

Merit Selection

DECS is about to change the rules for selecting public school principals.

The current *'procedures and processes'* were written a decade ago – before Governing Councils. A White Paper has been written, proposing changes to the current system. The paper was apparently written after consultation with 'Key Stakeholders'. SAASSO, which represents 90% of Governing Councils was not one of them.

A feedback sheet is available for you to comment on the proposed changes (download a copy at www.saasso.asn.au/educationmatters/meritselection).

From the first words of the Executive Summary, the White Paper is clearly focussed on making the processes easier for DECS and extending principal appointments to 10 years. Matching the right person to the specific needs of the school, seems not to be a priority.

How does it affect parents and Governing Councils?

The White Paper discusses at length, the changes in the 'education landscape'; evidently Local Governance is not one of them, as it is not mentioned. In proposing 'Operating Principles', there is an allusion to including the broader community – but doesn't mention the Governing Council having any actual role.

What's it all about?

Sadly, there is actually little scope for real change in this document. It is primarily focussed on:

1. The impending retirement of a significant number of principals
2. Doubling principal tenure to 10 years
3. Making the process less rigorous for DECS
4. Ensuring Governing Councils have no say in extending principal contracts.

Too often we hear from Governing Councils that they are treated as token gestures; the White Paper is not guilty of that – it ignores Governing Councils completely.

Recommendations

The White Paper makes 8 recommendations. Some of them are:

1. DECS maintain its policy on merit being the sole criterion for placement.

Throughout the paper, however, there is repeated statements of adopting a lesser standard of merit. Added to this, there is no mention of schools, who don't get a process to appoint a principal; instead having someone placed there, for a week, a month, a year.

From the first words of the Executive Summary, the White Paper is clearly focussed on making the processes easier for DECS and extending principal appointments to 10 years. Matching the right person to the specific needs of the school, seems not to be a priority.

2. Some Operating Principles be included in the Policy & Procedures Manual.

3. The principal section of the Manual be separate from the sections on appointing other staff.

At SAASSO we've heard many complaints about the principal appointment process – nobody's ever said the problem in their school is that the manual is too hard to follow. We would hope that genuine merit selection principles apply to all school staff appointments.

4. Greater flexibility be introduced to the process.

This includes:

- abandoning job and person specifications

- reducing CVs to two pages
- having applicants 'screened' by DECS and the teacher's union before the panel meets them
- Accepting unqualified candidates in the hope that they will receive on-the-job training
- stopping the panel doing referee checks and instead having someone else do them and a report on them being available if the panel asks.

The White Paper devotes most of itself, to reiterating that we will soon have fewer principals to choose from – this sounds dangerously like lowering standards so that more people are 'qualified'.

5. Principals contracts extended to 10 years – subject to review by the Assistant Regional Director and the new Retired Principal's Panel.

It's reasonable that a principal who wants to extend should be able to, if they are meeting the needs of the local school community, but why isn't the local school community - represented by the Governing Council – even involved in the decision?

6. That the Teaching in South Australia website continue to be developed.

You may not have the principal you need - but there's a website....

8. That the White Paper be the subject of extensive consultation.

A sensible recommendation – although, the definition of 'stakeholder' seems limited.

Summary

Choosing the right principal is the most important decision for a school. It is also the only appointment in which the school community, through the Governing Council, has any say.

We face a shortage of qualified principals. We must make changes now to address what may become an issue that literally cripples our schools.

Sadly, the White Paper does not address these problems:

- It proposes nothing to make positions more attractive
- It doesn't propose proactively identifying and nurturing future leaders
- It doesn't address equipping principals with the skills they need before they become leaders, through training and development
- It doesn't propose retired principals becoming mentors for new principals
- It doesn't embrace using the immeasurable benefits of decentralised school management by fostering a community approach from the outset.

Instead it:

- Adds new bureaucratic layers to the process
- 'Dumbs it down'
- Brings in consultants
- Makes the forms easier for applicants to read
- Degrades the role of the local community
- Puts DECS in charge

But there will be a website... ■