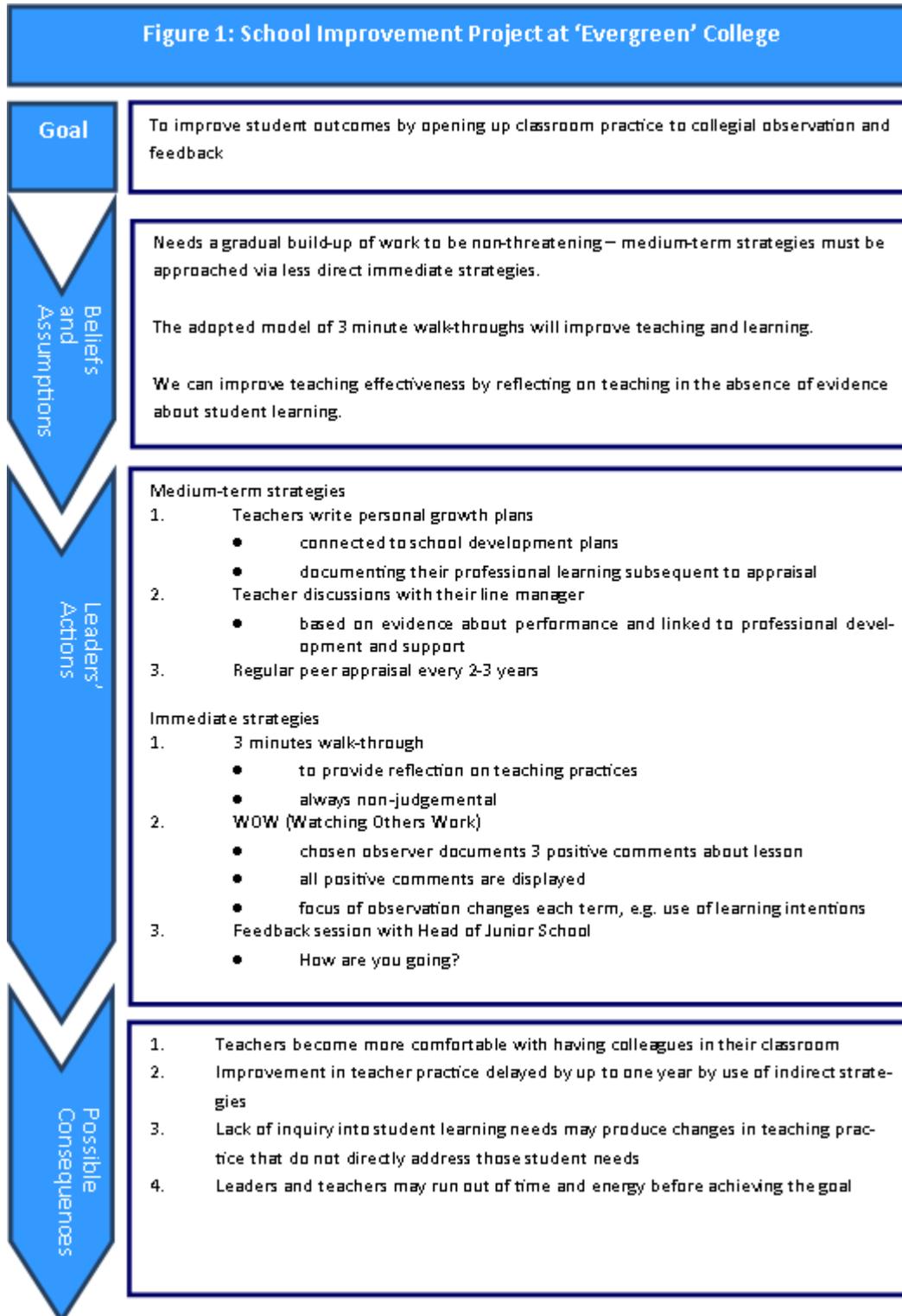
· What evidence do we have from our own inquiry or those of researchers about the validity of our causal assumptions?

· What does this evidence tell us about the particular conditions we need to put in place to ensure goal achievement?

The equity and achievement goals we have set ourselves as a nation and as individual schools are extraordinarily ambitious. While there are pockets of success there is an enormous amount to be learned about how to use existing research evidence to increase the probability of improvement in teaching and learning, and about how to generate school-based evidence about the effectiveness of teachers' own efforts. While improvement can and should be gained through evidence-based reflection and revision, efficient school improvement requires rigorous strategic thinking about the quality of what is proposed, so teachers' time is focused on those few change strategies that are *most likely to work* (Robinson, 2011). **Schools are busy, stressful places – nothing should be added to that load that has not passed the efficiency test and those things that do not pass should be taken off the table.** In that way, leaders can create some space in their school for the strategic thinking and learning that is required to achieve our highly ambitious goals for student success.

Figure 1: School Improvement Project at 'Evergreen' College

Goal

To improve student outcomes by opening up classroom practice to collegial observation and feedback

Beliefs and Assumptions

Needs a gradual build-up of work to be non-threatening – medium-term strategies must be approached via less direct immediate strategies.

The adopted model of 3 minute walk-throughs will improve teaching and learning.

We can improve teaching effectiveness by reflecting on teaching in the absence of evidence about student learning.

Leaders' Actions

Medium-term strategies
1.   Teachers write personal growth plans
   - connected to school development plans
   - documenting their professional learning subsequent to appraisal
2.   Teacher discussions with their line manager
   - based on evidence about performance and linked to professional development and support
3.   Regular peer appraisal every 2-3 years

Immediate strategies
1.   3 minutes walk-through
   - to provide reflection on teaching practices
   - always non-judgemental
2.   WOW (Watching Others Work)
   - chosen observer documents 3 positive comments about lesson
   - all positive comments are displayed
   - focus of observation changes each term, e.g. use of learning intentions
3.   Feedback session with Head of Junior School
   - How are you going?

Possible Consequences

1.   Teachers become more comfortable with having colleagues in their classroom
2.   Improvement in teacher practice delayed by up to one year by use of indirect strategies
3.   Lack of inquiry into student learning needs may produce changes in teaching practice that do not directly address those student needs
4.   Leaders and teachers may run out of time and energy before achieving the goal

The University of Auckland

Centre for Educational Leadership

Te Pokapū Mātanga Ako Mātauranga

CENTRE FOR
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

	Project Logic	Critical Questions for Project Leaders
1.	Student outcomes need improvement	Which students? Which outcomes? What student work and results has been used to identify student learning needs? What do these student learning needs tell us about teachers' learning needs?
2.	Student outcomes can be improved by opening classrooms up to collegial observation and outcomes	What leads you to believe that that will help? What do you know about what the research evidence says about the types of observation and feedback that lead to improved student outcomes?
3.	These three medium term strategies will lead to more collegial practice and better outcomes	Why is your group proposing both peer appraisal and discussion with managers? What do you collectively know about the types of appraisal that do and do not lead to improved teacher outcomes?
4.	The three medium term strategies must be approached indirectly via three immediate strategies	What is the link between the immediate strategies and the medium term strategies? What stops you from tackling the target of improved student outcomes more directly?
5.	Watching Others Work (WOW)	I do not understand how peers giving colleagues three pieces of positive feedback is likely to improve their teaching. Is this what you believe? If so, what leads you to that view?