



Leading innovators: How leaders can respond to the global crisis in the teaching profession¹

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¹ Our thanks go to graduate researcher Sajani Karunaweera who collaborated with us in data collection for the Smiths Falls case study



There is a crisis in the teaching profession. In the last 10 years, there has been a 12% drop in the number of Australians choosing teaching for university study. There has been almost a 20% decline since 2023 in those who listed education degrees as their first preference (Cassidy, 2023). At the end of 2023, New South Wales alone had 2,000 unfilled full-time teaching positions (Campbell, 2024).

In response, the Department of Education has announced a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan to boost teacher recruitment and elevate the teaching profession. But University of Melbourne professor, Pasi Sahlberg (2022), argues that the plan misses the point. Teachers, he argues, don't need more time teaching, as the Workforce Action Plan proposes. They need "time to plan and work with their colleagues to find more productive ways of teaching."

The crisis in teaching and leadership is not peculiar to Australia. At the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2022, General Secretary Guterres announced that, in partnership with the International Labour Organization, he would establish a High-Level Panel of 17 former Ministers of Education and teacher union leaders to report on the global crisis in the teaching profession and make recommendations to improve the future of teaching. In February 2024, the panel published its 59 recommendations (United Nations/International Labour Organization, 2024). Many of these reasserted priorities that have been identified and recommended for decades: increases in teacher pay; enhanced status; reduced workload; greater job security; more time to plan, prepare, relax, and reflect; opportunities and encouragement to collaborate; attention to teachers' wellbeing; and greater autonomy to exercise professional judgment. All these priorities are legitimate. Many of them remain neglected. None should be ignored. But, like Sahlberg (2022) says, we are still missing something.

Andy wrote one of six experts papers commissioned by the panel. He emphasised the importance of improving how the job of teaching feels. Teaching, he argued, needs to pull people in, motivate them to come and to stay, enable them to exercise their judgments and fulfil their moral purposes, and cultivate feelings of belonging with their colleagues and in their schools (Hargreaves, 2023). The way to do this is to create collaborative cultures of continuous innovation where teachers constantly generate new strategies to serve the students they know best in their own schools. This will enable teachers to experience joy in exercising creative professional judgments with and for their students, and to strengthen their sense of professional belonging with their colleagues. There is already strong evidence that systemwide commitments to cultures of innovation in schools significantly increase teacher satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2018).

Rather than simply *retaining* teachers with pay increments, career pathways and workload adjustments, we also need to be *sustaining* them by feeding their desire to create programs and pedagogies that engage young people in their learning and engage themselves in their own commitments to teaching. Retaining teachers is a minimalist goal. Sustenance, by contrast, is about nourishing, developing, growing, and thriving.

This article draws on a large-scale project in which Andy and his colleagues have worked as a team of university-based researchers and developers in partnership with a range of groups and organisations, including Cam Jones and the school district in which he is a system leader. The project has created cultures and networks of innovation to improve student engagement and wellbeing and has benefitted educators' engagement and wellbeing too. It then zooms in on how one school developed a culture of innovation that had a positive impact on students and teachers alike. In the final part of the paper, we outline five leadership lessons on how to develop thriving cultures of innovation in schools that sustain teachers in their work.

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Innovation and teacher engagement

In schools, engagement levels are falling. Attendance, the most basic indicator of engagement, is plummeting. Homeschooling is rapidly on the rise. The pandemic disrupted young people’s experience of school by taking them away from it. It shattered a historical habit. We must give young people good reasons to go to school now. And we must create good reasons for people to go into teaching and to stay there too. A big part of the answer is innovation and this is where leaders and leadership come in.

In 2022, the year after the pandemic, the LEGO Foundation awarded Andy, his co-investigator, Trista Hollweck, and five other University of Ottawa colleagues, \$3.04m AUD to build a network of 41 school teams across seven provinces in Canada that would create and connect innovations in play-based learning for vulnerable and marginalised students in the middle years. Building on Andy’s prior research with Dennis Shirley on student engagement (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021) and well-being (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022), the purpose of the Canadian Playful Schools Network (CPSN, 2024) was to use play-based innovation to improve engagement and wellbeing among groups of students whose mental health and learning had been adversely affected by the pandemic.

The project invited school teams of four teachers to submit proposals to initiate or enhance one or more of four kinds of innovation: green (outdoor or indoor nature-based initiatives, gardening, Indigenous learning on the land), screen (digital play, coding, editing, simulation), machine (maker-oriented teaching and learning, design thinking, and construction with different materials), and everything in between (inclusion, identity, emotional development, and language-based learning).

School teams often integrated more than one mode and sometimes all four modes of play. For example, a painted tableau with buildings constructed on 3D printers was populated by tiny ozobots dressed up as characters in costumes and accompanied by written narratives to portray a story in which the ozobots moved across the landscape as the main protagonists.

The impact of schools’ innovative efforts on students’ engagement and wellbeing came through loud and clear. “Play allows students to work collaboratively and experience ‘light bulb’ moments that they want to share,” one educator said. “Staff have observed overall improvement in student engagement, attendance and most importantly in ‘fun’ across the curriculum.” Students who were chronic absentees showed up when the projects were taking place. “The kids have been engaged, enthusiastic and asking for more!” “We are noticing a huge jump in engagement from our struggling writers with the addition of book creator.”

“Students are more engaged and happier. They are taking the lead in their learning and even teaching their teachers how to play games.”

Teachers also reported increased engagement and improved wellbeing among themselves. They felt differently about their work. Teachers need to play too. In one school, for example, teachers shamelessly said that the main reason they joined the project was that all

the joy had disappeared from professional learning in their own province, with too much mandated training, and no resources or encouragement for discretionary professional learning. They just wanted to meet with colleagues in person, including at a culminating showcase for all the schools, and experience the fun and joy of professional interaction about positive change.

There needs to be teacher choice as well as student voice. Two schools devoted half a day each week to classes organised around teachers’ interests that their students signed up for such as knitting, Minecraft, cooking, chess, beautifying the school, building outdoor shelters, and performing magic tricks. Many educators commented on how innovation had inspired them as well as their students:

While play-based learning is engaging for students, it’s important to highlight the merits of play-based teaching. It’s invigorating to work in an environment where educators ask, how can we make this more fun? Inevitably, what’s fun for the students is also fun for teachers.

This project has opened our eyes to the power of our own words and openly and without judgment sharing our ideas and building upon each other’s ideas. It has allowed us to create and host a wonderful day and evening for our students and their families to come together and learn through play.

I feel my wellbeing has improved this year. I am motivated to come to school so the students can enjoy the activities that I have planned. I am often a lead teacher, but always have teachers work with me. I have yet to have someone not interested. They all enjoy it as it’s something different. Educators are also finding that play is making this a happy environment for them to be teaching in.

Collegiality and collaboration and senses of professional belonging were significantly enhanced by the project. Schools had to apply in teacher teams, led by teachers, not by principals. Teachers got to know and work with new colleagues – exemplifying a key principle of effective collaboration – that it is best embodied in working together and not just talking together. They met colleagues in other schools with similar passions and diverse interests and approaches. The project resources funded time away from class so that this collegial work could be undertaken within the school day, just like it already is in countries such as Finland (Sahlberg, 2021).

Not all teachers stepped forward spontaneously. Some had to be persuaded to join or to expand the impact of play-based approaches beyond their usual network of colleagues. Engaging with play-based innovation was not equally intensive or extensive in all the schools. This is where the job of leading the innovators or leading the practice of innovation came in. This is highlighted in one of the project schools which the CPSN team visited and with which Cam has been closely involved.

Leading innovation and innovators

Smiths Falls, about 90 minutes drive from Ottawa, has seen recurrent arrivals and departures of manufacturing jobs in chocolate, engineering, and, most recently, cannabis production, for decades. The town has 10% unemployment and 25% low-income families. There have also been recent outbreaks of racism as new immigrants have moved into this hitherto white, working-class community.

When Nancy Holman took the job as principal of Duncan J. Schouler elementary school in the town, her colleagues “knew that this was a school that needed a special touch” she said. Project team members described how the school has had to cope with challenging behaviours from students. In some teachers’ classes, half the children had

special educational needs. According to their teachers, the children have difficult home lives, have trouble with positive and healthy collaboration, and feel undervalued. Yet, while a lot of the children “don’t have a lot, what they have, they give with their heart.”

When Cam sat down with the school’s innovation team in September 2022 to discuss its initial ideas for its CPSN project, two themes emerged.

- Food insecurity was a continuing threat in students’ low-income families, so the teachers wanted to give children the means and skills to provide healthy food for themselves and each other.
- Teachers and their principal also wanted students to feel that they mattered and that they could be seen for who they were and what they brought, not just what they lacked. Cam added the thought that in this demanding school, educators might come to see themselves this way too. Principal Holman’s major goal was to change people’s minds about the school, the students, and the community. Building a new basketball court with money the community had raised was an early statement of her intentions. Children appreciated everything they were given, she said.

The CPSN project focused on teaching students about healthy nutrition, cooking, and planning for meals (budgeting, planting, grocery shopping, distributing food to community etc.). Cookery was blended in with literacy skills learnt through researching recipes and writing their own. Math involved measurement and comparing food prices in grocery stores.

Students built grow towers with light, irrigation, and heat to cultivate plants indoors during the long and harsh Canadian winters. As in many schools elsewhere, this school had been dealing with self-regulation challenges among its early adolescents in the wake of COVID-19, with scuffles and fights breaking out from time to time. These kinds of problems were one of the very reasons for the existence of the CPSN project, in fact. Engagement, voice, and leadership had to be part of the answer to self-regulation issues, not just keeping kids calm. For example, after one student questioned why \$1,200 (Cdn) of funds had been expended on a commercial grow tower, he went home and made one with his dad in his garage for less than \$100, and then led other students in building their own low-cost towers to provide fruit and vegetables for the community.

Students made their own recipe books (accompanied by QR codes they created to link their original recipes to associated playlists that people could listen to while they were cooking). “You don’t just feed your body, you need to feed your soul,” one of them said.

Students went on field trips to restaurants, tried different and unfamiliar cuisines, and built relationships with the owners. This was one response to racism - replacing the emotion of disgust about things and people that are unfamiliar, with positive dispositions of curiosity instead. Money was raised for the local food bank. Supermarkets were connected to the foodbanks to provide healthy food. One local resident wondered why the supermarket was full of teenagers in the middle of the school day. When the students explained, he took out his wallet and donated \$20 on the spot. This project therefore respected and renewed young people’s working-class skills and identities. It addressed racism and diversity too.

The project also engaged and uplifted its teachers. Two of the teachers on the team were like many other teachers in the project and in innovative efforts in general. They were enthusiastic about trying new things, willing to pick up the slack if anyone dropped out, and able to keep the team upbeat and excited. But in several other school projects, where principals weren’t involved directly, the impact didn’t spread out much beyond the initial enthusiasts to others who were more cautious, sceptical, and even sometimes downright jealous.

So, Nancy Holman, who had become somewhat adept in change management by this point in her career approached Kari Sloan, a Grade 7/8 teacher, who took a tightly structured approach to her curriculum and was sceptical about the value of play-based approaches for her students. This teacher was a bit “old school,” but she was dedicated, effective, worked hard, was respected by her colleagues, and taught hand-in-glove with Tracey MacTavish, an educational assistant who was born and raised in Smiths Falls. Tracey used to work in the chocolate factory until it closed, and she was so well known and trusted by families in the community that, in her own words, children were often “knocking at my door after school.”

Kari was “scared to death” about letting her students lead their own learning. Time after time, she doubted whether students would learn anything, and she worried that she’d not know what to do. “Sometimes, it’s hard to let go of the curriculum texts,” she said. “I need to know the endgame,” she went on. “When I go into something, if I’m teaching it, I want to know what I’m teaching. But when the kids are driving the bus and I don’t know which direction we’re going in, I can’t plan ahead.” “If I don’t even know what the end goal is,” she concluded, “that’s frightening.”

Kari was sceptical about the play-based learning innovation not because she didn’t care about her students, but because she did. At the introductory meeting, she had tears in her eyes. “I really don’t think I’m the right fit for this pilot project,” she said. “I don’t think I can do this.” “How do I just put everything aside? And only do this.” But the school leaders kept coming back to insist, “No, you’re the right one!!” Eventually, Kari capitulated. “I’ll do it,” she said. “It won’t work,” she warned, but “I’ll do it.”

Kari and Tracey worked together. Kari would keep a group in the class, and Tracey would take another group downstairs, to do the playful learning, for example. Kari began to see what her students were capable of in ways that she had never grasped before. The project “built them up so much. And these kids need to be built up. They need to feel good about themselves.” “It’s allowing them to be more successful and feel better about themselves. It’s letting their strengths shine.” Students “learned to cooperate with other people,” including ones who “weren’t so cool before.” Kari recalled how one Grade 7 student joyfully declared one day that, finally she could read, after being motivated to read the recipes that she wanted to cook.

Kari felt that her students had “to be able to let the people at home know that school is a good place to be.” “If I had not seen the successes of the kids,” Kari concluded, “I think I’d still be on that road to fear (where) I don’t know where I’m going, and the kids are driving the bus.” “I am just so thankful to be a part of this (project),” Kari said. “It has just melted my heart to see our kids so happy when they actually made something, or when they come to me and say, ‘Do you think maybe we can try and make apple crisp next week?’ Or ‘can we make this?’ Or.....”

Unlike many other school leaders, Nancy grasped one of the first principles of sustainable innovation. You can’t just go with the enthusiasts. They’ll give the project a quick start, but the team and the school will just run out of gas later as the doubters start to wear them down. So, some sceptics need to be involved from the outset, not just as a motivational trick, but also to learn from them and recognise their own potential as leaders. These sceptics, if they are sincere and hard-working professionals, are more likely to spread innovations and the benefits they have for students to other teachers and classes, than enthusiastic and sometimes eccentric “early adopters” who often can’t persuade anyone who are different from themselves (Rogers, 1962). As Kari herself put it, “In the beginning, all I wanted to do was escape. But now I could help people that felt the way I felt.”

Leadership lessons

What does this school illustrate regarding how to lead innovation and the innovators who do the work? The evidence of the CPSN project is that innovation in education can benefit teachers as well as students. It can transform how the work feels. Instead of just coping with required curricula or imposed mandates on one's own, teaching can mean working on exciting pedagogical changes together that will engage all students. This one case reveals what leaders need to do to make all this happen, especially in contrast to occasional instances in the project where innovation was neglected or even obstructed by leaders. This final section outlines five lessons for leading cultures of continuous innovation that make school a place where teachers want to be, as much as their students.

1. Get out the way

If innovative teachers are doing a terrific job together that is motivating for them and engaging for their students, leaders just need to get out of the way sometimes. This is one reason why the CPSN project invited teacher teams to apply, with principal involvement but not principal control. In at least three cases, within the CPSN project, though, system administrators interfered with or obstructed CPSN projects. One complained to a principal that students had been decorating the school exterior in non-approved paint colours. Another delayed a school's outdoor construction of a large Indigenous tipi involving science, math, and learning on the land, for fear that teenagers would engage in sexually inappropriate behaviour within it. A third administrator required a school to remove rubber tyres from a new outdoor learning area just days before an official opening, long after the installations had been initially approved. If system and school administrators are not committed to or convinced by innovation or innovations, or if they feel threatened by teacher-led change, then they can obstruct progress through indifference, discouragement, or active opposition.

2. Actively support teacher-led innovation

The principal at Smiths Falls encouraged and supported teacher-led innovation. With the help of project funds, there was time to meet, plan, and reflect. The innovation was aligned with the school's mission of serving students from low-income families and re-instilling pride in the school and community. The principal constantly encouraged the innovators and reassured them that traditional achievements would not suffer. Principals needn't drive or micromanage innovation, but actively supporting innovators broadens educators' minds and strengthens their hands.

3. Challenge as well as support

Teacher-led teams that didn't include administrators were less likely to draw in sceptics than projects where principals were actively involved. In one school, for example, a dynamic but self-avowedly atypical team-teaching pair enlisted two colleagues to undertake and share creative innovations involving film making and field trips. But the principal's and other staff's indifference and their preference to focus on teaching the prescribed curriculum meant that the innovative team's work had little chance of ever spreading out across the school. At Smiths Falls, however, administrators used their positional and earned authority to take on resistance and scepticism from the beginning – something much harder to do among teacher colleagues in a culture where norms of non-interference and protecting individual professional autonomy are common. The administrators didn't force sceptical teachers to get involved. They used their powers of persuasion that included respect for these teachers' effectiveness and professionalism to encourage them to lead the way for other colleagues. This extended the project's impact across

the school as a result.

4. Connect the school's innovative efforts to those occurring in other schools

In a developmental evaluation of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia's inclusion strategy, Andy and his University of Ottawa colleague, Jess Whitley, found that the top predictor of successful implementation was collaboration among principals across schools (Whitley et al., 2023). Like innovation, the complex practice of inclusion was most likely to get figured out when principals did this together. Innovation and inclusion are complicated. They vary from one place to the next. They cannot be implemented in a simple way from the top-down. The best way to circulate and stimulate the knowledge that informs new practice therefore involves working with other educators in other schools. This approach is what Andy and others have called leadership from the middle. *Leadership from the middle* involves getting educators who are close to the constantly shifting ground of their schools to get closer to each other so they can lead and drive engaging cultures of innovation together (Childress et al., 2020; Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2024; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2020). Most school leaders regularly connect with their peers in system-wide principal meetings. They can be the first to spot potential connections for their schools that they can then invite their teachers to take up. They can also encourage their staff to join one of the many networks that are out there, like the CPSN, to energise and inform their practice. Teachers should not be islands in their schools. And schools should not be islands in their systems either.

5. Make positive use of educational support personnel to increase flexibility

Schools need to have and use educators with flexible role responsibilities that allow them to move across and between groups in their classes or between entire classes, so they are not responsible for and overwhelmed by the same groups of students all day. Qualified educational support personnel, like Tracey, at Smiths Falls, need not just be employed to support individual students. They can also support and assist teachers to meet with different groups of students in a flexible way, to pursue innovative projects without having to let go of attending to foundational skills. The use of properly qualified assistants, especially ones who are known and trusted in the local community, can significantly enhance inclusive professional environments of continuous innovation and collaborative inquiry.

Final word

There is an old joke about a mother calling upstairs to her son in the morning, saying, "Jason, it's time to go to school." "But I don't want to go to school," Jason complains. "Hurry up. It's time. You'll be late," his mother says. "But I really don't want to go to school," he insists. "Well, I'm sorry," his Mum says. "But you *have* to go! You're the principal."

How do we solve the global crisis of attendance and student engagement? By actively turning school into a place that kids want to go to rather than expecting them to do so out of compliance or habit. And how can we help solve the crisis of teacher and leader recruitment and retention? By making school a vibrant and professionally sustaining place where cultures of continuous innovation engage all students and energise all educators too. After decades of tests and targets, followed by a gruelling pandemic and its aftermath where sheer stoicism and survival got everyone through, it's time that we don't just let the children play. It's time to let teachers and their leaders experience some play, fun and joy for themselves too.

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