

Having a dedicated ‘Research Lead’ in schools

‘Effective schools keep up with developments in research and professional knowledge’ (ACER 2016, p. 15).

Engaging in research projects, and using high-quality research to inform planning and practice, helps schools improve. One method of supporting a school’s engagement with research is to have a designated ‘Research Lead’: someone who prioritises the use of research in planning, decision-making, professional learning, and teaching and learning. The Research Lead can also coordinate the school’s internal and external research and evaluation activities.

The term ‘Research Lead’ was coined by researchED, a grass-roots teacher-led organisation in the UK aimed at improving research literacy in education communities. While not as widespread in Australia, there are still schools who have a dedicated research-coordination role, albeit with different titles. For consistency and to acknowledge the main references supporting this document, the term ‘Research Lead’ will be used throughout.

What does a Research Lead do?

As part of their survey, Riggall and Singer (2016) considered the activities performed within the role and found it most common for a Research Lead to:

- access research findings and share them with colleagues
- support school colleagues to carry out their own research
- provide evidence-based advice to the principal or leadership team
- evaluate the school’s programs and practices in light of research evidence.

However, a Research Lead may also:

- translate academic research into plain language summaries for teachers, leaders and parents/carers
- lead discussions with staff and parents/carers on a research topic or article in order to consider what the research might mean in their school’s context
- use research findings to develop tools or resources for staff to more easily translate evidence into classroom practice
- facilitate the use of research in professional learning teams/communities
- coordinate the school’s participation in external/academic research projects
- develop partnerships with universities and researchers to support in-school and teacher-led research and inquiry
- establish partnerships with other schools who are also interested in and committed to research engagement.

Of course, the role of a Research Lead should be tailored to meet a school’s particular needs. In a large, well-resourced school, it could involve a full-time staff member with expertise in research translation and application. Alternatively, it could be a volunteer role taken on by a classroom teacher with an interest and passion. Bennett (2016) found that schools in the UK that appointed a Research Lead interpreted the role in many different ways:

- **Gatekeeper** – The Research Lead acts as a conduit for research, dedicating a discrete portion of their time to actively pursuing current research findings and the latest developments in education, on behalf of colleagues.
- **Consigliere** – The Research Lead is a special adviser to the principal or senior staff, with a responsibility to assist with change leadership.
- **Devil’s advocate** – The Research Lead acts as a ‘critical friend’ to the school community, taking on an investigative role and challenging staff to review their thinking and practice in relation to credible research.
- **Auditor** – The Research Lead has responsibility for coordinating an evaluation of the whole school’s relationship with current research to inform research-related goals and continuous improvement strategies.
- **Project manager** – The Research Lead has a time-bound, specific mission to achieve, such as managing a year-long research project in partnership with a local university.

What does a Research Lead need to be successful?

Bennett (2016) suggests a number of factors need to be in place to give the Research Lead the best chance of success. Most importantly, there must be authentic buy-in from senior leaders in the school, with real support to empower organisational change. The role cannot just be a token effort or publicity strategy to impress prospective parents. Senior leaders can support the initiative by:

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- allocating protected time for the Research Lead. While a highly enthusiastic volunteer may get a new project off the ground, long-term sustainability requires investment of time and resources
- giving status and profile to the Research Lead. To help them gain commitment from other staff, they should be assigned a regular slot on meeting agendas, a role in staff professional learning and a position on the school leadership team.

The right choice of Research Lead is also important. As well as being an influencer and someone who people respect, they will need to be:

- enthusiastic and passionate about research and evidence-informed practice
- well-informed about the limits and dangers of poorly designed research, and aware of basic research methods, including quantitative and qualitative approaches
- prepared to campaign and advocate for research, while also listening to and addressing their colleagues concerns and questions
- willing to have a key role in shaping research-informed professional learning opportunities for teachers and leaders.

Further reading

For more information on the topic of Research Leads, including some fantastic examples in UK schools, three reports in a series on research awareness and research use are available on the Education Development Trust website www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com:

1. Tony McAleavy’s [Teaching as a research-engaged profession: problems and possibilities](#)
2. Tom Bennett’s [The school Research Lead](#)
3. Anna Riggall and Rachel Singer’s [Research Leads: current practice, future prospects](#).

Next steps

1. Ask the school leadership team to read through the information above and schedule a meeting to discuss your learnings and reflections using the questions below as a guide.
2. During or before the meeting, watch the [short videos](#) of two staff members in Melbourne Catholic schools talking about their role as Research Leads.

For schools that already have a Research Lead, consider:

- What is working well in having a dedicated research role in your school? Why?
- What could be done differently to strengthen the role of the Research Lead?
- What is one thing you will do this year to improve the role and impact of the Research Lead?

For schools that are just starting out, and interested in having a Research Lead, consider:

- What are the top three things you would like the Research Lead to do? Refer to the section above titled ‘What does a Research Lead do?’ and choose up to three activities from the list.
- What process will you go through to appoint a Research Lead? Consider setting up an internal expression of interest process, recruiting widely for a new role, or adding it to the job description of an existing and suitable staff member.
- What will the leadership team do to give the Research Lead the best chance of success?

References

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2016, *The ACER Professional Community Framework*, www.acer.org/files/professional-community-framework.pdf.

Bennett, T 2016, *The school Research Lead*, www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/EducationDevelopmentTrust/files/93/93c332a4-40df-41ac-8a9b-f803c6573d10.pdf.

Riggall, A & Singer, R 2016, *Research Leads: current practice, future prospects*, www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/EducationDevelopmentTrust/files/a7/a7ef4a14-0999-4a5c-a47b-c754ee5a790e.pdf.

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