



# PrincipalConnections

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## Whole School Leadership

**JOANNE QUINN & MICHAEL FULLAN**  
*The Drivers*

**TRACEY EZARD**  
*Leading with Ferocious Warmth*

**EMMA LIND**  
*You Can Speak Here*



Principals & Vice-Principals

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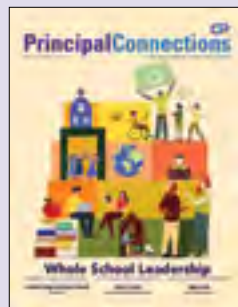
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## EDITORIAL, ADVERTISING & SALES

- Deirdre Kinsella Biss**, Editor  
dkinsellabiss@cpco.on.ca
- Carol Anne Jeanson**, Copy Editor
- Erika Futuyama**, Designer  
efutuyama@cpco.on.ca | ext. 25
- John Nijmeh**, Advertising Manager  
events@cpco.on.ca | ext. 28
- Juleen Anderson**, Marketing & Communications Manager  
janderson@cpco.on.ca | ext. 38
- Gaby Aloï**, Manager of Corporate Operations  
galoi@cpco.on.ca | ext. 26

## CORPORATE, PROGRAMS & SERVICES

- Michael MacPherson**, President  
president@cpco.on.ca | ext. 22
- Joseph Geiser**, Executive Director  
jgeiser@cpco.on.ca | ext. 34
- Nancy McDowell**, Accountant  
nmcowell@cpco.on.ca | ext. 29
- Diana Mazzotta**, General Counsel  
djoseph@cpco.on.ca
- Antonella Rubino**, Support Services Advisor  
arubino@cpco.on.ca | ext. 40
- Tilia Cruz**, Support Services Advisor  
tcruz@cpco.on.ca | ext. 27
- Michael Young**, Support Services Advisor  
myoung@cpco.on.ca | ext. 41
- Damien Joseph**, Administrative Assistant, Legal  
djoseph@cpco.on.ca | ext. 42
- Luciana Cardarelli**, Coordinator and AQ Registrar,  
Catholic Leadership Development Services  
lcardarelli@cpco.on.ca | ext. 37
- Jan Murphy**, Assistant Coordinator,  
Catholic Leadership Development Services  
jmurphy@cpco.on.ca | ext. 24
- Vanessa Kellow**, Administrative Assistant,  
Catholic Leadership Development Services  
vkellow@cpco.on.ca | ext. 31
- Will Wang**, Communications & Technology Officer  
wwang@cpco.on.ca | ext. 30
- Maria Cortez**, Administrative Assistant, Operations  
mcortez@cpco.on.ca | ext. 32

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Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario  
Suite 640, 10 Carlson Court  
Etobicoke, ON M9W 6L2

1-888-621-9190 toll free • 416-483-1556 phone  
info@cpco.on.ca • blog.cpco.on.ca • www.cpco.on.ca





## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Michael MacPherson

# Whole School Leadership

Each day as a Catholic leader, we journey in community. Effective leadership is the catalyst to leading a school in 2023. Whole school leadership continues to be the way forward in building a caring, inclusive, equitable and thriving learning community. Whole school leadership is about empowering your community with an emphasis on collaboration, shared decision-making, learning and building collective efficacy.

As we embark on another challenging school year filled with exciting possibilities, I have identified five areas to reflect on for your journey as a lead learner. These are areas of whole school leadership that provide ideas and insights to empower schools. Each is influenced by a leader's visible example of faith.

**Relationships and Trust** – Leadership is built on strong relationships. Relationships help build connections. Connections create value. Value builds trust. Those who invest time building relationships with students, staff, families, caregivers and school partners will build a strong inclusive, equitable and caring school community. As James Comer says, “no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.” Spend time modelling this for your community.

**Reconciliation, Equity, Culture and Learning** – Leaders who build strong cultures in their school community lead with an equity mindset. As leaders, we are to be at the front of reconciliation, learning and disrupting systems that do not meet the needs of students; especially students who have faced systemic obstacles. Leaders who lead with an equity mindset are foremost lead learners. Whole school leadership means equipping staff and students with the confidence to speak up for those who have been harmed or historically marginalized.

**Belief in Your Community** – One of the best ways to encourage whole school leaders is to have an unwavering

belief in the ability of your community to grow and learn. Leaders who are excited every day to be with staff and students model the attitude of growth. As a whole school leader, you must first model the way for others to follow. Your daily example is living proof of your commitment to your entire community, including parents, caregivers, neighbours and community partners.

**Establishing Presence and Visibility** – Leaders must be visible in your school community. A school that exemplifies this principle ensures that leaders are out greeting staff and students every day. Leaders extend this presence by making themselves available for parents and caregivers. These encounters allow leaders another opportunity to build, nurture and grow relationships. It is important for school staff to see leaders in the school, modelling relationship building. By being visible and present throughout the building, leaders can mentor, message and express appreciation for the collective efforts of the community.

**Value Added** – Leaders have an opportunity to influence their community by adding unique, creative, solution-based initiatives. These value-added opportunities come from the voices of all school stakeholders including students, staff, parents, caregivers and community. In 2012, Canada's first High School Give Back Day was created in Guelph, Ontario. All three Guelph Catholic high schools now take part in a day filled with fun, faith, food and dialogue between graduating students and staff. Graduates get to share their thoughts on key questions about their high school experience and have the opportunity to donate back gently used uniforms to future students. Hundreds of families have benefitted from Give Back Day, and it has changed the culture of the schools in a positive way.

Best wishes to everyone for a wonderful 2023-2024 school year.

*Leadership is built on strong relationships.*



# Giving Voice to All

*Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.*

1 Peter 5:3

Those of us who are given the privilege of Catholic school leadership are also charged with many responsibilities to ensure that our work on behalf of and for the students in our care is guided by the voices of all those who have a stake in ensuring success for every member of our school community.

Becoming a principal in a Catholic school (elementary or secondary) should never be viewed as having ‘arrived.’ The real work begins when you are first appointed to the role. From your very first day as a principal there is an overwhelming opportunity and responsibility to make a real difference to the students and the community you are called to lead. This is true no matter the circumstances of your appointment – establishing a new school community or taking over from a well-loved administrator or even being placed in a school facing difficult circumstances. Whatever the situation, it is important to rely on the skills, expertise and experiences that have brought you to this moment in time to make a difference in the lives of those you are called to serve. Above all, we must always remember that a significant element of our work is based on the tenets of our Catholic faith.

Being a ‘whole school leader’ requires that we listen to all the voices – those whose perspectives we share and those with whom we may disagree. It is also an opportunity to give voice to those who may have a greater understanding and insight into the school’s culture and climate than our own – teaching and support staff, members of our marginalized communities, students of varying backgrounds and differing abilities, parents who may be struggling in their roles, as well as the local parish team.

Unfortunately, we sometimes get caught up in calling out those who have different perspectives and responsibilities than our own. It has become easy to dismiss those with whom we have disagreements; to ignore their voices rather than seeking common ground as a way of making good choices and decisions. Catholic leadership requires the ability to listen to and understand these voices and to discern what makes the most sense for us and ultimately for our students. We must be the living example of Jesus’s lessons to all with whom we come into contact.

Leadership of a Catholic school is special and unique. While there are those who may anticipate that the 2023/2024 school year will be a challenging one from the start and may feel paralyzed by what lies ahead, I am confident our collective leadership strength lies in focusing on our students and their successes. It is imperative to always remember we have been called upon in this moment to a role that requires personal resilience, patience and faith. The role of Catholic Principal is not a stand-alone vocation. It requires communication, collaboration and support. Let us continue to rely on our common faith and each other – no matter our perspectives and possible disagreements.

May the year ahead be one in which you embrace the challenges, seek positive solutions, and experience personal and professional successes, while listening to all the voices in your role of whole school leader. May God always bless you.

*I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

John 5:30



## FROM THE EDITOR

Deirdre Kinsella Biss

# Leadership is a Choice

It is always about individuals and their actions. The ability to influence and inspire others through a specific role served in a school, is vital to school improvement. A school that is built around encouraging people to use, grow and lead with their talents, sets the stage for self-expression, self-direction and full accountability. Put simply, promoting the business of leadership in all roles held within a school positively affects everyone.

We are all leaders in our own right. Principals, vice-principals, teachers, students, parents, the pastoral team, chaplains and individuals from the community-at-large all engage and contribute to leading our schools. This is the heart of Whole School Leadership.

Promoting leadership in every position within a school community helps people to see themselves as an integral part of the community, ultimately creating a stronger connection between the individual's role and the school's success. When new ideas and decisions are generated from a place of leadership and ownership, then collaboration and motivation to achieve goals improves, propelling the school agenda forward and igniting success. In this edition of *Principal Connections*, we explore leadership, practices associated with leading and the ideas and reflections that connect to the various types of leadership roles that exist within a school community.

Joanne Quinn and Michael Fullan build our thinking on whole school leadership in their article *The Drivers*. They begin with a call for system reform starting with the school. They address the need for collective purpose in our schools and invite us to embrace the Humanity Paradigm, a set of actions driven by well-being, social and machine intelligence, equity-equality investments and systemness. They advocate that we must change the way we change, to serve humanity.

Tracey Ezard, author of *Leading with Ferocious Warmth*, sees leadership as a way of being, not doing. She sparks our thinking about whole school leadership by reflecting on the fundamental importance of the quality of our relationships and connections. She ascertains that leading with a balance between strong moral purpose and authentic connection is essential to school transformation. She invites school leaders to address their own well-being and recognize what they need to do for themselves, as they journey a path of transformation and change.

***Encouraging people to use, grow and lead with their talents, sets the stage for self-expression, self-direction and full accountability.***

*You Can Speak Here*, by Emma Lind, provides personal considerations for everyone in a school. Her message speaks to whole school design. As Equity, Diversity and Inclusion continue to top the agendas of schools, the exercise of self knowledge and self awareness remains significant. In this article, Emma encourages us to recognize the power of knowing and understanding our own personal racial scripts and how they impact our thinking and connections with others.

In *Harnessing Teacher Sprints*, Simon Breakspear proposes a practical solution for principals to create rigorous, sustained, job-embedded professional learning for their staffs. He suggests *Teaching Sprints* when schools and schedules are at their busiest, most hectic and overloaded. The process involves teachers working in teams collaboratively, reflectively, improving on their practice. Research is clear; a rise in student outcomes is not possible without an investment in teacher learning.

Whole school improvement occurs when members of the school community exercise leadership. Building capacity, developing ownership, supporting leadership from the middle, valuing and acknowledging the leadership that individuals in the school bring to the learning community, will enable long-term school success. Leading together creates a rich environment for the continual improvement of our excellent Catholic Schools in Ontario.

# THE DRIVERS

By Joanne Quinn and Michael Fullan



This issue of *Principal Connections* focuses on ‘whole school leadership.’ In a narrow sense, since the one-room schoolhouse, the goal of intact whole schoolness has always been the case. The problem is that this piecemeal conception of the school assumes that we are talking about so many schools as units of a big puzzle. The reality is that schooling must be part and parcel of a system puzzle whereby coherence in and about society is served.

Policy makers have tried to accomplish this sense of wholeness by forcing top-down requirements. Good goal; wrong strategy. To accomplish wholeness, paradoxically, one must start at the bottom and forge systemness through the development of schools with internal coherence, who in turn see themselves as part of the bigger picture. Where they help achieve unity of purpose through interactive development within themselves, with other schools, and with local, regional, and natural entities. The school is the first order of whole system development, while engaging the external systems. You cannot have whole school development without whole system development, and vice-versa.

In our work we focus on whole school development as the most important ‘driver’ required to change the larger system.

“Humans yearn for purpose and thrive when it becomes possible.” p.8<sup>1</sup>

The world of education has been upended by the intertwined challenges posed by the pandemic, growing inequality, poverty, climate deterioration and the reduction of trust across the globe. The sense of being overwhelmed is palpable and trying to patch up the status quo is no longer viable. The pandemic has sharpened awareness of these huge discrepancies in society and the need for learning that has purpose and authenticity if we are to keep students engaged. We are at a crossroads where we can transform the life chances of all youth or backslide into the status quo.

Highly effective leaders in education recognize these forces of fatigue and overload but can build collective purpose. They stop living ‘in the rear-view mirror’ and seize the opportunity to forge new pathways for change. The future demands *a new purpose*

*for education: to cultivate civic-minded changemakers who make a difference in their own lives and in society. We see glimmers of the magical change we seek and believe it is possible to make it more pervasive.*

We have identified four drivers that constitute the engine of a new model. *A driver is a force and set of actions that propel the system forward.* Together these drivers are the means to fulfilling the goal of human flourishing for all – what we call the Humanity Paradigm. *The Humanity Paradigm consists of actions taken to enable all living things to cope, develop and flourish under the complicated and adverse conditions of complex societies* The Humanity Paradigm centres on the ability to learn how to learn, know oneself, care for others and the environment, and to do all of this in concert with others.

## THE DRIVERS

The four drivers are intrinsically interrelated – within a given driver, and across all four. The drivers feed on each other as a system so users always need to think through their inter-dynamics. In concert they form a dynamic synergy to rock and change existing systems for the betterment of humankind. (See Figure 1)



**DRIVER 1: Well-Being and Learning** – recognizes that people can no longer survive unless they have sense of purpose, belonging and safety in society combined with dynamic learning competencies. The six Global



## The Solution to System Transformation



Figure 2 The Solution to System Transformation

**Stay the course.** Never do we remember a period when so many things have been unsettled for such an endless time. Distractors abound. But the systems and schools that we see making a difference are mindful of the opportunity such instability brings to pursue the Humanity Paradigm. They can articulate their purpose, build broad understanding and commitment, and most importantly stay the course. This seems common sense, but the mandate madness and plethora of shiny solutions can easily dissipate energy and pull efforts away from the goal.

We have been working with Uruguay on Deep Learning and system change for a decade. They embraced the competency-based approach combined with a strong use of technology to amplify learning. They began in 2014 with 100 schools and now engage over half the country's schools in this new approach to learning. As a result of the impact observed in students and teachers, the national government adopted competency-based learning for the entire country in 2023. They have accomplished what few countries have done: spread technology universally throughout the country in the service of learning; involved schools in joint determination of innovations and their use; established rapport with local towns and communities throughout the country; and maintained support and shared ownership with the National Ministry of Education, the president, and political sectors. They kept the vision of a new way of learning and well-being at the forefront without distraction despite budget cuts, political shifts and a pandemic.

**Foster systemness.** Remember that systemness is defined as the sense that people at all levels of the system are indeed the system. We think simply of three levels – local (school and community), middle (district or regional) and central (province/state or federal) – that constitute the system. The Solution to System Transformation (See Figure 2) mobilizes interaction across all levels.

You don't need permission for half the things you should want to do. Our examples above and many more in our global partnership did just that. Focus on (a) building the internal local systems, (b) enabling local entities to learn from each other, (c) developing two-way vertical learning relationships and (d) establishing new outcome measures

that include well-being and Global Competencies around a spirit of partnership, not compliance. This is the work at the school and broader system levels.

Effective leaders are constantly taking stock of their context and strategies to mobilize positive change. Leaders who want to embrace the Drivers and move towards the Humanity Paradigm may want to reflect on the prompts in Figure 1 individually or with their leadership teams. The Drivers and the Humanity Paradigm provide some insights, ideas and motivation to navigate an exceedingly complex and unpredictable world.

If there was ever a time to act, it is now. We must transform the purpose and focus of learning. More than that, we must change the way we change! If you want to change the system deeply, you must help the whole system to learn how to operate much differently than it has in the past. This means mobilizing the bottom and the middle to interact within and across each other while intriguing the top, all in the interest of emerging system change that serves the Humanity Paradigm.

Be guided by the drivers to go deep. Address the wounds of the pandemic as you develop a new era of education. There is something profound and heart-warming to realize that our best future will be embracing the Humanity Paradigm. [CP](#)

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### Joanne Quinn

Global Director New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) and International Consultant for Leadership, Learning and System Change

### Michael Fullan

Worldwide authority on educational reform with a mandate of helping achieve the moral purpose of all children learning. Professor Emeritus OISE

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<sup>1</sup> Fullan, M., & Quinn, J., (2024). *The Drivers: Transforming Learning for Students, Schools, and Systems*. Corwin Press.

# Leading with FEROCIOUS



## WARMTH<sup>®</sup>

By Tracey Ezard

In today's complex job of leading education, our ability to both achieve results and build strong relationships is critical. Without a focus on results, with whatever outcomes we set, we meander along without a clear vision and plan for the type of education we are providing. Without a focus on relationships, not only is collective efficacy elusive, but also well-being, inclusivity and community.

### Leading Transformation and Connection

The balance of these two core focusses often suffers as schools and systems struggle to emerge from a challenging few years. This, coupled with an urgent need for the education paradigm to address increasing inequity, embrace greater student agency, and keep up with rapid technological advancements, presents exciting yet confounding times. How do we ensure we support ourselves to be able to lead change and transformation, while also have the warmth to inspire and connect people?

I call this approach to leadership Ferocious Warmth. At the best of times leadership is messy. It's about a way of being, not doing. When great leaders are in balance, they are both ferocious about the moral purpose and courageously making a stand, while warmly building strong and enduring relationships. These leaders manage the nuance of the head and the heart.

### The Impact of Ferocious Warmth Leadership

There is an elation I feel when I discover a Ferocious Warmth leader. I can sense their passion through the newsletters and videos on the school websites. I hear it in the language they use when communicating face to face, via email, over the phone or virtually. I experience their connection with students and staff as we walk through the school. Their belief and love for those they serve is expressed in their words. I feel the psychological safety in place for people to raise and discuss ideas, differences of opinion and personal challenges. I feel the sense of



Leadership Impact Tracey Ezard

Our need for action, finalization and decisiveness short circuits our thoughts away from people towards hard-edged results. The pendulum swings too far from centre to the results. Taken too far, ferocious becomes fearsome, disregarding warmth. The fearsome leader uses fear, shame, intimidation and unchallenged authority to gain compliance.

On the other side, for leaders erring more to warmth without balance, as everything speeds up and stress rises, our results meter starts to lower, and we lose sight of our purpose. The volume gets turned up in our heads and, before we know it, we're sucked into stories and dramas – our own and those around us. This is the rocky territory of the leader driven unhealthily by relationships – pressured and stressful. At the extremity of warmth, we become enmeshed, tangled in relationships that display co-dependency, avoidance and passive-aggressive behaviour.

Both extremes cause cultures to descend into corrosiveness. Poor performance is coupled with relationships bouncing around this drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). Rather than adults working together with collective professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), we become victims, rescuers or persecutors, where trust, learning, focus and momentum suffer.

### Getting Back in Balance - Start with Self

Amid the stress generally experienced by school leaders, let alone the additional pressure of leading communities through and out of a global pandemic, staying in balance is a daily challenge. Our emotions are contagious, and our impact on others can last a lifetime, for better or worse. It takes big, daily doses of self-awareness to realize the effect of our leadership on those we lead. Ask people suffering at the hands of fearsome or enmeshed leaders which skills they wished their leaders had more of, and the answer often is self-awareness and empathy.

***Are you aware of when you're balanced and when you start to tip to one side or the other?***

## Actioning Self-Care

Without self-care and self-compassion, the Ferocious Warmth balance quickly begins to wobble. The exhaustion in school leadership currently is palpable. Putting out such intense energy and support to others takes its toll on many. Along with systemic shifts to provide greater support to leaders, our willingness to see our own personal well-being as a leadership behaviour rather than a 'nice to have' is vital for our sustainability in balancing the head of the heart.

What does your self-care look like? Here are some fast reframes if you find yourself moving out of Ferocious Warmth, leading solely from the head or the heart, obsessing over just results, or just relationships:

### Find your joy bubble

Hang out somewhere in the school with the people, activities or things that give you the most joy. This provides us with a burst of the chemicals that help our thinking and connectedness – oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine (Zak, 2018).

### Reflect on how far you have come

Give you and your team time to reflect on the achievements over the past year. Unearth the great number of things to be proud of and surprised at. Never underestimate the impact of reflective storytelling.

### Just be

Sometimes we need to sit with our feelings when not staying as centred as we'd like. A big dose of self-compassion is what we need here.

### Breathe

Square breathing helps us settle and reduce cortisol in the brain. In for four with the nose. Hold for four. Out for four with the mouth. Hold for four. Repeat. This technique is used by professionals, such as emergency responders and special operations forces. It's a calming, gentle way to recalibrate.

### Connect

If you're feeling disconnected, focusing only on results and forgetting who you're doing it for, go and spend time with teachers in the staffroom, the students in the yard and the classroom, the parents at the gate. Listen deeply to their perspectives, share stories, empathize, seek to understand.

## Do a wonder walk

Take time to walk around your school, specifically to observe and relish in wonderful daily things. Make a note in a journal about them, mention them to others, show gratitude, acknowledge them. Give your head and your heart a moment to acknowledge all the good going on, and your contribution to these.

## Great Leaders are Like Great Teachers

Being a great leader is not that different to being a great teacher. The leaders who make a difference value us and bring out our best. We remember great leaders long after they've left our arena, but their legacy continues in us. They connect our heads and our hearts to the challenges and joy of life. They help us see a grander vision than the one we might have for ourselves. They see in us things we can't see ourselves and give us the nudge we need to aspire to more. They laugh with us and let us see their foibles, wrinkles and blemishes. They admit when they're wrong and seek to make things right. They reflect and learn from their mistakes and see the world with curiosity and wonder. These leaders push against inequity and are never complacent.

Ferocious Warmth leaders are by no means perfect. They are always seeking to bring their best selves to the work, picking themselves up with compassion when they fail. Learning and evolving. They aim to blend the right amount of head and heart in any given situation. Education leaders turn up to provide this balance everyday. The challenge is staying there through complexity and an adversity. [CP](#)

### For Your Reflection:

- As an individual and as a team, when we are out of balance which way do we tend to default to? Results or relationships?
- What are some of the outcomes when this happens?
- What strategies can we put in place to get back into balance?

**Tracey Ezard** is an international educator, speaker and author based in Melbourne, Australia. Tracey works across schools and systems in the area of leadership and professional learning cultures. She is the author of three books, including *Ferocious Warmth*, *School Leaders Who Inspire and Transform* (2021), and *The Buzz, Creating Thriving and Collaborative Staff Learning Cultures* (2015). Tracey is a National Fellow of the Australian Council of Education Leaders and was awarded the Hedley Beare Educator of the Year Victoria Branch 2022.



# You Can Speak Here

By Emma Lind

This is a story for white folks who are too scared to make mistakes and stay hidden from anti-racism's many invitations for change.

I can still feel the tension in my body as if it were yesterday. Like a giant lump in my throat, all I could do was stay silent.

It was a Friday evening 20 years ago, and I was gathered with a few other university students, just in from the cold where we were attending a vigil to acknowledge the epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada. Once the vigil was over, we gathered in the students' centre, assembled in a circle on couches, warming our hands with fresh tea.

An Indigenous Elder was offering remarks about the colonial violence against Indigenous women, how the rates of murdered and missing Indigenous women were related to other systems of violence. Once she finished speaking, she invited those of us assembled to share reflections. One by one, people started sharing. I braced myself as I felt my turn to speak come. I was so stressed out I couldn't even think of the topic at hand. All I could think was: *what are the rules here, and how can I follow them?*

Many of those who spoke before me were themselves Indigenous, sharing the pain of having friends or relatives who had gone missing. Others were women of colour, who similarly connected their experience of racism in Canada to the stories of the Indigenous women. I froze. What on earth could I possibly contribute that would be meaningful? Should I mumble platitudes about how moving the vigil was, like the other white woman did across the circle from me? I can't share anything about my own personal experience – my community doesn't experience racist violence ... so what to do?

*Listen. My inner voice said. These stories are important to hear. There are centuries of patterns involving white people refusing to hear these stories. It's your turn to break the pattern. Thank everyone for their stories ... and keep quiet. Yes! I thought. 'Enlightened White Person' – that's the role I want to play. Ok.*

"These stories are really important," I said quietly. "I don't have anything to share at this time. I'll pass. Thank you." *Oh good!* I thought. That was the right thing to do. I noticed the white woman to my left copied me, similarly, passing on the opportunity to speak.



# Harnessing Teacher Sprints

By Dr. Simon Breakspear

How can Canadian school leaders design and implement professional learning that enhances teaching expertise and builds agency across their staff? How can we unlock full-school momentum for professional growth when we feel stuck in a state of professional exhaustion?

Rigorous, sustained and job-embedded professional learning for teachers is critical; the research is clear that a rise in student outcomes is not possible without an investment in our teachers. But on the ground, enhancing teacher practice is hard. School terms move at a frenetic pace, life at the chalk face can be unpredictable and teachers often report feeling overloaded. In this context, it's difficult for teachers to prioritize getting better at the job when they're so busy just trying to do the job. This has been especially true over the last three challenging years.

## Embracing collective incremental gains

*Teaching Sprints* (Breakspear & Jones, 2021) is a practical solution for educational leaders to explore because they allow exhausted teachers to enhance their expertise step by step. It was collectively designed in partnership with teachers in Australia and Canada as a professional learning approach that is both rigorous and manageable. At its core, *Sprints* allows teachers to enhance their expertise by engaging in evidence-informed cycles of deliberate practice in their own classrooms (Ericsson, 2016).

*Teaching Sprints* embraces the notion of “massive incremental gains,” where seemingly modest improvement goals become the focus for growth (Clear, 2018). Applied to teacher learning, this way of working supports teachers to work on truly modest shifts to practice; when sequenced thoughtfully, small evidence-informed changes can add up to significant improvement over time.

## A focus on teaching practice for the benefit of students

*Teaching Sprints* is, first and foremost, about teachers and their learning – the deepening of their pedagogical knowledge, the expansion of their instructional repertoires and the enhancement of their expertise. While the focus of the process is enhancing the quality of teaching, the ultimate aim is to lift student learning sustainably. As teams of teachers routinely engage in short cycles of practice improvement, they build the capacity to tackle more complex instructional challenges and meet the needs of diverse learners.

## The *Teaching Sprints* process

The *Teaching Sprints* process is easy to remember and simple to use. It involves teachers working in small teams and comprises three discrete phases. This article outlines the key elements of the three-phase process. Leaders should feel free to tweak, stretch, shrink and mould the *Teaching Sprints* process to fit their school or district context.



### Working together in teams

It is unlikely that sustained improvement happens in isolation. Enhancing our expertise requires disciplined collaboration and support from colleagues to help each other to keep getting better. *Teaching Sprints* is designed to support collective efforts. Collaboration is, of course, not an end in itself, but it is the means by which we can best push our thinking and practice forward in classrooms. While *Teaching Sprints* can support one-to-one instructional coaching, we've found it works best in teams of about three to seven people.

Each team needs a Sprint Leader. This provides a powerful opportunity to build teacher and middle leadership capacity across the school. This is the person who will lead the planning and facilitation of every *Teaching Sprint*. The role of Sprint Leader is usually

played by an existing grade-level leader or instructional coach, but any teacher can fulfil this role. You might decide *Teaching Sprints* would, in fact, best be led by someone who is not in a formal leadership role.

### Unlocking meaningful progress

*Teaching Sprints* is an improvement process all educators can use to get better at what they do best. *Teaching Sprints* is designed to become “part of the furniture” in the regular running of your school. If embedded as an organizational routine, *Teaching Sprints* should eventually feel habitual.

Can you imagine the compounding benefits to culture and outcomes if every term, teachers came together to learn from the research evidence and apply their learning intentionally in classrooms? Sustainable school and system improvement will emerge from leaders who can unlock fresh energy, momentum and agency from their staff by providing a better process and embedding a new organizational rhythm for professional growth. The answer to making progress on your largest school improvement goals may just be found in working on the next four-week *Sprint*. [↗](#)



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**Dr. Simon Breakspear**, Bpsych(Hons)Bteach MSc(Oxon)  
PhD(Cantab)  
Managing Director, Breakspear Learning Group  
Adjunct Senior Lecturer, UNSW, School of Education

For more information, resources and tools, check out [teachingsprints.com](https://teachingsprints.com)  
To learn more about Dr Simon Breakspear and his global work go to [www.simonbreakspear.com](https://www.simonbreakspear.com)

A stack of colorful folders in shades of orange, green, blue, red, yellow, and pink is shown in a blurred, artistic style. In the foreground, a silver pen with black perforations lies diagonally across the bottom of the frame. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient of light colors.

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# Grounded in School Climate and Culture

By John Hattie

We hear multiple cries about the supply of teachers, their burnout, attrition, out-of-field teaching and the quality of initial teacher education. So, let's take a closer look.

Indeed, the fundamental issue is that there is rarely a career structure for teachers that recognizes and rewards the best to stay in the classroom. We pay teachers more by promoting them to middle leadership. So you would think the supply of future leaders is assured. But within a short time, this current teacher supply crisis will turn to leadership, with many positions attracting few applicants. Many simply don't want the significant uptake of responsibility (without a major uptake of pay) from senior leadership. And that's compounded by society and systems placing even greater burdens on schools to solve societal ills.

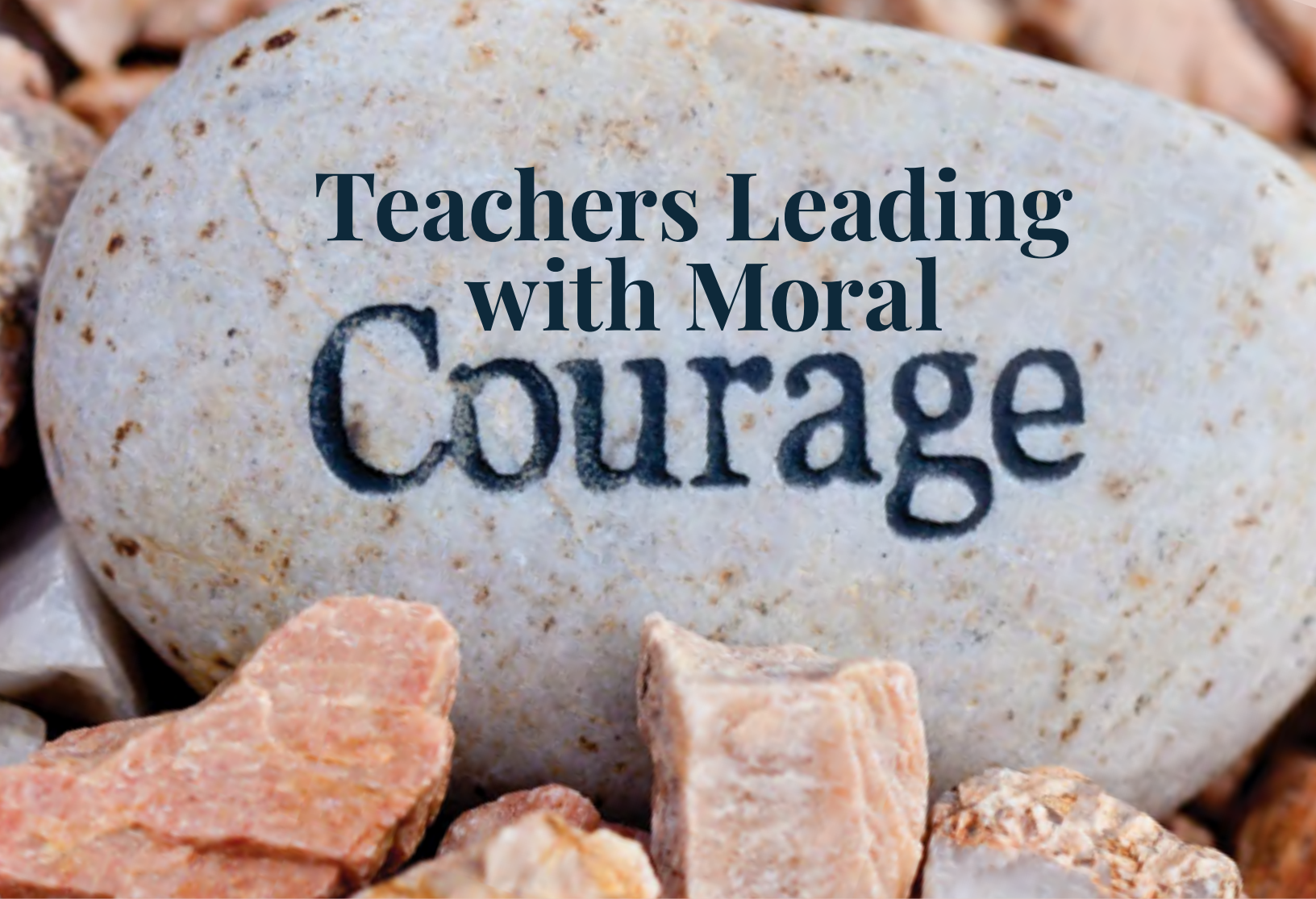
But the evidence is stark. The Teaching and Learning International Survey, TALIS (2018), a worldwide evaluation on education conditions, found 99 per cent of Alberta principals (the only province that participated) are satisfied with their job, and 76 per cent are satisfied

with their salaries. Across all countries, 94 per cent of principals are satisfied with their performance in the school and would recommend the job to others. Looking at this and other evidence, I would say educators have remarkable coping dealing with stressors, workload and the daily pursuit of making a major impact on the learning lives of students. Educators want to share their passion and truly make a difference. Educators have exceptional levels of expertise.

I recently updated my *Visible Learning* publication (Hattie, 2023). It includes 42 meta-analyses on the effect of leaders on student achievement – which is substantial since it is primarily an indirect effect via the teachers in the school on the students. The major move I made in *Visible Learning: The Sequel* is to show that the impact of leaders is primarily through the school's culture and climate.

The leader's most significant power is choosing the narrative for the school, setting the expectations and building a collective of educators to deliver on the purposes of the school. It is about establishing a climate





# Teachers Leading with Moral Courage

**By Andrew Campbell**

Teachers are the leaders in the classroom. When a teacher stands in front of the classroom, they are not only communicating curriculum content to their students; they are setting an active example by serving as role models for their students.

Teacher leadership occurs within the classroom and extends beyond the walls of the school into the broader community. As a result, teachers should be incredibly powerful players in equity work, offering students a shining example of how to elevate diversity, create a culture of belonging, cultivate brave spaces, celebrate difference, and respect all human beings as the unique and beautiful individuals they are. Educators should act as change agents in the classroom by leading with moral courage and risk-taking in support of true equity. However, far too often, this is not the case. Many classroom teachers see themselves as just a classroom teacher, and not the transformative leaders they truly are. As a result, they do not boldly use all their leadership

capacity as major players in confronting and dismantling inequities and oppressive practices and standing up as the champions they truly are.

Ontario school boards are working to support a range of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues and anti-oppressive practices, with many school boards implementing formal policies and documentation to support equity and reduce prejudice within their schools. On paper, all our school boards have equity frameworks and standards in place to support their students.

However, as someone who has been doing equity work in the field for years, one of my major concerns is the fear that educational leaders have about taking real action beyond simply putting forward a paper statement. I see the limited moral courage among educational leaders to truly usher in change. I recognize the worries among classroom teachers that they are ill-prepared to tackle issues of equity and the resistance when they claim that

# Inspiring Hope

By Norm Roberts



Over 2000 years ago, the disciples huddled inside the upper room, the door locked. They were afraid wondering what would come next after witnessing the crucifixion of their friend and hoped-for Messiah. The room was filled with shame, betrayal, fear, anger, blame, confusion and disappointment. Their hope in the Messiah had been challenged and crushed. The world beyond had become overwhelming and dangerous, leaving them imprisoned within this spiritual and psychological prison. It is in this context that Jesus penetrated the locked door and set them free when he

uttered those words that would echo for generations to come, empowering his beloved: “Peace be with you!”

School communities have always been on the front lines of the challenges facing society. Our students and staff have returned to school wounded. Many have lost their motivation and consider attendance in classes and completing assignments as optional and unnecessary. As teachers labour to fill three-year learning gaps, students turn to AI, social media and their phones to hide their fear of not being successful.

# Standing in the Tragic Gap

By Michael Saver



*The seasoned Grade 7 teacher's voice shakes as he shares his stories about the 2022-2023 school year.*

*"I've never seen anything like it. Something happened to the kids over the past three years. I don't just mean they are behind in areas like math. The inappropriate, hurtful language they use – casually throwing about racist or homophobic slurs. You name it, I've heard it this year. And when I challenge them, they say, 'I'm only kidding, sir. You see that word all over the place. It doesn't mean the same anymore.'*

*"That is a reference to social media," he continued. "A lot of them spend most of their time outside school on gaming sites, or in unregulated chat spaces, or on TikTok. The online world has become a war zone and a cesspool. Kids are embracing the culture of harm, especially targeting the most vulnerable of their classmates."*

.....

*The secondary school vice-principal's face shows her exhaustion. She was appointed just as the pandemic was taking hold, and she describes the time since like being on an out-of-control roller coaster: online, in-school, hybrid, repeat. And in this school year, tasked with the job of putting it all back together.*

*"I've had every kind of meltdown take place in my office: students, teachers, parents – all looking to me to fix everything," she sighs. "I have the St. Jude prayer, for hopeless situations, taped above the phone on my desk."*

.....

More the norm than the exception, these stories from educators can be heard across the province, in both Catholic and public schools. While it is true that they also share stories of perseverance, resilience and hope, educators find themselves poised between fear and

# Well-Being: Time for a Reset

By Mary Jean Gallagher and Beverley Freedman

*Leadership Success: Developing and maintaining resiliency and well-being in turbulent times.*

You are an educational leader in challenging times. Your students, staff and families need a reassuring and supportive environment in which they can do their best work, and they look to you to provide inspiration and guidance. You know that inspiring them with the joy of learning, and creating a sense of caring and belonging, will make the new school year a success. You ask yourself, “How can my leadership skills serve the needs of these demanding times, for myself and for the people who are counting on me?”

Leadership matters. Leithwood and others have identified principal leadership as second only to classroom teaching in promoting student learning<sup>1</sup>. In underserved schools, the principal’s influence is even greater. But when schools are disrupted both organizationally and emotionally, when problems are pervasive and externally sourced and when they multiply with frightening speed, leaders cannot help feeling overwhelmed. “It is lonely at the top”.<sup>2</sup> When feelings are intense, the time is right for us to review our skills and reset our approach.

Leaders are not the only people who are overwhelmed. Students are major players in the ongoing drama, bringing their issues with them to school every day. COVID-19 played havoc with their programs, contributed to their sense of isolation and loss of control. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) reports that 59 per cent of Ontario students feel depressed about their future, a feeling that has been exacerbated



by the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Staff too have been negatively affected by school and work disruptions, economic and health uncertainties and social isolation. The People for Education's survey suggests the magnitude of the problem: 95 per cent of the 1,044 schools surveyed report needing more mental health supports and resources<sup>4</sup>.

The world is experiencing “rapid, unpredictable and unprecedented change” and effective teaming, resiliency, a sense of belonging and well-being are needed to counteract growing anxiety, depression, anger and frustration<sup>5</sup>.

When the new school year begins, immediate needs of teachers, students, parents and colleagues, are likely to capture the leader's attention. As demanding, crowded days hurtle by, school leaders reflect, “Am I taking time to reflect on how I am faring? Am I taking time to plan for my own well-being?” The good news is that many of the things you can do to enhance and maintain your own well-being are familiar strategies. You have used them in the past to lead school improvement and change, and they are equally useful for staff and students.

It may help to think of these strategies in these three areas.

## 1. CONTEXT

School leaders in Ontario have used school improvement planning for most of their careers. These planning techniques have been part of a pre-pandemic environment of general optimism. Now, leaders must acknowledge that things are more challenging but still possible. Leaders must continue moving forward.

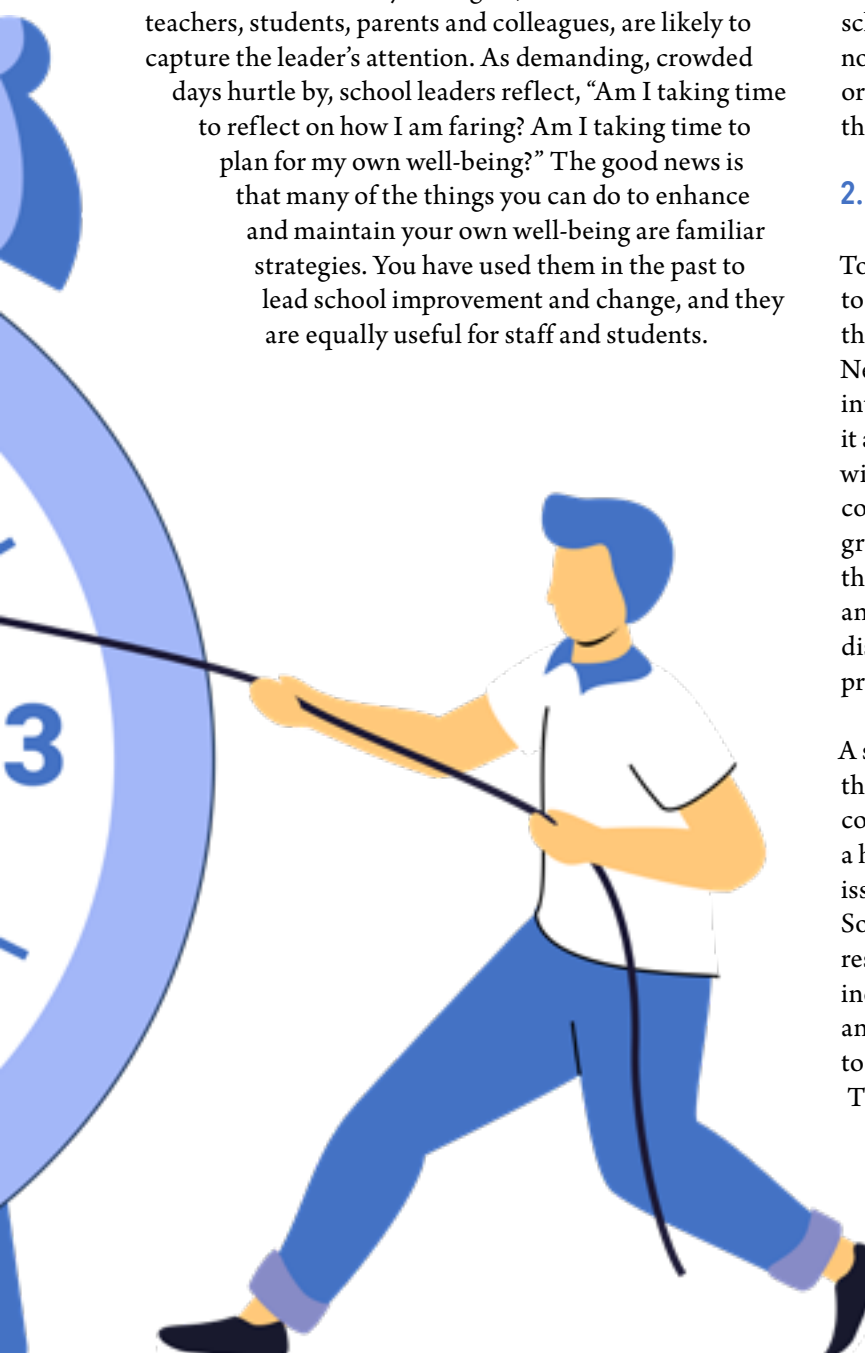
Like captains of sailboats, school leaders take advantage of favourable winds to make gains and move “full speed ahead.” But when the winds change, they reassess the school's goals and adjust for the context in which they now work. Some goals and priorities may need to be reset or reduced. It may feel different, but leaders recognize that progress, not perfection, is the goal.

## 2. NETWORKS

Today's challenging high-demand environment can lead to burnout. To develop and sustain personal well-being in this high-pressure setting, leaders can focus on networks. Networks can be professional or social, sometimes intersecting. Successful leadership does not mean going it alone, but rather creates a culture in which people work within networks to address challenges. Education is a collective endeavour requiring collective efforts. As the group makes changes, and implements core directions, the leader's work of coordinating, supporting, reframing and refining is validated<sup>6</sup>. Learning leaders expect distractors and dissonance, but their sense of well-being prevails as they keep the team moving forward.

A sense of well-being develops when the priorities of the people concerned are honoured. Students and staff consistently rate social, emotional and safe learning as a high priority. They want to learn more and talk about issues of wellness and mental health through embedded Social Emotional Learning (SEL). They want access to resources, tools and trained professionals to discuss issues including stress, anxiety, financial challenges, transitions and change. The school leader can use this opportunity to call on trusted and capable staff to lead the team.

The community may join the learning and recognize new efficacy in your school. Your own well-being is enhanced when staff, students and community share benefits of broader networks.



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# An Interview with Tyrone Dowling

By Michael MacPherson



Tyrone Dowling is the Director of Education for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. As part of a district K-12 role in Wellington Catholic, I had the privilege of working with Tyrone during his two years as Superintendent, Wellington Catholic. That provided amazing opportunities for me to grow as an ally and ‘co-conspirator’ in the work of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Reconciliation. Learning with Tyrone and others on the Equity Leadership team was a gift. Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Tyrone and ask him about his new role, and about his thoughts on equity work and school leadership.

***Tyrone, tell me a little bit about yourself, including your education, key learning experiences and background that brought you to this Director of Education leadership position?***

I attended the University of Waterloo where I earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree. I graduated from Niagara University in Niagara Falls, New York, and earned a Master of Science in Education Degree. My teaching career started in the Niagara region with the Lincoln Separate School Board where I taught for two-and-a-half school years between January 1993 and June 1995. In September of 1995, I moved back home to teach in my home board of Waterloo Catholic. Between 1995 and 2020, I worked in Waterloo Catholic as a teacher and principal. In September 2020, I moved to Wellington Catholic to begin a two-year journey as a Family of Schools Superintendent. In the summer of 2022, after much prayer and discernment, I became Director of Education for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board.

***You have been in your new role as Director of Education, Waterloo Catholic District School Board, for one full school year. What are your learnings? What insights would you like to share?***

It is exciting to be a graduate of this system, and my desire each day is to bring hope so that all our students experience a positive impact. Each day, we want students and staff to be in a safe space that is full of love and care. People always look to your leadership. Finding the time to discern and reflect is a challenge when you are a leader. The questions that are always circulating are:

- How do I build as much time as possible into being with students, staff and school communities?
- How are we going to have the biggest impact on students?
- How do we help all the organization continue to see the connection between our faith, equity, our right to read and de-streaming?
- How do we make a positive impact on all students?
- How do we help our students experience the opportunity that they deserve?
- How do we find ways to support and continue to build community?

***In your opinion, how do we continue to move Equity Diversity and Inclusion forward?***

Our work is laid out in the Gospel values through our Catholic social teachings. Connecting the social teachings to our Graduate Expectations, this is equity work. This work is not an add on; it is authentic Gospel





# Nurturing Communities and Inspiring Change

By Annalisa Varano

*“You are going to learn from the people before you teach them anything.”* Pope Francis

Stepping into the role of a Catholic principal in a new school community can be both exciting and challenging. It means having real opportunities for learning and growth along with the chance to make meaningful, enduring improvements in the school. This article explores the significance of Whole School Leadership from the perspective of a Catholic principal in a new school community.

## Knowing Our Communities and Building Relationships

To lead a school community effectively, we must first understand the unique needs and values of the community. For a new principal, getting to know the staff, students and families is the foundation for building trust and fostering meaningful connections. Traditionally, this has taken time and intentional effort through activities such as Meet the Staff evenings, Parent/Caregiver–Teacher Interviews, Parent Council meetings and school concerts/performance events.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of knowing our communities on a deeper level: the socioeconomic disparities, the mental health struggles and the many

other community-specific concerns that impact on students’ ability to learn. These challenges emphasize the need not just for awareness, but also for compassion and support. By actively engaging with their community and parish partners, school leaders can better identify and address the evolving needs of their community, and proactively develop strategies to ensure every student’s success.

Engaging families as partners in education helps build trust and encourages collaborative problem-solving. To create a welcoming and inclusive environment for families, a good first step is establishing open lines of communication through newsletters, emails, websites and social media platforms. Involving families in collaborative goal setting and allowing space for families to share their expectations, aspirations and concerns are key to creating collaborative action plans. Seeking input on issues related to curriculum, extracurricular activities and school policies, and creating a continuous feedback loop, in person or virtually, creates a positive and inclusive educational environment for students and respects individual and personal circumstances.

## Respecting the Community’s History

Every school has a rich history and a legacy of leadership that shapes its identity and traditions. Acknowledging

leaders can foster an atmosphere where students feel safe, supported, and valued. They can achieve this by implementing policies and practices that promote inclusion, respect and emotional safety. For example, leaders can ensure students have access to trusted adults who are trained in mental health support and resources readily available to those in need. They can create physical spaces within the school where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, such as designated quiet areas or outdoor spaces for relaxation and reflection. By nurturing a culture of acceptance and understanding, leaders demonstrate their commitment to student well-being and provide the necessary foundation for academic success and personal growth. Strategies for promoting wellness include:

- Establishing a wellness committee of teachers, parents and students to develop strategies, initiatives and programs to address various aspects of wellness
- Collaborating with mental health support (SMHO) and school counsellors to provide support students mental health needs
- Ensuring that students have access to support and creating a safe and confidential environment for them to seek help
- Implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to help students develop skills such as self-awareness, self-management, relationship building and responsible decision-making
- Providing opportunities for students to develop empathy and resilience

Whole School Leadership offers a transformative approach for Catholic principals to lead their school communities effectively. By building relationships, respecting the community's history, empowering leadership at all levels and leading from within, principals can create an environment that embraces change and promotes growth. Through instructional excellence, equity and inclusivity, and a focus on student wellness, leaders can cultivate a community that nurtures the academic, social and emotional development of all students. In this ever-evolving educational landscape, Whole School Leadership empowers Catholic principals to be beacons of positive change within their school communities. [CP](#)

### For Your Reflection:

- What steps are you planning to take to build strong relationships and establish trust within the school community as a new whole school leader?
- How do you plan to gather input and engage stakeholders, including teachers, parents and students, in the decision-making process to ensure a collaborative and inclusive school environment?
- What strategies do you have in mind to promote a positive and supportive school culture that fosters student well-being, academic achievement and a sense of belonging for all members of the school community?

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**Annalisa Varano**, Superintendent of Learning,  
Waterloo Catholic District School Board

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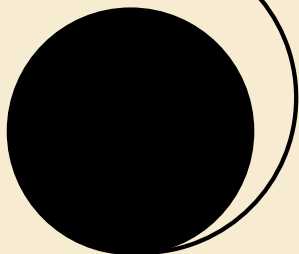
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# Teachers Matter!

By Mary Noce

**M**y experience in leadership has been a journey. As an elementary school administrator, I have encountered all walks of life, welcomed countless challenges, felt overwhelming joy, and heartache, and I have learned to embrace it all with an open heart and mind.

Much like music, my journey can be described as a series of tensions and efforts that evoke emotions and memories. And in my medley of songs, a common theme arises repeatedly: teachers matter. My carefully curated “playlist” of songs helps illustrate this fulfilling ‘musical’ journey in school leadership and highlights the importance of teachers in education.



## Track #1

### Reunited (and it feels so good) by Peaches & Herb

Prior to the pandemic, there was much discussion about teachers being replaced, as technology became more prevalent in learning. However, in a world of fast-paced digital technology, with infinite broadcasting capabilities and artificial intelligence, nothing can replace the warm smile, inviting curiosity and nurturing love of a teacher.

The pandemic and lockdown experiences of children and parents made it abundantly clear the art of teaching is a face-to-face, in-person phenomenon that was desperately lacking during a difficult time. Students missed their teachers; parents missed them even more. Returning to school, students and families came back with genuine appreciation for the learning experience within the classroom environment with a teacher leading the way. This past year, saw teachers welcoming students back with reassuring embraces and a grateful “pat on the back.” School was back to normal. Teachers and students were reunited in the classroom!

## Track #2

### Happy by Pharrell Williams

I’ve learned the culture of care in a school is dependent on everyone, regardless of their position. Positive feelings and a warm atmosphere are amplified by the efforts of teachers. They make people happier.

Teachers have a critical role within classrooms and the larger school community. The connections they make with students create relationships that build layers of trust, creating a culture of care, love, acceptance and an overall feeling of comfort and support. In the words of Coretta Scott King, “the greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.” Students are at their best, thriving to their potential, when they feel safe and accepted.

As administrators, we are tasked with building strong relationships with our teachers. These relationships have a direct impact on student-teacher relationships. As in any organization, a happier employee is a more effective and productive employee. At our school, a happy teacher is defined as one who:

- Is respected as a professional
- Feels valued, supported and appreciated
- Exercises autonomy and isn’t micro-managed
- Is trusted to make decisions
- Is taken care of and fed when work goes beyond the school day

# Encouraging the Leaders Among Us

By Melissa Daddabbo

We would not be administrators if somewhere down the line we weren't encouraged, supported and mentored into the role. Where someone saw something in us and pushed us to develop certain skills. Those "skills" that are the very essence of leadership. Were we innately the type of people to seek out and attempt something new and share it with our colleagues?

When leaders seek out these people on staff, or they stand out on their own, how can we encourage and facilitate teacher leadership in our schools, in the people we encounter daily?

Educators need to find and hold on to their why, their reason for going into education in the first place. They need to look beyond the challenges in education and see that they can and do make a difference. We need to allow them to clear away the negative space and to fill it with action, with positive experiences that will inspire growth and change.

Teacher leaders are change agents in a school. They build capacity in themselves and in turn spread that capacity, that infectiousness, that excitement, to their colleagues. Teachers, who identify as leaders or who have shared leadership in their school, are more likely to stay in the profession longer. And they have a greater impact on student achievement because they are invested in their experiences. Teacher leaders see their place in the bigger picture. They understand their influence casts a wider net than just their own educational space: it has school-wide, sometimes, district-wide impact.

But if they don't have opportunities to share, present, highlight their experiences and demonstrate their



*"If I look back on many of the past and present mentors in my life, they are indeed people who saw something in me, or vice versa. I wanted to emulate them and their style and to be a leader myself. How did those people, and now how do I, encourage teacher leadership?"*

expertise, then what, or who, is inspiring them? As their leader, we need to have conversations with our staff regularly, to pose thoughtful questions, to point out their impact, so that they will continue to be those teacher leaders. And we need to let them know their impact.

We can provide opportunities for teachers to step into the role of teacher leader. For example, by encouraging their participation in professional learning teams, by supporting them in completing a specialist AQ or in serving as a mentor, coach, classroom demonstrator, consultant, coordinator, divisional lead, student advocate, or simply by validating their ideas on a school level project.

As administrators, we can encourage and support teacher leaders by serving as their own mentors, through strategic partnering, by creating a culture of shared ownership, by knowing and capitalizing on staff expertise, by communicating effectively with staff and by encouraging a learning stance. These opportunities are rooted in trust of teacher expertise. There should be no need to micromanage, because these teachers exhibit the skills to execute well. Our role is to provide the go ahead and encouragement along the way; to offer check-ins and help



get things off the ground, while letting them take the reins. Let them problem solve. Allow them to understand how to navigate the roadblocks that will inevitably show up. But provide support at every step through guidance, conversation, listening, questioning and encouraging reflection and reevaluation.

Not everyone needs to evolve from teacher leader to administrator. We may all have the capacity to be leaders, but that doesn't mean everyone should or wants to go the administration route. We need those teacher leaders on staff to help us as administrators, to inspire us, to bring out the mentors in us. Teacher leaders serve as models of the learning stance we are trying to foster with all. Great leaders, including our teacher leaders, need to have empathy and perspective. Empathy to see situations from a variety of perspectives and consider them all, and perspective to see how what they are doing is impacting the whole.

Additionally, teacher leaders naturally acknowledge and harness the power of student voice. They see among their students the leadership qualities that student

voices possess, not just about the needs of their own students, but how to impact and influence students across the school, to lift their voices and take ownership.

Leadership must also exist at every level in a school, among all groups; secretaries, TAs, DECEs, custodians, teachers. If this shared leadership does not exist, everything falls back on one person – the principal. And who wants to have all that responsibility? As school leader, you need the human force, in staff leaders, to help set, build and implement vision. Teacher leaders influence other staff members to jump on board because they trust and know it will be something they want to be a part of. They can say, I was there, I helped with that! Teacher leaders possess a personal responsibility to contribute to the whole, because they know when they do, it benefits the entire school community.

What can you do to encourage teacher leaders in your school? The first step is to form relationships and connections with your teachers. Rein in their enthusiasm and create focus and intent. Plant seeds and ideas. Be supportive and talk them through their thoughts. Hone their ideas. Ask them probing questions that elicit their own thinking process – “What if ... ? Did you consider ... ? You have this budget ... how will you use it?” Debrief with them. Encourage reflection. Show them you value what they bring. Introduce them to people. Offer strategic partnerships and teaming. Create shared ownership. Communicate often. Share opportunities that are offered through the system. Buy resources that inspire them. If they come to you excited about something they learned and want to share, invest in it. Challenge their annual learning plan to push boundaries while offering supporting mentorship. Let them know their value, often.

When you combine these supports, when you offer this type of encouragement, you create a culture of professional regard where there is a coordinated vision of leadership. Teacher leaders will emerge.

“The real job of a leader is not about being in charge but about taking care of people in our charge.” (Simon Sinek, @TheWealthSquad, Tik Tok 2023). [CP](#)

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**Melissa Daddabbo**, Principal  
Guardian Angels Elementary School,  
Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board

# Kindling the Leadership Spark in Students



By Stephanie De Castro and Katie Bowie

Our education system is comprised of leaders at every level; leaders who ignite and influence each other's spark to lead. Whether it's determining safe schools' policies, ensuring students succeed in their exams, or building relationships and positive school climates, school leadership is responsible for determining how a student experiences education.

Leadership should come from every level, including the student population. A school community is only as strong as its ability to encourage student leaders, who serve their peers and constituents.

Often, principals and teachers provide students with their first leadership encounter, changing the lives of many. Their dedication to provide leadership opportunities to students allows students to grow to their fullest potential. Outside the classroom, extracurriculars play a significant part of a student's journey, and we acknowledge and appreciate the time and commitment teachers provide to facilitate such activities. Providing students with the ability to immerse themselves in teams and clubs that foster leadership skills is critical in developing students' capacity for leadership and their potential to tackle stronger leadership positions in their school communities.

Since the pandemic, students have seen a dramatic decline in the availability of extra and cocurricular opportunities. An increase in student and staff mental health concerns, burnout and years of pausing these activities can mean a much less rich and empowering educational experience for students. It is necessary principals support their staff, and by extension their students, by providing the necessary support systems to keep these programs running. Students have diverse interests they are passionate about. By supporting students to explore their passions in creating new teams and clubs, or just engaging in discussion, you may kindle a spark to take their leadership to the next level. Students may want to start a debate team, a robotics club, or knitting as an afterschool activity. Providing resources, facilities and assistance to bring student ideas to life are impactful steps in a student's leadership journey.

Fostering collaboration and teamwork in class environments also creates opportunities for students to work together and learn from each other's strengths. Immersing students in group discussions and projects can help teach skills regarding teamwork and cooperation, especially in students who may not yet have the initiative to pursue leadership opportunities on their own. Collaboration with teachers and administrators is important for students to feel heard and valued in their school communities.

# The Power of Parent Leadership

By Annalisa Crudo-Perri and Joe Perri

Parent engagement has faced its fair share of challenges over the years. Many parents have felt disconnected from the school community, lacking opportunities to voice their concerns both at the local and board level, and to contribute actively to decision-making processes. During the pandemic so much of what had been part of school life shut down. And many parents spoke of not feeling an open welcome as schools reopened.

Post-pandemic, parents are once again finding their voice. Now, they seem to be regaining their footing in the life of the school. It has been a challenge, but thankfully there is a shift happening with parents being re-engaged and recognized as key stakeholders in their children's education. The Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, as the voice of parents in Catholic education, is actively bridging the gap between parents, school leaders and educators, empowering parents to lead and advocate for their children's education.

"In a world where education is constantly evolving to meet the needs of a technologically advancing society, parents have a vital role to play in this process. As we celebrate the 85th anniversary of the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE), we recognize the importance of parent leadership in shaping the entire education landscape in Ontario," reiterates Annalisa Crudo-Perri, Co-Executive Director, OAPCE. "These are challenging times in Catholic education; it is crucial for parents to be involved and take on leadership roles to ensure their child receives an education through a Catholic perspective, an education that reflects their values and beliefs."

Education is not just the responsibility of boards, schools and administrators; it is a partnership between parents and educators. When parents take on leadership roles and work alongside schools and educators, the school community thrives. The benefits of parent leadership are numerous. It improves parent engagement and involvement in the school community. Parents who become more invested in their child's education feel a stronger sense of belonging in the school's success, resulting in improved communication and collaboration among all stakeholders.

An inclusive and supportive learning environment can be created through the active participation of parent leaders. OAPCE has partnered with a speakers' bureau Beyond-U.ca in order to provide meaningful presentations through life-experienced speakers to parents with a focus on fostering leadership. By contributing these unique perspectives, experiences and skills, parent leaders enrich the decision-making processes, ensuring that the education provided reflects the values and beliefs of Catholic families. Parent leaders have a deep understanding of their child's strengths, needs and learning styles, which can build instructional strategies and interventions. Moreover, their diverse backgrounds and expertise contribute to the overall growth and richness of the school community.

When parents feel valued and included, they are more likely to actively contribute their time and skills to support the school's initiatives, which fosters a sense of community and belonging within the school environment. Volunteering in the classroom, organizing community events and







# Vulnerability and Leadership

By Janet Pun

**F**or years, even decades, education leaders have silently shouldered the immense pressure they have at work. With ever-increasing demands for classroom resources, student behavioural problems and everyday crises, leaders are physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. If not managed, this exhaustion can lead to a breakdown in staff trust and even impact the very culture of the school.

To manage their schools, some leaders may adopt the ‘all-knowing persona,’ fearing that otherwise they may be perceived as weak. What they may not realize is presenting an all-knowing persona is not effective leadership. And it will keep them in a cycle of isolation and exhaustion. By failing to acknowledge their own shortcomings and lack of knowledge, leaders most likely won’t find the best solution and they’ll curb other voices in the process. This all-knowing leadership style will result in a decline in trust, animosity among staff and ultimately a dysfunctional working environment in the school.

In previous years, autocratic, democratic and transformational leadership styles were part of a principal’s playbook. Today, however, authentic and compassionate leadership is paving the way to better self-care for leaders and staff, and ultimately better student outcomes. But being more authentic can be difficult when we’re feeling burned out. And it may force

us to be more open with our struggles before we are ready to share.

## Common myths around vulnerability

At the heart of authentic, compassionate and effective leadership is accepting our own vulnerability; having humility, self-awareness and courage to acknowledge our own imperfections. According to Dr. Andrew Miki, Chief Science Officer and Clinical Psychologist at Starling Minds, society has a number of misconceptions about vulnerability:

1. **Vulnerability is a weakness:** We’ve been conditioned to view vulnerability as a weakness, but it is a strength. Being vulnerable shows we have the self-awareness and confidence to admit when we don’t know something and to therefore find people who know the answer.
2. **Vulnerability is a weapon against you:** We may think people will take advantage of our vulnerability, but it can be an effective leadership tool, one which fosters understanding and compassion.
3. **Confident people are not vulnerable:** Confident leaders are more willing to be vulnerable and admit when they don’t have the answer. They are confident in who they are, and they are willing to surrender control of a conversation and let the best idea win.

# Going Beyond Rhetoric

By Annie Kidder

***“The whole school environment, including its individuals and their relationships, the physical and social environment and ethos, community connections and partnerships, and policies, are important areas for action if a school is to promote health.”***

Broader measures of success: Physical and mental health in schools, 2014

How can we ask school leaders to do even more than they’re already doing?

For years – decades even – many of us have talked about and longed for action on schools as community hubs. There has been research, there have been multiple pilots, and a former premier even appointed a Community Hubs Framework Advisory Group to develop an action plan to make community schools a reality. But, despite the years of advocacy and the evidence that school-community connections make a difference to the quality and degree of student outcomes and well-being, and despite rhetoric in government documents that points to the importance of connecting with communities and community resources, there is still little funding to ensure the staff support necessary to build and maintain strong connections between schools and their communities.

In People for Education’s 2017/18 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS), we asked school principals if they had staff, other than the principal or vice-principal, who were responsible for acting as liaisons with the community. Only 18 per cent said yes (and even that was a steep decline from previous years), but the vast majority (77 per cent) reported there were zero hours allotted to the position, meaning this work is done off the side of desks, or, in the end, by over-stretched principals and vice-principals.

Ontario does currently provide funding for things like community workers, community-based organizations that provide tutoring for students, and community mental health services, etc. But there is virtually no funding for staff inside schools to build connections with these community resources. There is one fund –

the Well-Being and Positive School Climates Allocation – that is described as funding to meet “local needs and priorities that promote well-being and inclusive education, including strengthening positive school climates.” But it has a total of \$3.2 million allocated for the whole province, which works out to just over \$600 per school.

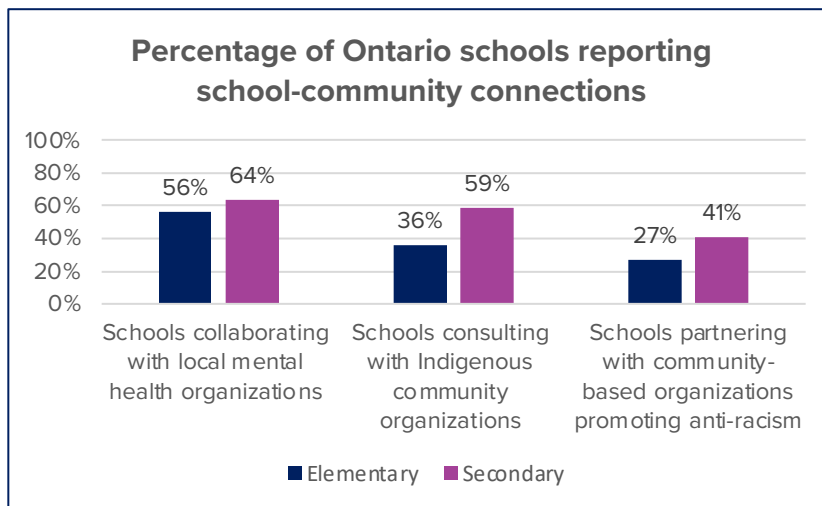
## Principals under pressure

***“There’s just so much; it can be overwhelming. Parents and families are looking to the school to support them as well, and this is difficult to resource.”***

Elementary school principal, Central Ontario

Over the last few years, the Annual Ontario School Survey has painted a picture of school leaders under incredible strain – trying to deal with fallout from the pandemic, implement new curriculum and policy, and find ways to support an ongoing crisis in student (and staff) mental health, all at the same time and all without substantial increases in support. In addition to all that, there is an assumption that school leaders will coordinate vital connections to their communities.

In our 2022/23 Annual Ontario School Survey, we asked principals about connecting with community to support Indigenous education, mental health and anti-racism.



Source: 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey

# Unleashing the Leader Within

By Roxanne Derhodge



A school environment possesses its own unique identity, grounded in core fundamental values and beliefs that encompass the entire ecosystem. This ecosystem comprises the faculty, students from diverse backgrounds, parents and the wider community. As a school leader, navigating this multifaceted system involves considering numerous variables to create an optimal functioning space within each subset.

The leader must continually address multifaceted concerns while adapting to the ever-evolving needs of the students. Adopting an aerial view of the system, the leader needs to grasp the history of the school from its inception, understanding all the elements preceding their leadership. From there, their own leadership journey can begin. The role of a principal should be to exemplify leadership that inspires others to connect with the leader

within themselves. Authentic heart leadership is the key to establishing this connection.

As a school leader, a principal must embody a space of biological, emotional, psychological and spiritual safety. In my book, *Return on Relationship*, I explore how leaders who create this space embody these qualities, empowering others to use their voices without fear of repercussions.

Creating a culture of vulnerability and relatability initiates this chain reaction. The leader must start by becoming more self-aware of their own leadership, with a specific focus on balanced processing (decision making), relational transparency, connection and recognition. Engaging in a deep dive into their leadership style enables principals to become the best version of themselves, which, in turn, positively impacts those around them. This form of leadership prompts reflection on how others



# Integrated STEM: Facilitating Innovation

By Anjali Joshi

**W**ith the release of new Math, Science and Technology and Computer Studies curricula in just the last two years, the Ontario Ministry of Education has made it clear that we are in an era driven by technology and innovation. It is crucial for schools to embrace integrated STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) programming. This is no easy feat for school leaders, especially in secondary schools where courses and departments may be siloed.

By connecting subject areas and creating an integrated STEM program, schools can foster students' critical thinking, problem-solving and collaboration skills.

School leaders play a pivotal role in facilitating integrated STEM programming and we can create school conditions

that allow educators to successfully and effectively take on an interdisciplinary approach to STEM. I suggest a few areas of focus that can help facilitate an innovative integration of STEM in your school:

## 1. Start with the Why: Emphasizing the Importance of Integrated STEM

When teachers and the larger school community understand the importance of STEM education, they are more likely to invest – time, funding and efforts – in building a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration. You can start by organizing information sessions, presentations and workshops to explain the rationale behind integrated STEM programming, emphasizing how integrating STEM promotes 21st-century skills and prepares students for future career opportunities.

# Prioritize Leading a Mentally Healthy School

By Judith Desjardins and Toni Lauzon

Principals and vice-principals need to consider many competing priorities as they welcome staff, students and their families into a new school year. Central to our planning as school administrators, is our desire to ensure every student finds a school community that is inclusive, supportive and fosters a sense of belonging, which encourages positive mental health and well-being. These attributes are vital for students to feel supported, valued and engaged in learning.

Creating mentally healthy schools takes intentional effort, led by principals and vice-principals who understand that it requires strong leadership commitment and a whole-school approach.

As an Ontario Certified Teacher, principals and vice-principals must support students' mental health, as per the OCT's *Professional Advisory: Supporting Students' Mental Health*, 2018. The advisory aims to help educators enhance their professional knowledge and practice with respect to understanding how best to support students' mental health. The responsibility exists in the profession's ethics and lives in its practices. School administrators are well-positioned to support school staff in the awareness and promotion of this advisory.

## What is mental health?

Mental health is a state of well-being that includes a range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (World Health Organization, 2022). It is part of our overall health. When we are experiencing positive mental health, we are typically enjoying life, and managing stress and adversities well. Positive mental health is something we

all want for ourselves, our children and others whom we love and care about.

Everyone has mental health. Although it is important to recognize that each culture has unique ways of knowing and being, and that not all cultures use the same terminology or approaches to mental health as mainstream Western understandings. For example, Indigenous understandings of mental health are often more holistic and strength based, and in many African cultures, traditional healing practices take a holistic approach that involves spiritual rituals, ceremonies, dancing, drumming and storytelling. This recognition can help to create a more inclusive and culturally responsive school environment that validates and honours the diversity of students' lived experiences.

## What is a mentally healthy school?

A mentally healthy school prioritizes commitments to reconciliation and equity, and the mental health and well-being of students and staff. In a mentally healthy school:

- A sense of belonging is fostered
- Proactive steps are taken to promote positive mental health
- Support is provided when mental health challenges arise



# Faith Leadership in Action

By Sandra Donaghue

*Father Toby Collins, CR, was ordained in 2007. He has served as vocation director and as the “spiritual animator” for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. Father Toby is presently Pastor, St. Mary’s Parish, in Kitchener. He works collaboratively with schools to help provide experiences that deepen students’ understanding of their faith and builds leadership in St. Mary’s community by encouraging student involvement. This article follows a conversation with Father Toby and is an account of how spiritual leadership can help students put their faith into action and contribute to something that matters and is life changing.*

As Catholic leaders, we are always searching for ways to ensure we have strong relationships with our parish, home and school. Father Toby Collins and his parish, St. Mary’s, in Kitchener, have created an exemplary model of just that.

As a large well-established parish with a long history of community involvement, Father Toby and his parish team felt that to live the Gospel, they not only had to do more, but they also could **do** more.

They began to address issues that were right in front of them, supporting those who were unhoused. With people experiencing homelessness and living ‘on the streets’ frequenting the area and struggling with food security, Father Toby’s team knew simply providing a meal was not going to be enough to be of real service. Instead, the parish opened their church hall and welcomed 120 homeless people per night with a safe space to stay and a hot meal, helping them get out of poor weather conditions and creating a community of care.

This is simply the beginning of this story, as Father Toby and the St. Mary’s parish team knew it was a temporary solution, which did not get to the actual core of the problem. They also realized they could not do this alone. And since they were located close to Waterloo Catholic District School Board, they knew they were sitting on



a gold mine of resources and social justice warriors – students, Catholic educators and their families. Together, they created Faith Experience Thursdays, Tiny Home Takeout and, eventually helped to create A Better Tent City. ABTC is a community-based approach to providing a home and a sense of belonging to residents who have experienced chronic homelessness in the Waterloo Region.

With the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations at the forefront of our core goals for students, Father Toby was able to get support from the surrounding school communities to involve them in the work. He continued to create awareness about St. Mary’s and A Better Tent City, those who were unhoused and/or experiencing food insecurity. And students began to engage in acts of service and faith. Students started to assist in the building of tiny houses and shared stories of their experiences with their own families, which served to deepen understanding and awareness and further fostered a community effort. This also encouraged bonding to occur among the students, the staff, the parish and the community members of the tent cities.

Father Toby believes that through this tactile experience of building and doing, students are Living the Gospel. He is convinced, “Doing leads to transformation. Instead of judging, we are doing.” These acts of service are truly acts of our faith, our faith in action.

Through the work of ABTC, Father Toby witnessed how community changes lives as they received support from local businesses, schools, parish and parishioners.

# This is Who We Are

By Ray Frendo



***“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appoint you as a prophet to the nations.”*** Jeremiah 1.5

Our Christian faith calls us to a divine purpose and direction. This is the call to a vocation; the call and destiny God has arranged for each of us even before we were born. The seed of faith was planted in us, then nurtured by our parents and other significant people in our lives. As we matured in our faith, we took ownership of nurturing our own faith and how we model that faith to others as today’s Chaplaincy/Christian Leaders.

This is who we are – Christian leaders, who model our role as the pastoral animators, the ones giving “soul” or “spirit” to our respective school communities, our respective communities of faith. This role is based on the leadership Jesus modelled and set forth for us. A

leadership based on the ministry of presence, showing the caring and compassionate face of the Church. It is a role of planning and carrying out initiatives according to the liturgical year, one that provides spiritual direction and pastoral counselling for both staff and students, a role that acts as the conscience of the school by reminding administrators and staff of the Catholic faith dimension of education, a ministry that maintains good relationship with the local parishes that serve the school and the parent school council. It is a role that is diligent in promoting a culture of vocations.

The role is one of neutrality. If Chaplaincy leaders are to act as critic and conscience of the school regarding the faith dimension, they must be free to challenge up and down the hierarchy of education. School administrators must be open to have their administrative style critiqued from a Christian perspective. Administrators need to be



# Reflect With Me

By RomaLee Bumbacco Sodaro

***“Leadership is not about titles, positions or flowchart. It is about one life influencing another.”*** John C. Maxwell

The role of a school administrator is a rewarding and challenging one that continues to evolve with ever-increasing demands and responsibilities. Of course, daily operational items are required for a school to run effectively so that procedures and expectations are consistent and transparent. However, at the heart of a school community is our connection to people – staff, students, parents/guardians and all stakeholders.

Taking the time to connect and establish trusted relationships is leadership. It is the connection piece that enables communication, where the leader is approachable

and supportive. If there is no connection to individuals, then the question remains – how is leadership represented?

Our school administrator role involves leading with compassion, having a listening ear, while not turning away from challenging conversations. It is working collaboratively in collectively identifying the interests and needs of a school community and working to achieve them. Problem solving and critical thinking are noted skills. An answer to an inquiry may not be known immediately, but informing individuals, regardless of their position, that an answer will be obtained, is competent leadership. It is humble and transparent. It does not take away from being competent in the role or our leadership capabilities; it models learning in leadership.



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