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Who Influenced Your Career?

As a new school year dawns and I begin my tenure as president of CPCO, I find myself nostalgically reflecting on my journey from teacher to principal. I have been fortunate to teach with many wonderful administrators in my 16 years of teaching before becoming a principal myself. These individuals shaped my career in ways that they could not have foreseen. There are three extraordinary individuals to whom I am particularly indebted. While these three principals had many characteristics in common such as being supportive, motivating, respectful and compassionate, and displaying a deep authentic faith and commitment to Catholic education, each also had unique gifts and qualities.

Marty Kings hired me as a first-year teacher in 1981 at Msgr. Haller School in Kitchener. Marty demonstrated what true collaboration was by his actions and interactions with staff. He had the uncanny ability to engage staff in the organization of the school, thereby inspiring leadership. Marty worked with staff to create a school environment built on trust - a place where everyone's voice was accepted and valued. Marty saw his role as that of a lead teacher, committed to improving the learning and achievement of all students. He was engaged in developing himself professionally as a learner, as well.

Loreen Cresswell in service to her community showed tremendous emotional intelligence. Loreen was known for her random acts of kindness towards staff and often went out of her way to recognize staff for their achievements and contributions to Msgr. Haller School. Who could forget her home-cooked turkey dinners that she would prepare for staff on parent-teacher conference nights, complete with linen tablecloths and fine china. Loreen readily shared her faith with everyone. It was from her that I learned the unique and important ways to engage staff in prayer and that decisions must be grounded in compassion and our Catholic values.

Ron Ertel could be seen on the playground at Holy Rosary School in Waterloo, tying skates at lunch hour, supervising the toboggan hill, playing "schlockey" or chatting with kids at the canteen. Ron showed me that students come first and that every decision, especially the most difficult and unpopular ones should be made with this in mind. Ron could stay cool and calm through any storm and could resolve conflicts keeping everyone's dignity intact by listening with an empathetic ear. Ron encouraged and motivated me to spread my wings and apply for a principal posting in another board.

Michael Fullan wrote, "a true sign of leadership is the number of leaders you leave behind." Each one of these individuals allowed

me to experience leadership. They built this capacity within the staff and within me and for that I am truly grateful. Each principal had a passion for learning, teaching and leading and it was evident to all that they were immensely satisfied with their chosen vocation. Coincidentally, they possessed many of the skills, knowledge and attitudes outlined in our new Catholic Leadership Framework. These individuals are now retired and have channelled their efforts in other directions. I wish to thank them for their contributions to our profession and for sharing their Catholic leadership with me and so many others.

The shortage of principals and vice-principals is of provincial and national concern and the number of interested aspiring leaders is decreasing. Teachers with leadership potential often cite their perceptions of the role as major deterrents. Workload, the dynamics of staff relationships, lack of job protection and lifestyle balance are their most common issues. While these are very real concerns and ones that CPCO regularly brings to the attention of the government and our Catholic partners, they can overshadow the more joyful and gratifying aspects of the role of principal.

Napoleon once said, "A leader is a dealer in hope." As we begin the next school year, let us not forget that we have potential leaders within our midst. They are our hope for the future. Make a special effort to celebrate the achievements of your teachers and to praise them privately and publicly for their accomplishments. Acknowledge their leadership potential by "tapping them on the shoulder." Facilitate opportunities for leadership, thereby empowering them as servant leaders within our schools and systems. Invite them to attend information sessions for those aspiring to be vice-principals and principals in your local boards. Provide them with information about the Catholic Principal's Qualification Program (PQP) by directing them to the CPCO website, www.cpco.on.ca. Start by ensuring that the CPCO flyer about PQP gets posted in your staffroom. Be vigilant and especially encouraging of those teachers who may not yet realize their leadership abilities. Together, let us nourish and motivate those potential leaders through our actions and words, continually demonstrating the many wonders and gifts that leadership in a Catholic school system affords.

As I look back on my journey from teacher to principal, I realize that the ancient Chinese proverb is true, "The journey is the reward."

I wish you a blessed and successful school year and look forward to visiting your local associations throughout this coming year.