

Pupil leadership: A guide for schools

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Pupils need to be treated as partners in the quest to develop better schools, says head boy **William Leith**.

Whether it's leading the school magazine to completion or a sports team to the final, extra-curricular activities are some of the most useful and certainly authentic avenues for leadership development.

Personally, leadership has also helped me engage with my work better. This year I've taken a lot more ownership over my learning. I attribute this to what I've learnt as a leader; no longer taking things for granted and pursuing change for the better.

The result of quality leadership education is pupils who are able to take control of their personal, social, educational and professional lives and be more successful for doing so. Rather than just a fanciful advantage, it is a necessity in the modern world. Long gone are the days where your future was planned out based on your gender or surname. What you know is more important than what you are.

New Zealand's school curriculum has a vision of creating lifelong learners but its implementation is lagging behind. The responsibility is now on schools. Pupils are your partners in achieving a better school but they'll only be as good as you allow them to be.

William Leith is a pupil representative at the Cognition Institute's symposium in Wellington on the education system. His piece was written with the support of the Institute, the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the NZ Council for Educational Research. Other pupil opinions are at cognitioninstitute.org

LEADERSHIP is undervalued in many schools and simply underutilised by many more. In order to produce the competent, lifelong learners demanded by the modern world, schools need to tackle leadership education as they would any other part of their educational function.

As head boy at Heretaunga College, I have talked to prefects from schools around Wellington about this. At the worst end, many pupils miss out on leadership opportunities and even pupils selected as prefects feel restricted as leaders.

What many schools are lacking is an approach that reflects leadership training as a fundamental part of their educational function. In too many cases such education is available only for pupils with identified leadership skill.

In a school, of all places, it would seem idiotic to teach something only to those who already know it. Leadership is a skill for everyone. Everyone needs to know how to lead their own lives, and support others to lead theirs.

Attention to leadership also starts too late: the immediate personal, social and educational benefits are of as much value to year 9 pupils as they are to those in year 13.

The neglect of leadership education is further seen in the way some schools treat prefects. The application process seems to focus on their academic and attendance records, rather than their skills and traits relevant to the job. Once in the job, prefects have very prescriptive roles and responsibilities.

Pupil leaders in this type of school feel more like puppets than leaders. Teachers should ask themselves: are you smothering your pupils and potential leaders with formality and tokenism?

By giving pupils freedom and independence with their roles, you're inviting and challenging your leaders to be creative and active.

At my school, pupil leaders deliver important messages in unique and appealing ways. Dressed in white coveralls and safety glasses, we established 'Litter Scene Investigation', melodramatically cordoning off rubbish in the corridors. It was entertaining and effective.

At the better end of the scale, leadership is actively promoted and taught. Schools run programmes, usually camps or one-day events, to help pupils develop leadership skills.

Some of the best avenues for building these skills exist in parts of school life outside of the lesson timetable.