# Unpacking the Issues: Researching the Shortage of School Principals in Two States in Australia

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## Abstract

*An investigation into the declining supply of principals in two states in Australia revealed that a mosaic of issues surrounds the overall trend towards fewer applications for vacant positions. Looking beyond systemic factors influencing this trend – factors such as the increasing workload of principals – this study discovered why some schools are more affected by a shortage of applicants than others. We found that one of four categories of deterrents was generally involved with declining numbers of applications: location, the size of school, the presence of an incumbent, or difficulties arising from local educational politics. We found, furthermore, that smaller numbers of applicants for vacant positions do not necessarily indicate a decline in interest in school leadership: interest in the principalship remains relatively high but principal aspirants have become increasingly strategic in their applications. Whilst drawing attention, in this paper, to the research finding that numerical interpretations of principal supply have serious limitations, we are keen to acknowledge, briefly, the research data that refers to (a) social and generational changes (b) demographic information, (c) teacher resistance to the modern principalship and how these data explain declining numbers. We also include information about recent changes that go counter to the trend.*

## Introduction

Governments across the world are convinced of the importance of school principals to the achievement of successful school reform. This view is supported by researchers from the school change, effectiveness and improvement fields, as well as those who undertake in depth school ethnographies. When it is reported that there is a looming shortage of teachers willing and able to apply for the position of principal, policymakers and the research community alike respond with interest and concern.

International researchers have begun to explore the reasons for this apparent shortfall in applications (Beaudin et al. 2002, Bell 2001, Bowser 2001, Johnson 2002, Jones 2001, Krüger et al. 2001, Olson 1999, Pugmire 1999, Rader 2001, Williams 2001). Some suggest that while large numbers of teachers take part in leadership training activities, less are inclined to turn this into bids for the position. It is argued that this is because the job is simply too big and unattractive. Others point to the attrition rates in the principalship, concluding that retention in the job is as big an issue as attraction to it. In recent years, there has also been considerable investigation of the problem of principal supply in Australia (Bond 2002, Carlin et al. 2003, Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei 2003, Lacey 2002a). Like their overseas colleagues, local scholars largely attribute the supply problem to declining teacher interest produced by changes in the amount and nature of principals' work, and to inadequate succession planning. Both issues need attention, they argue, and we agree.

The bulk of this international and Australian research has been conducted at a system or state level. At this scale, the data provide convincing evidence that there is both a declining interest in principalship and also a strong probability that the situation will get worse, as younger teachers show low interest in school administration. However, in the USA, a recent re-appraisal suggested that the shortage of principal applicants could neither be described as pervasive nor as universal. Roza et al (2003) argue that the supply problem is confined to particular schools and/or particular districts.

This is precisely what we decided to investigate in our ARC funded study *An investigation of the declining supply of principals in Australia*. On the basis of our own experiences we were keen to get below the level of the whole system and to disaggregate the big picture provided by our colleagues. We wanted to ask which schools receive the most applications and which schools the least, what patterns there might be in this distribution, and what these data might allow us to suggest to policymakers.

In this paper we report what information we have been able to glean about the differential distribution of shortages in applications for the principal position across two states in Australia – South Australia and Victoria. We discuss the lack of publicly

available labour market data and the strengths and limitations of the kind of evidence we have accumulated. We focus on four major reasons for lack of aspirant principals: location, size of school, the presence of an 'incumbent' and local educational politics. We raise some questions about the gendered workings of these key factors, point to the lack of clarity about promotion 'pathways' and discuss the need to accompany succession planning projects with a systematic policy agenda which intervenes in the inequitable supply of school principals.

We begin by briefly reviewing the evidence made available by our colleague researchers and describing the trajectory of our research project and our quest for numbers.

## Desperately seeking statistics

Our initial thinking relied on two major Australian studies on principal shortage and succession planning, one conducted by d'Arbon and colleagues in the Catholic sector across several states (d'Arbon 2003, 2000, d'Arbon et al. 2001, d'Arbon et al. 2002a, d'Arbon et al. 2002b), and the other by Lacey (2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b) who concentrated on Victorian government teachers. We were interested, in particular, in the unusual situation, reported in both studies, that a decline in the number of applications for principal vacancies was accompanied by relatively high figures regarding interest in school leadership: the Catholic Education study showed that 34.5% of senior leaders in the system were actively considering applying for a principal position (d'Arbon et al. 2002b, p. 5) and the Victorian study indicated that 24% of teachers had leadership aspirations that extended to principal class (Lacey 2003a, p. 7). Neither figure was consistent with the idea that the supply of principals might be uncertain in the future: the figures seemed a little too high to indicate a critical decline in interest in the principalship. If people had indicated, at the time of the surveys, that they were interested in applying for leadership positions, why might they not have applied? Although this puzzle remains with us, we now have some explanations.

As the volume of our data grew it became clear that, even though almost every school district reported that the number of applicants was down on figures from the eighties and nineties, an apparent confirmation of the view that there was a problem with future supply of educational leaders, the situation was more complex than it initially appeared to be. We found that a decline in the number of applicants did not automatically indicate a decline in interest in school leadership – a finding that provided interesting links to the d'Arbon and Lacey studies.

The reasons for the apparent disjuncture between leadership aspiration and the decline in application rates is what we have come to think of, in part, as 'secret business'. The

less obvious factors involved in the supply of principals presented us not only with the necessity of reappraising the value of statistics and projections in our research but it also challenged us to confront the overlapping issues of loss of diversity (Fenwick & Pierce 2001, Jones 2001) and quality (Krüger 1996) among principal applicants, as we will show.

## Difficulties with data and interpretation

It is important to state, at the outset, that we were unable to extract comprehensive data from the state systems under study. One told us that it did not routinely aggregate data about applications: an internal study of trends had been conducted and was promised to us, but it was never sent, despite numerous requests. In this state we were, however, able to get a set of equal opportunities data which provided good evidence of spread and number of applications and the gender and ethnic characteristics of applicants. The other state system was evasive, apparently unable to provide data or unwilling to do so. We have, therefore, had to rely largely on reports made to us by people who chair panels for the selection of principals and on the data derived from interviews with senior HR managers in each state.

Our view is that statistical data related to school leadership not only ought to be collected and aggregated, but also ought to be made public. The qualifications, age profile, and distribution of teachers and administrators are important indicators of the capacity of the state system to deliver education to all students regardless of their location, and the population characteristics (gender, ethnicity, disability) speak to the diversity of the profession. We suggest that it ought to be obligatory for governments, particularly those who say they are committed to transparency, to routinely release such information as part of their annual accountability regimes.

We did, however, have some statistical data and a lot of qualitative material, including a substantial volume of information obtained from principals and assistant principals from a wide range of school districts and regions, which presented us with difficulties in making decisions about categorisation and interpretation. We had, first of all, to be flexible in the interpretation of 'decline': a small number of applicants, it was evident, could be regarded as a shortage of applicants in one locality but not in another, so we allowed research participants to represent their own understandings of decline, relevant to their context, and we avoided oversimplifying the data for convenience. There were also other interpretive difficulties associated with regional differences. We found in the data, for example, that the variation in application rates in one state could be classified according to the leafy suburbs/industrial suburbs divide that existed in its capital city and yet this pattern was not repeated in the other. Class, or the socio-economic context of the school, had little narrative meaning in some locations where we conducted research: we were told, moreover, that becoming

principal of a school where children were in need of special support attracted a certain kind of applicant – it was pointed out that working in a disadvantaged area was viewed as an opportunity by some applicants, not a deterrent. A number of interviewees struggled with the identification of categories such as middle class and found it hard to differentiate between schools which served areas with similar income profiles, but where there were some important differences in educational background of parents (what sociologists might think of in terms of class strata or fractions).

What is defined as rural and remote is not equivalent in the two states. South Australia in particular, has many far-flung small schools, often with high numbers of Indigenous students, while Victoria has a far greater number of regional cities and towns with larger high schools and a clutch of primaries. South Australia on the other hand has an extensive system of 'area schools' which are R-10 or R-12, but these are not the norm in Victoria. Lifestyle opportunities and distances vary significantly between states (and within South Australia) and this undoubtedly has profound effects in staffing and the preparedness of teachers to move from one location to another. The two states also differ in their histories of self management, organisation of administrative districts and regions.

It has not been easy, therefore, using our qualitative data, to work out the analytic categories of schools where shortages of applicants are a problem. What we offer here reads across such differences and attempts to find some common principles.

## Which school?

As noted earlier, we have established four major issues in principal shortage: location, size of school, the presence of an 'incumbent' and local educational politics.

### Location

In South Australia remoteness and isolation have long been associated with principal shortage. In these distant places, principals travel two days by car to get to a district meeting and the district manager visits schools by plane: clearly very few make a decision to apply for such a position as some schools have gone as far as to raise money within their community, 'to boost the principal's salary' (Bond 2002), in order to attract applicants. Schools serving the Aboriginal lands in the centre of Australia also had great difficulty recruiting teachers and principals alike: the equity issues here are well known but remain unresolved.

However, in less distant places, rurality was not a definitive disincentive. Distance from the city was not an overriding issue: there were some relatively close areas

which attracted fewer applications than those further away. Some areas which were on the tourist map remained in favour in one state while receiving fewer applications in the other. We were told of country locations which were considered highly desirable lifestyle destinations and where, it seemed, promotion positions were internally distributed around the district, making it hard for 'outsiders' to 'break in'. Thus, rurality could be identified as a factor influencing application rates in some country districts but not in others. There were considerable differences from place to place.

In South Australia the northern suburbs of the city, a site of considerable deindustrialisation and impoverishment, and intense competition with newly funded low fee private schools (see Thomson 2002), had a long history of few applications and appointment of relatively inexperienced principals. During the period of our study it remained a relatively undesirable place for most, but continued to attract a small number of people committed to working in challenging circumstances for social justice. However, this was not the case in Victoria, where the socio-economic context of the school seemed less an issue than other factors.

Interviewees suggested strongly to us that outside these specific cases in South Australia, schools that have had trouble attracting applicants for a principal vacancy are not necessarily those with a high migrant population, with low income families, at the busy intersection of transport routes or out in the bush. Location and demography may be a problem – or they may not: scarcity does not conform to a predictable geography.

However, some patterns did emerge.

### Size of school

In both Victoria and South Australia, the schools that attract fewer applicants than average are those that are either very large or very small. Our research participants regarded a school with over 800 students as a large school and a small school as one having fewer than 200 students. It was rare, we were told, for schools between these extremes (i.e., between 200 and 800 students) to experience trouble in attracting applicants for the position of principal – unless they had a 'poor reputation' (for example, the local 'grapevine' represented them as having fractious parents, militant staff, students with apparently low aspirations or a history of allegedly inadequate management).

It may seem unusual, at first, that a decline in interest in school leadership is especially evident in very small schools. They would seem to be an ideal choice for a person undertaking their first principalship, for example, and might be expected to be in demand for that reason. Similarly, it may not be expected that there is a direct

relationship between a decline in applications and very large schools. Many experienced principals, one might imagine, would welcome the chance to move to a bigger challenge and take on a position in a large city school, possibly one that is commonly regarded as elite. Yet it is evident that the very small and the very large schools, irrespective of whether they are in the 'right' part of town or not, whether they are rural or urban (with the locational caveats mentioned before), and whether they are primary or secondary, have not, in general, attracted substantial fields of applicants. Our interviewees reasoned that: (a) there was a preference for 'safe' schools and avoidance of schools which present special challenges; and (b) only a few people identify themselves as capable of meeting the challenges presented by schools at both ends of the spectrum.

Why is a small school not a 'safe' school, one might wonder. Our informants suggested that the small school is difficult to run, has less funding, fewer staff and, furthermore, poses an unfortunate likelihood for a person to become 'stuck'. It seems that it constitutes a career dead-end. No longer the 'stepping stone' to higher positions that they once were under an hierarchical system of promotion, small schools have become 'traps', we were told. That is, principals of small schools have, in many cases, had difficulty moving out of their positions after a number of years because, under merit selection, they are unable to demonstrate breadth of experience. Moves from small schools can thus be a long time coming, especially if one has had no career experience of working in a larger school. This phenomenon is well known and has deterred others from applying in the first place.

At the other end of the scale, large schools have large budgets and staffs, complex organisational arrangements and are demanding in terms of management and leadership. Devolution has not been accompanied in most cases by an appropriate level of infrastructure and principals in these schools spend long hours on a range of tasks, at least some of which could be done by others. We were also told about the multiplier effect of numbers: there were simply more children and young people in trouble, requiring individual support and more parents with whom to negotiate.

### Secret business

Along with the noticeable trend in size of schools there were other factors that influenced rates of applications for jobs in a less conspicuous way. It is clear, as Lacey (2003a) points out, that not all aspirants become applicants: there is often reason for people to hold back from applying. The data we collected revealed that a reduction in the number of applicants for a position for which a good number of applications were expected was most commonly caused by a situation involving an incumbent – an incumbent re-applying for their job (Blackmore et al., in press).

In both South Australia and Victoria the sensitive issue of competing for a position against an incumbent has led to a covert but universally known and respected code of behaviour, among both principals and aspirants: viz., putting in an application for a position in which the incumbent is reapplying is unacceptable. An ex-principal, reflecting on her experiences as principal of an urban primary school, explained:

> … there were 'rules' such as you did not apply for a friend's job. So you had to know that about a school and you had to know whether or not someone had been acting in the position, looking after it while there was a principal working his way to retirement and therefore deserved the position, so people didn't apply for those jobs. People didn't apply for jobs where they perceived there was somebody ready to take it. … I can remember when my job was re-advertised; there was one application that was from someone way out in the country who obviously didn't understand the 'rules'. No-one from round about applied.

The 'secret business of principal supply' produces considerable speculation and rumour, the research revealed. There was a lot of conjecture among principals, assistant principals and leading teachers, we were told, about who was applying for a position and if there was as much as a suspicion that an incumbent or a friend was applying, this had a direct influence on the number of applications for a position. We were told that, at times, positions had to be re-advertised when people had incorrectly assumed that an incumbent was reapplying. As one Superintendent put it:

> … one of the hardest things is to push out the information that the current incumbent is not applying. Because in the principal networks if there's a sense of an incumbent applying it dries up the field immediately and even when the incumbent sometimes makes it very clear that they're not, then people don't believe them and, unless they've won something else, they just don't believe it and so they don't apply. And often you have to re-run a position in order to show people that the incumbent is not applying and then you get a really different field. I'm just doing, currently, a director's position in a pre-school, one of our most difficult pre-schools, and our highest classification of director and, you know, the field is just non-existent because people thought, although the current director said she wasn't applying, she really was, and so they didn't apply. And that pattern is repeated often when there are incumbents.

This is the negative side of the professional norm of collegiality (c.f. Achinstein 2002). Often based on inaccurate speculation, it is as much concerned with 'not rocking the

boat' as it is with not being seen as being too eager to gain promotion and/or professional recognition. The incumbent rule can also it seems produce a profound sense of futility in potential applicants. This is because incumbents are, most commonly, successful in regaining their positions. This phenomenon, widely observed and discussed, deters many an aspirant from putting in the time and effort to submit an application because to do so would be pointless.

Figures giving the numbers of applicants for positions, we came to understand, do not necessarily reflect the number of people who are seriously interested in school leadership. For such numbers to have veracity, we also need to know whether, and where, the incumbent 'rule' is in operation.

### Local politics

Earlier studies (Carlin et al. 2003, Lacey 2003b) suggested that the selection process itself was a significant issue. Applicants, it was reported, were frustrated with the complexity of the application and the amount of time needed to complete it. A loss of confidence in merit selection has been linked to a decline in application for principal positions by some researchers. Pritchard's (2003) study in Western Australia demonstrated this convincingly: 44% of survey respondents listed the selection process as the greatest deterrent for application.

Our research affirms this finding and suggests that a decline in respect for the merit selection process is a very important factor. Failure of the merit selection process to appoint the best applicant for the position does appear to have caused some people to refrain from applying for positions which did, in fact, interest them. We were told, on a number of occasions, that it was common for a favourite applicant to have an advantage with a selection panel, and that other applicants had little chance of getting noticed when this was the case. District/regional managers, key players on interview panels, for example, clearly act as gate-keepers to keep some people out and champions to support others.

There was talk among some research participants of hierarchically made decisions about who would be selected to fill particular positions. It worked, essentially, by a regional/district director's representative on a panel subtly influencing panel members such as parents or young, inexperienced teacher representatives in their decision making: they were often able to sway people's opinions sufficiently to get an outcome that suited them. The choice was, invariably, somebody whom they considered ideal as a member of their network, somebody of similar outlook. This manipulation of selection, we were assured, excluded some people of considerable merit from being selected.

There was a difference of opinion among our informants as to whether 'old boys' networks still existed. Women, once demonstrably disadvantaged by such affiliative groups, have increasingly moved into the principal class. In Victoria, in some locations, if not throughout the system, women principals have become more numerous than men: in South Australia there are now roughly equal numbers of male and female secondary principals. In some instances we heard talk of gender issues persisting or re-emerging after a period of equal opportunity, in which there was professional development around gender issues and the regular publication of statistics about the gendered distribution of the principalship. Such 'women's audits' are no longer the norm.

We noted a different kind of steerage of selection at work in regions where district/regional managers had a major role in determining the outcome in principal selection. We were told that district/regional managers have been known to favour certain kinds of applicants and in the absence of a state-wide standard for selection, people who did not fit into this mould were often frustrated in their efforts to become a principal. Some district/regional managers sought people with strong managerial characteristics so that the schools in their district would be run effectively from an administrative point of view. Other district/regional managers were known to favour people with innovative ideas or people with a solid understanding of educational theory and practice: some valued experience more than potential. These varied approaches to selection enabled applicants to predict whether they had a chance of getting selected in particular locations.

Informants told stories of people who refused to apply for particular schools because they did not like the management style of the local district/regional managers. If the school had been in another district, it was suggested, there would have been many more applicants. People were also reluctant to apply for schools where there were known histories of industrial difficulty, where there was a parent body prone to litigiousness, or where there was a hostile local media.

## Proceeding with caution

These issues complicate the 'supply' issue and advise caution with figures that might be presented as a robust guide to the future of educational leadership. Looking simply at statistics, if they were available, could lead us to believe that there is a critical situation in all schools because the number of applicants is declining. Yet our data suggests the importance of a number of factors – decline may be no more than the incumbent rule, the influence of a regional director or superintendent, the size of the school or its location. We are confident in saying that claims about a universal principal shortage are likely to be over-claims. We do, however, have some confidence in suggesting that there is a mosaic of supply issues which will produce shortages in applicants in particular schools at particular times.

## Changing principals' work

Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei (2003) are careful not to reduce the supply issue to simple explanations, and, particularly, not to single causes. Writing about 'leadership disengagement', which they suggest cannot be ignored as a contributing factor in the supply of school leaders, they argue that 'intensified, expanded and restructured work roles' and 'changing conceptions of professional identity and career commitment' (p. 11) are also important aspects of the supply question.

In conclusion we deal briefly with this issue and consider how it might intersect with the factors that we have identified in our analysis of 'which school'.

### Principal deterrents

The move to self-managing schools brought enormous changes to the role and workload of a principal (Bodger 2000, Boston Consultancy Group 2003, Gronn 2003, Mulford 2003). As we have argued elsewhere (Blackmore et al. 1996, Thomson 2004, Thomson et al. 2002, the fact that principals frequently voice their frustration with the range of things that are expected of them ironically acts as a deterrent for others to move into principal class. Younger teachers who might normally aspire to progress to the principalship get a negative view of school administration as a career. In our study, research participants of varying backgrounds remarked on the impact of principals' negative feedback to their colleagues.

**AP1** … like I'm an assistant principal, like the whole job is overwhelming. Between HRMs, prims, and CASES, finance, and CASES 21, and occ health and safety, and asbestos management, and all those sorts of things, like I just look at it and think…

**Interviewer** …so are you going to apply?

**AP1** No. Not at the moment I wouldn't.

**Interviewer** What would change your mind?

**AP1** I think it just takes a long time to get to know everything. Like you feel like you need to know everything but you can't possibly.

The weight of accountability, pressure from parents, the shift from managing discipline to establishing social and emotional supports for students combined with a diverse range of expectations, including skilful financial and risk management, act as a deterrent for many people who might otherwise aspire to become a principal. Information we obtained through principals' associations and the Australian

Education Union suggests that there are competent principals who have signalled their intention to resign or not reapply for their position when it becomes vacant because they have 'had enough'. Many principals in our study, individually and in group discussion, gave voice to their regret that the principalship had become strongly management oriented and regret that educational leadership was not at the centre of the work. A strong commitment that 'they were there for the kids' prevented many assistant principals from taking the next step.

### Social and generational changes

Some research participants linked the decline in applications for principal vacancies to changes in family life and changes in society.

Whereas teachers, particularly men, were once quite prepared to move to a new district in order to secure a principal position, this has changed significantly over time. Both male and female teachers, like other professional people, are now likely to have partners with a career of their own, and that career may not easily be transferred to a new location. Where women might once have given priority to the 'head of the household's' job, they are now more likely to maintain their own position and not sacrifice themselves. Rather than jeopardising the career of one of the partners, a safe option is to stay within a locality, taking the opportunities that arise there instead of seeking them elsewhere. Teachers are less likely to move house to take up distant positions even if the benefits promise to be considerable. This shift in family relations and patterns of work has resulted, especially in South Australia, in lower mobility for teachers: fewer teachers are applying outside their local area than ever before. This reluctance to move contributed, it seems, to a lowering of the numbers applying for rural positions.

Mobility is also affected by lifestyle changes of a more general kind. Quality of life means that teachers, like others, are examining the additional hours required in promotion positions, and at least some are choosing not to go further on the career ladder. Lifestyle and quality of life issues have also affected country regions in particular ways. We were told that the view, that living in the country is a healthy choice, ideal for raising a family, is not as strong as it used to be. Parents are more likely to be more concerned about access to education for their children, access to health facilities, entertainment and cultural activities that are commonly associated with a 'good lifestyle'. Country towns seem, in present circumstances, to be viewed as places that can hinder rather than advance a family's prospects. Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier, they can become places that entrap, making it difficult to leave. It is safer not to apply in the first place, many potential applicants conclude. People are not prepared to take the risk; by not applying they at least maintain their lifestyle and preserve family harmony.

A final demographic factor concerns generational differences. More than half of the country's teachers are aged 45 years or more (Ministerial Council on Education 2003) and an increasing number of them will retire in the coming years (Preston 2002). Young, or relatively young teachers currently in schools, identified as likely to be promoted into principal class, to cover a shortfall in supply, have good prospects of becoming educational leaders. Whether they will take up the many opportunities as they arise or not is uncertain. As studies such as that by MCEETYA – The Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2003) – and the Australian Education Union (AEU) (2003) suggest, and as we can confirm from our research, young teachers are as likely to envisage themselves as having moved out of education within five to ten years rather than having stayed in the system.

There are two aspects to the exodus of young teachers from the profession. On the one hand, graduate teachers, frustrated by the difficulties that confront them at school are likely to take the attitude that if things do not improve for them in two to three years, they will leave. They will seek alternative employment. On the other hand, young teachers, whose teaching experiences have left them feeling reasonably satisfied, may still seek out other opportunities elsewhere because that is the modern way of life. One no longer stays in the same job or even the same occupation for long periods of time: the pattern is to change after five or six years, to seek stimulation elsewhere and not be consumed by any one organisation (Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei 2003, p. 10). This scenario is, perhaps, the most serious aspect of the supply issue.

Nonetheless, a new wave of influences appears ready to provide some counterweight to this trend. In the course of our research we compiled information about numerous leadership development programs conducted by state leadership units, professional associations, regional offices of departments of education and the AEU. The need for some form of succession planning, having been identified, has resulted in the targeting of younger people for leadership positions, especially in Victoria, where the Blueprint for Government Schools (2003) is poised to exert some influence on leadership. Local initiatives, driven largely by principals who have been persuaded of the need to foster young talent, have made an impact as well in some places. As a result, people in their early 30s have recently taken on principal positions, even in large secondary schools.

We commenced our research with a demographic study (Preston, 2002), which showed that the current crop of school principals represented a small cohort from a relatively numerically large generation of teachers (p. 2). The subsequent two generations of teachers were both much smaller in number and, if the principal-teacher ratio were stable across generations, the model suggested a pretty severe leadership issue. But, this labour market modeling showed not just a shortfall of

principals, but also of teachers. When the current oldest generation of principals and teachers retires within the next ten years there could well be serious recruitment problems for teachers, middle managers, principals and teacher educators. This labour market study suggests that succession planning ought to be strongly directed towards developing not only the middle generation of teachers in schools, but also the very youngest.

This suggests that part of the supply solution also will be provided by conscious intervention at both local and state levels to work on retaining younger teachers in the profession, as well as thinking about ways in which some might reenter after having a period of doing other things.

## Conclusion

In summarising the factors that have affected applications for principal positions in the period 2002-2005 it is clear that some schools are more likely to attract applicants than others: issues of locality, size, covert rules about the etiquette of application, and local politics are all important. There is no uniform shortage of principals at present, but rather there is a mosaic of issues which attract and put off potential applicants.

There are two key issues here. The first of these is a tendency for teachers to be more strategic in their application for vacant positions than in earlier times, as in the mid eighties when the introduction of merit selection resulted in 'an avalanche of applications'. Teachers have become more selective in their applications for clearly identifiable reasons, for example, avoiding applying for positions where they see powerful factors other than merit to be at work, or knowledge that an incumbent is re-applying, they have a friend, against whom they feel disinclined to compete. The second trend, running parallel to the first, is related to quality of life and lifestyle issues. While the first of these is amenable to policy intervention, the latter is less amenable to government intervention. Nevertheless, the consistent evidence that significant numbers of teachers are deterred by the modern principalship with its emphasis on management rather than educational leadership does, we continue to argue, point strongly to the need for coherent and robust efforts to redesign this critical educational work.

Our investigation into the decline of the supply of principals in Australia has confirmed that there is a reduction in the numbers of applicants for principal positions, but this shortage is not evenly distributed across the state systems. It is virtually impossible to depict, in a definitive way, the decline in interest in school leadership. It is not a simple, quantifiable matter. A decline in applications does not necessarily mean a decline in interest in leadership. While there have been, and

continue to be clear deterrents for people to take on the principalship, there are multiple factors at work, in any vacancy, that may cause a small number of applications to be lodged. These need to be analysed on a case by case basis to get an adequate understanding of the various issues at work.

Our project and these data suggests that succession planning needs to start early and that those who are interested in school administration receive every encouragement and the systematic provision of opportunities to develop a repertoire of appropriate experience, skills and knowledge. Our research has highlighted the inadequacy of data either kept or made available by state systems and the singular importance of this in disaggregating issues relating to supply. There are important equity issues at stake here, besides the principles of good and transparent government. Tracking who applies for principal positions and to which schools is important not only for encouraging diversity in the workforce but also for ensuring that the most vulnerable communities get the skilled school leadership and management that they need. In our view, state systems need to open up discussions about 'which schools' in order to develop a more diverse and differentiated menu of approaches to the question of principal supply.

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