



**Building leadership capacity and capabilities  
to improve school culture and climate**

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AREA SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT

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## **Purpose of Sabbatical**

To investigate, observe and explore ideas on building leadership capacity and capabilities to effectively lead professional learning conversations to continually improve school climate and culture at Christchurch Adventist School.

## **Acknowledgement**

I wish to acknowledge and thank the chairman and the members of the Christchurch Adventist School Board of trustees for their respective leadership and vision to provide me opportunities to explore and investigate best practice ideas in building and growing leaders.

This report also acknowledges the contributions made by the New Zealand Seventh-day Adventist Schools Association for funding the Staff School Improvement Survey. Also to the many educational leaders, principals and school leaders for sharing their vision and creative ideas on empowering leaders and creating a rich school culture.

## **Executive Summary**

Although this report is predominantly strategically for Christchurch Adventist School, the findings were shared with contributing schools that were willing to share their stories. The outcomes of the Insight SRC Staff School Improvement Survey will give strategic direction on improving the culture and climate of the school in order to maximize the educational outcomes and achievements of the students, whom we serve, educate and love.

Key critical elements in implementing a school improvement plan:

- Intentional programme learning, such as staff professional development and training to build awareness, knowledge and understanding
- Coaching to support, develop, and encourage reflection and learning on overall improvement plan

- Implement an action plan to set systems and structures to measure and bring about effective school improvement

Leadership will apply the four culture behaviours principles when leading out on school wide initiatives or addressing teaching practices. The four pillars of culture are:

- Empathy
- Clarity
- Engagement
- Learning

Cultural change will be achieved through:

- Distributed leadership
- Whole Staff Collaboration to facilitate professional learning conversations
- Empowering Staff to co-construct and co-create agreed systems and structures
- Leaders and staff will create an authentic and infectious culture of faith

Strategies will be delivered through various school wide activities to establish a positive and effective school culture and climate:

- Explicit improvement agenda
- Analyzing data using meaningful and robust data
- Clearly communicating a culture that promotes learning modeled by both teachers and students
- Use of targeted school resources
- Mentoring / Coaching 'expert teaching team' to support teachers
- Produce a systematic curriculum delivery
- Implementation of differentiated teaching and learning
- Consolidation of effective pedagogical practices school wide
- Strengthen school-community partnership including local church community

## **Background**

In 2012, Christchurch Adventist School undertook a self-review through a wellbeing research project with Insight SRC. From its findings, and using other internal self-review tools, the Board and Senior Management Team explored and investigated a strategic leadership plan to maintain a high performing school by improving the school climate and culture. The aims were to maintain and sustain an effective culture by the school leaders, teachers and learners whereby on-going learning conversations would lead to a climate of continued student achievement.

The school climate of on-going social and emotional changes due to the Canterbury Post Earthquake recovery and school enrolment growth impacted the school culture. The school needed to sustain a school and culture without additional pressure to the demands and workloads of teachers at Christchurch Adventist School.

Furthermore, as a key outcome of the Principal's Appraisal targets, the action to build leadership capacity and capabilities to effectively lead learning conversations with all learners as a means to improving the school culture and climate. As an Area School of 220 students, the sustainability to the school leadership team in sustaining a high performance school has triggered emotional responses from the staff and may have created certain friction and challenges when leading and implementing a school improvement plan or initiative. Therefore, ensuring school structures and systems are embedded within the school culture will generate a sustainable success climate for all learners.

### **Rationale for building leadership capacity and capabilities**

Leadership is both complex and multifaceted activity. 21<sup>st</sup> century schools are more complicated and diverse than ever before. School demands and expectations are so overwhelming that leadership struggles to meet all the challenges it faces. Schools require its leaders to continually grow and even 're-invent' themselves to become effective to the school and team they lead.

The essence of an exceptional teacher requires sound organizational skills and 'reflective practitioners'. In reality there is limited capacity at Christchurch Adventist School in managing and driving change. As enrolments increase there will trigger points in the organization that will cause friction and tension. Identifying and managing these triggers requires skilled leaders to ensure the structures and systems does not staff morale and detract educational outcomes.

As a small Area School that seeks to continuously improve, the building, equipping and empowering school leaders is critical to the success in driving a change in behaviours and emotions.

To better understand the concepts of building leadership capacity and capabilities, critical questions were gathered, observed and explore:

1. What are the best practice models of leadership in building capacity and capabilities of teachers in schools?
2. What are the key aspects of school climate and culture, and how will these aspects impact school improvement at Christchurch Adventist School?
3. What are the best practice models of leading, sustaining and building a climate and culture of learning conversations amongst all learners
4. What are the leadership tools and strategies that school leaders use to create a climate and culture of learning amongst teachers and students?
5. What systems need to be put in place to create a climate and culture of excellence amongst all learners?
6. What resources and training are needed for a successful transition to a school climate and culture of excellence?
7. What are the obstacles, challenges and barriers when transitioning into a culture of excellence for Area and Christian schools, and how what strategies need to be considered?

## **Methodology: Nature of the Study**

The experience in exploring ideas and practices was thoroughly enriching as it led to the value establishing focal targets for the school. The investigation was intentionally diverse in nature and included visiting different schools in Australia, business corporations such as Google and hospitals such as Florida Hospital and Loma Linda University Hospital.

Exploring literature review on the theories on capacity and capability building to bring an improvement to the culture and climate of schools involved reading recommended books and journals by principals and my appraiser, Dr Maureen Doherty.

The period of study involved the following activities:

- Exploring ideas through professional reading of journals and current research on improving school climate and culture
- Interviewed Christian school leaders to share their stories on creating, nurturing and sustaining a culture of excellence within Adventist Schools in Australia. Then explored and observed what school leaders considered to be the essential tools and strategies to create a culture and climate of learning. Australian schools visited included Central Coast Adventist School, Hills Adventist College, and Mountain View Adventist College.
- Attended the America Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference in Nashville to investigate current trends of how school leaders managed “school improvement” by equipping their leadership team, boosting staff morale and student achievement.
- Read to explore the literature on school improvement through leaders from small to large schools from the United Kingdom, United States and Australia.
- Attended Insight SRC Professional Development for School Leaders and reviewed Insight SRC’s Staff School Improvement survey data on climate and culture to identify key areas of strengthens and areas for improvement to establish strategic goals.

- Surveyed all staff at Christchurch Adventist School using the Insight SRC's Staff School Improvement Survey as a research project to generate evidence and data.
- Reflected to implement a strategic leadership action plan to build school leadership capacity and capabilities to improving school culture and climate.

## **Key Findings and Implications**

### **Corporate Sector: Google Corporation**

Google's work culture and climate is obviously intentional from the building structure to the workplace spaces. The exterior buildings design and colours encouraged creativity. Employees were scrupulously selected to match the work place mindset and work ethics. It was clearly evident that "work and play" were critical to Google's corporate culture and climate.

The reality is schools cannot match corporate funding levels to operate schools, especially Special Character (faith-based) Area schools (Years 1 to 13). The ability of Area Schools to attract high caliber and quality teachers cannot match the human resource capacity and capability such as Google. However, in principle, schools with limited financial resources can create a vibrant and rich workplace atmosphere.

### **Health Sector: Florida Hospital and Loma Linda University Hospital**

Exploring large organizations in how they build leadership capacity and capabilities to improving the culture and climate organizational was the reason to visiting Florida Hospital and Loma Linda University Hospital. Valuing patient care and communicating high standard of health was obvious in both organizations. However, intentionality was evident in the language and expectation of the hospital and university administrators. Beside the mission, vision and core values visually everywhere, the "people speak" or the corporate language was audibly evident. Administrators walked and talked self-improvement and every level of the organization understood their roles, function and purpose.

The larger the organization the ‘louder’ leaders needed to provide clarity and expectation of the employees to gain optimal outcome.

### **United States North Eastern School Sector**

Professional conversations with various school “administrators”, such as principals, district superintendents, and school lead teachers provided a broader understanding of the educational system in various states. School leaders are highly committed and passionate to the education profession, but had limited ability to create change due to the bureaucratic and litigious system. Due to court action against schools by teachers terminated for under performing or incompetency, certain school district implemented “assertive action”. In reviewing teacher appraisal data showed that many schools lacked the support systems and structures required in bringing about effective teacher improvement. Furthermore, many schools lacked providing teachers clear expectations on teaching practice and learning.

Certain school districts such as in the city of Chicago and New York made intentional policies to fund ‘Teacher Leaders’ to strategically “coach” both high performing and underperforming teachers as part of the teacher improvement plan. Best practice coaching are ‘strategist coaches or ‘intervention coaches’ in modeling and reinforcing teaching practice and learning expectations. The emphasis was to empower teaching through robust and intentional feedback by using data, classroom observation and creating tools to provide a transparent student voice on teacher performance.

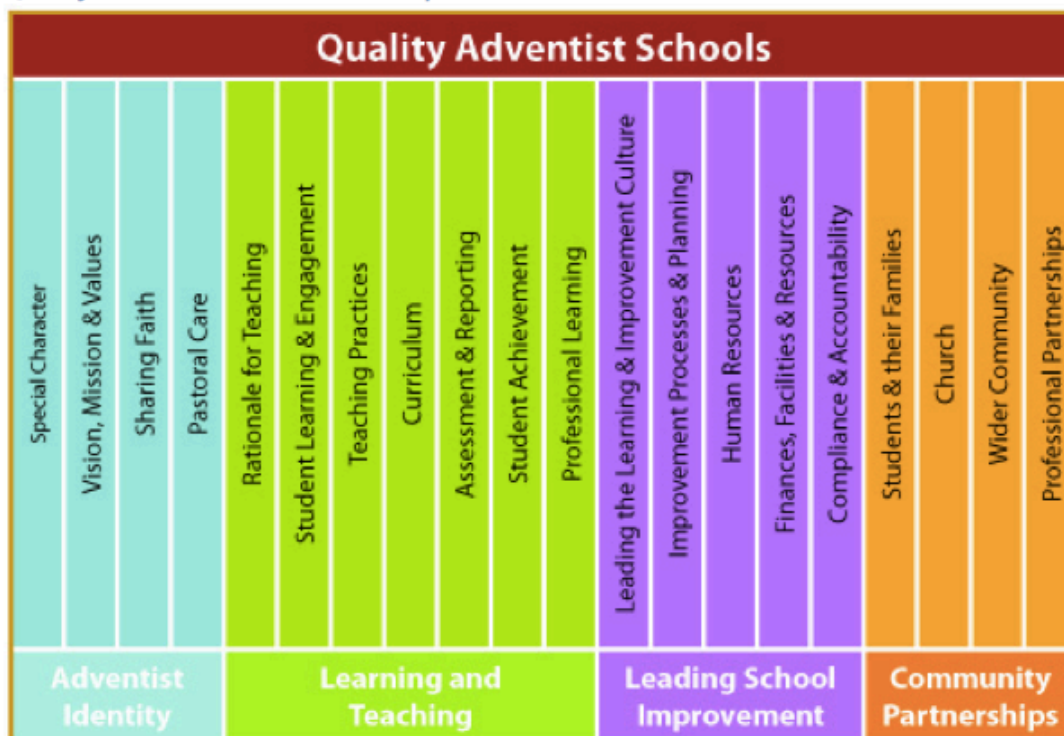
### **Adventist Schools Australia Sector: School Improvement Framework**

Seventh-day Adventist education system is the world’s largest protestant education system. Adventist Schools Australia’s school leaders completed a national self-review on evaluating what makes an effective Christian Adventist school. The findings of the review discovered the need to engender and create a culture of professional conversations amongst school leaders and teachers on ways to formulate an improvement plan. This eventuated in the development of the “Quality Adventist School Improvement Framework, an explicit self-assessment tool to measure effectiveness in 2013. This school improvement framework focused on four key domains or dimensions of what defines the operational culture and the teaching and



learning climate practices of an effective Christian Adventist School. These four domains are: Adventist Identity (Special Character), Learning and Teaching, Leading School Improvement and Community Partnerships. Under each domain were 20 foundational components that underpinned improvement areas. (Murdoch D, Enhancing School Improvement, Quality Adventist Schools, 2013)

### Quality Adventist Schools - 20 Components



The aim is to guide school leaders create an authentic Christian learning environment and develop a culture of improvement to ensure Adventist schools are ‘quality sustainable schools’.

The next step is to support school leaders in building capacity and capabilities to drive the school improvement framework. It was clear that many school leaders of various smaller school rolls (less than 300) were finding the self-review a sustainable model, however, acknowledging that driving and leading a change in cultural behaviours was a three to five year journey.

## Literature Review Findings

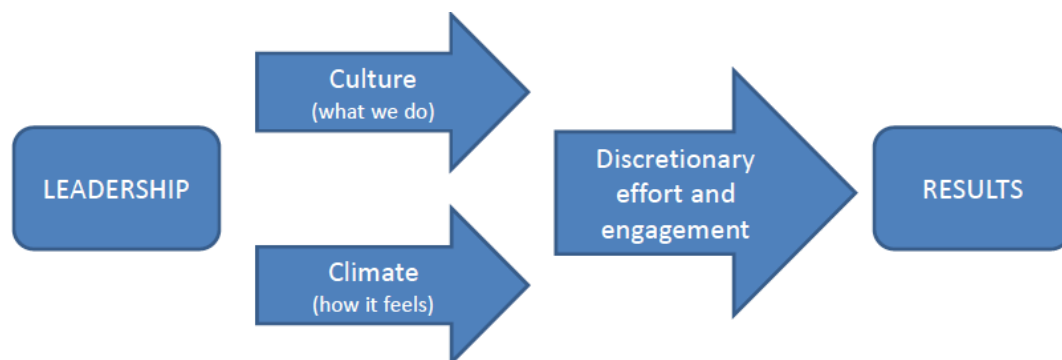
1) The Basis for Building Leadership Capacity: Assumptions (Lambert, Kent, Richert, Collay, & Dietz, 2012)

The five assumptions that serve as the basic premises for building leadership capacity in schools:

1. Leadership is not trait theory; leadership and leader are not the same.
2. Leadership is about learning.
3. Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader.
4. Leading is a shared endeavor.
5. Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority. (2012 pp122–143)

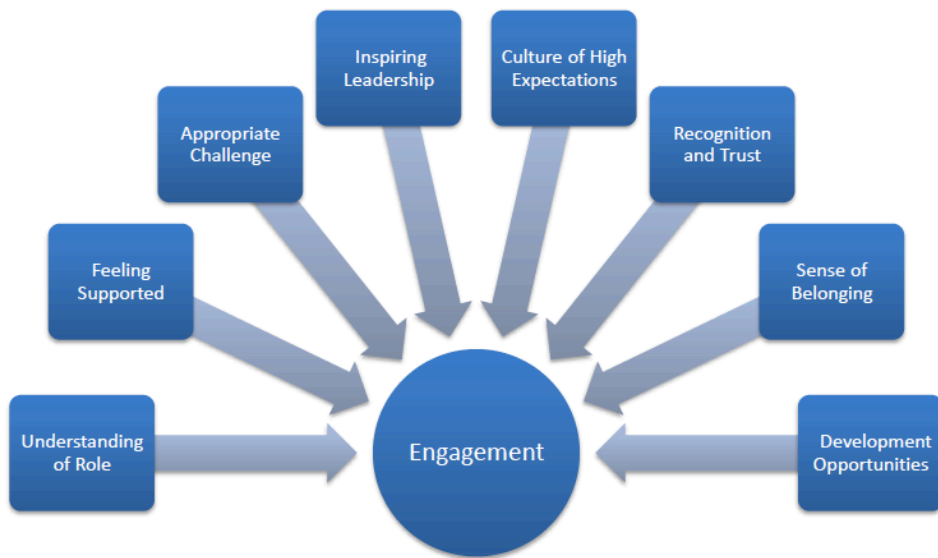
2) Seven Habits of Highly Effective Schools, Buck, A 2014

Buck indicates that fostering a positive attitude amongst school leaders and staff is key to driving improvement to the culture of the school organization. (What makes a Great School, 2009). Buck ascertains that by creating the right culture and climate it will achieve the desired educational results of the organization.



Source: Pendleton and Furnham, 2012 ‘Leadership – all you need to know’

A change to the culture and climate requires the right engagement tools that will not only have the ‘buy-in’ the staff but also include that of students and parent community. Buck’s findings showed that the key impetus for change was “personal engagement”. This requires the leadership skills of an empathetic communicator.



Source, Buck, A 2014, Seven Habits of Highly Effective Schools

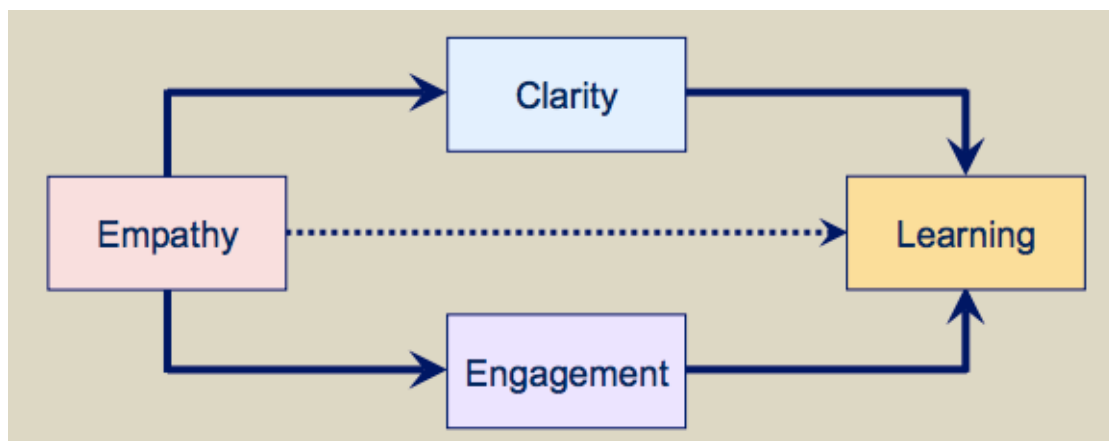
3) Understanding School Climate to drive Improvement: Insight SRC ( Insight SRC Social Research Consultants) provides a diagnostic assessment on the values, attitudes and performance of an organization. SRC utilizes current best practice research on the evidence-based models on school effectiveness and data from the school to assist and strengthen school’s organization with change management and morale improvement programmes. Culture is defined as the “deep seated norms, values and traditions of the school that evolves over long periods of time, is not be easily measured nor immediately obvious”. Climate is defined as the “behavioural and attitudinal manifestations of culture, that can be changed relatively quickly, is measured through surveys; and be picked up in a few weeks. Insight SRC states “the quality of the school’s climate has a strong influence on the socio-emotional and faith-based outcomes for students, which in turn, influence students’ levels of academic achievement” (Understanding School Improvement: Linking School Culture, Faith-Based Behaviours and Student Outcomes in a Christian School Environment, 2014)

Furthermore, that the attitude teachers (85% impact) have towards their students is equally, if not more, important than their professional skills in building strong teacher-student relationships that contribute to student wellbeing (58% impact),

engagement in learning (60% impact), faith-based behaviours (48% impact), student relationships, and academic achievement (18% impact). By changing behaviour will gradually change culture. (Insight SRC Understanding School Improvement, August 2015)

The four core pillars of culture that form the foundations of wellbeing and performance within an organisation are:

1. Empathy – optimising trust, respect and understanding
2. Clarity – optimising a sense of purpose, focus and accountability
3. Engagement – optimising teamwork, empowerment and shared ownership
4. Learning – optimising challenge, personal growth and continuous improvement



An engaged workforce (teachers and staff) is the key to school improvement, as they set the school climate. Therefore, the emotions of energy, enthusiasm, passion, pride and team spirit are key to staff morale. The organisational climate has seven core behavioural elements to improving the culture of the school. These are:

1. Supportive leadership – caring, understanding needs and effective communication
2. Role Clarity – Staff have a clear sense of purpose, expectations and goals
3. Teamwork – collaboration and proactively supporting each other
4. Empowerment – decisions are co-constructed and co-created by the staff
5. Ownership – staff have shared and agreed goals

6. Appraisal and Recognition – receiving regular feedback on role performances
7. Professional Growth – Staff’s efforts are recognised and given opportunities to grow

## **Conclusions**

In partnership with New Zealand Adventist Education, Christchurch Adventist School implemented a school effectiveness improvement survey to assess the school culture and climate to implement strategic goals from 2016. Staff school Improvement Survey assessed the school’s strengths, challenges and opportunities for improvement. The survey evaluated how school demonstrated links between the different types of School Climate (Organisational and Teaching Climate), Student Behaviour, Student Wellbeing, Faith Climate (faith based behaviours) and Academic Achievement.

The school data provided a means of assisting the leadership team and school board of trustees to understand how well our school is operating and ways to help improving people management and work practices that drive staff wellbeing, motivation and performance.

### 1) Opportunities to building leadership capacity and capabilities

Building capacity and capabilities for Christchurch Adventist School is essential as the school enrolments increases and with the property development will impact school culture and climate. Reviewing the school leadership structures to identifying staff morale to guarantee smoother transition in facilitating change.

The school’s leadership team will:

- i) identify key staff and develop a professional development plan to up skill leaders implementing the four pillars of cultural change model.
- ii) work with staff to addressing the ongoing educational changes such as assessment and work demands in order to develop a continuous improvement plan without impacting student achievement as enrolments continue to grow.

The engagement of the School Board and Proprietors to support and implement the required structures for change in managing growth whilst meeting the mission of the school and church.

## 2) Opportunities to strengthen school culture and climate

The leadership identified two pillars of cultural change for development:

1. Clarity on teaching practice and workplace expectation
2. Engagement of staff should always be accompanied with evidence-based data to empower action that is owned and co-created by them

"Teaching needn't be exceptional to have a profound effect, continuous common-sense efforts to even roughly conform to effective practice and essential standards will make a life changing difference for students across all socio economic levels."

Mike Schmoker, *Results Now (Building Teachers Capacity for Success, 2008)*

## Professional Reading References

Relevant research and reading information used for the Sabbatical:

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