

in the moment

NEWSLETTER

WHEN GOOD ENOUGH IS GOOD LEADERSHIP

Education leaders live with an uncomfortable contradiction. We care deeply about quality, yet there is never enough time to do everything to the standard we would prefer. Especially now, when so much of the educational expectations under our feet are on the move.

There may be a variety of views on the current raft of changes, but the song sheet of every school and centre I and my colleagues walk into is the sheer volume of work associated with them.

If, like me, your DNA spells “*perfectionist*” (not uncommon amongst school and centre leaders) the temptation is to respond by working longer, checking more carefully, rewriting something one more time, while reluctantly accepting that the job is never finished.

But the research points us in a different direction. The answer is not to perfect more tasks. It is to become more disciplined about **which tasks deserve our best attention.**



Judge leadership by the system, not the polish.

For principals and centre managers, this begins with a shift in how we define the quality of leadership. **A leader's quality should be judged less by how well they do each of their tasks and more by how well they create the conditions for good teaching.**

That is a significant reframe. It means the polished Board report, the thorough strategic document, and the carefully worded email are not the best evidence of effective leadership.

Research on principals' use of time suggests we're at our most effective when we strengthen the conditions in which teachers and learners can succeed. Horng, Klasik and Loeb found that principals who spent more time on organisational management, rather than being swallowed by routine administration, were more likely to lead schools with stronger achievement, a better learning climate, and safer psychological environments for students to thrive.

While no equivalent research exists for how Centre Managers should best use their time, a New Zealand case study by Marnell & Thornton in 2022 identified effective centre leadership practices. These included creating conditions for teamwork, sharing expertise, facilitating and guiding staff, and organisational management.

“Organisational management” doesn't sound inspirational. It's often behind-the-scenes work. It takes self-discipline and strategic intent on your part – putting the people, resources, routines, and conditions in place that enable good teaching to occur reliably. Not necessarily stimulating work, but vital nonetheless.

Organisational management is less about clearing today's inbox and more about building the systems that prevent tomorrow's problems. Grissom and colleagues similarly found that principal's organisational management skills consistently predicted better school outcomes.

There is no escaping “*routine administration*” – those immediate tasks such as dealing with student discipline, completing compliance requirements, and processing paperwork. The point isn't that administration does not matter. It is that administration should serve the work, rather than become the work.

Put time into the work that matters most.

The practical question for a time-poor leader is this: which work most directly strengthens teaching, teacher learning, school orderliness, and the strategic allocation of people, time and resources?

That question is both liberating and demanding. It gives us permission not to treat every task as equally important. But it also requires the courage to distinguish between work that is urgent, and work that is genuinely consequential.

The evidence is particularly clear about teacher learning. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe's meta-analysis found that promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the strongest association with improved student outcomes of the leadership practices they examined. That makes teacher learning one of the areas where a leader's limited time is most likely to repay the investment.

International research on ECE leadership paints a similar picture of the need for Centre Managers to protect their leadership time for staffing, staff learning, creating workable routines, and systematic quality improvement.

And when leaders cannot improve everything, coaching is one of the better bets.

Kraft, Blazar and Hogan's meta-analysis of teacher coaching – those sustained, focused conversations in which you help a teacher examine evidence about their practice – found substantial effects on instructional practice and positive effects on student achievement. Grissom and colleagues also found that time spent on teacher coaching and evaluation was more strongly associated with improved learning than time spent on informal classroom walkthroughs.

I can feel principals of larger schools cringing at this point. How is it possible to give useful feedback to teachers, to encourage them to try specific improvements, and to evaluate their effect on student learning? Think again – the point is that you need to create the system for this to happen, to establish the organisational management for it. Great if it's you – that's essential in smaller contexts – but not at the expense of other elements of the organisational management falling by the way.

Walkthrough visibility has its place, but visibility without useful feedback can easily become performance theatre. Coaching, by contrast, creates the possibility of change. Walkthroughs at the expense of systems leadership becomes ineffective practice.

For a time-poor principal or ECE manager, this suggests a smaller number of deeper conversations rather than a larger number of superficial contacts. It means investing in feedback that helps teachers understand what is working, what is not yet working, and what they might try next. It also means resisting the temptation to launch too many improvement priorities at once.

Manage teachers' workload.

There is another leadership responsibility that deserves much more attention: **the active management of teacher workload.**

Time poverty is not simply a personal productivity problem. OECD and New Zealand evidence shows that education work is structurally overloaded. Teachers and leaders face the combined demands of teaching, planning, assessment, administration, pastoral care, family communication, documentation and continual change. In early childhood settings, staff are constantly moving between children, families, planning, compliance, and administration.

Some of that overload is imposed from outside. But some of it is created from within. Leaders therefore need to ask hard questions about the work they require:

- Which documentation is genuinely used?
- Which meetings improve teaching?
- Which initiatives have outlived their usefulness?
- Which tasks could be simplified, standardised, delegated, or stopped?

Protect teacher time.

Protecting teacher time is one of the most important expressions of instructional leadership. A leader who removes unnecessary work, slows initiative churn, and clarifies expectations is creating the conditions in which teachers can focus more fully on teaching.

The second part of the challenge is **collaboration**. The evidence supports collaboration, but not collaboration as a vague ideal or as an additional meeting.

Ronfeldt and colleagues found that teachers working in schools with higher-quality collaboration achieved better gains. TALIS 2024 suggests that the most useful collaboration is aimed at instructional improvement. Collaborative professional learning, working together to establish common standards in assessment, and joint planning activity across classes or age groups were all associated with stronger fulfilment of lesson aims.

Replace solo effort with shared instructional problem-solving.

The test is whether collaboration replaces duplicated solo work and is anchored in concrete questions:

- Which learners are not progressing as expected?
- What do their work and responses tell us?
- What teaching approach will we try next?
- What will we stop doing?
- What evidence will show whether the change has made a difference?

These are not questions that require elaborate inquiry templates or lengthy meetings. They require clarity, shared evidence, professional trust, and follow-through.

This is where leadership quality becomes visible. Not in whether every teacher produces the perfect lesson plan, but in whether teachers have the time, support and collective discipline to improve the next lesson. Not in whether every initiative is implemented, but in whether the most important work is done well enough, consistently enough, and thoughtfully enough to improve learner outcomes.

Time-poor leaders will never complete everything to their preferred quality. Nor will their teachers. The real leadership task is to ensure that the right work receives the best time, the rest is deliberately simplified, and quality is judged by impact rather than polish.

This issue of our
In the Moment Newsletter
was written
by Stephen Hensman.

Please look out for our
next issue coming
November 2026.

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