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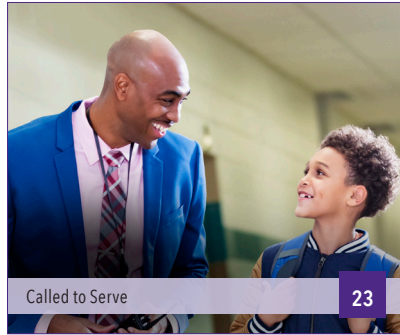
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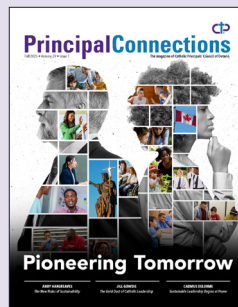
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FROM THE PRESIDENT & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Ralph Sharples, Tilia Cruz

A Focus on Sustainability

We are blessed, in education, with the opportunity of a new beginning each fall. For our students, it offers new knowledge, friendships and challenges. For our staff, it is the prospect of reimagining and adapting lessons as they plan for a new group of students. For us, as administrators, it is the prospect of building on the rich, safe, learning environments that we provide, with a focus on sustainability and the future growth from our decisions.

In establishing a wider vision for our school communities that is both clear in direction and agile in adapting to the unknown, we are much like the captain of a ship. A captain, who knows the destination and can predict much of the crossing but cannot possibly plan for all the uncertainty that lies ahead.

Throughout our yearly voyages, we commit to sustainable leadership by prioritizing the holistic well-being of our students and staff for the long-term, while also maintaining our own ability to lead through troubled waters and inspire others to our calling.

This September, we embark, once again, on a new journey over untravelled waters, setting course with revitalized enthusiasm and commitment as we navigate our schools through the crests and troughs of another academic year. Through our leadership, we need to rely upon our own experiences, adaptability and deftness at the helm and take strength from our abilities in guiding us to safe harbours. At the same time, it is incumbent upon us to mentor new leaders, as we were mentored, giving them the skills and confidence to voyage out on their own journeys, remembering we are never truly alone.

Our greatest strength as leaders is not to venture into the unknown alone, but, rather, with the support we give each other.

Unlike the sea captain, isolated in the vastness of the ocean, we have the blessing of being able to depend on our fellow administrators. For as Proverbs 11:14 reminds us, “Many advisers mean security,” and our greatest strength as leaders is not to venture into the unknown alone, but, rather, with the support we give each other so we can succeed even in the most trying times.

At CPCO we will navigate a new school year as we welcome a new Executive Council team. A few members have been on this journey with us, but some are joining our team for the first time, bringing new perspectives and experiences to our table.

For this school year, one of our goals is to share our new strategic plan more broadly with our members. This new plan will provide a foundation for our work over the next

few years. We will continue to focus on completing negotiations at the local level and implementing those. We are certainly entering into uncharted waters in some areas with these Terms and Conditions and the Provincial Agreement. We will continue to document these experiences and processes as we begin to plan for the next round of provincial bargaining.

We wish all our members a very successful 2025-2026 academic year. We hope it is one that will be filled with positive experiences, opportunities and relationships while also providing you with an opportunity to continue on your life journey with hope.



FROM THE EDITOR

Deirdre Kinsella Biss

Pioneering Tomorrow

Sustainable leadership is the cornerstone of shaping a future where learning is adaptive, equitable and forward-thinking. Through collaboration, connection and visionary thinking, school leaders who focus on sustainability, nurture educators and students alike, empowering them to tackle global challenges with ingenuity and ethical awareness.

These school leaders don't just address today's needs – they pioneer solutions for tomorrow, cultivating a generation that values sustainability as a fundamental principle of progress. Their determination comes from the energy generated by collaboration, the joy of witnessing student growth and the support of like-minded educators who share a passion for meaningful change. Challenges don't deter them – they push boundaries, rethink outdated practices and champion adaptability. To them, sustainability isn't just a goal, it's a promise to those yet to come.

Principals and vice-principals who focus on sustainability, nurture not only their students but also their staff, curriculum and community. It means preparing young minds for a rapidly changing world by emphasizing critical thinking, problem solving, social responsibility and environmental stewardship. Plus, sustainable leadership ensures that initiatives – whether academic, technological or cultural – have long-term impact rather than fading away with leadership turnover. This issue of *Principal Connections* will look at how sustainable leadership guides educational progress.

Know the new rules for education sustainability. Andy Hargreaves revisits his original thinking about Sustainable Leadership. His article identifies four new rules that enable educational sustainability to work in a volatile world. Traditionally, sustainability was all about longevity. These new rules are all about creativity, flexibility and practicality in pursuit of that longevity.

Identify your “Unquenchable Spark.” Jill Gowdie explores the spiritual dimension of sustainable leadership in her article, *The Gold Dust of Catholic*

Leadership. She suggests that people are drawn to leaders not solely for their competence and experience, but because they see something within the leader that resonates with their own unquenchable spark. She identifies “you” as the most important part of leadership. Profound personal self-knowledge is key.

Make community building intentional. *Sustainable Leadership Begins at Home*, written by Cadmus Delorme, offers a powerful example of leadership rooted in collaboration, empathy and intergenerational connection. Building community means embracing diverse worldviews, listening deeply and cultivating others to lead. He reminds us that true leaders are those who are willing to keep learning.

Think Blue and Green. *The Urgent Need to Think Blue*, authored by Maude Barlow, invites schools to rethink their responsibility in water conservation and inspiring students to become advocates for water justice. By framing water as both a human right and an ecological necessity, schools can instill a deep sense of stewardship in future generations – because sustainability and social responsibility go hand in hand.

Know what keeps you going. Catholic school leaders navigate immense challenges, yet time and again, they rise – with resilience, determination and an unwavering commitment to their communities. What sustains their leadership? What fuels their passion? What drives them to push forward? CPCO reached out to principals across the province to uncover the heart of their dedication – the moments that remind them why they do what they do and the deep love they have for their calling.

At its core, sustainable leadership is rooted in legacy – shaping schools and communities in ways that endure beyond any single assignment. Catholic Principals and Vice-Principals continue to drive positive transformation, forging a future where sustainability, justice, social responsibility and adaptability are not just ideals, but everyday realities.

The New Rules of Sustainable Leadership

By Andy Hargreaves



In 2006, I coauthored a book on Sustainable Leadership. It argued that we need to take care of our people and organizations like we try to take care of the planet. Sustainable Leadership, we proposed, consists of seven interlocking principles. A key one was about making sure that everything you start will last, in the long term, even after leaders turn over, policies shift and money runs out. This principle – sustainability as longevity – still applies, I believe. But recently I have been pushed to think about it differently.

Rethinking Sustainable Leadership

Towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, a team I assembled at the University of Ottawa received \$2.7 million from the LEGO Foundation to build a network of 40+ schools across seven provinces to improve student engagement and well-being in the middle years, after the pandemic.

We gave participating school teams \$5000 each to spend on project purposes. We offered resources for substitute teachers, so teachers could plan and collaborate. We provided funds for teams to travel to a national showcase and for principals to go to a regional event to share strategies. And we built a platform of online support for schools to network with each other and get outside stimulus from world-renowned thought leaders.

It was a big investment. But there was a catch. Very soon, we realized there would be no follow-up funding for any of the LEGO Foundation's projects. We had \$2.7 million. But we had 16 months to spend it. What did that mean for sustainability? Would our work be just a flash in the pan? Or could we think about sustainability differently?

New Rules

The conventional approach to sustainable improvement is that everyone must be committed, deliver improvements on a big scale and not let them fade away. Changes that are temporary or marginal, that happen on the fringes and that disappear when leadership changes or funding dries up, are ineffective and unsustainable.

Ironically, this concept of sustainability may be impractical and unsustainable today. Perhaps the old rules of sustainability – that funding should continue, that leaders should last or choose suitable successors, or that governments shouldn't change direction, are unrealistic. Maybe it's time for new rules for educational sustainability that will work in a volatile world.

Drawing on our recent project, on collaborative research with Ontario school districts from 2009-2018, and on current experience of leading a network of seven governments committed to humanitarian goals in education, here are four new rules for sustainable leadership.

1. Become a Sleeper

In the world of espionage, there are people called sleepers. They learn the arts of spying, then go undercover until their handlers activate them. In education, sleepers learn their knowledge and skills when windows for innovation open. Many of the issues I advance now as a senior leader, like alternative assessments, professional collaboration or student well-being, began with a peak experience in early career. When windows for innovation re-open, these ideas can reappear on a large scale after our careers have progressed. Give teachers peak experiences of innovation in early career, and you're investing in their future as system innovators later.

2. Jump-Start Innovation

When we worked with Ontario school districts on their inclusion strategies, their leaders asked, "What's one thing you can do with one year of extra funding now, that will last forever?" A 3D printer may break down, but in our play-based learning project, educators jump-started innovation by building outdoor trails with their students, by injecting fresh momentum among their colleagues after an energy-sapping pandemic, and by changing the mindsets of innovation-sceptics. Our project jump-started joy and that joy didn't dissipate once the project was over. Children still walk the trails. Innovation sceptics have become change ambassadors. And principals are taking what they have learned to their next schools.

3. Change Something, Not Everything

Sometimes, it feels like teachers have no wiggle room. But even in top-down change environments, schools in our recent project typically took half a day or a whole day a week to do something different. Students in one school built a cardboard arcade with games where players could learn about UN Sustainable Development Goals. Three schools devoted Fridays to classes focused on teacher's interests like magic tricks, cooking, knitting or building outdoor shelters. Cut the required curriculum by 10 to 20 per cent and reallocate that time for teachers to design mini-courses and projects of their own. Let's try and sustain something, even if it's not everything.



4. Make What's Essential for Some, Good for All

One thing we learned from working with Ontario school districts is that culturally responsive teaching is about more than designing strategies just for this group or that group. What may be essential for one group of students' needs, can be good for all students. In our project, we have seen how Indigenous traditions and pedagogies, like learning in circles or ellipses, moving outdoors or playing Indigenous games, have inspired and benefitted schools with no self-identified Indigenous students at all. Schools that create welcoming environments for immigrant and refugee students can become more welcoming towards any students who change schools for one reason or another. What's essential for some, is, indeed, often good for all.

Moving Forward

Sustainability should no longer mean that everybody must do everything that leaders and policymakers want, everywhere, all the time. That was never a realistic goal

anyway. But we can help early career teachers to learn and feel things now that they will take on, system-wide when they become leaders, later. We can jump-start innovations that will keep everyone going even after the initial excitement has passed. We can innovate in a few things with passion and permanence without feeling this is a just a failure to innovate in everything. And instead of fragmenting our responsiveness to different student needs, we can implement changes that support one group in ways that benefit everyone.

The old sustainability rules are about longevity. These new rules are about creativity, flexibility and practicality in pursuit of that longevity. [CP](#)

Andy Hargreaves

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Sustainable Leadership Begins at Home

By Cadmus Delorme

The most important table to talk reconciliation in Canada is our kitchen table. Families provide us with a personal identity, an understanding of the culture and connections that give us a sense of belonging.

My kitchen table – Baby boomer parents who instilled hard work, pride in garden food and wild meat on the Cowessess First Nation.

Today, I have accepted many leadership roles; Chancellor, Chief, Chairperson, student leader, sports captain, as well as others. I attribute my success to leading with good attitude, pivoting to the surrounding opportunities and challenges, inclusion of ones around the table and tone setting. As I continue to grow and learn, I find a lot of my confidence is motivated from my identity, culture and sense of belonging in two world views – a Canadian world view and an Indigenous world view.

In the 1990s, our world became a global connection through the internet. In the 2010s social media created a new means to share thoughts, feelings, point of view and so much more. These adapting times push leadership to be open minded of change and open minded to global and shared cultural practices.

In my early days of joining social media (Facebook, Instagram, X, Snapchat, TikTok), I had a personal rule – if it is not funny or does not help someone, I will not post or share. This rule resulted in a great share of followers and enhanced my character as a leader.

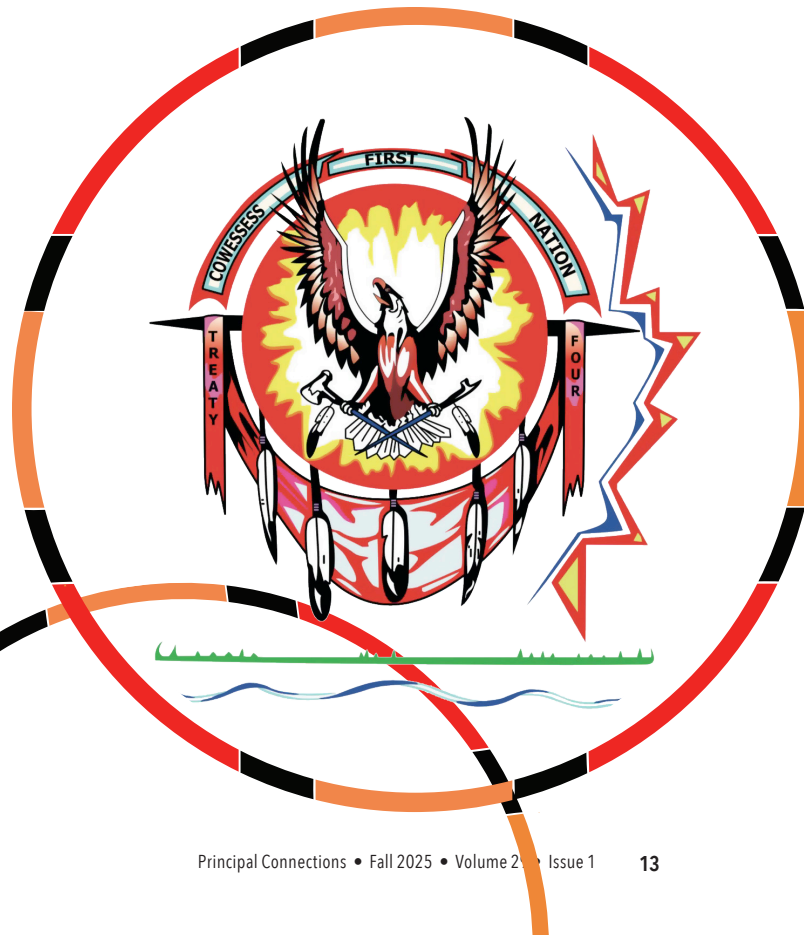
Today, I share with others, who post or share online, that one day they will have to answer to those posts. They may not see it at that moment, but life does come full circle. This can also be a leadership teaching on treating others with kindness and a smile. Some people may stay friends for a long time and others come and go but treating everyone the way I want to be treated opens opportunity when our paths cross again. Also, these same people become my advocate when someone talks about me in circles and I am not in those circles.

As people, we need to vent or sometimes talk about others. I use a book teaching *The Law of The Garbage Truck*, by David J. Pollay, to hold discussions with people who bring negative energy (gossip, miscommunication

and other kinds of negativity). This book taught me that some people's issues are moving garbage trucks and they will dump their garbage on you without permission. David shares a theory to let others' garbage pass you by, but still focus on the discussion that needs to happen. It also taught me to ask for permission before venting or complaining, which can be a metaphor of garbage. Being an elected leader for seven years, David's book helped me to keep focused on the long-term goal. And empower all around me and lift them to their potential, regardless of the energy they shared.

Education in our country is a driver of hope. Everything we do to empower students; our hope is they will have a better life than we do right now. The late Senator Murray Sinclair once said in regard to Truth and Reconciliation, "Education got us into this mess, education is going to get us out of this mess."

Over the past five generations, the Canadian curriculum had different tones of moulding minds to succeed in Canada. When it comes to Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (TRC), the Baby Boomer Generation was not taught the truth when it comes to the relationship between Indigenous People and Canadians. Generation X was taught the opposite of truth. Generation Y was taught that rights were surrendered. It was Generations Millennial, Z and today's Alpha that received cultural sensitivity training, Indigenous studies, TRC and more.



Leadership Agility

By Simon Breakspear



Playing the Long-Term Game

Every school leader faces a fundamental tension: the urgent need for change versus the patient work of lasting improvement. Sustainable school improvement means embracing the long-term approach: selecting fewer priorities, executing them exceptionally well and patiently integrating them into the school culture. Yet counterintuitively, committing to long-term goals requires leaders to stay agile.

Leadership agility refers to the ability to maintain a clear strategic direction while continuously learning, adjusting and adapting to changing circumstances. Agile leaders strike a balance between clarity and flexibility, understanding that meaningful progress often comes from the ability to adapt plans in response to real-world feedback and emerging opportunities.

Why Traditional Approaches Fall Short

Having worked on agility in educational improvement for over 10 years, I've witnessed its growing relevance amid today's complex challenges. Traditional approaches to school improvement – detailed multi-year strict plans, rigid milestones and linear implementation – often fall short.

Many school leaders feel overloaded, caught in cycles of introducing new initiatives without seeing real, sustainable progress. Does this sound familiar?

Educational environments aren't simple machines; they're dynamic social ecosystems filled with complex human interactions. When we treat school improvement journeys as simple, predictable and linear, frustration inevitably follows.

Embracing an Agile Approach

Agile school improvement methodology offers a practical alternative. Agile approaches emphasize iterative cycles of planning, doing, checking and adjusting. Rather than waiting for perfect plans, agile leaders start before they feel entirely ready, continuously refining their approaches based on real-world feedback.

In practice, agile leadership means disciplined experimentation and rapid learning cycles. Rather than implementing rigid three-year plans, agile leaders break large goals into smaller, manageable pieces. They test new ideas on a small scale, learn quickly from results and

adapt accordingly. This “implementation-as-learning” approach contrasts sharply with traditional “implementation-as-delivery,” which expects perfect execution from the outset.

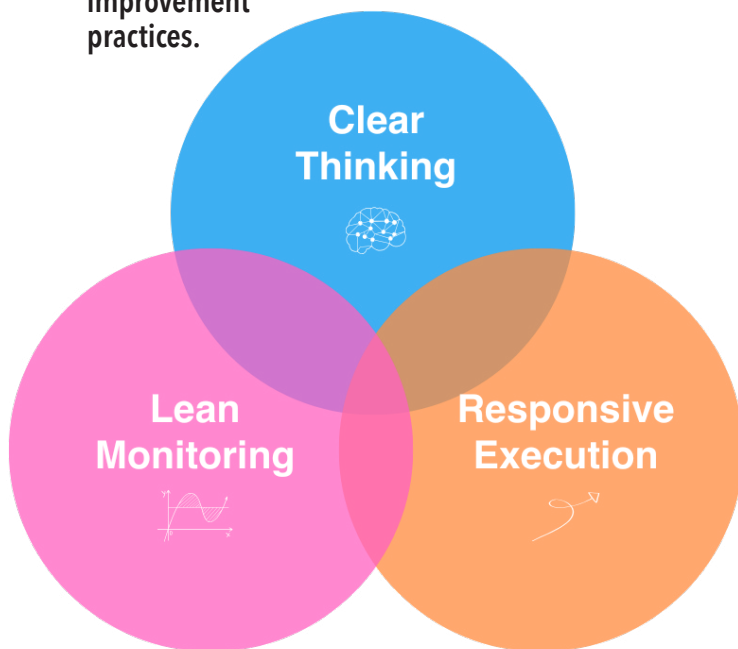
Three Key Practices

Agility in educational leadership involves three interconnected practices that create a sustainable cycle of improvement. Schools using this approach typically see meaningful progress within one semester rather than waiting years for results.

Clear Thinking is the foundation, focused on developing shared direction with your team. This isn't about having perfect plans, but getting directionally correct and ensuring everyone understands the right work to prioritize. Agile leaders don't pretend they have all the answers upfront, but they foster clarity around purpose and direction.

Responsive Execution moves teams into action through short five- to eight-week cycles. Rather than waiting for perfect conditions, this practice is about finding ways to get critical work done despite the daily busyness that characterizes school life. It's about maintaining momentum while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances.

The three key agile improvement practices.



Lean Monitoring closes the loop by keeping learning at the centre of the process. This ongoing assessment updates initial thinking, allowing leaders to course-correct and adjust as needed, ensuring continuous improvement rather than rigid adherence to original plans. Leaders continually generate and review evidence to understand what's working, for whom, under what conditions and why. Instead of summative evaluations at the end, agile leaders engage in formative monitoring throughout, making mid-course corrections that enhance long-term success.

Collective Progress

These agile practices and their associated tools offer a clear pathway for collective progress, enabling entire teams to move forward together. Over the past decade, I've taught and coached thousands of leaders in this approach, helping them pursue their long-term improvement goals while staying agile through the inherent complexity of educational work. When teams adopt these shared agile routines and methods, they build collective efficacy, maintaining coherence and momentum even as they adapt and respond to new challenges.

Sustainable Improvement Through Agility

Looking forward, educational challenges will only grow more complex. Agile approaches aren't merely useful today: they're essential for the future. Schools will increasingly need to rapidly adapt to new contexts, technologies and learning demands. Leaders who master agile methods and mindsets will be uniquely positioned to drive meaningful and sustainable progress despite growing complexity.

Ultimately, agile leadership is about making continuous improvement an embedded organizational habit rather than an isolated event. It's about leading sustainable, meaningful progress by striking a balance between clarity of purpose and flexibility in execution.

As educational leaders, we must stop chasing short-term fixes and commit to the disciplined, patient work of agile improvement. By doing fewer things better, staying flexible in the face of complexity and fostering continuous collective learning, we create the conditions for schools to thrive sustainably into the future. The schools that thrive in the coming decade will be those led by a leadership team that masters the art of agile, sustainable improvement today. [CP](#)

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From Belief to Impact

By Jenni Donohoo

Research consistently demonstrates that collective efficacy – a team’s belief in their ability to positively impact student outcomes – directly influences how educators think, feel, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 2000).

Schools serving similar student populations can achieve dramatically different outcomes based on one critical factor: whether collective teacher efficacy is firmly established. Collective teacher efficacy is the most impactful influence on student achievement, according to John Hattie’s (2025) research synthesis.

Collective efficacy “is a belief about ability, not actual ability”

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 497).

While collective efficacy functions at the group level, it is built on the individual efficacy beliefs of its members. Understanding how these personal beliefs take shape – and how they can be intentionally cultivated – is essential for leaders aiming to sustain meaningful school improvement.

This article explores the role of strategic optimism: the practice of intentionally cultivating slightly elevated self-beliefs that enhance persistence, innovation and

collaboration. Strategic optimism is not about ignoring challenges or inflating abilities. Rather, it is a mindset that helps educators override self-doubt, act on potential and contribute more fully to collective goals. When individual confidence is intentionally developed, it strengthens the collective mindset that supports effective collaboration and sustained school improvement.

The Power of Optimistic Self-Beliefs

What if being ‘realistic’ holds teachers back? Research suggests that a touch of optimism – slightly overestimating one’s own ability – can lead to greater persistence, initiative and impact than accurate self-assessment. This challenges a common leadership assumption that we should always help teachers develop ‘realistic’ views of their abilities.

Bandura’s foundational research demonstrated “evidence shows that human accomplishments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy to override the numerous impediments to success” (Bandura, 1998, p.56). This explains why educators with slightly elevated confidence are more likely to take on difficult initiatives, persist through setbacks and contribute meaningfully to collaborative problem-solving – maintaining resilience essential for lasting impact.





Called to Serve

By Annalisa Varano

In the quiet moments before dawn, Catholic educational leaders across our communities are already stirring with purpose. They carry within themselves something far greater than administrative duties or operational due diligence – they carry a calling that transforms the very essence of leadership from career to vocation.

The role of principal or vice-principal is undeniably challenging. Budget constraints, staff shortages, behavioural issues, family crises, academic pressures and the constant demands of multiple stakeholders can feel overwhelming. Catholic leaders are not immune to burnout, frustration or moments of doubt. They face the same systemic pressures, difficult decisions and sleepless nights as leaders in any educational setting.

Yet, through extensive conversations with seasoned principals and vice-principals serving in our Catholic schools, a resounding sentiment emerged: sustainable leadership in Catholic education flows not from avoiding challenges, but from finding meaning within them. These leaders understand that their role extends beyond

managing schedules and budgets; they are called to be vessels of hope, architects of community and guardians of something sacred – even when the path feels uncertain.

“It’s not about me,” shared one veteran principal their voice carrying the weight of years spent walking alongside families through triumph and struggle. “I realized early on that I was called to this work – called to create space where teachers can flourish and students can discover their God-given potential.” This sentiment echoes through countless conversations with Catholic school leaders who have discovered true sustainability comes from understanding their position as servants rather than commanders.

Pope Francis taught us, “For leadership there is only one road: service. There is no other way. If you have many qualities, the ability to communicate, etc., but you are not a servant, your leadership will fail, it is useless, it has no power to gather [people] together ... Leadership must enter into service, but with a personal love for the people.” This wisdom illuminates the path these educational leaders have discovered – authentic authority flows from genuine care for those they serve.

Principals and vice-principals speak of listening, really listening, to families who entrust them with their most precious gifts. They understand that behind every behavioural incident, academic struggle and family crisis lies an opportunity to embody Christ's love through patient guidance and unwavering support. They've learned sustainable leadership requires the courage to be vulnerable, to admit uncertainty and to seek wisdom beyond their own understanding.

Walk through any thriving Catholic school, and you'll witness something remarkable: leaders who find strength and renewal through their encounters with students. "The kids keep me going," explains one vice-principal, her eyes lighting up as she describes a morning greeting ritual that transforms both her day and theirs. "Their energy, their questions, their capacity for joy, it reminds me why I'm here, especially on the hardest days."

Catholic leaders are called to be vessels of hope, architects of community and guardians of something sacred.

This connection isn't merely professional satisfaction; it's spiritual nourishment that sustains them through difficult meetings, challenging parent conferences and complex personnel decisions. These leaders have discovered sustainable leadership requires staying close to the source of their calling – the young hearts and minds they serve. They understand children possess an

innate wisdom, an authentic joy that can pierce through administrative fatigue and rekindle the flame of purpose when the weight of responsibility feels heaviest.

Sustainable Catholic leaders recognize their responsibility to create environments where hope can flourish. They understand psychological safety isn't merely a management concept, it's a Gospel imperative. By fostering communities where teachers feel supported, students feel valued and families feel welcomed, these leaders become instruments of God's peace in often turbulent times.



What truly makes me happy and keeps me going is being able to serve and lead school communities that value and promote faith formation, learning, equity and growth. I love serving others in this role. It gives me a sense of purpose and direction every day. I'm deeply passionate about learning and educating others, whether it's supporting students' academic and spiritual growth, or empowering educators to continue growing professionally. The best part is seeing children share their learning, with their smiling faces and excitement to come to school. Knowing I'm making a real difference, whether making things better for staff and students, or empowering them to take initiative, make decisions and boost their confidence. Being able to openly share and practise my faith is central to who I am. It connects me to the greater mission and vision of our schools and fuels my passion for guiding students and staff.

Karen Quan King Thompson

Principal, Our Lady of Good Council C.E.S.
York CDSB



The thing that makes me happy in my role as a Catholic School Principal IS the role! The idea that my day-to-day role is to lead a community that is committed to educating and improving the lives of young people is such a blessing. To have a job that actually matters and that impacts so many people is what makes the early mornings and the late nights not only tolerable but exciting. There can be a temptation to focus on the frustrations or the challenges. But the key to this job is to remember what the job is ... to serve and support young people and by extension all the adults who support them. Quite simply, I find it easy to go to work each day because I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what I will do that day WILL MATTER.

Michael Wetzel

Principal, Mary Ward C.S.S. Centre for Self Directed Learning
TCDSB



What Sustains

We are often told that being a principal is one of the most stressful jobs. YES! That is true! BUT, there is also joy ... To me, it's the small stuff; the students' notes and drawings that fill my office, the 'don't worry, we got it' collaborative staff response after a long day, and the cheerful greeting when I see a student unexpectedly outside of school. But what really makes me find joy is knowing that I am making my 16-year-old self proud by being the voice to the voiceless and the advocate to the vulnerable. It is in spreading the Gospel without using words and making a difference lasting a lifetime.

Marie Murad

Principal, St. Nicholas School
Halton CDSB



Unless you have lived this work, it's difficult to grasp the weight of responsibility it carries. Yet, what stays with me are the many moments of joy – welcoming a Kindergartener to their first adventure, sharing a newcomer's first snowfall, a new teacher leading a liturgy or a vice-principal completing a school-wide initiative. What sustains me is the call to serve a vision beyond myself: a Catholic school rooted in Christ, radically inclusive and alive with learning. This mission is shared work, built by many hands. I stand on the foundation of those before me and hope to leave something meaningful, something beautiful, for others to build upon.

Mary Beth McCuen

Principal, St. Peter
Wellington CDSB



I love being a Catholic educator because it allows me to help create a nurturing environment where students can grow in faith, wisdom and love. Each day, we witness the beauty and dignity of every child as a beloved creation of God. It is a profound joy to remind them that they are deeply loved, not only by those around them but especially by God. In this sacred space, we foster a sense of purpose, belonging and hope through our words, actions and leadership. Being a Catholic School Principal is a privilege and a blessing that continually inspires my vocation.

Norm Roberts

Principal, Thomas Merton Centre
Halton CDSB



Being a Catholic Elementary School Principal is both an honour and a sacred responsibility, as we have the awesome ability to influence, inspire and nurture every day. Having the opportunity to live my faith daily, and witness and share it with others, brings me immense joy. At the heart of this role and what truly sustains me in this vocation are the people: the connections, the relationships, the support network and the community. Building relationships, building culture and building community all in support of student well-being and achievement is the essence of what drives the work for me. A journey that began by answering “the call” has transformed into becoming faithfully committed to “the calling,” and leading, learning and growing alongside others in the journey.

Nancy Podobnik

Principal, Father Daniel Zanon
Dufferin-Peel CDSB



Your Joy?

I turn to Pope Francis, as he was my role model. His example always helped me understand the power of a Catholic leader who leads with love, compassion and servitude. In my role as a Catholic School Principal, this is what brings me joy. In order to embody optimism, I value and enjoy interacting with my community, parents, staff and students, and by establishing meaningful, trustworthy and engaging relationships. As a Catholic Principal, my goal is to make everyone I interact with feel like family and feel welcome in our school. This brings me joy and inspires me.

Tensy Kalaparambath

Principal, St. Giovanni Scalabrini School
Dufferin-Peel CDSB





Know Your Passion

By Norm Roberts and Lorrie Naar

In a world of global uncertainty, a shrinking middle class, constant change and increasing demands, sustaining leadership is not just a professional necessity – it is a deeply personal and spiritual journey. Leadership, when rooted in service and vocation, requires more than strategy and skill. It demands heart, reflection, community and a continual return to one’s “why.”

This is especially true of education in an environment where finances are limited, class sizes are increasing and existing structures are expected to respond to the vast needs of a society trying to meet the educational, social and mental health requirements of our young people.

So how do we sustain our Catholic school leaders? What keeps them from crumbling under the stress when the work becomes heavy or the path unclear?

The answer lies in cultivating joy, community and purpose. When we look to the Apostolic foundations of the Church and the witness of the saints, we discover that sustainable leadership is not about avoiding challenges, but about nurturing the inner life of the leader in relationship with Jesus so they can meet those challenges with resilience, creativity and love.

A photograph of three people in a professional setting. On the left, a woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a pink shirt, is looking towards the center. In the middle, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a beige blazer, is smiling and looking towards the right. On the right, a man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt, is gesturing with his hand while looking towards the woman in the center. They appear to be in a meeting or discussion. The background is a chalkboard with some faint white lines.

Cultivating Healthy Adult Communication

By Jennifer Abrams

Leaders who wish to build strong, professional learning cultures and healthy, thriving school communities need to be aware of and compassionate towards a key understanding on which few leaders focus: Educators have credentials in how to teach subjects and grade levels, but what they don't have are credentials in how to talk to and with other adults.

Yet, for a strong and healthy school culture, leaders need to put energy and time into developing the skills and capacities for everyone to engage in healthy adult-to-adult communication.

Schools that don't just survive, but thrive, are schools that expect, encourage and support everyone's growth around skills for healthy adult-to-adult communication. The work of being a place of lifelong learning, continuous growth and successful innovation, must encourage both inner and outer development of those that work within them.

Psychologically safe schools where educators can develop capacities and mindsets to become more psychologically mature and cognitively capable are schools that create a positive ripple effect that reaches far into the future. With this type of inner and outer development around successful communication, those working within a school will become more capable of adapting successfully to change, have broader perspectives that allow them to be more objective and less 'swept by' new initiatives, and be better able to manage complexity with more sturdiness and an increased sense of well-being.

We need to develop school cultures that, like healthy trees, have solid, connected, nourished roots. They can sway flexibly in the wind by not breaking or toppling when strong winds come up.

To this end, leaders emphasizing the sustainability skill of successful adult-to-adult communication need to focus on:

- **Process and results.** They know how we do our work is important, not just what we do.
- **Effectiveness and efficiency.** They know educators working with each other in ways which support a healthy school culture makes the school more effective. And this is as important, if not more so, than getting work done in quick and expedient ways.
- **Being both technical and adaptive.** They know while the management of technical tasks is important, so is the robust work they do around leading in complex times.

The development of a sustainable and healthy culture requires that we have a more deliberate and intentional focus on adult-to-adult communication in both intrapersonal and interpersonal ways. While we might consider those over the age of 18 are not a main focus of our learning in schools, it is essential that all those in a school are stretching at their learning edges.

When professional learning happens it often comes in the form of work around instructional strategies, assessment practices or curricular shifts – all necessary ways to professionally develop. And inner and outer development around adult-to-adult communication is also essential to a thriving school. Adults can grow psychologically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually, even when they're done growing physically. Neuroplasticity is possible for everyone.

When one is aware of the world's challenges at this time – climate crisis, human rights violations, wars on multiple fronts – we know human development is not an indulgence. Students are watching us to see how we respond. It is critical that leaders focused on sustainability work on developing themselves and those at their schools to be better educators and bigger human beings. Our communication with one another is being observed. Students are learning how to be people by watching us.

Expecting, emphasizing and supporting those working in schools to develop skills to collaborate respectfully, willingly innovate in teams and navigate cognitive conflict requires a focus on these types of skills, capacities and mindsets. In my work, *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work* (Abrams, 2021) there is a focus on five ways to grow.

Knowing Our Identities

How can we know ourselves deeply as an individual, a colleague and a teammate? What should we know about ourselves as we work with others? By acknowledging and knowing our history, upbringing, strengths, biases, limitations, motivations and values, we can become better and more aware colleagues and teammates.

Suspending Certainty

How do we stretch beyond ourselves and build our intellectual humility and perspective taking? Being able to suspend certainty that we are “right” enables us to see outside ourselves and reflect on and critique our own decisions and value systems. These qualities are essential to work effectively as a team member and a more inclusive, equity-minded colleague.

Taking Responsibility

How can we take responsibility for our own work product, our language, our actions and our development? We need to consider how to face challenges directly and humanely with an intent to work out solutions, as well as apologize effectively when we have been incorrect or hurtful.

Building Resiliency

The work we do is challenging and demands resiliency. What emotional and psychological hygiene must we practice to be healthy for ourselves and for others? How do we sustain commitment, energy and health for ourselves and our work? Learning how to build the bandwidth to feel more comfortable with life's ambiguities and disappointments helps a school culture be healthier and more productive and our communications more humane.

Engaging in Reciprocity

It is our responsibility to work together and communicate respectfully as we recognize we cannot accomplish major feats in siloes. We need to work with an increased expertise in how to collaborate effectively.

The world challenges all of us working in schools – socially, politically and environmentally – and leaders who focus on sustainability in their work know this at deep levels. The need for self-awareness in all our interactions and especially in our schools is paramount. This work can feel like at least one, if not two, sizes too big for us. And yet it is essential we move forward just the same and grow into the work instead of being paralyzed by the task. Leading with a focus on healthy adult-to-adult communication is a place to start. Onward. [CP](#)

Jennifer Abrams is a communications consultant who works internationally with K-12 schools around the globe. She is the author of several books including her most recent book, *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work*. www.jenniferabrams.com.



Strategy as a Living System

By Pasi Sahlberg and Dave Runge

Could your new strategy process be the pathway to sustainable leadership and system transformation? Organization or system strategy is often viewed as a static document, an implementation plan or a guidebook for change. But what if it were something more organic and engaging? What if your education system strategy became a living expression of your aspirations – written and enacted in a way that reflects how you wish to lead continuous improvement in schools? Not just short-term wins, but impact that is system-wide, future-focused and enduring.

The question we have been asking here in Australia is – how could education system strategy empower sustainable leadership, strategy that drives improvement, builds capacity and outlasts leadership in schools?

In today's uncertain and rapidly changing world, rethinking how we build sustainable leadership in practice has never been more important.

Global Educational Landscape

Education system improvement strategies are still largely grounded in traditional approaches that focus on top-down control, compliance and standardization. This is not what we thought would happen when the COVID-19 pandemic shocked education systems around the world. But some education system leaders are brave enough to challenge the status quo. They argue that continuing to apply the same approaches, while expecting different outcomes, is not only ineffective, but morally indefensible.

Across the world, education systems struggle with declining student achievement, the eroding status of

being a teacher and difficulties engaging students in deeper learning in school. Too often, reactive leadership drifts with changing policies, instead of responding with a long-term, future-focused vision for schools.

While charismatic leaders can sometimes create lasting impact at the school level, truly sustainable system transformation remains rare. There are leaders who choose a different path, one marked by deeper collaboration, contextually responsive interventions and a commitment to professional teacher agency. These leaders are setting the stage for adaptive, long-lasting change.

Sustainable System Leadership in Action

An example of such leadership is unfolding in Western Victoria. The Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited (DOBCEL), under the leadership of Executive Director Tom Sexton, is intentionally building the capacity for sustainable leadership in about 60 Catholic schools. Their new 10-year strategic plan, *Pursuing Fullness of Life for All*, was developed with longevity in mind. Tom notes, "It will likely outlive my tenure" – a clear commitment to leaving a legacy beyond individual leadership.

DOBCEL's new strategy sets a clear vision through shared priorities and goals across the system. It reflects trust in teachers' professional agency and collective responsibility for learning and well-being in their schools. As a leader of a Catholic school system, Tom encourages schools to be bold and brave, but not reckless. He invites them to co-design the future of teaching and learning alongside him and his leadership team. DOBCEL is stewarding a system where shared responsibility and collaborative leadership are valued and celebrated.

Co-Design Is a Journey

At the heart of DOBCEL's approach to system transformation is co-design, a human- and community-centred process shaping both culture and strategy. Co-design values lived experience, honours local context and elevates collective professional wisdom as an important driver of school improvement.

Unlike rigid, top-down strategy models, co-design embraces multiple voices, iteration and the inevitable "messiness" of collaboration and change. By embedding co-design into the strategy process, DOBCEL is nurturing shared values and reflective practice. The values developed are visible in how people engage with the strategy and with one another.

Core principles of co-design in DOBCEL's strategic development:

- Building deep collaboration within and between schools and communities
- Honouring lived experience and local context
- Privileging relationships and community connections
- Designing for equity, inclusion and well-being
- Embracing the non-linear nature of change

Global Learning, Local Impact

DOBCEL's co-design process has been enriched through learning with and from global peers. A key relationship with Ontario's Ottawa Catholic School Board has helped spark a shared vision for sustainable change. As Tom D'Amico, OCSB Director of Education, explains, "Knowledge-sharing across systems builds the leadership capacity needed for ongoing, positive transformation." DOBCEL's team visited Ontario in 2024 to take some lessons home from the OCSB experience of sustainable system improvement.

Connecting internationally with thought-leaders like Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves not only inspired DOBCEL's leadership but also supported collective sense-making in schools and communities for deeper understanding of the new strategy. Together, these networks are helping to shape a theory of change for more collaborative and sustainable system of Victoria Catholic schools.

Collaborative Change for Sustainable Leadership

Lessons from successful education systems around the world show that collaborative cultures are linked with

improved educational performance. The theory of change, co-created with the DOBCEL community, has become more than an operational guide. It's a way to work together for better schools for all children. The following three practical principles underlying the new strategy inform collective action and create better conditions for productive educational practice in schools and sustainable leadership.


Deeper Collaboration-Building stronger cooperation within and between schools strengthens social capital and a shared sense of purpose. This principle is essential to system-wide transformation.

Networked Local Innovation-Empowering schools to co-design and lead improvement efforts. Purposeful investment in grassroots initiatives and ideas supports innovation from the ground up, allowing it to grow laterally across the system.

Collective Autonomy and Agency-Trusting schools to make decisions that matter for them and their communities. Professional autonomy is paired with shared responsibility to one another and to the governing authority. Student voice, agency and active engagement are central, not optional.

Sustainable Leadership as a Strategic Goal

DOBCEL's strategy recognizes that good ideas and innovation to improve the system already exist somewhere in the system. The primary challenge is to identify and share them across other schools. Initiatives emerge from within open systems when schools are allowed to take smart risks and learn from possible failures.

Active networking within and between other networks of schools exemplifies how DOBCEL is not just adopting new approaches but is investing in the capabilities required to sustain them. Lessons from OCSB and DOBCEL suggest that sustainable leadership isn't about one individual, but about cultivating a culture of continuous, collaborative improvement. It is about building collaborative cultures where innovation and improvement continue long after system leaders move on. 

Pasi Sahlberg
Professor of Educational Leadership
Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne

Dave Runge
Director of Future Schools, Australia

Serving Shepherding Loving

By Maria Solomon

What is sustainable leadership? How do we as Catholic principals faithfully serve our communities, unite our schools, care for the environment and support those in need? What gives us the strength and purpose to continue leading?

One of the guiding principles my late father lived by was, “self-pride has no honour.” This belief profoundly influenced my leadership as a Catholic principal over the past 16 of my 27-year journey as a Catholic educator. He modelled humility and resiliency and was a servant leader helping the marginalized and poor. His faith and love of the Mass, Eucharist and Rosary built the foundations for my sustainable leadership reflective in the Gospel teachings of serving, shepherding and loving with a compassionate heart.

Serving

The Catholic Leadership Framework helps align our decisions, actions and school culture with Gospel values to serve others. We are entrusted with a mission deeply rooted in faith and strategic in learning. We are committed to improving student achievement by balancing the demands of being clinicians and analysts of school and system level data. Learning must be intentional and impactful. Serving others comes with nurturing school cultures, promoting critical thinkers and problem solvers, and supporting social and emotional well-being, student voice and experiential learning. But how do we serve with sustainability when work intensification is real and challenges are great?

At St. Mary Catholic, we are building communities of faith, learning and service, where Christ is known, loved and imitated in words and actions. Serving others requires a deeper understanding of Pope Francis’ art of



encounter and accompaniment. How do we meet people where they are at in a non-judgment way? And how do we walk with them intentionally?

Much like the road to Emmaus, we create a sacred space, and we are companions on the journey – inviting, welcoming and walking alongside others. We are inspired by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si* and we believe deeply that we are all responsible for the common good of taking care of each other and our Earth. We make our service visible, intentional and rooted in faith through school events such as: Moose Hide Campaign, Eco Art Fair and our Pope Francis and Mother Mary Peaceful Prayer Gardens. We are cultivators, living in the image and likeness of God, evangelizing by serving others.

If we believe the role of a Catholic principal is a vocational calling from God, we will lead by initiating, implementing

and inspiring both learning and action within our schools and communities. Journeying with our clergy, staff, students and school community helps us to support a culture of co-learning and co-creating with a shared vision. We establish clear measurable goals, communicate purpose with clarity to maintain high expectations. We need to draw strength and hope from each other living out our pastoral care. This sense of connection grounds our “boots-on-the-ground” approach.

Shepherding

Sustainable leadership requires leading with care and purpose. Leading for the good of the flock must be watchful, patient and deeply aware of the role to guide and protect. Every member of the flock must be nourished, safe and able to thrive; this is how we build relationships and develop people. Pope Francis said, “A shepherd should smell like his sheep.”

Acknowledging and appreciating our people comes from the little acts of kindness that are personable and authentic. Developing our schools using this philosophy is reflected in community events such as: Community Clean Ups, Project Share and the Giving Bowl. We work alongside the St. Vincent DePaul Society to host events like Shrove Tuesday and North of 60, and we assist those in need through food banks embodying the spirit of service.

We are on a shared mission where family, church and school are ‘herded’ together in service of the greater good. When we act in His honour, the Holy Spirit renews our energy, transforming complaints into gratitude and weariness into calm strength.

Loving

Loving with a compassionate heart comes with being genuine and appreciative. The word compassion comes from two Latin words ‘cum’ meaning with or together and ‘pati’ to suffer and to bear, sharing in one another’s suffering. The heart should not be set aside in our decision making. “Don’t walk before me; don’t walk behind me, walk beside me.” (Romans 5: 2-5).


We draw strength from our members, which is the heart of compassion. St. John of the Cross speaks to encouragement, empowerment and transformation; this is sustainable leadership through the love of the heart. Taking the time to listen, being present in conversations

and relentless with problem solving, acknowledges our sustainable leadership and strength.

Pilgrims of Hope

Even when we serve, shepherd and love deeply, some may still see it as ‘not enough.’ The weight of self-doubt and the challenges posed by those who mistreat, misunderstand or misjudge us can feel overwhelming and sometimes we are the only ones still standing. Yet, when we place our trust in the Lord, we are empowered to lead with humility and forgiveness. We recognize that leadership is not about proving ourselves right but about choosing to do what is right. We learn to let go of our egos and assumptions, seek reconciliation, and own and learn from our mistakes. In the words of St. Mother Teresa, “If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are.”

The synodality of the Jubilee Year speaks to the Church’s commitment to walking together in faith and discernment. As ‘Pilgrims of Hope,’ we are all on a sacred journey toward deeper communion with God. Pope Francis modelled sustainable leadership by prioritizing care for the poor, marginalized and Earth.

The wisdom of Pope Leo XIV and generations of Church leaders reminds us that true leadership is rooted in justice, compassion and care for creation. When we cultivate sustainable leaders in our homes, schools and across our communities, in our own humble way, we are building stronger foundations and contributing to a leadership that is far greater than we can fully grasp. This is true visionary and missionary work! 

Maria Solomon

Principal, St. Mary Catholic Elementary School
Niagara Catholic District School Board



Cultivating Lasting Leadership

By Jennifer Vieira



In February, I joined CPCO as Manager of Catholic Leadership Development Services (CLDS). I am honoured to have moved into a role that prioritizes the professional learning and growth of Catholic principals and vice-principals and supports the development of sustainable leadership anchored in lifelong learning.

As a lifelong learner, I recognize the importance of ongoing learning and the value of continual growth. My personal journey has centred on uplifting leadership, learning alongside others, curiosity, questioning, creativity and risk taking. Learning collaboratively with colleagues along the way, my teaching career was marked by seeking out new challenges and opportunities.

My previous roles as Mathematics Consultant and Elementary Program Department Coordinator are

where I grew most as an instructional leader. While participating in a system-level collaborative inquiry, I learned about the importance of developing and nurturing a co-learning stance. A co-learning stance supports the conditions necessary for learning. Conditions of well-being that support diverse individuals, working together as communities of faith and co-learners. As I moved into the roles of Catholic vice-principal and principal, developing a co-learning stance with staff became a cornerstone for transforming schools into true learning organizations that focused on the well-being of all learners, enabling sustainable growth, innovation and positive change.

While serving locally on our P/VP Executive as president and lead negotiator, strong advocacy for principal and vice-principal well-being was essential to me. With important connections to student learning, effective staff development, school cultures and school improvement, administrator well-being directly impacts the success of our schools.

A review of research paints a clear picture of the negative consequences that result from poor principal and vice-principal well-being, including impacts on student learning, achievement and well-being, not to mention teachers, school cultures and school improvement, all well documented. Well-being is an important issue to address.

Building on the experiences that have developed me as a leader, in my role at CPCO, I am championing principal and vice-principal well-being, re-envisioning meaningful professional learning and prioritizing much needed leadership development in challenging times in education. I have the opportunity to collaborate, advocate, contribute knowledge and influence professional learning that impacts principals and vice-principals and the important work they do.

Professional learning is essential for leaders in Catholic education. Ensuring administrators stay current, effective and responsive, CPCO's CLDS is committed to supporting leadership development by offering professional learning for a variety of career stages. From high quality AQ

programming to virtual and face-to-face workshops, CLDS provides opportunities for Catholic principals, vice-principals and aspiring teacher leaders to further their leadership development through differentiated professional learning sessions grounded in Gospel values.

We are proud to have recently updated our 2025-2026 workshop offerings, made available through our *Professional Learning: Catholic Leadership Development* brochure. Re-imagined and re-created, our professional learning workshops address a variety of new directions. Sessions that can be booked by school boards or local associations include:

- **Resilience:** Building Strength for Sustainable Practice
- **Leading with Compassion:** Trauma-Informed Practices in Catholic Schools
- **Leading for Impact:** Strategic School Improvement Planning in Catholic Schools

This year we are excited to launch an innovative collaboration between the CLDS and Support Services. Our *Leading with Well-being: The Principal's Path to a Thriving School* workshop explores the growing body of research on principal and vice-principal well-being and its critical role in fostering effective leadership and sustainable school improvement. Supported by our CLDS Standing Committee, we are planning for our 2026 CPCO Conference, which will take place April 23 and 24, 2026, in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Our goal is to offer exceptional professional learning led by high-quality speakers who create meaningful connections to our Catholic context, within an environment that fosters wellness and renewal.

General comments from attendees about CPCO's 2025 Conference were affirming and abundant:

"Excellent opportunity to network with fellow administrators and get some rest from work! Felt fed very well!!! Thanks so much!!! Ready and refreshed for starting again at work next week!"

"The conference provided me with the opportunity to connect with other colleagues across the province, listen to valuable presenters' experiences and messages through their stories, visit different vendors, relax, rejuvenate and share in our Catholic faith."

"Very welcoming, very well organized; lots of humour from participants and presenters ... which was needed."

Whether through participation at our CPCO Annual Conference or engaging in other unique offerings such as our *International Exchange Program*, we invite our Catholic school administrators to explore the various opportunities available that best suits their learning needs.



Working closely with stakeholders across the province, I look forward to the important work that lies ahead of us. Through a Catholic lens, CLDS is committed to ongoing collaboration in support of the leadership development for Catholic principals and vice-principals across Ontario. I am excited to have joined the CPCO team and look forward to working with all of you. [CP](#)

Jennifer Vieira
Manager and AQ Registrar
Catholic Leadership Development Services, CPCO

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Heart, Head and Hands Leadership

By Liz Robinson

It is often said that being a school leader is the best job in the world. A privilege. And that can be true. But for many, at least some of the time, it is not. This article is an exploration of how we can support ourselves and others to keep finding the joy.

Big Education, a UK Multi-Academy Trust, exists because of a re-evaluation of the purpose of school. As a group of educational leaders and schools, we have asked – and continue to ask – ourselves the big questions. What is school really for? What matters about how school is? How might we design our provision in ways that meet the needs of our most under-served learners? What kind of data and information do we need to create that tells us about all the things that matter to us?

The widespread view of a predominantly academic purpose of school, as measured through standardized exams, has shaped the way learning is conceptualized and designed across the world for many decades. And of course, knowledge acquisition about the world and different subjects is important. It's just there are lots of other things that matter too.

We love the idea of an education of the 'Head, Heart and Hand,' not simply focusing on the Head but also attributing equal value to the Heart and the Hand. A bigger education.

An education of the Heart considers the importance of students' physical and emotional well-being and their capacity to develop healthy, secure and productive relationships, to have a sense of themselves, their identities, value and purpose.

An education of the Hand can be conceptualized as 'making and doing' things; the creative arts and physical pursuits, alongside taking action, doing work that is not just 'for my teacher, in my book.' This might include civic action, problem solving and developing the associated mindsets and skills in collaborating with others, presenting ideas and working with different stakeholders.



The educational debate in many jurisdictions, and notably in the United Kingdom, has centred around a reductive set of dichotomies; traditional versus progressive, knowledge versus skills, direct instruction versus dialogic teaching. We believe these are false dichotomies. Our model is Head AND Heart AND Hand; not Head OR Heart OR Hand. All are necessary, and none are sufficient without the others. The work is to look in more sophisticated ways at the integration of these aspects, how they are balanced, designed to complement each other and contribute to furthering the broader aims of our school system.

Being rooted in a confident articulation of this wider vision is a source of motivation, purpose and sustainability. Within the whims of changing governments and external pressures, such deep exploration of leaders' purpose and values is the foundation of keeping the joy. It brings a professional confidence, a resilience and clarity that roots leaders creating a 'holdfast'¹ in the choppy seas of school leadership.

Creating schools focused on an education of the head, heart and hand requires leadership of the head, heart and hand. Far too often, leadership is seen as being about having all the answers. Leaders feel they must be 'superheroes,' knowing what to do in all situations, leading from the front and being able to 'help' people by giving them advice and solutions. By exploring a different mental model of what leaders should 'do' and 'be like,' we open up a different, humbler and more authentic model of leadership.

This has big implications for how leaders see themselves and allow themselves to show up in their work. The human, fallible side, which can so often get hidden underneath the suit jacket and behind the big desk. In my experience, bringing more of my authentic self into my work has been powerfully impactful in creating a culture of greater psychological safety; allowing others to also talk more openly about what is really going on, rather

than what they think I want to hear. This is important because it means there is greater candour, less emotional energy drain and higher efficiency. We create a more human culture, where we allow ourselves to be learners as leaders, and make it safe for everyone else to be one too.

The values which underpin such a culture are critical. There could be a risk that, in allowing for a focus on the authentic expression of the adults, we lose focus on the children and young people we serve. This is where a clearly articulated set of values can be helpful.

A culture has many dimensions and aspects, and balance and nuance are key.



At Surrey Square Primary School, part of Big Education and the school where I was principal for many years, the core values – Responsibility, Respect, Enjoyment, Community, Perseverance, Compassion – have been in place for 20 years². They are now embodied in a family of beautiful 'characters,' like Kofi Compassion, who help the children to engage with the core values. The more 'human-centred' values of compassion and enjoyment are balanced with the robustness of respect, responsibility and excellence.

These values can be in tension at times; for instance, we have compassionate understanding for team members and students who are facing challenging circumstances, while also holding on to the drive for excellence and taking responsibility for our lives.

Leading and sustaining schools in this multifaceted mindset has many aspects. It's messy. It's complex. It's human. It's dynamic and fascinating. It's intellectual, emotional and practical; leadership of the head, heart and hand. [CP](#)

Liz Robinson
CEO | Big Education

¹The holdfast is the root ball of the seaweed kelp, which anchors the plant into the seabed and stops it being washed away by the tides

²The values can be explored more fully online at: www.surreysquareprimary.co.uk



Supporting Principals, Sustaining Leadership

By Annie Kidder

I was asked to write an article about sustainable leadership, but it's impossible to talk about something like that in a vacuum, as if we're not living in extremely challenging times – as a country, as educational leaders and as human beings.

I spent the winter and spring of 2025 talking to principals across Canada. They told stories of incredible challenge and inspiring excitement.

Some said they started every day having to deal with missing staff; others talked about violence in their schools. In one Zoom meeting, a principal apologized for being late and for the bruise on her chin – she'd been in a confrontation with a seven-year-old who was not happy about getting on the school bus.

But despite the challenges, principals also talked enthusiastically and hopefully about programs that were making their school more equitable, and about things like work-integrated learning programs and school-wide literacy strategies that were making a real difference to their students and their school community.

These conversations were part of our preparation for the Annual Canadian School Survey – a partnership between People for Education, Laurier University and the Canadian Association of Principals, launching this fall. It will go to every principal in every publicly funded school in Canada. Its goals are twofold: to build public understanding – and with that, support – for what goes on in schools; and to track differences and similarities in programs and resources nationwide.

What's this got to do with sustainable leadership?

At People for Education, our goal is to make clearer the connections between the strength of our schools and the strength of our society.

If the public doesn't understand the importance of schools, they won't support them. If voters take schools for granted, sustaining the system and its leaders becomes impossible.

While we can think about sustainable leadership as an individual responsibility, we must also think about it systemically. What do we have to do as a society to sustain our school leaders?

The Current Climate: Challenges on Every Front

Across Canada, principals are leading in the context of increasing complexity. A national shortage of qualified teachers and support staff has become an urgent crisis. In Ontario, a 2023 report from the Ontario Principals' Council found 81 per cent of school leaders were dealing with significant staffing gaps every week, and 62 per cent reported having to cover classrooms themselves regularly (Ontario Principals' Council, 2023).

At the same time, there is a disturbing rise in incidents of violence in schools. The Canadian Teachers' Federation (2023) reported that 85 per cent of teachers have experienced or witnessed violence in schools, a trend that has added further emotional and administrative burden to school leadership. Principals are often the first responders in these situations – expected to manage



“What did you learn on the job today?”

It’s a simple question – and one that often stops school leaders in their tracks. Not because there’s nothing to say, but because the learning we experience in a day is embedded in moments that move quickly: a walk down the corridor, a quick exchange with a teacher, a tense but productive parent conversation or a coaching session that energizes us just as much as the person we’re supporting.

These daily interactions aren’t just routine – they are the very fabric of our leadership. And if we’re paying attention, they’re also the heart of our professional growth and the growth of others.

In a world where sustainability in leadership is about more than self-care and succession planning – where it’s about building leadership that lasts and leaves a legacy – the quality of our conversations matters more than ever.

Leadership that Lasts Starts with How We Talk

We often think of coaching as something formal: scheduled sessions, defined goals, set protocols. But what if we saw coaching not as a process or bounded activity, but as a way of leading?

This is the core premise of Growth Talk. A coaching way of leading does not belong solely to certified coaches or designated mentors. It’s a leadership approach available to every school leader, every day. It’s grounded in how we listen, ask questions, notice what matters, and support others to make sense of their work and move forward. And crucially, it’s sustainable. Why? Because it does not rely on charisma, authority or heroic effort. It draws on curiosity, trust and a belief that people grow best when they are supported – not steered – by their leaders.

Conversations as Currency

Schools can be thought of as “human-intensive systems,” where the complex work of teaching and learning happens through webs of human interaction. They don’t run on processes or metrics alone. They run on relationships – and relationships are built, maintained and deepened through conversation.

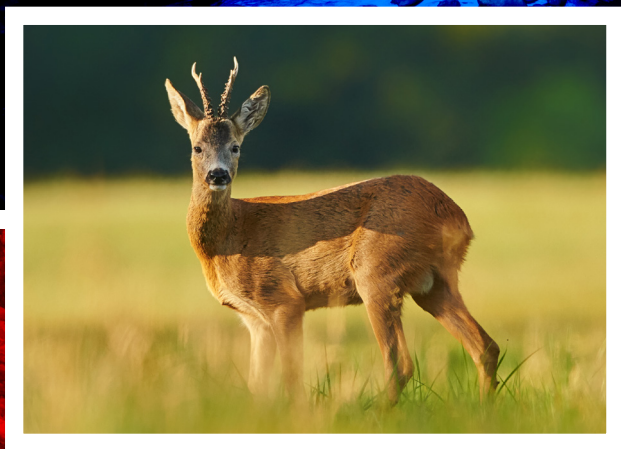
That’s why we describe conversations as the currency of school life. And like currency, their value depends on how they are exchanged. A purely transactional conversation – a compliance checklist, a quick instruction – might serve a purpose. But it rarely fuels growth.

A Coaching Way of Leading

By Chris Munro



Is it ... “Indigenous Leadership as Resilience” or



“The Resilience of Indigenous Leadership”

By Troy Hill

Shé:kon sewakwékon Troy Hill ni iónkiats, Kaniienkehake, ni wakonwentsioten, Ohswé:ken kherihonnyén:ni (Translation: Greetings everyone, my name is Troy Hill, I am Mohawk from Six Nations of the Grand River where I am an educator.)

We as Kaniienkeha (Mohawk people, keepers of the flint), begin each day with the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen, the words that come before all else. The Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen is recited each morning as our feet touch our Mother, the Earth, and each evening as our feet leave our Mother, the Earth.

We were also instructed to recite the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen before and after meetings when important dialogue is to take place. We do this to encourage good mindedness, reminding us of our leadership responsibilities, while acknowledging thankfulness that all beings are performing their leadership responsibilities.

We begin our Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen by thanking Onkwehshón:’a (people beings), giving us the responsibility to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living beings. We then thank Iethinisténa Ohóntsia (our Mother the Earth) and her responsibility to care for all, providing nourishment for all beings.

*We move from our Earth to thanking the waters and their responsibilities, and then;
the fish and their responsibilities,
the plants and their responsibilities,
the food plants and their responsibilities,
medicine herbs and their responsibilities,
the animals and their responsibilities, the deer as the leader,
the trees and their leader the maple tree,
the birds and their leader the eagle,
the winds and their responsibilities,
the thunder and their responsibilities,
the sun, our eldest brother and his responsibility,
our grandmother moon and her responsibility,
the stars and their responsibilities,
the enlightened teachers and their responsibility,
and our Creator.*

We have recited the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen for generations past for generations to come since the time of the creation of all. Within the setting of our education, our children recite it on the morning announcements to begin each school day and to end each school day. Our people have sustained our commitment to the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen, fostering our commitment to the sustainable obligation of the leadership roles of all.



Sustaining Hope

By Michael Saver

"Hope springs eternal in every human breast."

Alexander Pope, 1732

Educational leaders, teachers and parents can be forgiven if Alexander Pope's assertion about hope seems more suited to the 18th century than the 21st. This is particularly true if they have had the fortitude to sit through all four episodes of Stephen Graham's *Adolescence* on Netflix.

The series is an unflinching exploration of boys and young men being radicalized online into perspectives of toxic masculinity. The resulting violence lays bare the disconnection of parents and teachers from the daily world of social media experienced by children, and especially by teenagers.

While describing well a reality that is backed up by statistics showing increases in violence (physical and emotional) among the young, *Adolescence* does not presume to offer any hopeful solutions. Indeed, as described by *The Guardian*, it is 'a howl of despair.'

It is true that sometimes we need a wake-up call. Human beings cannot live without hope. Hope is a healing light that helps dispel the shadows of despondency, trauma and isolation. But we are often at a loss to teach precisely what it is, and therefore to support children and young people to access it.

Hope is often mistaken for optimism, a glass half full, 'accentuate the positive' stance that skims the surface

while ignoring complex and painful realities: Dancing through Life as Fiyero urges his classmates in *Wicked*. Young people can see the emptiness of this false hope, and its advocacy fuels them to embrace its opposite: cynicism, anger and detachment.

Genuine hope necessitates that we stand firmly in what Parker Palmer describes as the Tragic Gap. This is the space between "the way things are and the ways we know they might be."¹ Hope enables us to hold the tension of this gap as we seek a way forward that neither ignores the painful reality nor abandons the patience and determination needed to create a different reality.

Principals and other educational leaders must be beacons of hope. Modelling hope, encouraging hope, is more important today than ever. The social forces leading children and young people toward cynical disengagement or into escapist fantasy are legion.

But, sustaining hope as a leader is also more challenging than ever. What are some practical ways to cultivate hope in our own lives while avoiding embitterment on the one hand or irrelevant idealism on the other?

Recognize hope is communal.

The quickest path to despair for a leader is belief in the 'lone wolf' model of leadership, which posits everything rests on the shoulders of a single person. This model, all too prevalent today, narrows what is possible by ignoring



Connecting Voices

Principal Connections invites our readers to share thoughts and give voice on the articles we publish. We are looking to build a professional learning community, and we are particularly interested in how you use these articles to support your practice. We invite you to send us a paragraph – maximum 75 words – that provides feedback, connects further ideas to articles, offers personal reflections or suggests next steps to share with our readers.

“Kevin Fairfield’s *Technology: The Physical Costs* offers practical strategies to support student and staff wellness in our increasingly tech-driven environment. It serves as a strong reminder these habits must be explicitly taught and embedded in our school culture. Beginning with staff meetings, we can introduce these concepts, model them as a team and equip teachers to pass this learning on to students. By partnering with families and promoting healthy, ergonomic routines, we can foster a school environment where everyone thrives.”

Josie Zuppa, Principal, Hamilton-Wentworth CDSB

“Sometimes as admin it’s hard to embrace new technologies. Jennifer Casa-Todd’s question, ‘Is using AI going to help me, the human administrator, better support the humans in my building?’ Yes it is! We need to jump in and harness the power of productivity and utilize tools that will clear the way of managerial tasks so that we can dive into the instructional leadership we all crave. Explore the possibilities! Need a graduation speech, some summative evaluation paragraphs, a team building game, a letter to the community, or need to turn your staff photos into baby pics for a fun school wide game. Is a teacher needing support in differentiating content for their diverse learners? Don’t be afraid ... harness the power and productivity of AI tools!”

Melissa Pouw, Principal, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

“After reading *Principal Connections*, I reflected on how my leadership can be instrumental in helping students and staff navigate the evolving overall impact of AI. I considered several proactive and supportive strategies. Promoting digital well-being education, fostering an inclusive and caring school culture, supporting mental health and emotional resilience, and modelling and teaching ethical and responsible use of AI can produce positive effects that will equip our students with the skills to be healthy and responsible consumers, producers and critics of AI.”

Monica Thompson, Principal, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

“As a newly appointed vice-principal, I understand that encouraging staff to step into the ‘unknown’ especially when it comes to designing meaningful assessments can feel daunting. *Assessment. What If?* highlights these challenges. It’s a reminder the journey of innovation often begins with uncertainty for everyone. By using board-approved platforms, staff can enhance the effectiveness of our assessments while giving students a greater chance to succeed. Creating professional development opportunities focused on assessment design will support staff and energize them to try something new.”

Ola Holyk, Vice-Principal, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

“The article *Mindful Engagement* really caused me to reflect. This article resonates with me as it has always been my fear that young people, are missing out on some of the simple joys of life that we experienced without technology. It is my hope that personally, I can lead by example for my own children and always ensure balance between screen time and being present to enjoy richer and more meaningful experiences available from the people and world around us.”

Rukshi Athulathmudali, Support Services, CPCO

“Susan Sweet and Deb Shackell’s article *Reducing Assessment Stress*, highlighted great strategies for starting your school year with student/staff wellness at the core of school improvement planning. Using the reminders about ensuring all staff are purposefully enhancing mental health in the classroom is a powerful message you can use to integrate into staff meetings, daily announcements and community messaging. I intend to highlight a school-wide plan including devoted time for explicit instruction in adopting a healthy mindset and strategic test-taking and study skills.”

Sandra Donaghue, Principal, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

We’d love to hear your thoughts about an article in this edition of Principal Connections. Send your comments to dkinsellabiss@cpco.on.ca by October 14th, 2025.

Growing Inspirational School Leaders

By Danielle Hyles

Sustainable leadership in education is all about empowering and developing inspirational school leaders. Sustainable school leaders are visionary, collaborative, emotionally intelligent, compassionate, resilient, strategic and creative in their pursuit of school success. They support all students in their educational journeys, nurture the well-being of the communities they serve and remain committed to their own professional growth.

1. Build Trustworthy Relationships and Shared Vision

Sustainable leadership requires fostering confident, adaptable and authentic team practice. This involves creating respect-driven, trustworthy relationships and maintaining an open mindset. By sharing a future vision with integrity, school leaders can implement strategies that benefit the entire school, students, staff, families and community members. This inclusive approach ensures that decision-making skills, restorative practices, values, abilities and goals are respected, especially in addressing special needs exceptionalities.

2. Engage in Active Listening and Proactive Planning

Effective sustainable leaders engage in meaningful active listening. They organize and predict tasks ahead of time and seek advice from their leadership teams. This proactive approach includes preparing for upcoming events, meetings and potential school issues. By focusing on equity, virtual STEM learning and leadership development, school leaders can promote home/school relations and introduce new learning ideas, techniques and resources for classroom engagement and teacher development.

3. Demonstrate Leadership Through Learning Walks

Incorporating weekly five-minute learning walks allows school leaders to demonstrate leadership coaching. This is an authentic strategy to witness the learning taking place in classes and credit teachers for their efforts. These walks provide evidence of metacognitive, experiential and collaborative skills in learning discussions with students and staff. By focusing on technological education and culturally responsive pedagogy, leaders can support student voice, neurodiversity and growth mindset, by fostering an environment where challenges and strengths are understood and addressed.

4. Nurturing Success and Self-Reflection


Sustainable leaders influence educators and staff to believe in and nurture their own success. By encouraging self-reflection and self-celebration of achievements, leaders promote a culture of service leadership and community support. This approach includes fostering self-regulation and introspection among students, encouraging them to be sociable, spontaneous, energetic and creative. Leaders should exemplify trustworthiness, reliability and collaboration, treating mentees as winners and demonstrating determination and support in their professional interactions.

5. Supporting Passion and Knowledge in Education

School leaders play a crucial role in developing knowledge, support and passion for learning among students. By nurturing the continued support of students and their families, principals and vice-principals contribute to the success of their educational communities. This commitment to sustainable leadership ensures that all students have the opportunity to thrive and achieve their full potential.

6. Engaging in Personal and Professional Development

Sustainable leaders should engage in activities outside their school communities that benefit their professional growth. For example, becoming an educational author or participating in community projects can enhance their leadership skills and contribute to the school community. Sharing knowledge and experiences through books, articles and other resources can inspire and support others in their educational journeys.

By building trustworthy relationships, engaging in active listening, demonstrating leadership through learning walks, nurturing success, supporting passion and knowledge, and engaging in personal and professional development, school leaders can create a thriving educational environment. This approach helps all students, staff, and community members to feel supported and empowered to achieve their full potential, contributing to a sustainable and successful future for education. 

Dr. Danielle Hyles
Elementary Vice-Principal
Durham Catholic District School Board

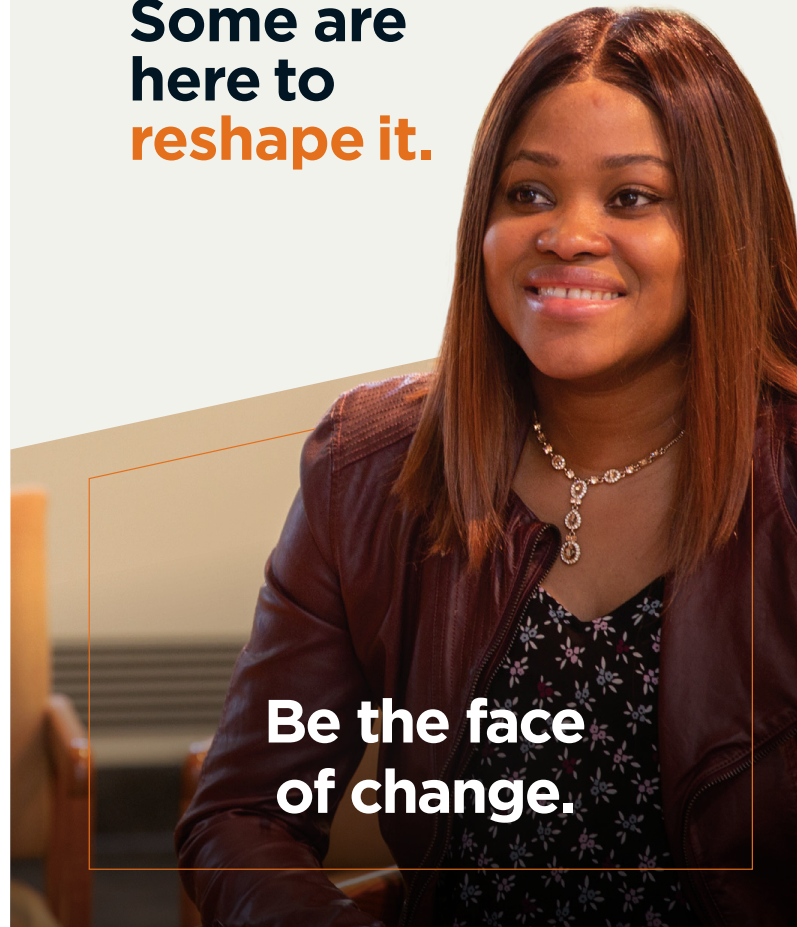


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