

Winter 2025-2026

Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian
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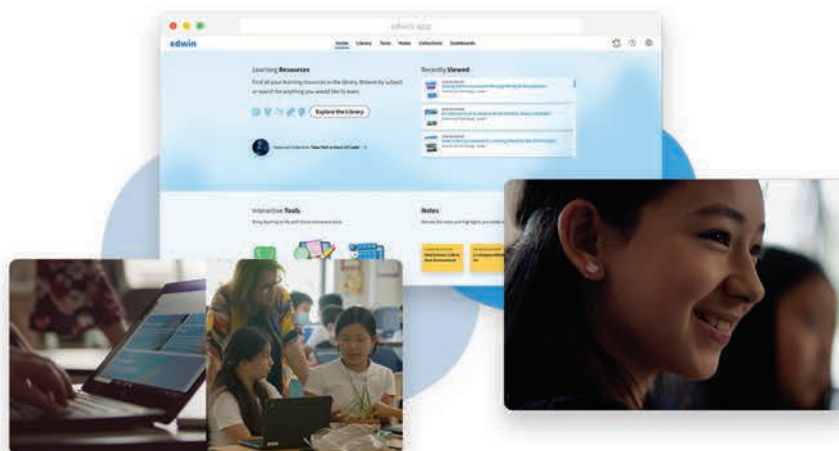


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On the cover:

This issue's cover features students from the FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) all girls Sparkanovas team working on their robot, an exemplar of ISTEM in action. Turn to page 16 to learn more. Photo courtesy of Joanne Higgins.



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Michael Helm
CASSA/ACGCS President

Motivating Engagement and Critical Awareness

I hope you are all doing well and ready for another exciting opportunity to read and learn from colleagues from across the country. Our Winter issue of *Leaders & Learners* is filled with many great articles and has something for everyone.

In November, I had the opportunity to take part in the Canadian Schools Mental Health Network meeting. The meeting focused on screen time for youth and was animated by MediaSmarts. The session was thought-provoking, and I am going to share some of the elements and thoughts that I took away from that session.

The ubiquity of digital technologies has transformed the developmental landscape for contemporary youth. Screens – whether in the form of smartphones, tablets, or computers – are now central to education, socialization, and leisure. The heavy use of technology has prompted much debate regarding the implications of screen time on cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being. While concerns about excessive use remain valid, an exclusively restrictive approach risks oversimplifying a complex phenomenon. Instead, what is being discussed is the need to have academic discourse around agency and autonomy in young people’s interactions with media.

We know all too well that social media platforms have been implicated in reinforcing social comparison and identity pressures. In many cases they become an addition with adverse effects which we are currently trying to counter. With that said, some digital environments also afford opportunities for creativity, knowledge acquisition, and civic engagement. The critical question is not whether youth should engage with screens, but how they can do so in ways that promote intentionality and self-regulation.

Agency and autonomy constitute foundational principles in developmental psychology and media literacy. When students exercise informed decision-making regarding their media consumption, they develop metacognitive strategies that extend beyond the digital sphere. The notion that we work on frameworks that encourage reflective engagement. For instance, interrogating the affective and cognitive dimensions of media use – through questions such as “What motivates your engagement with this platform?” – can foster critical awareness and mitigate passive consumption.

There is still a need for guidance by adults as they serve as models for balanced practices and establishing collaborative norms. Working with schools and families is critical to support the student.

The theoretical shift from control to empowerment aligns with contemporary pedagogical paradigms emphasizing learner-centered approaches. Thinking of our students as active agents rather than passive recipients reframes media engagement as a site of identity construction and participatory culture. Encouraging goal-setting, self-monitoring, and evaluative reflection operationalizes autonomy in practical terms, fostering resilience in an increasingly digitized society.

In conclusion, as we deal with cell phone restrictions and litigation against social media platforms, it is also important to be thinking about the impacts on our students’ mental well-being. Their future is with technology in hand.

Mike Helm
President, CASSA/ACGCS



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Golf as the Ultimate Teacher

This past fall as I went south and spent nine days golfing. The weather was pristine, the courses were beautiful, and I was in heaven. This has become an annual trip for me and a buddy of mine, even though my golf game has never been much to talk about. However, my continual love affair with the sport is unending. The serenity of a perfectly struck shot, the quiet of a morning on the course, and the camaraderie among players, those pieces I love. But there are the shanked shots, missed putts, and the endless reminder that perfection is fleeting, that is what I hate about the game. Jack Nicklaus captured this beautifully: *“Golf is not, and never has been, a fair game. But that’s why we love it.”*

Consider Bobby Jones, the legendary amateur who dominated the 1920s. Jones once remarked, *“Golf is the closest game to the game we call life. You get bad breaks from good shots; you get good breaks from bad shots – but you have to play the ball where it lies.”* His career was filled with moments of brilliance and heartbreak, none more famous than the 1925 U.S. Open when he called a penalty on himself for a ball that barely moved. No one else saw it. No official called it. But Jones did. He insisted on a penalty stroke against himself, a decision that ultimately cost him the championship. When praised for his honesty, Jones famously replied, *“You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank.”*

Golf has always been a game of contradictions. Walter Hagen, the flamboyant star of the 1920s, embodied its joyful side. He would arrive late to tournaments, sometimes partially dressed and looking like he had a wild night, yet dazzle crowds with his fearless play. His philosophy was simple: *“You’re only here for a short visit. Don’t hurry, don’t worry. And be sure to smell the flowers along the way.”* Hagen’s carefree resilience reminds us that life, like golf, is not about perfection but about savoring the journey. Hagen’s resilience – often recovering from disastrous starts to win major titles – reminds us that setbacks are not endings but opportunities for comebacks.

Then there was Ben Hogan, a story of struggle turned triumph that hard to comprehend. His career nearly ended in 1949 when a bus accident shattered his body. Doctors doubted he would walk again, let alone compete. Yet Hogan returned to win six more majors, his steely determination summed up in his mantra: *“The most important shot in golf is the next one.”* His story is a testament to resilience, showing us that setbacks can be the soil from which greatness grows.

My love-hate relationship with golf is not a flaw – it’s the essence of the game. From Jones’ honesty to Hagen’s joie de vivre and Hogan’s grit, the legends of earlier eras reveal that the struggle is the point. Golf teaches patience, humility, and resilience, offering lessons that extend far beyond the course. And perhaps that’s why, despite the heartbreak, we keep coming back, because in its unending struggle, golf teaches us how to live.

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a simple question: What does a competitive esports league look like in schools today? “We started by listening, to students, parents, and the broader community,” said Jesse Sadlowski, the Division’s Director of Technology Learning and Innovation. “Their message was clear. There was a desire for competitive esports in our schools.”

Students were passionate, parents were curious and the community was ready to support something new. This wasn’t just about video games. It was about engagement, opportunity, and innovation.

Initially, the idea of launching an esports league was met with hesitation at the division level. The stigma around gaming loomed large, with concerns about screen time and academic distraction. “But to lead effectively, we knew we had to challenge assumptions and focus on the potential benefits esports could provide to students,” said Sadlowski. “Our goal wasn’t to promote gaming for the sake of gaming, it was to create a structured, educational, and inclusive environment where students could thrive.”

To build a strong foundation, the division turned to experts within its technology department. Koji Nagahama, with his deep knowledge and passion for gaming, became a cornerstone of the initiative. The division also partnered with innovative educators like John Thai, who not only embraced the vision but has since led his school and teams to national success, which has inspired students and staff alike.

The division began by aligning esports with its educational values, emphasizing teamwork, strategic thinking, digital citizenship, and leadership. An intentional focus connected esports to STEM learning, career pathways, and social-emotional development. With clear goals and strong messaging, the support of school leaders, teachers, and families was earned. With the assistance of dedicated partners, a dedicated esports arena was constructed at a local high school.

A key component of the division’s approach was using esports as a catalyst for promoting mental health, diversity, and inclusion, especially among students who are sometimes harder to reach. “Esports is for everyone,” said Sadlowski. “Our coaches hold players to high standards of ethical in-game behaviour, emphasizing respect, inclusion, and sportsmanship. We also focused on building resilience



Duncan Jacobs of the Lethbridge Collegiate Institute (LCI) Valorant team getting ready for the LCI vs LCI Alberta Esports Championship 2024 grand final.

and perseverance, inviting experienced athletes to share their journeys and lead exercises in self-growth and visionary focus.” These efforts empowered students with skills that extend far beyond the gaming arena.

Within a year, the program was not only established, but it was thriving. “In our second year, over 300 students from across Western Canada joined us for a provincial tournament, forming teams, training together, and competing,” said Sadlowski. “The results were astonishing.”

Moving forward, the high school team from Lethbridge Collegiate Institute (LCI), the Samurai, became international champions, defeating the previously undefeated Novi High School Wildcats in the PlayVS Cup VALORANT Grand Finals. Their victory earned nearly \$10,000 Canadian in scholarships for the students.

“It feels great to put Canadian talent on the map,” said LCI esports coordinator John Thai. “It honestly feels amazing that we are putting ourselves in the limelight and that we have the talent to back it up.”

Today, the Lethbridge esports program is considered one of the most advanced in North America, supported by a volunteer team of 20 teachers, division staff, and student volunteers. “Our success has helped fuel a broader movement,” said Sadlowski. “From day one, we collaborated with other districts and stakeholders, leading to the launch of the Alberta Scholastic Esports League (ASEL), a province-wide league that connects students across Alberta in competitive, educational esports.”

ASEL provides structure, resources, and a shared vision for what scholastic esports can be.

Dual-credit opportunities with post-secondary institutions like Bow Valley College have been created, along with partnerships with tech companies like Lenovo and local businesses such as London Drugs. These collaborations have opened doors to scholarships, mentorships, and career exploration, making esports a bridge between school and the future.

Of course, challenges remain. “We continue to address misconceptions, ensure equity of access, and balance screen time with wellness,” said Sadlowski. “But the momentum is undeniable. Esports is not a distraction, it’s a dynamic, student-centred tool for learning and growth.”

As the division looks ahead, the focus is on sustainability and expansion. “We’re developing curriculum connections, training educators, and exploring new game titles that align with our values,” said Sadlowski. “We’re also working to ensure that every student, regardless of background, has the opportunity to participate.”

The journey into esports has been one of listening, learning, and leading. “It’s a testament to what happens when we trust our students, respond to their interests, and reimagine what education can be,” said Sadlowski. “Esports is here to stay, and it’s changing the lives of students.” ○

Garrett Simmons is the Communications Officer for Lethbridge School Division.

Streamlined School Improvement:

Planning for Student Success Using a SAP Template and Monitoring Tool

By Jennifer Ritsma and Kelly Roberts, Waterloo Catholic District School Board

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) has developed a School Student Achievement Plan (SAP) template that is efficient and intuitive: it is giving schools the flexibility to customize it based on unique priorities, planning strategies, and monitoring needs. The planning template balances simplicity with flexibility, empowering school teams to strategically plan with clarity and confidence and integrates seamlessly with existing data systems, which allows schools to monitor school improvement efforts.

A provincial shift

In 2023, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced the SAP, replacing the Board Improvement Equity Plan (BIEP) as part of a province-wide strategy to strengthen educational outcomes and increase transparency. This shift reflects legislative changes under the *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023*.

From an educational perspective, the shift from BIEP to SAP marks a significant evolution in Ontario's approach to school board accountability and student success. Historically, BIEPs allowed boards to set their own improvement goals and metrics, often resulting in varied applications across the province.



Introducing the Student Achievement Plan

The SAP marks a strategic shift toward a more standardized and data-driven framework for school accountability. Under this new model, all boards align their improvement planning with three core provincial priorities:

1. Core academic skills,
2. Preparation for future success, and
3. Student engagement and well-being.

These priorities are supported by Ministry-defined indicators, on which boards must report annually. At Waterloo Catholic District School board, we have added an additional priority – **Faith in Action** – to reflect our commitment to nurturing students' spiritual development and faith-focused learning objectives.

The case for school-level planning

The SAP brought greater consistency and accountability across boards, it also introduced a gap in school-level data collection, needs assessment, and strategic planning. Previously, BIEPs were complemented by School Improvement Equity Plans (SIEPs), which empowered individual schools to identify and respond to their unique needs. With the SAP now serving as the central planning tool – and no mandated SIEPs – there is concern that school-level strategic planning may be diminished.

Each school operates within a distinct context shaped by student demographics, community needs, and historical performance data. Without a school-level reporting requirement, these nuances risk

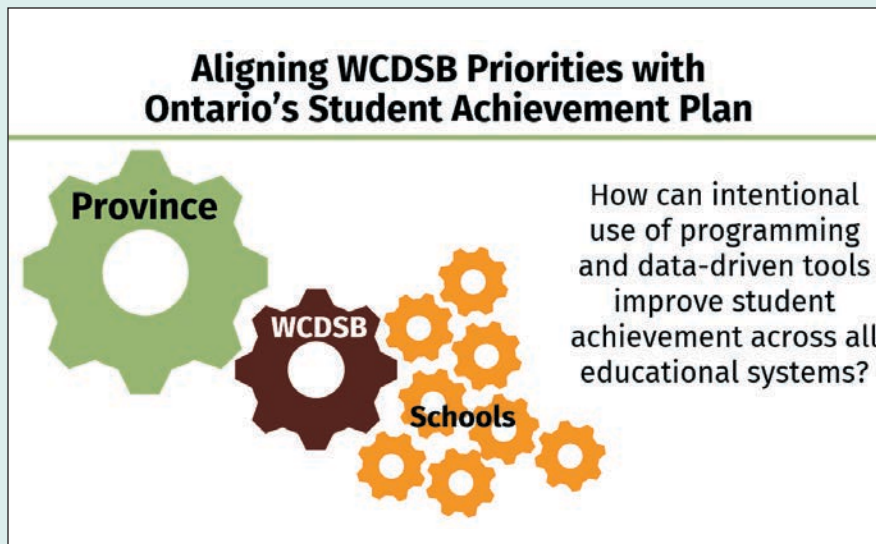
being overlooked. SIEPs traditionally provided a vital mechanism for schools to set targeted goals, monitor progress, and engage staff in the improvement process.

To maintain this focus, every school should have its own planning and monitoring tool – the school SAP – grounded in school-specific data. Such tools enable schools to develop and maintain a clear roadmap for improvement while aligning with the SAP priorities.

2023-24: Laying the groundwork

Our first iteration of the WCDSB School-level SAP in 2023-24 was, by many accounts, a challenging endeavour. Unlike previous years where SIEPs were more familiar and streamlined, the new school SAP required school teams to navigate in a new way. Staff and administrators had to locate and extract relevant data from board-level systems supported by a highly skilled but lean Research Team.

This process was time-consuming and, at times, frustrating, especially for teams less accustomed to data analysis or digital navigation. Yet, these challenges led to meaningful professional growth. Digging into student data, identifying patterns, and connecting insights to targeted strategies



Graphics courtesy of Jennifer Ritsma and Kelly Roberts.

and resources helped build capacity across school teams.

Educators became more confident at locating and interpreting data, recognizing student needs, and aligning interventions with evidence-based practices. This was not just a compliance exercise – it was a learning opportunity that deepened their understanding of student achievement.

Although cumbersome in its first iteration, the school SAP laid the groundwork

for a more data-informed culture of improvement. It reinforced that school-level planning and monitoring are not add-ons to board priorities, but essential lenses towards student success.

2024-25: Building the Template and dashboard

Building on the progress of 2023-24, the 2024-25 academic year marked a new phase of strategic development

Student Achievement Plan		
<p>Purpose:</p> <p>Leveling up achievement outcomes and experiences for every student.</p> <p>For each priority and indicator, school boards will use board-level data on their student populations to further refine actions.</p>	<p>PRIORITY: Achievement of Learning Outcomes in Core Academic Skills</p> <p>Goal: Improve students' literacy learning and achievement. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of students who meet or exceed the provincial standard on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 3 EQAO Reading Grade 3 EQAO Writing Grade 6 EQAO Reading Grade 6 EQAO Writing % of fully participating, first-time eligible students who are successful on the OSSLT/TPCL 	<p>Goal: Improve students' math learning and achievement. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of students who meet or exceed the provincial standard on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grade 3 EQAO Math Grade 6 EQAO Math Grade 9 EQAO Math
	<p>PRIORITY: Preparation of Students for Future Success</p> <p>Goal: Improve students' graduation rates and preparedness for future success. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of students who earn 16 or more credits by the end of Grade 10 % of students participating in at least one job skills program (Specialist High Skills Major, Dual Credits or Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program) 	<p>6. % of students graduating with an OSSD within five years of starting Grade 9</p> <p>7. % of students enrolled in at least one Grade 12 math or Grade 11 or 12 science courses</p> <p>8. % of students who believe their learning has prepared them for the next step in their learning experience (i.e., next grade, post secondary, etc)</p>
	<p>PRIORITY: Student Engagement & Well-being</p> <p>Goal: Improve students' participation in class time and learning. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of students of students in Grades 1-8 whose individual attendance rate is equal to or greater than 90 percent % of students in Grades 4-12 who were suspended at least once 	<p>Goal: Improve student well-being. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of Grade 6, 9 and 10 students who report being aware of mental health supports and services in order to seek supports for mental health
	<p>PRIORITY: Faith in Action</p> <p>Goal: Improve students' faith experiences in their learning. Indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> % of Catholic Elementary Students participating in Sacraments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First Communion Confirmation 	<p>13. % of students who experience the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations (Transferable Skills) within their learning environment</p> <p>14. % of Secondary students who met or exceeded the provincial standard on their religion final report card</p>

The outline of the Student Achievement Plan.

with the establishment of the School SAP Committee. This cross-functional group – comprised of administrators, the Research Team, and myself – was tasked with designing and implementing a dynamic School SAP template and dashboard to streamline data access and strengthen school-level planning.

The vision was clear: a planning and monitoring template where student data would be automatically uploaded, minimizing manual entry and maximizing efficiency. The committee developed a standardized template anchored in two core areas of priority: **Provincial Priority** and **Data Analysis and Interpretation**. These were supported by four interrelated planning components: data, goal, action, and monitoring. Together, these elements formed the structural backbone of the dashboard.

To ensure usability, the template included dropdown menus for actions and monitoring strategies, offering curated options for data sources, implementation stages, and opportunities within the system, while still allowing customization. The Research Team populated the

initial data column, giving schools timely and relevant information. From there, School Improvement Teams collaborated to set goals, identify targeted actions, and outline monitoring strategies to assess progress.

Accompanying the template, the Research Team also co-created a dynamic Power BI dashboard with the committee. This tool allows Board, school, and student-level SAP indicator data to be explored using interactive slicers, enabling school teams to examine how different groups of students are performing and to direct precise programming decisions.

This evolution represents a significant step toward embedding data-informed decision-making into school improvement routines. By combining centralized data access with localized autonomy, the dashboard empowers schools to act with precision, accountability, and purpose.

2025-26: Looking ahead

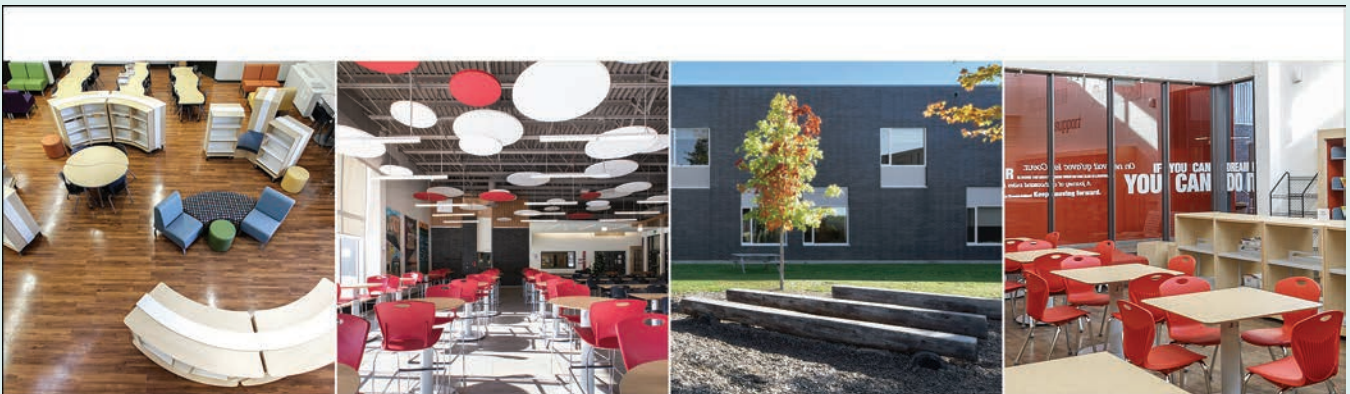
As we transition into the 2025-26 school year, the focus will shift from development to deepened implementation and refinement. With the dashboard

now in active use, our priority is to help schools leverage it as a living tool – one that informs decisions, fosters inquiry, and drives measurable improvement.

Continued engagement with administrators and School Improvement Teams will ensure the SAP template and dashboard remain responsive to evolving needs. Ongoing collaboration with the Research Team will strengthen data integrity and usability.

The work ahead is not simply about maintaining a system; it is about cultivating a culture where data-informed planning becomes innate and schools act with clarity, confidence, and impact. ○

Jennifer Ritsma, BA, M.Ed., Ed.D., is the Superintendent of Learning for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, and Kelly Roberts, B.Sc., M.Sc., is Research Coordinator for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. They wish to acknowledge the Research Team behind this article: Ryan Lewis, Jenish Mangukiya, and Mishell Naranjo; and the SAP Committee: Alicia Cunningham, Patrick Eby, Gilda Johnstone, Christopher Luciani, and Ben McKinnon.



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Leading the Way in STEM Educational Excellence: STEM Innovation Academy

By Joanne Higgins, Lisa Davis, and Denzil Mackrory,
STEM Innovation Academy

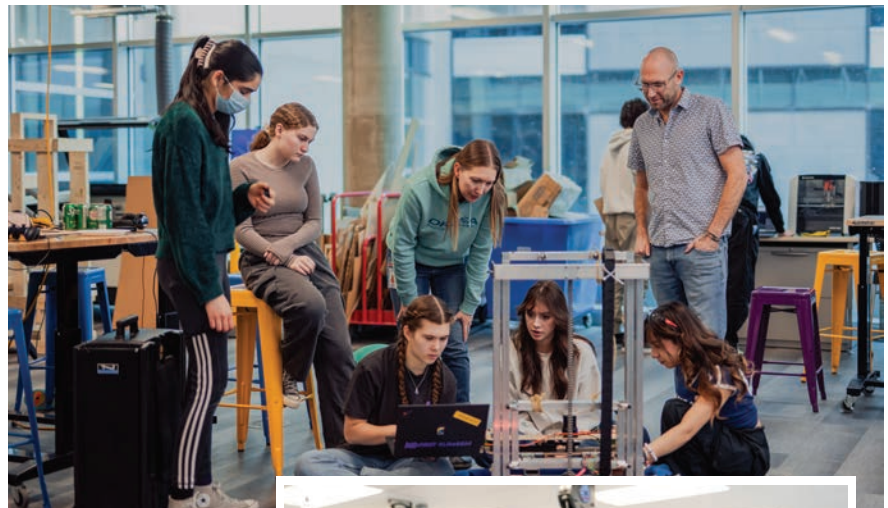
Established in 2021, STEM Innovation Academy (IA) is a public charter school in Calgary, Alberta, redefining secondary education through a dynamic STEM focused program for Grades 7-12. Driven by a visionary leadership team, STEM IA launched three schools in just three years, each within a 90-day window, demonstrating agility and commitment to educational excellence. From its initial cohort of 415 students, we have grown to serve over 1,670 students, offering a rigorous, future-ready curriculum.

Recognized by *The National Post* in March 2025 as a national education model, STEM IA is setting a new standard with immersive, real-world learning experiences that prepare students to thrive in a rapidly evolving, innovation-driven world.

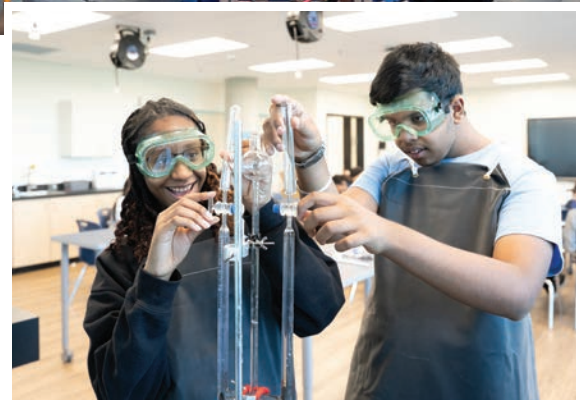
The constant search for exceptional programming in other provinces and countries is built into our DNA. This led us to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the number one ranked university in the world renowned for their science and technology innovation. Our MOU allows us to offer their unique high school courses to our students, we are the only school in Canada to have such an arrangement.

Using current research on STEM integration, we developed a framework for teachers to plan and develop curricular content that delivers hands-on, future-ready lessons. The framework consists of seven key criteria that our teachers assess their practice against using our integrated STEM (iSTEM) self-assessment tool.

At the heart of this framework lies a commitment to real-world applications.



Above: The Sparkanovas all girls FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) team working on their robot, an exemplar of integrated STEM in action. Photos courtesy of Joanne Higgins and STEM Innovation Academy.



Right: Science in action! Students splitting water with the Hofmann apparatus.

Rather than treating STEM subjects as abstract academic exercises, we ground learning in tangible, pressing issues. Consider the growing threat of forest fires, a challenge that demands innovative technological solutions. In our Mechatronics class, students don't simply study robotics in theory; they design and build autonomous wildfire detection vehicles that are subsequently deployed and tested in authentic field conditions in our Mechatronics Lab. This approach transforms students from passive recipients of knowledge into active problem-solvers, demonstrating that their learning has

immediate relevance and impact beyond the classroom walls.

The engineering design process serves as the pedagogical backbone of this approach. Our framework positions problem-solving as central to the learning experience. In all our STEM courses, students use the design process alongside the scientific process to create solutions. We also explicitly teach systems thinking to help students fully understand problems before creating solutions. Crucially, all student work is documented through portfolios that showcase their learning and achievements, a reflective practice that helps students understand their

own growth and development as engineers and scientists.

Contextualized learning represents another essential pillar of this framework. We recognize that true innovation rarely occurs in isolation from cultural, historical, and global contexts. We have committed time and resources to mapping examples of local and global innovations throughout the curriculum making learning relevant while broadening their perspective of global issues.

Perhaps most significantly, this framework challenges the conventional approach of teaching STEM disciplines in isolation.

Rather than separate courses in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, we integrate these domains organically in the STEM option courses. Students learn to identify which mathematical concepts and scientific principles they need as they navigate the design process, encountering STEM content not as predetermined curriculum but as necessary tools for solving meaningful problems. This integrated approach more accurately reflects how STEM professionals actually work, where disciplinary boundaries blur in service of innovation and problem-solving.

Looking toward students' futures, the framework explicitly develops future ready skills that transcend specific technical knowledge. As students engage in design challenges and scientific inquiry, they simultaneously cultivate leadership, adaptability, resiliency, communication, and collaboration skills. These competencies, increasingly recognized as essential for both post-secondary success and career readiness, are not taught as separate lessons but emerge naturally from authentic project work.

Students have multiple opportunities to develop and engage in authentic STEM practices. One way we do this is by creating the opportunity for students to conduct an independent capstone project in either engineering design or scientific research. Here students can deep dive into their passion while being mentored by a teacher and/or an industry or post-secondary expert.

Furthermore, we aim to connect learning to future careers, creating optimism and hope for students. We regularly host a Future Ready Lecture series where we invite experts from industry and post-secondary institutions to share experiences and inspire our students, showing them the doorways to their future careers.

Our STEM framework represents a fundamental reimagining of STEM education; one that prepares students not merely to understand the world as it is, but to actively shape the world as it could be. We have taken an active role in bridging the gap between high school and industry and post-secondary institutions. To fully understand the industries we are preparing students for, we created a Technology Advisory Committee consisting of industry and post-secondary experts. The committee consists of multiple sub-committees in the following fields: medical innovation, energy innovation, robotics, business, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. Feedback from the committee guides curriculum development.

For example, we have used industry experts to advise on our artificial intelligence course. We are currently working with the University of Calgary to develop a quantum computing course for Alberta. We also have an energy enrichment lead that is creating science enrichment learning experiences to enhance our science curriculum. We actively pursue relationships with post-secondary institutions and industry to provide us the direction to ensure our students are future ready.

At STEM Innovation Academy, we believe every student can succeed in STEM and should have the opportunity to engage with cutting edge science and technology. Our inclusive admissions model, serving a diverse student population with learning needs comparable to those in major metro districts, proves that innovation and excellence can coexist. Our students' exceptional performance on the 2024 Provincial Achievement Exams, particularly in math and science, places STEM IA at the forefront of Alberta's academic outcomes among schools that do not select their students. These results reflect the strength of our school-based leadership teams and their collaborative approach to ensuring our culture of excellence and to driving student success. ○

Joanne Higgins is the Superintendent for STEM Innovation Academy, Lisa Davis is the Founder of the STEM Innovation Academy (Calgary) and the STEM Collegiate (Edmonton), and Denzil Mackrory is the STEM Director for STEM Innovation Academy.



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It Takes a Village: Embedding Indigenous Education into Schools



*Umbay Nagamon with BU Cares.
Photos courtesy of Carole Shankaruk.*

“Let us find a way to belong to this time and place together. Our future, and the well-being of all our children, rests with the kind of relationships we build today.”

– Chief Joseph

By Carole Shankaruk and Suzanne Cottyn, Mountain View School Division



Umbay Nagamon session with Mackenzie Middle School staff in Dauphin, Manitoba.

Over the past decade, Mountain View School Division (MVSD) has been on a journey of learning to support our educators in growing into their role of embedding Indigenous Education within our school communities. In 2018, under the direction of our Indigenous Education Steering Committee, MVSD developed an Indigenous Education Framework, in partnership with local Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

The Framework supports the teaching of Indigenous perspectives and outcomes through the provincial curricula in appropriate and culturally relevant ways for all students. MVSD recognizes that everyone can benefit from Indigenous Education as it can enrich the experiences of all learners represented within the Medicine Wheel, while also supporting academic success for Indigenous learners. The Medicine Wheel philosophy of holism applies here also in terms of the principle, “it takes a village to raise a child.”

One of the recommendations within our framework is to provide professional development opportunities that enable

our staff to increase their knowledge and awareness of Indigenous cultures, histories, traditions, and perspectives and enhance their capacity to support all learners more effectively.

When Canadians learn the true history of Canada and Indigenous peoples, the reaction always seems to be the same: “What can I do? Where do I fit in this?” Umbay Nagamon (Come Sing) was born under those intentions: “What role does each of us play moving forward with Truth and Reconciliation? Where am I within reconciliation? What part do I have to support my children, my family, my community?”

Umbay Nagamon is a multi-media workshop that supports this partnership within our communities. Our goal is to create a safe, welcoming space where we can share and discuss our history as Canadians and engage in conversations of the many past and current policies that affect us all today. Within our workshop, we assist the participants to examine their role within reconciliation. Through a five-year Teacher Idea Fund grant, MVSD will be providing this workshop across the division's seven communities and 16 schools.

To begin the workshop, participants are invited to sit in circle and are welcomed in with an opening drum song. This assists participants to feel the drum, the heartbeat of Mother Earth, the first heartbeat that all human beings experience within utero. We contemplate our lives within the complete lifecycle: child, youth, adult, and Elder. We examine our history collectively and are honoured to have an Elder share their personal experience within the residential school policy. Embracing drumming, singing, and music allows our participants to move their emotions through the music.

Within the circle, we are witnessing participants' stories, and it is with great honour that we all learn and share together. Each of us within our communities are impacted by intergenerational trauma and these stories are shared and discussed. We have witnessed healing in action within our circles, and it is very profound and moving.

Participants then move out of circle to gather in a lunch-and-learn setting, where time is provided to discuss anti-racism education, systemic racism, and the importance of having these conversations together. As community

members, we still struggle with talking about racism and its negative impacts in our homes, schools, systems, and communities. Our workshop aims at helping us to sit in the messiness, the uncomfortableness, and work through it.

We also ask our participants to examine the Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action and try to make a personal connection with them. Where do they fit in this; what is their personal commitment to reconciliation moving forward? They are asked to document their commitment on a Star Blanket diamond. Our goal will be to create beautiful Star Blankets to share within the Parkland within the next five years as we continue to do this work.

We are doing this work within all our schools, but we also feel it is important that we mirror the work within the communities. Many Canadians never received the true history of Indigenous peoples within the public education system – we believe it is important that we educate community members alongside their children within our communities.

Within MVSD, as in many other school divisions, we were heartbroken to hear the findings of our 250 children discovered on the former Kamloops residential school on Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation in Kamloops, British Columbia. The Truth that was unfolding in terms of our Canadian history within the residential school policy catapulted our organization to develop ways to assist all of our schools and communities with reconciliation, enabling community members, students, and staff to understand the deep impacts of intergenerational trauma that our Indigenous families – and ultimately each and every one of us – were facing. Many of us may

think, "This does not affect me; this does not have anything to do with me." However, the reality is that Canada's true history affects all Canadians across this country. Canada was founded on a partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Moving forward within Canada today, our partnership is critical and the concepts of equity, inclusion, diversity, kindness, and basic respect between all peoples is imperative.

MVSD is embracing reconciliation as we are very aware of the high priority for this work to be done. It is imperative for every child, every family, every school to continue to work together in partnership in a healthy way. We are doing the work on the grassroots level to assist with moving reconciliation and the 94 Calls to Action forward within the geographical areas of the Parkland region. We also partnered with Brandon University Cares, a rural research group who assisted us with research and the publishing of our work to help other school divisions and all Canadians on reconciliation and their personal commitment. Umbay Nagamon, an invitation to action, please join us. ○

Carole Shankaruk is the Indigenous Education Coordinator for Mountain View School Division. She currently sits as a Board Director for Kids Help Phone. Carole is of Métis descent and the great-great-great-great granddaughter of the Métis leader Cuthbert Grant. Suzanne Cottyn is the Superintendent for Mountain View School Division. Suzanne is a white settler who was born on Treaty 1 Territory and who was raised and currently resides on Treaty 2 Territory and the homeland of the Red River Métis Nation.



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Engaging and Empowering Gifted Learners:

30 Years of Innovation at Westmount Charter School

By Dr. Adriana Klassen,
Westmount Charter School

Since opening its doors in 1996, Westmount Charter School (WCS) has been a leader in gifted education, becoming Alberta's first public charter school dedicated to gifted learners. Three decades later, we remain Alberta's only K-12 congregated public charter school for gifted students, an inclusive community where every learner is encouraged to reach their highest potential.

As a publicly funded charter school, WCS receives government funding and does not charge tuition, ensuring accessibility for all families. Like other Alberta charter schools, we are accountable to the provincial education authorities, ensuring equitable access, strong student outcomes, and alignment with Alberta's public education values.

WCS welcomes approximately 1,300 students, representing a richly diverse community across race, culture, gender, language, ability, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our inclusive environment celebrates all gifted learners, including those with exceptionalities and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, fostering a culture where differences are valued, and every learner truly belongs.

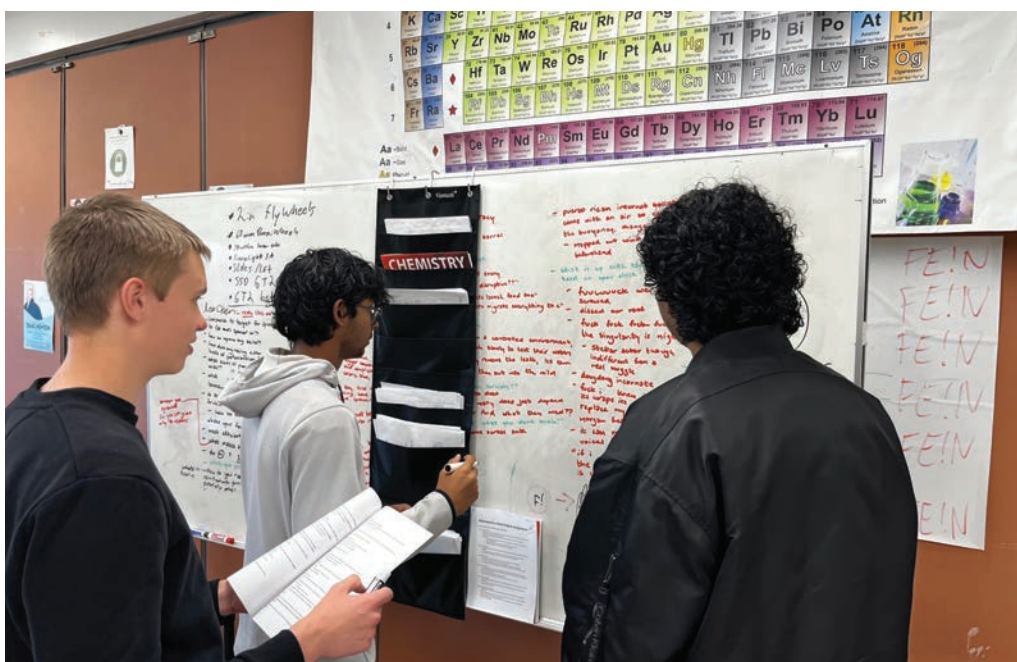
As we celebrate our 30th anniversary in 2026, our vision remains strong: to foster gifted education from the inside out.

Gifted education: Learning from the inside out

Giftedness reveals itself in many ways: intellectual curiosity, creativity, empathy, divergent thinking, passion-driven inquiry,



Right and below: Students participating in their student-directed study. Photos courtesy of Dr. Adriana Klassen.





Students participating in the learn, explore, acquire, discover (LEAD) program.

and more. Many gifted learners experience asynchronous development, where cognitive abilities may advance faster than emotional or physical growth. Supporting this complexity is at the heart of WCS' mission.

We begin by getting to know each learner: their strengths, challenges, interests, social-emotional needs, identity, and dreams. This "inside-out" approach informs every instructional decision, ensuring learning is both challenging and supportive. Our educators are empathetic, passionate, and creative, creating environments where gifted learners feel seen, supported, understood, and empowered to become lifelong learners.

Two examples of programs that put this philosophy into action include:

1. Learn, explore, acquire, discover (LEAD) at our elementary campus (Grades K-4 students), and
2. Student-directed study (SDS) at our mid-high campus (Grades 5-12 students).

Innovation in action: LEAD & SDS

LEAD and SDS illustrate how Alberta charter schools serve as hubs of innovation within the public education system. These programs:

- Prioritize student agency, autonomy, and ownership of learning,
- Foster executive functioning, curiosity, and self-advocacy,
- Model instructional flexibility and multi-age collaboration, and
- Demonstrate how gifted education can be socially and emotionally attuned and developmentally responsive.

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and share successful strategies across the public system. LEAD and SDS embody this mission, demonstrating that classrooms can be spaces where student choice, engagement, and well-being flourish alongside academic excellence.

Learn, explore, acquire, discover (LEAD)

Launched in 2017, LEAD turns Friday afternoons for students in Kindergarten to Grade 4 into enriched, curiosity-driven learning experiences. Through curriculum compacting, core subjects are condensed by 60 to 65 per cent, freeing Friday afternoons for meaningful exploration beyond the standard program.

Students participate in three LEAD courses per year, each lasting seven to nine weeks, with multi-age groupings (Grades 1-2 and Grades 3-4) that foster mentorship, leadership, and collaboration. Kindergarten students receive developmentally appropriate introductory experiences that increasingly emphasize outdoor and experiential learning.

Courses are inspired by teachers' passion and expertise and include robotics, musical theatre, global arts, fibre arts, detective work, coding, and STEAM challenges. The program blends choice, creativity, and challenge, encouraging students to think critically, take risks, and explore new interests.

"At Westmount Charter Elementary, our LEAD program reflects our commitment to enriching student learning beyond the curriculum. Through cross-grade regrouping, students in grades one to four choose three LEAD options each year, immersing themselves in passion-driven classes that ignite curiosity, foster exploration, and turn every Friday afternoon into an opportunity for meaningful discovery!" said Mrs. Karly Bagnall, Principal, Elementary Campus.

Whether students are coding, storytelling, engineering, or performing, LEAD exemplifies how student choice and teacher passion drive authentic, engaging learning.

Student-directed study (SDS)

SDS, introduced at the mid-high campus in 2021, was born from a guiding question posed by staff: "What kind of humans do we want to graduate?"

This inquiry sparked a shift in how learning time is used, centring student

agency, wellness, and purpose as core elements of gifted education. SDS empowers students in Grades 5-12 to develop autonomy, reflection, and self-management skills essential for well-being, post-secondary success, and lifelong learning. Grounded in Alberta Education competencies and Individual Program Plan, SDS provides structured time and guidance for students to make intentional decisions about their learning and well-being.

The program helps students balance academic responsibilities, personal growth, and self-care while building accountability and independence. Students may choose to:

- Access academic support in core subjects,
- Participate in wellness activities, such as yoga or a walking club,
- Work independently to deepen or extend learning,
- Collaborate on projects,
- Engage in interest-based activities, like knitting or trivia, or
- Receive university and post-secondary planning support.

Grades 9-12 participate in SDS twice weekly, while Grades 5-8 engage in developmentally responsive sessions integrated throughout their schedule. In each session, students practice intentional decision-making, time management, and self-regulation, preparing them for graduation and beyond.

A Grade 11 student shared, "I like it. It gives me the flexibility to pick classes, as students can decide which is most important based on their current work status. I can choose to get caught up on work or seek extra help from a teacher, or I can take a break and do something more active as a mental break."

SDS reflects Alberta's charter-school mandate for innovation in public education.

By blending structure and choice and by centring student voice, SDS nurtures resilient, balanced, and self-directed learners, fully aligned with WCS' mission to foster potential, creativity, and ethical citizenship.

Looking ahead: 30 years of innovation

As we approach our 30th anniversary in 2026, WCS remains committed to fostering gifted education from the inside out. Our mission continues to provide meaningful, student-centred learning experiences that support personal growth, social-emotional well-being, and academic excellence.

Every day, in classrooms, music rooms, gyms, and learning commons, students learn not only what to think, but how to think, create, collaborate, and lead. For three decades, WCS has contributed to Alberta's education system as a research-informed, student-centred, and innovative community.

Our LEAD and SDS programs exemplify how charter schools can design forward-thinking, student-driven models and share practices that benefit the wider public system. Through these experiences, students develop agency, resilience, curiosity, and a strong sense of purpose, skills essential for success beyond school.

For 30 years, WCS has celebrated the extraordinary potential of gifted learners. Today, that purpose is more important than ever. In a world that needs thinkers, dreamers, makers, and leaders, WCS students are already learning with curiosity, creativity, and courage, ready to make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world. ○

Dr. Adriana Klassen is the Superintendent of Westmount Charter School



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Leading for Flourishing: Transformative Leadership in Complex Educational Ecosystems

By Kevin Kaardal,
CASSA Past President

System leaders play a pivotal role in shaping environments where educators and learners can thrive holistically. In today's rapidly changing world, these leaders confront societal polarization, labour strife – as seen across Canada this year – increasing financial constraints, critical incidents, and climate emergencies. They do so with professionalism and compassion, welcoming new Canadians and refugees, and enriching learning communities through intercultural sharing and the celebration of diversity.

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential impact on learning and society presents new challenges for educational leaders. As educational researcher Michael Fullan notes, “The role of the leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of the leader is to create a culture in which great ideas can happen.”¹ Across Canada, leaders are recognizing that school districts are complex human ecosystems – interdependent and connected. The challenge is to provide meaning and effective organization within this complexity.

Core purpose and holistic education

The most effective system leaders possess a clear core purpose. In December 2023, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began developing a conceptual framework to help countries reimagine their education systems. This framework centres on holistic education – encompassing a diverse curriculum and well-being, with an emphasis on inclusivity and fair access. Educational goals, according to the OECD, should go beyond preparing students for employment; they should equip students to find purpose in life through learning. A flourishing life is “reason-based, moral,

meaningful, contemplative, and capable of awe.”² While not all educational leaders may share this core purpose, it exemplifies progressive thinking about the aims of public education.

Building effective professional learning communities

Achieving such a complex purpose requires the development of effective professional learning communities. System leaders must select teams committed to shared goals – a critical step in moving large systems forward. Teams inspire, create opportunities, and set up collaborative processes that generate energy, purpose, and change. As leaders, we are privileged to work with dedicated professionals who seek to understand the nature of learning and foster conditions where it can bloom in inclusive environments.

System leaders support schools that value the unique identities and contributions of each learner. They build culturally relevant environments that foster belonging, well-being, inclusivity, safety, and community. Engaging families and communities as partners is essential for creating meaningful, relational learning experiences.

Intentional design and learner agency

Leaders focus on the intentional design of learning, grounded in research and the belief that every learner is capable, competent, and curious. Effective leaders support learner agency, co-creating experiences based on students' questions, passions, and interests. Learning experiences are designed using powerful principles such as the First Peoples Principles of Learning, OECD Principles of Learning, which are both aimed at fostering holistic development.

Teams as the primary unit of influence

Leaders should treat teams as the primary unit of work and influence, focusing on four practical levers: weekly, focused check-ins; deploying each person's strengths; cascading meaning rather than rigid goals; and building

trust so teammates feel supported. As author Marcus Buckingham writes, “The team is the sun, the moon, and the stars of your experience at work.”³

Frequent, short check-ins are more effective than infrequent reviews for maintaining engagement. Focusing on strengths over uniformity allows team members to reach shared goals using their unique abilities. Buckingham's research underscores that “if you want better performance and lower turnover, focus resources and leadership development at the team level rather than trying to fix culture from the top down.”³

Expanding learning communities

Internal teams can form broader learning communities that extend beyond traditional school walls, supporting collective efficacy, intentional transitions for students, deeper learning, and collaborative leadership. Families of schools immersed in the OECD Principles of Learning and focused on the pedagogical core, student agency, and voice can create larger teams and explore innovative structures, such as multi-grade learning communities.

Learning occurs not only within schools but also across schools, as senior students support younger learners and gifted students access deeper learning or resources at senior or post-secondary institutions. Virtual communities provide flexible environments where relationships and learning can flourish anytime, anywhere. Students may experience a blend of in-person and virtual learning tailored to their needs.

System alignment and transformational leadership

Understanding the school district as a complex human ecosystem has deepened the approach to driving change in social systems. This has led to alignment and coherence in developing leadership competencies focused on enhancing the pedagogical core through inquiry, curiosity, innovation, and effective teams.

To support ongoing leadership development, superintendents or directors need to be

intentional about professional learning for their teams. It needs to be current and transformational. In one example from the Central Okanagan School District, senior staff invited district and school leaders to participate in the Transformative Educational Leadership Program (TELP) at the University of British Columbia. TELP offers opportunities for leaders to engage with current research and networks of experts globally. The district annually supported five to six participants. After eight years, the collective leadership of TELP participants (over 30) significantly impacted the collective efficacy of their colleagues as we engaged in ongoing professional learning.

Leadership team meetings, led by TELP alumni, included monthly sessions focused on transformative leadership competencies. The results have been significant as the district has seen a considerable rise in graduation rates (96 per cent for all students and 86 per cent for Indigenous learners for the past three years).

Strategic directions for transformative leadership

Our district's revised strategic plan emphasizes the critical role of developing transformative

leadership competencies at all levels. We believe that in an ever-changing world, transformative leadership is a catalyst for continuous improvement and growth, positively impacting the system, school communities, and each learner. Resources are focused on developing transformative leaders with these intentions:

- Leaders' agency as learners: Connecting leaders to reflective professional learning that responds to community needs.
- Inquiry-driven professional learning: Supporting continuous growth for all leaders and learners.
- Values and beliefs: Understanding how these impact leadership mindsets, routines, and practices.
- Collaborative leadership networks: Fostering an inclusive culture of trust, inquiry, innovation, and exploration.
- Sharing new learning: Deepening collective understanding and knowledge.
- Systems for improvement: Setting goals, examining progress, and analyzing learning targets for growth.

Conclusion

As we navigate the complexities of modern education, transformative leadership

is not just a strategy – it is a necessity. By cultivating purpose-driven teams, fostering inclusive and innovative learning environments, and committing to continuous professional growth, system leaders can ensure that every learner and educator flourishes.

The journey toward excellence and equity is ongoing, but with visionary leadership, collaborative communities, and a steadfast commitment to learning, we can create educational ecosystems where all can thrive. ○

Kevin Kaardal is a retired Superintendent of Schools for Central Okanagan Public Schools, author, speaker, presenter, consultant, award-winning educator, and leader, and he is Past President of CASSA and the BCSSA.

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