



PrincipalConnections

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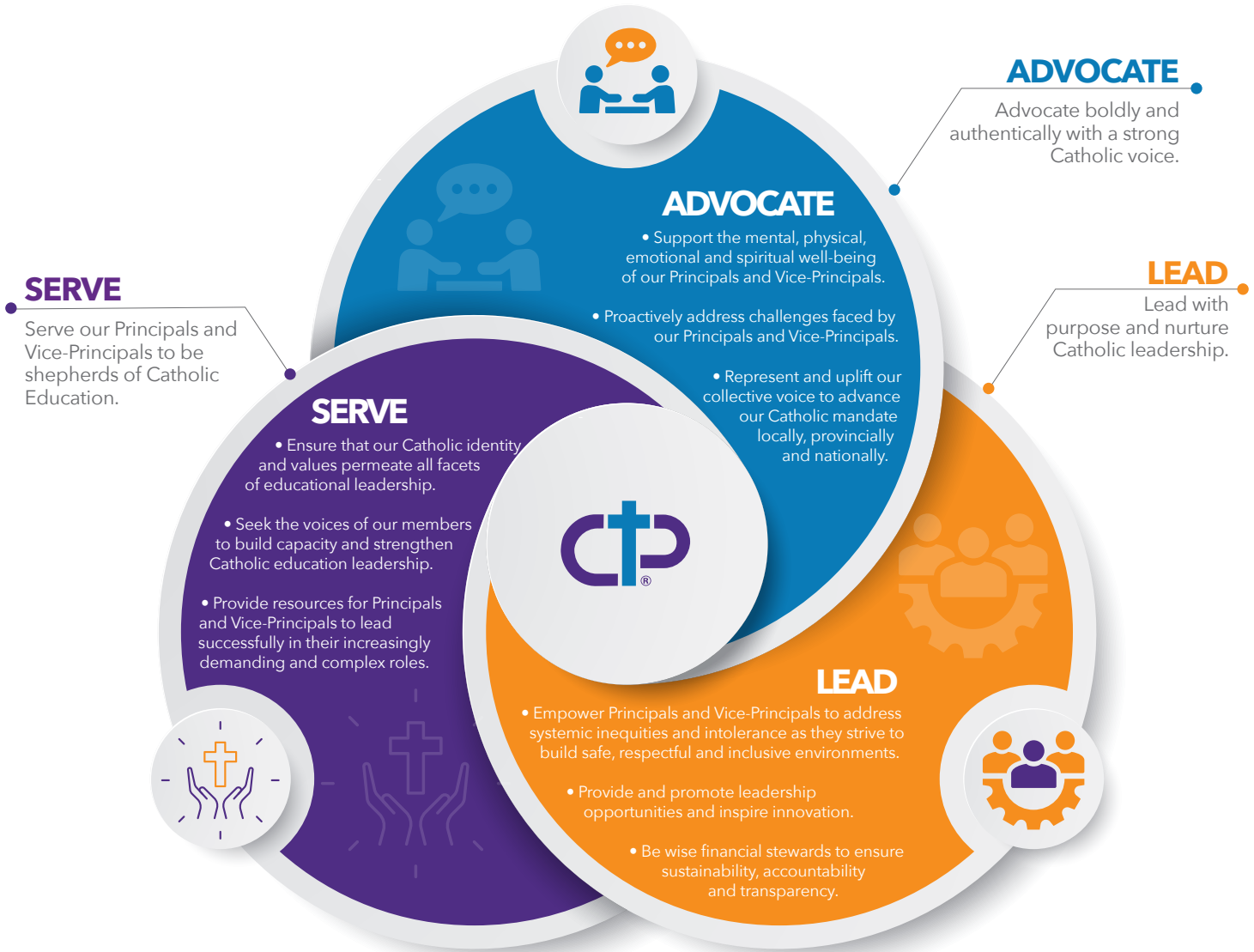
Trauma-Sensitive Education

ANDREW CAMPBELL
Moving to Thriving

JODY CARRINGTON
The Kids Are Not the Problem

HAMZA KHAN
Honour Your Indomitable Spirit

STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2027



What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
Micah 6:8

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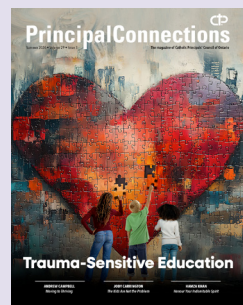
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FROM THE PRESIDENT & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Ralph Sharples, Tilia Cruz

Trauma-Sensitive Education

When we move from the classroom into administration, two interconnected lessons reveal themselves quickly. The first is the quiet power of the long game – the patience required to build trusting relationships that allow genuine partnerships to flourish. The second, often more striking, is the realization that not everything is as it appears, especially when we come to understand the burdens our students carry.

Each day, students arrive weighed down by backpacks filled with the essentials they need simply to get through the day. Yet for many, the heaviest load is not the one on their shoulders. They bring personal experiences that shape their reactions, relationships and capacity to learn. These internal weights, though unseen, influence how they move through the world. They cannot shed this weight by simply removing a bag from their backs. It is a weight that has woven itself into their being.

Trauma-Sensitive Education helps us respond to these realities with compassion and intention. It invites us to look beyond behaviour and consider the story beneath it. By creating environments that support students and prevent retraumatization, we offer students the stability they need to grow. By embracing a whole-school approach to Trauma-Sensitive Education, we strengthen our collective capacity to care for those entrusted to us and nurture a more compassionate education community.

But in this work, we cannot forget ourselves. Supporting students – and staff – through their struggles requires emotional presence, patience and deep empathy. Over time, the cumulative weight of this responsibility can leave us vulnerable to compassion fatigue and exhaustion. Trauma-sensitive leadership calls us not only to care for others, but also to honour our own limits. To continue serving with clarity and heart, we must tend to our well-being. By sharing our experiences with trusted colleagues, setting

healthy boundaries and acknowledging our own needs, we preserve the emotional capacity required to sustain those who rely on us.

Although our work is challenging and continuous, this year has seen multiple milestones and accomplishments for CPCO and our Associates. Of note, there has been the continued implementation of our new Strategic Plan that included the completion of a new CPCO prayer (created and revised by a number of stakeholders), the completion of most local contract negotiations, and the review and revisions to local Constitutions and by-laws. We continue to focus on Principal and Vice-Principal well-being and

innovative professional learning through on-going, CPCO created and led workshops. This has been possible through Ministry funding. This funding has allowed us to present to individual boards across the province on specific and practical job embedded practices that allow Catholic school administrators to add

greater tools to their professional ‘backpacks’. Feedback has been very positive, indicating a clear need across this province for mentoring opportunities for our servant leaders.

In the spirit of continuing professional development, recently, we came together for an outstanding provincial conference founded in hope, steadfast leadership and a collective commitment to building healthier, more sustainable school environments.

On behalf of CPCO, thank you for the patience, understanding and resilience you show your school communities throughout the year. Your steady presence helps others find the courage to face their challenges with renewed strength, and hope. As summer approaches, it is our prayer that you find time to unburden yourselves, rest deeply, and return in the fall renewed in spirit and purpose.

Trauma-sensitive leadership calls us not only to care for others, but also to honour our own limits.



FROM THE EDITOR

Deirdre Kinsella Biss

Rooted in Compassion

In every school community in Ontario, there are quiet stories – experiences of loss, fear, disconnection and resilience that shape how students and adults move through their days. Trauma-sensitive education begins with recognizing these unseen burdens and understanding that learning is inseparable from a person's sense of safety and belonging.

At its heart, trauma is less about the hurt itself and more about being left alone with that hurt. As Catholic school leaders, our role is to create environments where authentic human connection is possible and compassion is practised. When we approach our interactions with curiosity rather than judgment, we open the door to healing, trust and genuine engagement. This issue of *Principal Connections* invites us to deepen that commitment and to imagine what becomes possible when every person in our school community feels seen, supported and safe enough to learn.

Trauma changes how a student's brain processes information. It affects regulation, attention and learning in ways that aren't always visible. Jean Clinton advocates that when principals lead with relational safety, they create conditions that support healing as well as academic growth. A trauma-sensitive school culture – rooted in relationship, empowerment, collaboration and growth – helps every student feel valued, supported and able to thrive.

Compassion is the work. Joanne Schroeder, Peter Senge and Jean Clinton discuss how compassionate education systems help students and educators develop the emotional and systems-thinking skills needed to navigate today's complex challenges. Their article illuminates the belief that when learners feel part of something larger than themselves, they begin to practise empathy, share responsibility and develop problem-solving skills that help strengthen resilience.

Connection is the key. *The Kids Are Not the Problem*, authored by Jody Carrington, emphasizes that connection, not curriculum, is the foundation of healing. She proposes that trauma-sensitive schools prioritize regulation, relationships and repair for both staff and students.

When we concentrate on well-being, a student's character strengthens, and responsibility shifts from "fixing the student" to being the shared work of all the educators in the school.

We must be "well enough" to be "good enough."

Andrew Campbell reminds us that effective leadership requires self-awareness, humility and emotional regulation. Being "good enough" means managing our reactions and repairing mistakes, while being "well enough" is about maintaining inner steadiness to foster safety and healthy relationships for staff and students. He invites school leaders to rest, refuse and reframe.

Our communities need us to "Serve, Advocate and Lead."

Hamza Khan positions school leaders as messengers of hope, grounded not in avoiding hardship but in meeting it with purpose. When leaders acknowledge difficulty, honour endurance and frame adversity as something to navigate, they strengthen a community's persistence and resilience. A shared belief develops across the school community reinforcing the conviction that individually and collectively, we can do hard things.

Disconnection carries its own weight. Isolation can amplify stress, narrow perspective and erode the sense of belonging that anchors resilience. Left unaddressed, disconnection becomes a barrier not only to academic growth but to the flourishing of the whole person.

Schools are more than learning spaces – they are communities where presence and relational safety can interrupt isolation. Trauma-sensitive education is ultimately about how we choose to show up. Every interaction is a chance to replace disconnection with connection and remind someone their pain doesn't have to be carried alone. When we make human dignity our anchor and lead with steadiness and compassion, we create conditions where healing and learning grow together, communicating in every moment.

You are not alone in this.

Learning from the Work of Gabor Maté

By Deirdre Kinsella Biss

Trauma, as Canadian author and physician Dr. Gabor Maté explains, isn't the difficult event itself – it's the inner wound that forms when someone's ability to cope is compromised. It's the disconnection that happens inside, whether it's caused from emotions, by relationships or a lost sense of safety.

And trauma doesn't show up as a memory of what happened. It shows up in the patterns people develop to protect themselves: staying on high alert, pulling away, shutting down, striving for perfection or reacting suddenly. These aren't signs of disrespect. They're adaptations that once helped someone get through something hard.

Across Ontario, principals are leading schools through a time of real complexity. Academic gaps, growing mental health needs and increasingly dysregulated behaviour aren't occasional challenges anymore, they are a part of the daily landscape. To lead well in this environment, it helps to understand what might be driving these patterns. When we see trauma as an internal wound rather than an external event, behaviour starts to look less like a problem to fix and more like a message to interpret.

Think about the student who shuts down, avoids work, escalates quickly or seems constantly on edge. They're not choosing to be difficult. Their nervous system is doing what it learned to do to stay safe. Trauma changes how the brain processes information, how the body responds to stress and how relationships are understood. In classrooms that can look like impulsivity, perfectionism, withdrawal or sudden emotional shifts. When school leaders see these responses as survival strategies, the whole approach to supporting students begins to shift.

Trauma is far more common than we often realize. It includes not only upsetting events, but also ongoing stressors like family instability, racism, poverty, illness, loss or growing up in environments where emotional needs aren't consistently met. These experiences can interrupt healthy development, making it harder for students to regulate emotions, trust adults or stay engaged in learning.

But trauma isn't destiny. With consistent, supportive and predictable relationships, healing can happen and schools can be powerful places for that healing.

Dr. Maté emphasizes the importance of relational safety. His 4 A's Framework – Awareness, Acknowledgment, Attunement and Action – provides a powerful lens for understanding and responding to trauma.

Awareness invites school leaders to notice their own emotional patterns before entering challenging situations.

Acknowledgment supports them in naming what is happening within themselves and others, without judgment or blame.

Attunement calls leaders to be fully present – listening openly, reading cues and responding with empathy.

Action ensures that decisions arise from a place of clarity, compassion and commitment to safety.

When principals and vice-principals weave Maté's 4 A's Framework into their daily practice, they help create a school environment grounded in trust, stability and connection.

Ontario's commitment to safe, inclusive and equitable schools fits naturally with this way of leading. When principals use a trauma-sensitive lens, students aren't disciplined for their pain, they're supported through it. Schools become places where relationships come first, behaviour is understood in context and every student, no matter their history, has the chance to learn, connect and thrive.

This issue of *Principal Connections* looks at what trauma-sensitive leadership can look like in action: the science behind it, the strategies that sustain it and the school-level decisions that make it possible. At its core lies a powerful insight illuminated throughout Dr. Maté's work: when leaders truly grasp the impact of trauma, their approach shifts. And schools become environments where healing and learning can genuinely thrive together. [!\[\]\(b538fe54c1f3a7343e37e85cc2d00497_img.jpg\)](#)

Learnings for this article came from:

The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture by Dr. Gabor Maté with Daniel Maté. Copyright © 2022

Moving to Thriving

By Andrew Campbell

Research has deepened our understanding of student trauma and its impact on school experiences. We now better recognize how trauma can manifest in behaviour, attendance, emotional regulation, executive functioning and sense of belonging. Research also suggests that trauma can influence memory, focus and a young person's ability to feel safe enough to engage in learning.

But here is a difficult question: What does this mean for you? Not for students. Not for policy documents. For you, as an educational leader.

While this issue of *Principal Connections* rightly centres student trauma, this article shifts the lens toward educational leaders. This article builds on that conversation by turning attention to educational leaders, recognizing that the adults who lead schools also carry trauma and experiences that shape their decisions, their leadership and the conditions students encounter each day.



When leaders ask one another, “How are you?” the answer is often, “I’m good,” “Great, thanks,” or “I’m well.” Yet, many leaders are functioning in systems defined by urgency, emotional intensity and chronic overload. There is an implicit expectation in education that leaders must be steady, composed and endlessly capable. The assumption is that if you are not visibly struggling, you must be fine.

“We must be well enough to be good enough.” This is a phrase I use to name the truth that the quality of our leadership depends on the condition of our inner self; we cannot cultivate stability, belonging and care for others if we are personally operating in depletion and dysregulation.

When I say leaders need to be “good enough to be well enough,” I am not talking about perfection or performance; I am talking about capacity. Leadership is relational and regulatory; the tone you carry becomes the tone others feel. If you are chronically depleted, reactive or operating in quiet survival mode, that state does not stay contained within you – it becomes the climate.

To be “good enough” means being self-aware enough to notice your triggers, grounded enough to pause before reacting, humble enough to repair when you misstep, and regulated enough that your stress does not escalate what is already fragile. To be “well enough” means having the internal steadiness required to cultivate safety, hold courageous conversations,

model boundaries and protect the emotional conditions in which both staff and students can flourish.

I believe teams borrow their nervous systems from the leaders around them. Meaning, you set the tone – not only through policy or direction, but through presence. Teachers feel it. Staff feel it. Students feel it. Parents feel it.

If we want students to experience safety and belonging; we must evaluate the emotional ecology created by leadership. Understanding trauma requires us to rethink leadership itself. It requires us to move past surface-level strategies and toward systemic commitments. I suggest three: **rest, refusal and reframing.**

REST

Resilience in educational leadership is deeply rooted in the ability to prioritize rest and sustainability, not as luxuries, but as necessities for effective stewardship. In the educational leadership profession, exhaustion is often glorified – long hours, emotional depletion and initiative overload are worn as badges of honour. Yet, chronic urgency does more harm than good, as it dysregulates adults and, by extension, the school environment (Campbell, 2023). If we truly believe that regulated adults help regulate children, then rest must become a deliberate leadership strategy.

Modelling boundaries in visible ways includes protecting planning time, extending email response time expectations and limiting virtual availability to work hours. By visibly modelling healthy boundaries as essential, leaders demonstrate the courage to rest and set a tone that sustains the entire community.

REFUSAL

Refusal is not the neglect of responsibility or school community; it is an act of resistance. Educational leaders must intentionally prioritize their own well-being and understand that empathy is not only something extended to others but also a grace to offer to themselves. By making this practice central to their leadership, they create psychologically safe environments where communities and students can flourish.

In my talk on courageous conversations, I argued that staying engaged through discomfort is necessary for transformation (Campbell, 2025).



The Kids Are Not the Problem

By Jody Carrington

Let's start with this: The kids are the least of our worries. It's not the trauma they bring to school that's the biggest barrier to learning, it's what we, the adults, do about it. If we want to talk about trauma-informed education in a way that truly moves the needle, we need to stop asking, "What's wrong with that kid?" and start asking, "What happened to all of us?"

Trauma, whether it's chronic, complex or acute, profoundly changes the way kids show up in our classrooms. It affects their ability to learn, to regulate, to trust. It rewires brains, alters nervous systems and leaves many kids stuck in survival mode. But trauma doesn't just walk through the front doors of our schools in the backpacks of children. It lives in our staff rooms. In our leadership. In our own lived experiences.

You can't regulate a dysregulated kid if you're dysregulated yourself. And my friends, we are a dysregulated bunch.

We Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

The thing about trauma is that it is not the event, it's the disconnection that follows. When kids experience something hard and don't have someone to help them make sense of it, that's when trauma takes hold. And when the adults in their world are overwhelmed, burned out and unseen, we can't give them what they need most: co-regulation.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: **connection is the answer.** It's what builds brains. It's what regulates emotion. It's what heals trauma. And yet, in education, we've become so focused on curriculum, outcomes and policy that we've lost sight of the most powerful tool we have: **relationships.**

Here's the kicker: **You can't do trauma-informed work without being relationship-focused first.** Not just with your students, but with each other.

Trauma Doesn't Just Live in the Classroom

Educators are leaving this profession in droves. Not because they don't care but because they care so damn much that it breaks their hearts. I hear from principals, teachers and EAs every week who are hanging on by a thread. Many of them say the same thing, "I love this work. But I don't know how much longer I can do it."

Let me be clear: you cannot pour from an empty cup. And we cannot continue to ask educators to hold the trauma of their students when no one is *holding* them.

So, if we're going to build schools that are truly trauma-informed, we have to start by creating cultures **where everyone feels seen, safe and supported**, not just the kids. That means leaders who lead with vulnerability. Staff rooms that prioritize connection over competition. Professional development that focuses not just on strategy, but on healing.

What Compassionate Education Really Means

Compassionate education isn't soft. It's not about lowering expectations or letting kids off the hook. It's about understanding that **regulated brains learn**. And when a child's brain is on fire with fear, stress or grief, they're not being defiant, they're doing their best to survive.

Our job isn't to extinguish every fire. It's to walk with them through the smoke. To teach them how to breathe again. To show them what safety feels like so that, one day, they can carry that feeling into the world and pass it on.

But we can't do that if we don't know how to regulate ourselves. If we don't create space in our schools and our systems for grief, exhaustion and emotional rest.

We talk a lot about kids being "resilient." But resilience isn't built in isolation. It's built in relationship. In every moment where a student is seen and held and reminded, "You matter. You're safe. I've got you."

Practical Ways to Start the Revolution

What does trauma-informed practice really look like in schools?

It starts with three things: **regulation, relationship and repair**.

- 1. Regulation:** Every staff meeting should start with a check-in. Not with data, not with announcements, with people. Create rituals that allow staff to exhale. Teach students (and yourself) about the nervous system. Regulate your own body so you can co-regulate theirs.
- 2. Relationship:** Prioritize connection over correction. Know their stories. Know the name of their dog. Smile in the hallways. Celebrate the small wins. As I've said before, you don't need to attend every argument you're invited to but you do need to show up for the kids who need you the most, especially when they deserve it the least.
- 3. Repair:** We all mess up. We yell, we withdraw, we lose our way. But trauma-informed schools know how to repair, how to come back together after conflict. That starts with modelling apology, grace and accountability.



Let's build classrooms where it's safe to fall apart. Staff rooms where it's okay to say, "I'm not okay." Schools where we stop pretending to be superheroes and start being human.

The Bottom Line

Trauma-informed education is not a program. It's not a checklist. It's a way of *being* together.

It's acknowledging that every kid is just doing the best they can with what they've been handed. So are you. So are we all. We need to create spaces in our schools that honour that truth, not just for our students, but for the educators who show up every day, even when it's hard.

This is hard. And we can do hard things. But only when we do them together.

As we look ahead, I'm begging us not to go back to "normal." Let's create something better. Let's lead a reconnection revolution in Ontario schools one regulated, compassionate, courageous adult at a time.

Let's stop focusing on the trauma itself and start focusing on what we do next.

Because the truth is, *the kids are going to be okay* if those of us holding them are okay.

And that, my friends, is the whole damn point. [CP](#)

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Honour Your Indomitable

By Hamza Khan  Spirit 



At the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Celebration of Life, former U.S. President Barack Obama reflected on the late civil rights leader's "legacy of hope." Speaking to thousands gathered in Chicago, he acknowledged a sentiment that many people quietly recognize: "We are living in a time when it can be hard to hope."

For educators and school leaders, that observation may feel particularly relevant given the pressures many schools and communities are currently experiencing.

At the time of writing, several indicators of global well-being present a difficult picture. *The World Happiness Report* documents declining levels of happiness, trust and life satisfaction in many regions, along with a tendency for people to underestimate the kindness of others. Researchers suggest that these perceptions may contribute to growing political polarization and declining confidence in institutions. The *Edelman Trust Barometer* similarly reports widespread grievances toward governments, businesses and other institutions across many countries. Broader public surveys also indicate persistent economic anxiety and skepticism about the future. In workplaces, the *State of the Global Workplace* report identifies declining well-being among both managers and employees, with burnout and disengagement cited as contributing factors. Health trends add further complexity. Although life expectancy has recovered to pre-pandemic levels in several regions, some researchers have raised concerns about rising mortality among adolescents and young adults. Taken together, these findings suggest that many individuals are navigating substantial stress across social, economic and psychological domains.

Schools often experience these pressures in concentrated form. Students arrive carrying the effects of family instability, social disruption and personal hardship. Educators themselves frequently operate under increasing expectations while resources remain constrained. These realities have contributed to growing attention toward trauma-informed leadership in education.

Regenerative design scholar Dr. Daniel Christian Wahl has argued that many contemporary systems – economic, social and environmental – are structured in ways that generate strain rather than recovery. In that context, hope can become difficult to sustain, yet the capacity for hope remains an important psychological and social resource.

Hope does not require ignoring hardship. Rather, it involves recognizing a longstanding human capacity

to endure difficulty and continue acting with purpose. Many scholars describe hope as a future-oriented belief that circumstances can change and that individual or collective actions can influence outcomes. Within schools, that orientation can be especially important. Students who have experienced trauma often benefit from environments that communicate stability, dignity and the possibility of growth. Leadership practices that reinforce these signals can help create conditions where learning and recovery occur together.

The person who most clearly demonstrated this orientation to me was my father. During my childhood he often described how he helped lift his family out of severe poverty and later supported relatives across several countries. When I ask him today how he persisted through those years, his answer – shared in his native language – appears in different forms but carries a similar meaning: "It's a hard thing, but I can do it." His response reflects a mindset that treats adversity as something to navigate rather than something that determines the outcome.

A similar sentiment appears in the biblical passage, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Whether expressed through faith traditions, cultural teachings or personal conviction, this idea corresponds with a well-studied psychological concept. Research on self-efficacy suggests that believing one can manage challenges improves resilience and persistence. Studies conducted at the University of Zurich indicate that recalling past difficulties that were successfully overcome can strengthen confidence in one's ability to face future stressors. Structured reflection – through journaling, therapy, dialogue, prayer, meditation or similar practices – can help individuals access those memories and reinforce a sense of capability.





Nurturing Compassionate Systems With Young Learners

By Joanne Schroeder,
Peter Senge and Jean Clinton



It is no news to teachers or parents that our kids today are suffering. We are living amidst a global epidemic in mental health, even among young children. Suicide has become the third largest cause of death worldwide for young people, and children of all ages.¹ The causes are many – from social isolation to too much screentime, to COVID impacts, to living in a world where many adults around them likewise live increasingly distracted and stressed lives.

The symptoms of this global problem show up in our classrooms every day, as reflected by these recent comments of an experienced Kindergarten teacher in British Columbia:

“I have noticed, in the last six years especially, that many children are coming to Kindergarten lacking social-emotional skills and strategies. This affects their play and learning in the classroom, and on the playground. Overall, Kindergarten students seem less resilient, have difficulties with self-regulation and need so much daily explicit teaching on how to be part of a classroom community. Self-regulation has become my primary focus over the course of the Kindergarten year. Helping young learners recognize, understand and manage their emotions and those of their classmates is, now more than ever, a priority and necessity.”²

Developing practical classroom strategies to face this daunting reality are becoming a priority for early learning educators everywhere – for while the challenges are immense, facing them effectively can lead to early

Helping the Helpers

The old truism that we need to support teachers in order for teachers to support students has never been more so than it is today.

In our work with the compassionate system framework,¹⁰ it is not unusual that schools initially focus exclusively on adult well-being and capacity building. Understanding and nurturing how we as the adults “show up” in the system lays the foundation for expanding the tools to young learners. This starts with principals and others in formal school leadership roles, who set the tone in any school. Their capacity to model practices of self-awareness and relational authenticity influence the broader school climate. Supporting one another to do this is primary since we can all benefit from help in these domains.

This entails both analytic and reflective work. Systems thinking tools like the systems awareness iceberg provides perspective on common events like bullying on the playground, inviting us to consider underlying structures and systemic patterns. As educational leaders, we often have to react quickly to events. But is that all we can do? It helps a lot if we can also agree on deeper sources of problems we need to address even as we react in the short-term.

Another tool, the ladder of inference helps us recognize how we each filter events based on our experience and beliefs, and to unpack the actual experiences. For example, two teachers comparing notes on a challenging student may discover they have selected different “data,” which leads to different views about the student – and most importantly different possible strategies for dealing with them. Busy educators need practical tools to help slow down and think together about the sources of our actions rather than just re-acting habitually. Otherwise, the old adage, “How I **feel** affects how I **think** affects how I **act**” plays out mindlessly.

None of these practices are magic. The larger forces at play unsettling our societies will not go away because we create better controlled and happier classrooms or teachers feeling a sense of mutual support. But this is exactly the point. Learning how to create a more compassionate, interconnected classroom develops life skills, individually and collectively, for facing inherently complex and emotionally challenging realities – skills that will prove more and more important in the coming years and decades.

For more information on Compassionate Systems please contact Joanne Schroeder joanne.schroeder@ubc.ca 

Joanne Schroeder is the Director of the BC Compassionate Leadership Network housed at the Human Early Partnership (UBC). She has provided compassionate systems training to more than 40 districts and numerous schools throughout BC.

Peter Senge has been at the forefront of organizational learning since publishing the classic text *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, which provided theories and methods to foster aspiration, develop reflective conversation and understand complexity in service of shaping learning-oriented organization cultures. He is the co-founder of the Center for Systems Awareness.

Jean Clinton is a child psychologist from McMaster University, well known to the education community for her work on well-being. She has authored her first book *Love Builds Brains*.

¹<https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/children-and-young-people-s-mental-health--the-case-for-action>; <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240100374>

²Mary-Anne Barron, Coast Mountain School District #82

³HELP Early Years Disrupted Report, Human Early Learning Partnership, 2026

⁴Pre- versus post-COVID-19 pandemic comparison of Kindergarten teacher-reported child development in multiple Canadian jurisdictions, Social Science and Medicine, December 2025

⁵Heifetz, R., Leadership Without Easy Answers, Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁶<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/stress-classroom-contagious>

⁷We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang 1 and Antonio Damasio2

⁸Dan Siegel, The Power of Showing Up

⁹Stocks and flows are a core systems thinking tool that lays an intuitive foundation for analyzing system dynamics that arise from what in mathematics is called “integration over time,” a basic facet of differential calculus.

¹⁰Compassionate Systems Leadership Leveraging Disruption for Transformative Change: By Pippa Rowcliffe and Joanne Schroeder. Published 2020



Your Voice Matters Here

By Kavya Keethanjali Yoganathan

Young people often carry stories that adults rarely hear in full stories – shaped by identity, community and the quiet burdens of harm. What they need from us is not perfection, but presence: leaders who create spaces where truth can be spoken without fear and where courage is met with care. In this article, Kavya Keethanjali Yoganathan offers a powerful window into what becomes possible when a student’s lived experience is met with attunement, dignity and unwavering belief. Her story reminds us that principal agency is not only exercised in policy or procedure, but in the everyday decisions that signal to students: your voice matters here. As you read, you’ll see how a single moment of listening – truly listening – can become a catalyst for healing, affirmation and transformation. This is the work of leadership today, and it is work that changes lives.

“So, what is the point of this Leaders of Today Program?”

I sat there completely and surprisingly at a loss for words. I’d just spent 20 minutes talking about my work without taking so much as a breath. And doing a brilliant job, I thought. But as I sat there, confronted by my 16-year-old niece, I had no words left. Leave it to a teenager to cut straight to “the point.” She wasn’t asking what the program was. She was asking, why it mattered. What was its purpose? Why was it necessary?

Since I began facilitating the Leaders of Today (LOT) Program, these are questions I return to often. Especially after facilitating days that challenge and move me in ways I never anticipated.

As I reflect on these questions, I’m reminded of one of those days four years ago.

A student sat down to speak with me about his final LOT project – a photographic art piece that focused on a social issue he is passionate about changing in his community. Students research their topic, develop a visual idea and meet with me to discuss. These meetings often lead to deeper conversations about why this issue matters to them, challenging them to explore its impact on people, its root cause and how they might express it creatively.

When this student sat down to meet with me, I began as usual by asking what social issue he’d chosen. “Racism,” he said.

I asked if there was a specific aspect he wanted to focus on.

“Yes, racist words . . . I want the picture to be of me turned around like I’m being arrested, so my hands are in handcuffs. But instead of handcuffs I want the racist words people say to Black people to tie my hands together. And they should look like ghosts.”

After a long pause, I asked, “Why did you choose this topic?”

This young student looked directly at me and said, “Because people have called me these words. I have heard people say these words about my friends and family. And I don’t ever want another person to have to hear these words again. People should know what their words do to people.”

I asked him to write down the words he wanted on the picture. He returned with a list of words, each more cutting than the next. One, in particular, carried with it centuries of dehumanization, enslavement, oppression and unimaginable suffering. A word that, even in its reclamation through resistance, revolution and resilience, still bore the markings of its origins. Still weaponized towards Black people. I was trying to hold back my tears, heartbroken by this young person’s experience. An experience I understood deeply, but hoped time and so-called progress would have protected him from.

I asked, if he was sure he wanted to be in the photo. His answer, “Yes, because it happened to me.”

Not wanting to probe beyond his comfort level, I told him I was so sorry he’d ever been called any of these words, hoping he could tell I understood, even without really knowing what it must be like as a young Black man to carry the weight of these words. I was in awe of how this young man had spoken more clearly and honestly than most adults.

We then had a conversation about how to include language of this nature in art within the context of a school exhibit, given the attendance of younger audience members. With understanding, my student agreed the words would need to be partially starred out. I also explained, because of the use of strong language, he

Called By Name

By Lori Bryden



"I have called you by name; you are mine"
(Isaiah 43:1, ESV).

It's 8:15 a.m. The doors of the school open. Students pour in – some laughing with friends, others walking slowly, eyes downcast. The school leader greets each by name. This action is more than just a greeting. It affirms each student's dignity, quietly saying, "You are seen, you matter, you belong." These small acts build communities where relationships form the foundation for learning, something increasingly vital in today's schools.

Saint Mother Teresa's words resonate, "We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty." In schools, this 'poverty' may appear as isolation or disconnection.

Creating communities where every person feels seen and valued requires leaders who recognize the unseen experiences that shape how people learn and interact each day. Behind every interaction in a school community is a story that may not always be visible. Beyond managing schedules, policies and procedures, school leaders must navigate the increasingly complex realities students and staff carry in their "invisible backpacks."

The Effect of Trauma on Learning and Well-Being

Research confirms what educators see daily: adversity and trauma profoundly shape development, learning and health. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study showed childhood trauma's long-term effects (Felitti & Anda, 1998). Neuroscience reveals trauma's impact on brain development, regulation and relationships (Perry, 2006). For educators, these findings reinforce an important truth – academic success cannot be separated from students' emotional and psychological well-being (Cohen et al., 2018).

Trauma-Informed Leadership: A Shift in Perspective

Research on trauma invites Catholic leaders to see challenges as opportunities for healing and connection. Leadership in this context moves beyond programs or compliance. It becomes a ministry of accompaniment, where leaders walk alongside students, staff and families through moments of struggle and transformation.

Trauma-informed leaders view behaviour and learning challenges through a lens of understanding rather than judgement.

Instead of asking, "What is wrong with this student?" or "Why is this teacher reacting this way?" trauma-informed leaders ask, "What might this person have experienced? And how can I support them?"

This shift from judgment to curiosity is foundational in trauma-informed practice (Hammond, 2015). Curiosity allows leaders to pause, listen and respond with empathy, building relational trust within the school community. This posture aligns with the Gospel call to accompany others with mercy and understanding. As Jesus reminds us, "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34).

A Personal Reflection

"Creating a trauma-informed school isn't about educators becoming therapists. It's about creating an environment that focuses on relationships, trust and emotional safety" (Forbes & Sporleder, 2016).

After 40 years in Catholic education as a teacher and administrator – now retired – I have come to recognize how what I carry in my own "invisible backpack" has shaped the way I lead. Like all educators, I carried these experiences, both joyful and challenging, into conversations, classrooms and staff meetings.

Nurturing Connection Through Indigenous Education

By Jodie Williams

As Ontario deepens its commitment to trauma informed and healing centred education, many school systems are turning to Indigenous knowledge systems to guide meaningful transformation. Trauma-informed frameworks help educators understand how adversity – personal, systemic or intergenerational – affects student learning. Healing informed approaches, however, move beyond awareness to emphasize cultural strengths, relational pedagogy and community connection as powerful pathways to well-being.

The Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB) is demonstrating leadership in this space through Indigenous education initiatives that centre joy, identity, relationship and land as sources of healing. Two significant efforts – the Indigenous Influencers Series and the Wiimbaamitigoogshiing Indigenous Land-Based Program – illustrate how the board is cultivating classroom environments where all students, especially those affected by trauma, can thrive.



Uplifting Indigenous Excellence: The Indigenous Influencers Series

Healing-informed education requires learning environments that foster safety, belonging and hope. Representation plays an essential role in creating these conditions. When students encounter images and stories that reflect their identities and lived experiences, they are more likely to feel seen, valued and connected.

DPCDSB's Indigenous Influencers poster and video series was developed to uplift Indigenous leaders, artists, language keepers, scientists, activists and changemakers. These resources showcase Indigenous excellence through strength-based narratives, countering the deficit-based depictions that students too often see.

For educators, the series also helps address one of the most persistent barriers to integrating Indigenous education: fear. Many educators worry about “doing it wrong,” inadvertently appropriating culture or lacking sufficient knowledge. This hesitancy often stems from the misconception that Indigenous education is limited to cultural teachings or ceremonial practices.

When Behaviour Speaks of Suffering

By Laura Cesaroni and Stuart Shanker

“When we say that children are dysregulated, we mean that they are dealing with high levels of stress. Their entire well-being is impaired because their brains and bodies are burning up most of their energy trying to deal with excess stress.”

Dr. Stuart Shanker

Each morning, students enter our schools carrying invisible backpacks filled with the weight of their lived experiences. Some arrive calm and available for learning. Others come already depleted, their brains and bodies working hard to manage ongoing stress. For these students, simply being present requires the very energy their peers can direct toward learning.

The Invisible Backpack

Consider Clara, a Grade 10 student who arrives late most days, if at all. In class, she is distracted. When redirected, she shuts down or becomes defensive. She reports feeling chronically tired and foggy. Her academic work, once promising, is now incomplete. Traditional interventions have not helped. Consequences and

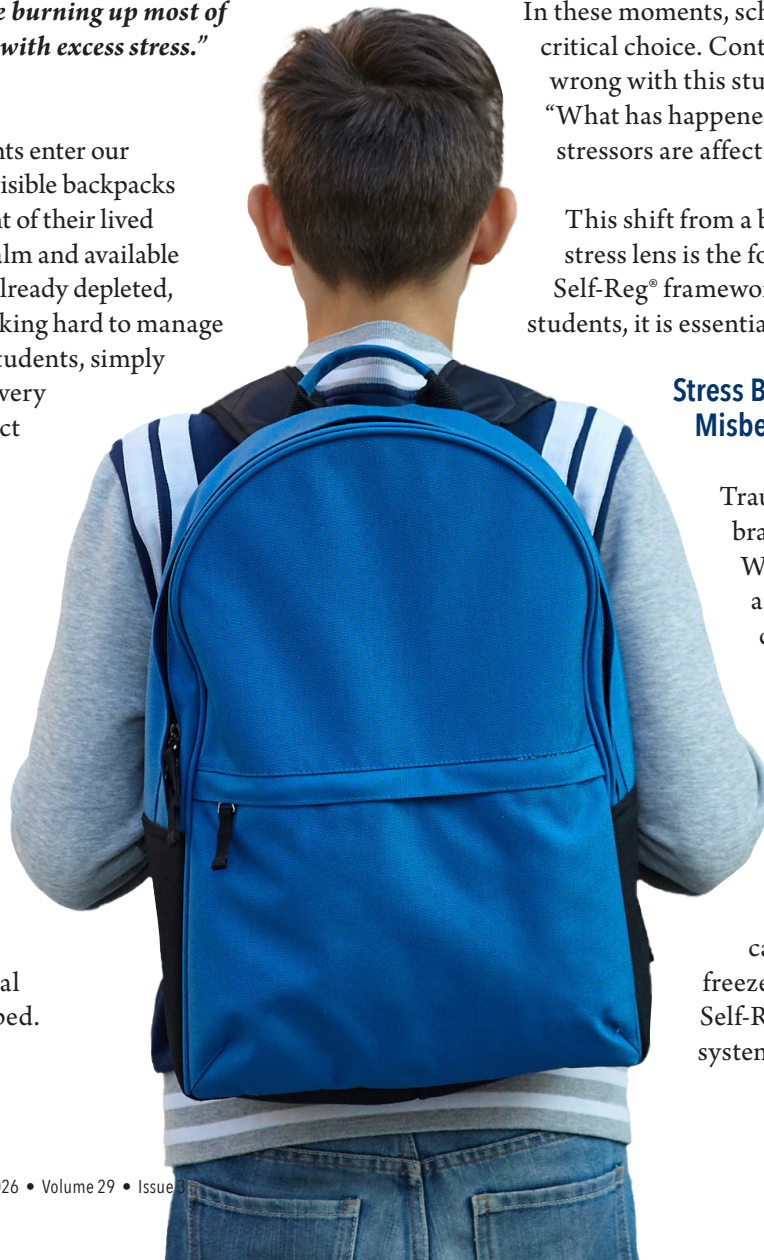
supports have gone unused. The teaching team is exhausted and increasingly frustrated.

In these moments, school leaders face a critical choice. Continue asking, “What is wrong with this student?” Or begin asking, “What has happened to this student? What stressors are affecting her right now?”

This shift from a behavioural lens to a stress lens is the foundation of the Shanker Self-Reg® framework. For trauma-affected students, it is essential.

Stress Behaviour Is Not Misbehaviour

Trauma alters how the brain manages stress. When children grow up amid instability such as complex family dynamics, poverty, peer isolation or the disorientation of starting over in a new culture, their systems become chronically activated. Over time, even minor stressors can trigger fight, flight or freeze responses. This is what Self-Reg calls a “kindled alarm system.”



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When Good Intentions Drift

By David Tranter

Trauma-informed practice has been widely embraced in education for more than two decades. Yet, student mental health challenges persist, academic achievement remains uneven, and educator stress and burnout continue to rise. Chronic underfunding and broader social pressures play a significant role. However, it is also important to consider whether some of our most well-meaning initiatives may be producing unintended consequences.

In our efforts to create safe classrooms and support struggling students, we may sometimes act in ways that feel compassionate but do not consistently serve students' long-term growth. Approaches that can feel responsive to students in the moment can gradually erode our educational goals. In our attempt to support student success, we may end up doing the precise opposite.

It is time to examine some of the fundamental assumptions – or myths – that underlie trauma-informed practice and reconsider them in light of what truly supports student well-being and achievement.

Six Trauma-Informed Myths Worth Rethinking

Myth 1: Students with trauma require a different kind of teaching.

The truth: Effective teaching remains grounded in clarity, consistency, high expectations and care. Some students simply require more of these things, not different things altogether. When we assume trauma fundamentally changes what good teaching looks like, we risk abandoning our core principles. Students affected by trauma do not need a separate philosophy, they need teaching that is both deeply responsive and appropriately demanding. Trauma does not introduce novel developmental needs. Instead, it intensifies what all students need: predictable routines, respectful relationships, meaningful challenge and steady adult leadership.



Myth 2: Students with trauma need more love and fewer rules.

The truth: Students with trauma benefit from caring relationships, but also clear, predictable limits. Warmth and structure work best together. It can feel counterintuitive to enforce limits with students who have experienced hardship. We may worry that consequences will damage the teaching relationship. Yet, inconsistency and unpredictability are often hallmarks of traumatic environments. Being responsive to emotional needs does not mean retreating from limits. Clear boundaries, calmly and consistently applied, create stability. Holding firm expectations for behaviour can be one of the most caring actions of all.





Getting Their Hopes Up Again

By Robyne Hanley-Dafoe

It started with one question: *What is the biggest, wildest, most special dream you can dream?*

As pandemic restrictions lifted and children returned to school, I was tasked with helping to rally hundreds of children and support them in becoming more resilient. You can probably imagine and even relate to how immense that responsibility felt.

That day in the assembly, I invited the children in the room to imagine the best thing that could happen to them. I even challenged the adults to do the same.

One educator shared with me beforehand she worried about getting the kids' hopes up. She believed they had been through enough and didn't want to see them disappointed. I understood the sentiment, but I also knew the importance of giving ourselves permission to imagine.

One boy declared he was going to play in the NBA. I told him about Canadian players who had done just that. Then, I asked him what one step he could take toward this dream. He said, "Maybe learn to play basketball, lady." I let him know that was a solid first step. Another little boy said he wanted to be an astronaut. I told him a bit about what I knew about an astronaut's path. He listened carefully and said, "Cool, just three things. I can do that." They're not easy things, nor are they guaranteed, but they're steps.

Afterwards, one educator asked why I hadn't corrected him, because surely becoming an astronaut involves more than just three things. I let her know that at his age, belief in possibility matters. We need them to dream it. And get their hopes up again.

Why Hope Matters

When a child has experienced instability, loss or trauma, their sense of safety is often disrupted. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk explains how traumatic experiences live in the body. They disrupt the nervous system and can alter one's sense of the future. And when the future feels uncertain, imagining positive outcomes and dreaming can feel risky.

The reality is that across schools and classrooms, students show up carrying more than backpacks. Some are navigating very difficult obstacles and carrying stories we may never fully understand. And educators show up every day with their own lived experiences and are tasked with teaching and steadying classrooms that reflect the complexity of the world.

As I write in, *I Hope So: How to Choose Hope Even When It's Hard*, hope helps us see beyond our immediate difficulties and stay oriented toward possibility. It is a key predictor of an individual's well-being and their capacity

Meeting Students Where They're At

By Ashmita Roy and V Bragagnolo

Engaging youth in conversations about abuse, violence and trauma presents challenges, particularly for us as Facilitators of the Victim Services Toronto Teens Ending Abusive Relationships (T.E.A.R™) Program. The T.E.A.R™ Program equips youth across Toronto with tools and resources to make informed choices through our workshops on healthy relationships, consent, online safety and human trafficking.

As we are occasional guests in schools where we facilitate workshops, we enter classrooms with limited knowledge of specific student trauma. That's why we have developed adaptable, trauma-informed facilitation strategies, used to guide discussions of sensitive topics like human trafficking, sexual violence and abusive relationships. Our methodology has evolved from large-scale lectures to smaller, interactive workshops, where components like participatory games and activities followed by group debriefings, have become critical for fostering safe spaces that enable greater engagement when educating youth on complex and potentially triggering subjects.

The T.E.A.R™ Program offers workshops for students in Grades 5 through 12, with content tailored to the developmental stages and capacities of each age group. For instance, human trafficking workshops are available to students in Grades 7 and older. The Mobile Program, an additional branch of the T.E.A.R™ Program, extends support to youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities by offering content in four sessions while using developmentally appropriate games, activities and lessons.

As T.E.A.R™ Program Facilitators, we deliver educational content and connect students to resources and safety tools. We are invited to schools by social workers, guidance counsellors, principals and educators, who identify unsafe behaviours among students or who are concerned about students vulnerable to or experiencing human trafficking.

Our T.E.A.R™ Program workshops were once delivered as assembly-style lectures to the entire school body. This approach was not trauma-informed, and students often disengaged from the material, unable to relate to the content. We have since shifted the focus to small-group workshops that use games and interactive activities as the foundation of each lesson, providing the space for students to connect their personal experiences and perspectives to abstract concepts.

The most effective and beloved game T.E.A.R™ Program Facilitators use is the Healthy Relationships Card Game, in which students work in groups and receive five cards describing characteristics or personality traits (for example: likes to laugh with you, is controlling, smells bad, is creative). Students discuss whether they would engage with a friend or romantic partner who has these traits, while identifying which characteristics are healthy, unhealthy, abusive or neutral. Students may exchange up to two cards they dislike for new ones. This game frequently generates giggling and debates about desirable and undesirable traits, and encourages students to reflect on what they value and the qualities present in their differing relationships, without focusing solely on the impacts of specific behaviours. The game also acts as a starting point for conversations about how unhealthy or abusive relationships can look, evolve and be a mix of desirable and harmful characteristics. For instance, as T.E.A.R™ Program Facilitators, we've observed students swap out the "has bad breath" card while keeping the "makes fun of me" card, prompting discussions of why potentially harmful traits may be overlooked in relationships compared to traits that can be addressed or changed, all in open and honest conversations.

Additionally, for students experiencing sex trafficking, the Healthy Relationships Card Game provides a non-judgmental, open line of communication about their experiences, as many young people identify their trafficker as a friend or romantic partner. For example,

Key Leadership Actions to Support Students

By Katina E. Pollock

Many Ontario students arrive at school each day carrying the effects of trauma. Experiences of stress, instability or adversity can shape how students experience school, affecting their relationships with peers and teachers, and their ability to engage in learning. If these students are to succeed, they will require additional support. School leaders are uniquely positioned to help create the conditions that allow these students to remain connected to learning and to school communities.

A recent survey of 650 principals and vice-principals from 25 school boards across Ontario provides insight into how trauma is affecting students and shaping school environments (Ontario Principals' Council, 2022). The findings suggest that trauma is not an isolated issue affecting a small group of students but rather a widespread challenge influencing multiple aspects of schooling.

Prior to COVID-19, many administrators estimated that fewer than 10 per cent of students in their schools were significantly affected by trauma. Since the pandemic, however, school leaders report a noticeable increase in the number of students experiencing trauma. When reflecting on the post-pandemic context, these estimates increased substantially.

Research has increasingly shown that trauma can influence students' behaviour, emotional regulation and ability to concentrate. When students experience prolonged stress, it can affect attention, memory and executive functioning – capacities that are central to learning. As a result, teachers often encounter trauma indirectly through behaviours such as disengagement, difficulty focusing, emotional withdrawal or conflict with peers.

These realities require schools to think carefully about how learning environments are structured and how students are supported. School leaders play a critical role in shaping these environments. Through their decisions about professional learning, school climate, partnerships and organizational practices, principals and vice-principals help establish the conditions that allow trauma-sensitive approaches to flourish. Several key leadership actions can help schools respond more effectively to students affected by trauma.



Building a Culture of



By Kristin Szabo

Daughter Project exists to end child sexual exploitation through **awareness, prevention and advocacy**. While our work spans many sectors, education remains one of the most powerful places for prevention to take root. Schools are often the only consistent environments children experience from early childhood through adolescence. That continuity gives educators and administrators like you an extraordinary opportunity to shape what safety feels like long before a child ever needs to disclose harm.

Trauma-sensitive education is a deepening of this mission to approach students holistically. Understanding trauma not as an isolated event but as an experience that shapes how a child feels, learns and relates, helps clarify the role of educator.

Prevention Starts Before “Duty to Report”

In Ontario, educators are trained in duty to report, and that legal obligation is essential. But trauma-sensitive education asks us to begin earlier, before disclosure, before crisis, in a harm-reduction framework.

If a child experiences school as a place where adults are consistently calm, emotionally regulated and trustworthy, they are far more likely to speak up early, sometimes before abuse becomes entrenched.

Prevention looks like this: From age four to 18, a child encounters adults at school who respond to every problem, big or small, with reassurance rather than dismissal, curiosity rather than judgment. Over time, that child learns something powerful: I can bring things here. I will be taken seriously. I will not be punished for telling the truth.

Understanding Trauma: Big “T” and Little “t”

Trauma-sensitive education requires a shared understanding of what trauma actually is. Trauma can be distinguished between **Big “T” traumas**, such as abuse, violence or catastrophic loss, and **little “t” traumas**, which could include moving house, chronic stress, instability or repeated experiences of not being supported.

Dr. Gabor Maté offers a critical insight: “Trauma is not what happens to you; it is what happens inside you as a result of what happens to you.” Trauma is not defined by the external event but by the internal impact.

Two students may experience the same event and be impacted very differently. Trauma forms when a child’s nervous system becomes overwhelmed and they lack the relational support needed to process what is happening. This is why safe, responsive adults are protective factors that actively reduce harm.

The 5C Model: What Safety Looks Like in Practice

At Daughter Project, we emphasize a 5C model to help educators translate trauma-sensitive theory into daily practice. While each “C” represents a practical approach, together they form a framework for building relational safety across a school community.

- **CALM:** Remain calm. Don’t react or shut them down when they disclose trauma or abuse.
- **CREATE:** Create an emotionally and physically safe environment.
- **CONNECT:** Active listening. Affirm and believe them.
- **COMMUNICATE:** Explain your next steps, like reporting protocol etc.
- **CHOICE:** Give them a choice and empower them. Ask them what they would like to happen next.

CALM

CREATE

CONNECT



A Peaceful Revolution

By Melissa Sadin

It is time for a REVOLUTION! While Webster defines a revolution as the “forcible” overthrow of a system, the revolution I’m calling for is a peaceful movement. Gandhi said, “A non-violent revolution is a program of relationships ending in a peaceful transfer of power.”

What we need is a peaceful, relationship-building shift in our “business as usual” paradigm.

School shootings are on the rise. Academic outcomes are on the decline. Mental health concerns among students and teachers are at an all-time high. As educational leaders, we cannot ignore the significant impact of trauma and the pandemic on our students’ and teachers’ social and emotional well-being. We cannot keep doing what we did “back then.” Our post-pandemic world is forever changed. Students are different. We are different.

It’s time for revolutionary ideas, instructional strategies, and compassionate and restorative responses to behavioural challenges.

In our classrooms, nearly half of the students have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). And many have experienced significantly more. ACE data shows that childhood trauma is epidemic.

Exposure to childhood trauma may change the way our neurobiology develops. Repeated or chronic trauma exposure in childhood may impair neurobiological development. Childhood trauma causes atypical and delayed development of the limbic system. The limbic system, specifically the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex are responsible for autonomic responses

to stress, memory, cognition, logic and reason. The part of the brain that helps us respond appropriately to embarrassment, being scolded or corrected by a teacher, or laughed at by peers may be delayed. Children with trauma often struggle to regulate their emotions. Dysregulated children are not able to learn and will exhibit behaviour that is unsafe and not conducive to learning.

Trauma-informed education represents our peaceful revolution. Trauma-informed schools are places where students build resilience. Resilience is the ability to adapt to challenges and changing environments. Resilience can be learned.

Hope theory offers educators a path to resilience in our students. Hope is defined as the capacity to develop pathways to desired goals and to motivate oneself through agency to use those pathways (Snyder, 2002).

Many of us use ‘hope’ synonymously with wish, optimism, faith and resilience. Hope differs from wishing or praying in that hope offers steps to achieve goals (waypower) and the belief that one will achieve these goals (willpower). Hope is a verb. Hope is something we learn. And something we can teach others. Hope builds resilience and resilience builds hope.

Hope has been shown to predict academic achievement in students. Children with higher hope show higher daily attendance, higher grade point averages and higher graduation rates (Marques, Gallagher & Lopez, 2017). Students with high hope perform a full Grade Point Average (GPA) higher than students with the same

Leading with Understanding in K-12 Schools

By Jean Clinton

In every school community, students bring their own stories shaped by all their relationships, experiences and environments. For some of your students, those stories include the invisible weight of trauma. The impact of trauma is not always seen in obvious behaviours; it is often embedded in the developing brain, a brain that develops well into the 20s, influencing emotion regulation, attention, learning and social connection.

For principals and school leaders, this understanding is more than pastoral, it's pedagogical. Recognizing how trauma shapes brain development helps us move beyond a "what's wrong with you?" mindset to one that asks, "what happened to you, and how can we help you heal?"

A K-12 school, unified in its approach, has the unique capacity to build long-term, safe, warm and secure relationships that foster recovery and resilience. It can be a stable environment where safety and belonging are not only restored, but actively taught and modelled.

The Neuroscience of Safety

The developing brain is highly responsive to environment. When children live with sustained stress or adverse experiences, the brain's alarm systems, particularly the amygdala and stress-response pathways, become overactivated. This chronic activation can shift neural energy away from high-order functions like reasoning, memory and creativity, and toward survival instincts. The thinking brain must go on hold.

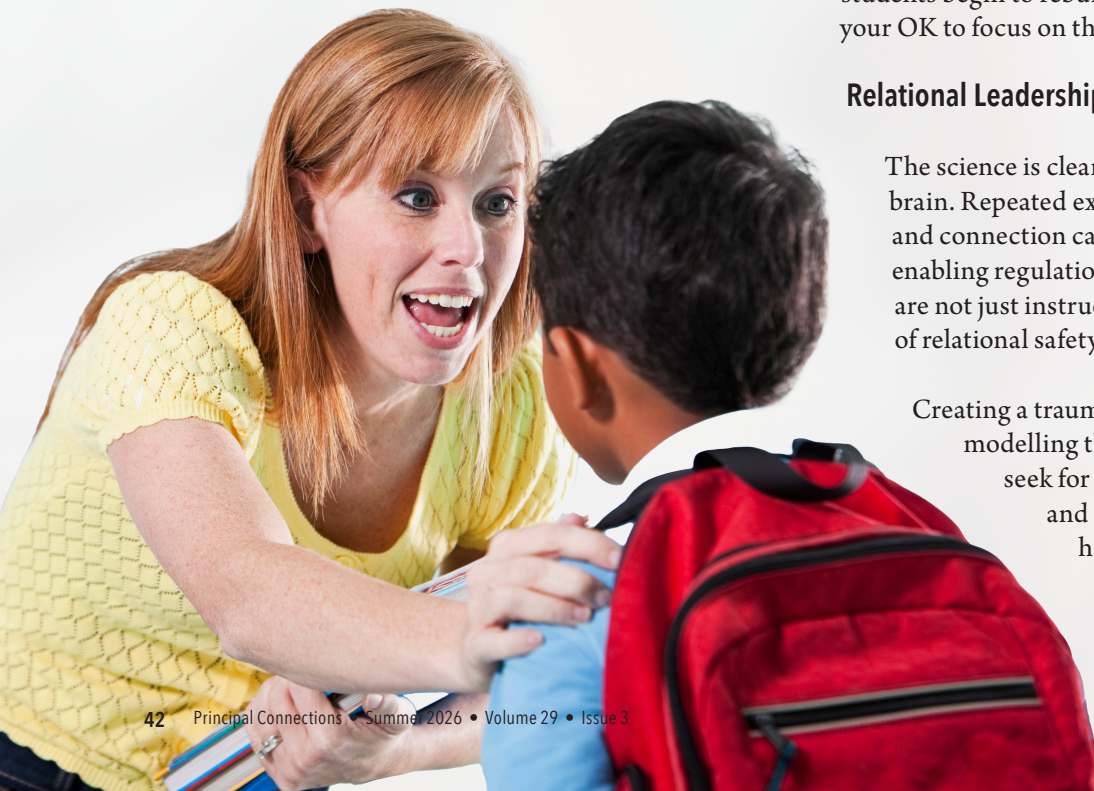
In practical terms, this means a student may appear inattentive, oppositional or withdrawn, when, biologically, they are primed for self-protection rather than learning. Educators who grasp this neuroscience can interpret behaviour as communication, not defiance.

Leaders play a critical role in embedding this understanding into staff culture. When every adult in a school community recognizes that relational safety comes before curriculum, classrooms become calmer, and students begin to rebuild trust in learning. But they need your OK to focus on this.

Relational Leadership as a Protective Factor

The science is clear: relationships grow and heal the brain. Repeated experiences of safety, consistency and connection can literally reshape neural pathways, enabling regulation and growth. Principals, therefore, are not just instructional leaders, they are architects of relational safety.

Creating a trauma-aware school starts with modelling the same relational principles we seek for students. Staff well-being, trust and collaboration are not "nice to have," but central to trauma-informed practice. Teachers who feel emotionally safe and professionally supported are



From Awareness to Action

By Luciana Cardarelli

“Students are experts in their own experiences. When leaders listen deeply, schools become safer, more responsive places to learn.”

– School Mental Health Ontario, #HearNowON, 2025

Across Ontario, principals and vice-principals are navigating increasingly complex student needs alongside growing efforts for inclusive, equitable and mentally healthy learning environments. One of the most significant shifts in recent years is the recognition that trauma – whether individual, collective or intergenerational – profoundly shapes how we learn, act and relate to others.

Importantly, today’s trauma-sensitive leadership builds on prior learning and system efforts related to trauma-informed leadership, extending this foundation into daily school culture, relationships and decision-making. For school leaders, this evolution is not optional; it is essential to fostering safe, responsive and successful school communities.

Trauma can be understood as an emotional wound caused by frightening or life-threatening experiences that disrupt healthy physical, emotional and cognitive development. These experiences can undermine a young person’s sense of safety, identity and ability to regulate emotions and relationships.

Importantly, trauma is defined not only by what happens to an individual but by the lasting impact of those events – meaning that trauma is often invisible to educators and leaders.

This reality underscores the need for compassionate, consistent responses to every student rather than approaches based solely on known histories or diagnoses. It is not necessary to know the specific trauma details in order to support the individual.

Why trauma-sensitive leadership matters

All students must feel safe, calm and connected to learn effectively. When trauma disrupts these conditions, attention, memory, behaviour and social relationships are affected. Trauma-sensitive schools intentionally create predictable, welcoming and inclusive environments that support both healing and academic success.

Strong relationships are central protective factors when students are navigating traumatic experiences. Providing a sense of connection, community and calm helps students to feel safe, supported and more regulated in their emotions and behaviour. At times, maintaining a calm and compassionate response can feel challenging, particularly when a student is communicating their unmet needs or emotions through difficult behaviour at school. Research shows that these are the moments when leadership matters most. Punitive or exclusionary practices risk reinforcing disconnection and may serve to escalate difficult situations. In contrast, connection inspires a sense of belonging that can support healing.

Trauma-sensitive leadership is inseparable from commitments to equity, identity-affirming and culturally responsive approaches, since systemic inequities and social determinants of health are deeply intertwined with trauma exposure and outcomes.

Everyday leadership decisions – how discipline is framed, how staff are supported, how families are engaged, how communication occurs – shape whether students and adults experience school as a place of safety and belonging or unpredictability and stress.

In this way, trauma-sensitive practice is fundamentally about leadership culture. A way of being, rather than a single initiative or an itemized checklist.



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Carrying Both Worlds

By Jereecah Dela Cruz

Every year, Canada welcomes thousands of newcomer families. Among them are youth who are carrying various forms of trauma coming to a new country. These traumas often highlight newcomer students' experiences with loss of home and identity, language barriers and school integration challenges. While these students learn to navigate the changes in their lives, they must now carry both worlds and figure out how to co-exist in both their realities.

The Realities of Immigrant Youth

I'll share one such experience. I had a school referral for David, a newcomer student. I sat down with David to check in on how he was doing. As we began talking about school, I asked what his timetable looked like. He gave me a puzzled look – as if I asked him to solve the hardest math equation. It took me a while to figure out why he was so confused. In the silence, I realized, he had no idea what “timetable” meant. This student had been attending school for an entire year. I thought, how many more school terms did he not understand? How many more daily school routines was he confused about? And why had no one taken the time to explain to him these details?

It is very easy to overlook simple terms we use at school. However, for many new immigrant youth, even the most ordinary school routines – school bells, switching classes, asking questions – can feel entirely new and daunting.

David immigrated to a small town in Alberta a year ago. He struggled to cope with the sudden move to Canada, deteriorating mental health, and reconciling with the fact that he now lives with his mom, who he hasn't seen in over 10 years. By the second week, his attendance began to drop significantly. Five months into the school year, he had missed nearly 80 per cent of school days and he was attending classes only once or twice a month.

David's story is not uncommon. Unfortunately, he represents the real-life challenges many newcomer students face each day. David needed someone to confide in. And someone he could talk to about the loss he felt after immigrating to Canada. He also needed someone to check in on him to understand why he stopped coming to school. For David, each day at school was another day of feeling invisible, another day of being a foreigner in a foreign land, and another day just trying to survive until the final bell. Instead of asking for help, David retreated to what he knew made sense – to slowly disappear, hoping someone would notice.

It is often assumed that young people who attended school in their home country will easily transition into a new school system. But this notion overlooks the deep trauma many newcomer youth carry – the ache for a home they left behind, the grandparents they will never see again, and the country once familiar, but now unknown.



Compassionate Learning Communities

By Linda O'Neill

Compassionate learning communities – trauma-informed schools – are needed more than ever, as so many children and youth are experiencing adversity, both in person and online. Educators, including administrators, elementary and secondary teachers, school counsellors and special education teachers, all provide support to children, who are presenting learning and behavioural challenges symptomatic of complex trauma (developmental trauma disorder).

Possible impact areas found in complex trauma include struggles with affect regulation, attachment, dissociation, cognition and self-concept. Complex trauma symptoms may result from emotional, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, severe attachment disruption, serious early medical interventions, natural disasters and other trauma-based circumstances. We now understand it is not the event but the child's central nervous systems reaction to events – such as aggressive, chaotic or punitive environments, inconsistency in caregiving, neglect and other family situations – that result in spectrum of presentations.

When fear and stress are a major part of a child's early environment, the survival responses of fight, flight and freeze appear. Children and youth who are often hyperaroused with the intense emotion found in a fight response cannot hear or understand verbal communication, and require to lower affect to hear. They need educators and staff to assure them they are safe, use soothing language and determine physical space needs. On the other end of the stress response continuum, children and youth with a flight or freeze response often dissociate and

cannot be present mentally, emotionally or physically. They often don't have access to a large amount of information for assessing themselves and the environment, and they may struggle with memory issues. They require gentle attention, patience and empathy from caring adults.

Van der Kolk (2005), a leader in traumatology, suggests that trauma exists when children, youth and adults keep behaving under normal circumstances as if being abused, neglected, abandoned and threatened, because that is what their brain is relaying. This suggests we should question, not what is wrong with this child? But more importantly, what we think might have happened to this child?

We can provide better services in schools by understanding trauma or adversity is often the core event around which development and behaviour organizes for children. This understanding suggests that knowledge of trauma be incorporated in all aspects of service delivery, with fight, flight and freeze symptoms understood as attempts to cope and survive, not simply as presenting problems.

Being a compassionate school has been described as an intentional mindset for all administrators, educators and staff to incorporate the consideration of trauma-informed practice principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment. The main points of a trauma-informed approach are to: understand children's current coping and survival strategies; increase feelings of safety by minimizing the chance of inadvertently re-traumatizing children so these defences eventually diminish; and ensure that educators and staff have the support they need to be consistent, predictable co-regulators.

A Trauma-Informed Teaching Blog

By Tom Hierck



Becky is a Grade 9 student at a secondary school. Her parents are divorced and she is living with her mother. Becky's mom is gone a lot with her job and dating. Becky is responsible for her two younger siblings. She makes them dinner most nights. Becky's mom comes home late and sometimes brings home her newest boyfriend. It's during these times that conflicts can arise, which cause Becky and her siblings to get scared and must hide. The fighting usually ends up with Becky's mom getting hit, pushed, or beaten in some way.

In the mornings, Becky quietly helps her siblings get ready for the school bus. She also rides a bus and must get herself ready. The children leave quietly so they don't wake the latest boyfriend or their mom.

When Becky arrives at her school, she hears a lot of noise and chaos. This noise can be overwhelming and sound like the chaos she experiences at home. Luckily, Becky's homeroom teacher, Ms. L, understands the stress some of the students are under and has put strategies in place that make her classroom calm and welcoming for all students. Becky looks forward to going to her classroom.

Students can experience trauma in many different forms and intensities. Rather than trying to have students disclose and then trying to “fix” the situations they face,

teachers can focus on accepting them for who they are, and try to establish and maintain safe, stable environments. In the book, *Trauma-Informed Instruction: Creating a Safe and Predictable Classroom Environment (2021)*, the authors discuss the attribute of mindset. Mindset refers to the mental perspective or frame of reference we have in relation to situations or our students.

Becky's teacher has adopted a mindset that her room should be a place for students to feel comfortable, and experience stability and safety. Even though she is responsible for teaching math, she knows she must first connect with her students, build relationships with them and help them get ready to learn. Her emphasis on student relationships does not mean she is not helping them learn math. Ms. L is first building a foundation of trust and stability, then building the math content on this foundation.

Ms. L's students can gradually transition from their home situations to classroom structures each morning. She has set up quiet areas for the students to relax when they enter the room. She has areas where there are comfortable chairs, bean bags and small table groupings. Students can quietly visit and get themselves ready to learn in these areas.

AGM Address to Delegates

By Mark Sonnemann, *President Elect*



“The readiness is all.” Hamlet Act V Scene II

We cannot, as Hamlet notes here, know when big things will happen. Nor can we delay or avoid these events. Instead, we need to use the time and the resources we have to prepare for these moments, and embrace them even when we feel unready, trusting in the wisdom of our faith, the work we have done, and the discernment we have earned through our experiences and relationships. These are the moments when we grow, and the moments that test our commitment and resolve. To be a principal or vice-principal is to know this truth intimately. We are rarely faced with the routine, and very often find ourselves operating in areas outside our comfort zone.

I cannot say that I ever imagined that I would have the opportunity to serve as your president when I began my journey in administration, and I am humbled by the opportunity to work on your behalf. I believe that my time serving as a local chair, lead negotiator and AMR, along with my years on provincial executive will serve me well in this role, as will the many strong relationships I have built with other colleagues around the province.

I also cannot say that I ever thought that the role of principal would look anything like it does at this moment or that we would be amidst the complexities and pressures that we now face. Too many of our colleagues suffer from a poor work/life balance because of stress and workload. Doing the work should not hurt us or our families. We must find a way to make the work we do joyful and sustainable. It should be difficult and rewarding in the same measure.

It cannot be overstated how important our work is to our communities and the families we serve. Consequently, it is incredibly important for our professional organization to play a central role in our work as a trusted leader when it comes to negotiation, support, professional development and advocacy. We need to be proactive in anticipating the needs of our members and responsive to the changing face of educational leadership and the demands it places on us.

I am proud to be part of our dedicated and committed team, and I pledge to you that I will always strive for transparency in our decision-making and clarity in our communications. I plan on visiting as many Boards as I can, in-person, to listen and understand your needs so that I can better advocate on your behalf. In all that I do, I will strive to follow the guidance of St. Francis of Assisi who wisely reminds us that, “The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today.”

As Catholic leaders in education, we must constantly strive to live the teachings of Jesus, because our actions matter. The example we set is a light for our students, our staff, and our communities, and models the richness of a life with faith at its core.

My main areas of focus will continue to be the state and future of our benefit plan, the strengthening of our support services, and the enhancement of our professional development offerings, as well as political advocacy to ensure our work, our professionalism and our terms and conditions of employment are respected.

I look forward to spending the year Serving, Advocating and Leading as your president.



2026 CPCO AWARD RECIPIENTS



PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

Diana Assenza
Durham Catholic District School Board

Diana Assenza has been a school administrator for 13 years, serving four different regions within Durham Catholic. Prior to her administrative role, she taught a variety of grade levels, spending most of her time in the intermediate classroom. Diana later moved into special education, serving as both a Program Support Teacher and a Student Services Coordinator, supporting inclusive practices and student

success. She is an active member of the CPCO Durham executive, helping to organize events, including the annual local conference. Diana represents CPCO on various committees and continues to support colleagues through formal and informal mentorship. She is grateful to work alongside great Principals and Vice-Principals and a supportive senior administration team.



PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

Francesco De Bartolo
York Catholic District School Board

Francesco De Bartolo has dedicated 22 years to York Catholic, including 10 years as an administrator. A lifelong learner and passionate educator, he is committed to fostering inclusive, engaging and student-centred learning environments. Francesco's leadership is guided by collaboration, innovation and a deep understanding of educational

best practices. He continually seeks opportunities to grow professionally while supporting both students and staff. Known for his dedication, integrity and approachable leadership style, Francesco strives to build a school culture where every student feels valued, challenged and empowered to reach their full potential.



PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

David Della Rossa
Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board

David Della Rossa is a servant leader who quietly elevates others through his steady, humble presence. He embodies the Basilian principles of positivity, presence and prevention in how he shows up each day – fully committed to students, staff and families. People trust his calm guidance, and his genuine care fosters a school community where collaboration and belonging naturally flourish. Rooted in a sincere and authentic faith, David

creates spaces where others feel supported and empowered to thrive. His influence reaches far beyond the school. Through his work on board teams, family-of-schools committees and the local P/VP executive, he offers thoughtful insight shaped by integrity and experience. As a mentor, David nurtures future Catholic leaders with patience, wisdom and heartfelt encouragement.





PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

Paul Droog

London District Catholic School Board

Paul Droog started his career with the London District Catholic School Board in 2003, teaching Grade 7/8 at Holy Rosary. He transitioned to secondary education, teaching Religious Studies at St. Mary's Catholic Secondary School in Woodstock for nine years, serving as Department Head during 2014–2015. In 2015, he moved into administration as Vice-Principal at Catholic Central

High School, followed by two years as Vice-Principal at St. Mary's. He also served as Vice-Principal at Holy Cross Catholic Secondary School and John Paul II Catholic Secondary School. Since 2020, Paul served as Principal at Holy Cross. Additionally, he participated in Called to Lead and Serve committees, provided music for Principal Masses and acted as MC for Spirit Awards and CPC banquets.



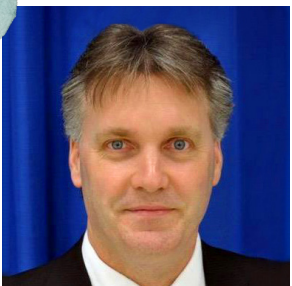
PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

Andrea Farkas

Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board

Andrea Farkas has been a dedicated member of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board since 1989, serving in various teaching roles before moving into administration. She began her vice-principalship at an Equal Opportunities school, where she strengthened her commitment to supporting vulnerable students and families. Over the past 17 years, Andrea has led four different school communities as principal, fostering environments

rooted in equity, compassion and high expectations. A strong advocate for students with unmet needs, she has consistently championed inclusive practices and access to opportunities. Since joining CPCO, Andrea has served on its executive team, contributing her experience, leadership and unwavering dedication to Catholic education. Her work continues to inspire colleagues and communities everywhere today.



PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR AWARD

Christopher Vuorensyrja

Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board

Chris Vuorensyrja is an outstanding candidate for the CPCO Catholic Principal of the Year Award, exemplifying servant leadership that prioritizes others. His strong leadership and advocacy are evident in his role as a former President and Executive Member of the CPCO Huron-Superior Executive Committee, where he negotiated favourable employment terms for his colleagues. A pillar of the school

community, Chris consistently supports student activities and excels as a Math Lead and mentor to fellow administrators. He is renowned for his kind, caring and compassionate character, forging strong, positive relationships with staff, families and parishes. Chris lives his Catholic faith through action, always donating his time and efforts for the betterment of the HSCDSB and the wider community.



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

Barry Oliver

Ottawa Catholic School Board

Barry Oliver has nearly three decades of dedicated service to Ontario’s Catholic education system. He is a seasoned leader committed to academic excellence and community mentorship. Barry has spent the past 15 years as an administrator with the Ottawa Catholic School Board, serving 13 of those years with distinction in the role of Principal. His career began with 14 years at the Durham Catholic District

School Board, where he developed a versatile pedagogical foundation teaching Grades 3, 4, 7 and 8, as well as serving as a High School Resource and History teacher. Beyond his school site, Barry has been a pillar of the Catholic Principals’ Council Ottawa Executive for 14 years, contributing as Vice-Principal Councillor, Secretary and Treasurer.



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

Melissa Vickery

Durham Catholic District School Board

Melissa Vickery started teaching at Durham Catholic in 2002. After 12 years in the classroom, Melissa transitioned to Program Support to pursue her formal leadership journey. In 2017, she joined CPCO Durham Local Executives. Melissa was elected to the Executive as Secretary, a role she held for three years, and now serves as Chair. As Chair, her focus is on advocating for the principal’s role

– meeting with senior administration, participating in negotiations centred on system needs, representing administrators through committee work and speaking to PQP classes about principalship. Melissa is grateful to the many DCDSB colleagues and leaders who have supported her growth and she is committed to giving back through service, advocacy and mentorship.



FR. JOHN REDMOND MEMORIAL AWARD

Bishop Robert Kasun CSB

Archdiocese of Toronto

Bishop Robert Kasun was ordained a priest in 1978. He served the Catholic Church as a high school teacher, administrator, vocations director and parish priest. In 2016, he was ordained a bishop to serve in the Archdiocese of Toronto as one of four auxiliary bishops. He currently serves as the Auxiliary Bishop for the Central Region of the Archdiocese. He has responsibilities for the 72 parishes in

his region. Additionally, he serves on the Ontario Bishops Education Committee and has contributed to the Catholic school religious education curriculum, Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ, as well as the Health and Family Life Curriculum, Blessed and Beloved. Bishop Kasun has also served as the liaison bishop to CPCO since 2016.





FR. JOHN REDMOND MEMORIAL AWARD

Linda E. Staudt

London District Catholic School Board (retired)

Linda Staudt worked for 25 years with the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board as a teacher, vice-principal, principal and superintendent, and for eight years as Director of Education for the London District Catholic School Board. In retirement, Linda served as Chair of the Synod Committee for the Diocese of London and the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario. She was one of four

lay Canadians appointed by Pope Francis as a voting delegate to the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, participating in the October 2023 and October 2024 sessions. Since returning, Linda shares her synodal experience leading sessions with parish, diocesan and educational partners, supporting the implementation of the synodal process of listening and discernment.



AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Michael MacPherson

Wellington Catholic District School Board

Michael MacPherson is an educator and coach with 33 years of experience in education. He retired in September 2025 from Wellington CDSB after serving as principal of all three Catholic high schools in Guelph. He also worked as a system principal in district student success, virtual learning, re-engagement and continuing education. Michael has been with CPCO since 2001 and has held

multiple leadership roles over the past decade, including AMR, Lead Negotiator, Executive Member, Vice-President, President and Past President. He has been married to Rachelle for 33 years, and they have two adult sons. Passionate about safe sport, Michael has coached high school football and hockey throughout his career. He has worked extensively in hockey as a scout.



PAST-PRESIDENT'S AWARD

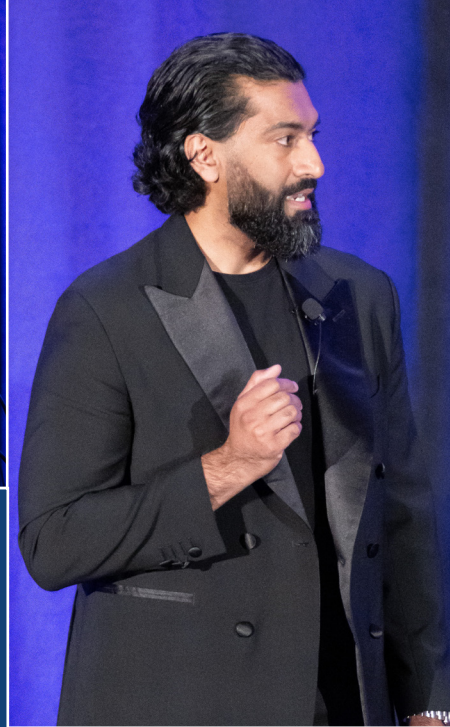
James McDade

Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board

James McDade is the kind of leader whose vocation has always been service. For 20 years as a principal, 18 years on his local executive and eight years on the provincial executive – culminating in the profound honour of serving as Provincial President – he has led with humility, wisdom and unwavering faith. His heart has always been rooted in nurturing the spiritual

formation of students and staff, ensuring that every school community he touched felt supported, inspired and valued. James has devoted his life to cultivating compassionate leadership, strengthening Catholic education and uplifting those around him. His legacy is not only in the roles he held but in the countless lives he has quietly and beautifully shaped.






ANCHORED IN
HOPE
CPCO 2026
Conference and
Awards Ceremony
April 23-24

