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SUMMER 2012
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PHOTO: The Police Corps at Mornington Secondary College in Victoria
The rise of the school business manager

KAREN STARR explains the increasing importance and imperative of school business managers.

ONE important effect of increasing localised school autonomy, authority, responsibility and accountability has been a growing, yet understated recognition that effective business management is an essential component of educational leadership. Recent headlines in Victoria highlight the community distress caused by school business failure and the liability borne by school councillors (e.g. Murphy, Jones and Minear, 2012; Topsfield, 2012). Education business is expanding and becoming more complex and requires propitious oversight.

Focus on cost effectiveness

Education takes approximately one-third of government budgets in most advanced societies, and in the current fiscal climate, governments worldwide are demanding further reforms for education to become more ‘cost-effective’ and efficient, to increase performance, to be responsive to more sophisticated ‘consumers’ with increasing expectations, while being more transparent, accountable and demonstrating ‘VFM’ – ‘value-for-money’. As a consequence, the business associated with education and the work of those who lead and manage this business is coming into sharper focus. School business managers are being quietly yet rapidly thrust into the spotlight. Significant and widespread fundamental changes are occurring as politicians, the general public and education professionals wake-up to the enormity and primacy of school business work (Southworth, 2010).

Research involving business managers across all sectors and levels of education in all Australian states in 2010 and 2011 produced valuable information about the role they currently play (Starr, 2012). They are responsible for:

- strategy and governance
- human resource functions
- compliance, accountability and legal oversight
- managing buildings, facilities and resources.

Besides these key tasks, business managers oversee the work of ‘front-line’ education support staff and their ongoing professional learning and development. Business managers have to keep up-to-date with government policies, systems, programs and legislation, while being responsible for meeting the demands of numerous stakeholder groups. They manage extended services and relationships with suppliers, parents, the community and professionals from other agencies. Business managers are expected to be entrepreneurial and creative to extract utmost business benefits for institutions and their students.

They identify and make application to new sources of funding and secure savings by eradicating wastage and duplication, so that maximum funds are targeted at teaching and learning. Swaps, sharing, cross-institutional cooperation and mutual usage schemes – ‘prosumption’ measures (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) - are increasingly part of these efforts. School business managers oversee large and small scale facilities developments and maintenance. They must comply with rigorous external inspections, audits and regulatory requirements. Documented ‘evidence’ is now required by governments for many operations and decisions - a role that business managers are increasingly shouldering on behalf of educational professionals.

School business management necessitates simultaneous ‘big picture’ and fine detail insights and oversight, multi-tasking, and high level drive, commitment and energy in environments that present untold interruptions and unexpected events. Business managers have to be highly organised, efficient and flexible, keep meticulous records, develop effective operational procedures, be proficient in the use of a range of software programs, possess excellent communication skills, take initiative, be able to prioritise, remain calm and polite, and cope with the stresses of juggling tasks and constantly changing focus.

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An expanding portfolio

Business managers increasingly assume responsibility for many tasks that were traditionally the preserve of teachers or educational leaders:

- managing some pastoral care activities such as organising breakfast programs
- providing assistance to teachers
- managing the work of integration and multicultural aides, chaplains and wellbeing workers
- organising excursions, camps and work experience programs
- coordinating and organising casual relief teachers
- overseeing yard duty and bus duty rosters.
- marketing, writing grant applications and fundraising
- operationalising extended services such as out-of-hours care programs.

Almost half the business managers involved in the research said they are involved in timetabling, teacher deployment and student allotments and believed these are the kinds of services that should be delegated to liberate educators from administrative activities. This situation is creating a closer, symbiotic relationship with education peers and giving rise to a paraprofessional status amongst education support staff. Business managers believe educational leaders benefit from their work, arguing that they:

- save education leaders’ time and effort, enabling them to focus on educational matters
- save money, ensure organisational efficiency, effectiveness and viability
- source and secure resources and services for the benefit of students and teachers
- contribute business knowledge to decision-making, ensuring comprehensiveness, judiciousness and diligence.

Overseas research supports these beliefs. Studies in the United Kingdom suggest that the net return on investment for schools hiring a qualified business official can exceed 80% (PwC, 2010). Business managers save money, usually covering their own salaries within a three-year period (NCLSCS and TDA, 2009). A UK study found that principals mostly work between 50 to 80 hours per week, including nights, weekends and holidays to keep up with occupational demands (MIDG, 2010; National College, 2009). Those working with business managers reported delegating business, administration and compliance work that would have taken an estimated 19 extra working hours a week, hence business managers save up to 35% of principals’ time (National College, 2011). Business managers create ‘soft-savings’ by enabling educational leaders to reduce their time on business matters to focus on the demands of educational work. Where school business is managed by a dedicated professional, education leaders report higher rates of job satisfaction and reductions in work anxiety about business-related matters, especially those relating to finance, operational procedures and strategic management (McKinsey, 2007). Resources that are saved - including time - are able to be re-invested, creating benefits for students and teachers. Over half the business managers participating in the research believed that their role statement did not accurately reflect their current working lives. Interviews demonstrated the willingness and ability of business managers to assume responsibility for tasks above and beyond those indicated in their employment contracts. Recognising that many role statements inadequately portray the reality of most business managers’ working lives, members of the Association of School Business Managers in Victorian State Schools recently developed a generic position description. This document highlights key attributes deemed essential for performing duties concerning human resources management, finance, student administration, general office management, policy, technological management, buildings and facilities management, marketing, after-school and vacation care programs, governance and council reporting, school transport, catering, and other tasks within education. The role description, all-embracing as it is, still includes the ubiquitous catch-all phrase ‘any other duties as required’, recognising that it is impossible to capture all responsibilities that come under the remit of business managers.

Business managers are ‘indispensable’ (Woods, 2008). Educational leaders work in multi-professional teams, with interdependence required between educators, business and support staff for effective school operation. Complementary knowledge and skill sets are required for optimal results. The direct and indirect savings that business managers create provides a sound rationale for their appointment, professional advancement and positioning as education business leaders.

*The comprehensive set of references that accompanies this article is available from the author.

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