# Transcript

**Mary Jean Gallagher on Leading a School that Learns**

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MARIA ODDO: Good morning, everyone. It's great to have you with us this morning. My name's Maria Oddo. I'm a recent past principal and I'm the Manager of the Principal Programs Unit at the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. And this morning it is with great pleasure that we welcome with us Mary Jean Gallagher. She certainly doesn't need any introduction, I'm sure. You've all read her bio on our website. And we've started this morning with just the first slide just setting up some principles for our way of working together virtually, and I'm sure you've all had some time to read that.

Now, before I go into the Acknowledgment of Country, please use the chat. Let us know who you are, where you're from and even your role. We’d certainly love for you to engage with us. So we'll just start with our first slide, which is our Acknowledgment of Country. So on behalf of us all, we acknowledge the traditional owners throughout Victoria and we pay respect to the ongoing living cultures of our First Peoples. We recognise their deep connections to the places where we do our work for continuous school improvement. We continue to learn from the vibrant and innovative knowledge systems of First Peoples, the depth of their teaching, learning and education practice. We observe their resilience through times of change and find ways to promote this through our work. We understand that each of us here has a role in supporting each other to respectfully walk and work together.

I'd like to - before I go to Mary Jean, I'd like to thank her for partnering with us at the Academy and being the second of our Thought Leadership series well-known international expert. This is an exciting extension for us at the Academy where we are extending our provision of great speakers throughout the world, where we're going to learn more about leading school improvement.

This is a series of free webinars that we've got for our thought leaders but particularly for all our school staff - our principals, our leading teachers, learning specialists, middle leaders and our teachers in schools. It's a time for you to learn with and from your colleagues to reflect on how you respond to the needs of young people in a rapidly changing environment and I'm confident that you'll really enjoy this webinar. It will help you to understand how to build your school's improvement narrative and create a continuous cycle of sustainable improvement.

And I'll now turn to you, Mary Jean, where you'll do your Acknowledgment of Country and begin your presentation. Thank you for being with us.

MARY JEAN GALLAGHER: All right. That's great. Thank you very much, Maria. I very much appreciate it and I'm very pleased to be here. And I want to acknowledge that this land in which I work is the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of the First Nations, comprised of the Ojibew, the Odawa and the Pottawatomi peoples. We value the significant historical and contemporary contributions of the local and regional First Nations and all the original peoples of Turtle Island, North America, who've been living and working on the land from time immemorial. We commit to learning together and caring for this land in the generations to come.

 And hello to all my good friends here in Victoria. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to have the opportunity to be part of this conversation with you today. You know, when I was thinking about a topic for this talk, I started out by recognising I think - and I want to recognise with all of you - that there's a lot of change all around us. We're dealing with huge challenges, and the question I think that is really important for any leader in a school system to think about is how do we stay professionally centred on the things that really matter in what we're doing? And I think at times of what it takes to, say, enter a sailboat race. Some days you're in this boat and you have the wind at your back and the sun is shining and you can make great progress directly towards your goals. Other days when you're out in your sailboat, the wind is in your teeth and the storm’s pretty dark around you and the waves are difficult to deal with but you still keep heading for the same destination. The difference is that you have to exercise different skills in tacking back and forth, making progress towards your goal nonetheless. You can't simply give up and let the wind take you wherever because that, in fact, is a ticket to disaster, and I think that's exactly the kind of thing that we need to think about as we're dealing with these challenges, most of which we've never faced before. The equivalent in a school I think to that sailing exercise is leading and creating a school that learns, where students and staff focus together on learning above everything else and are engaged and empowered to solve together the complex challenges that come along with learning, and I want to talk about what that means as we move along in our presentation today.

My goals for today are the same ones you would have seen earlier, that you will understand the critical factors that are going to influence your ability to create that learning school where everyone learns, not just some of the kids, but all of the kids and certainly all of the staff and yourself as well, and how to create a culture of trust and collaboration. It's a huge, important part of the tools for change, and how to build your school's improvement narrative to foster that coherence and precision, et cetera, that you need.

I want to begin this with a bit of a challenge for you as we go forward because I want you to think about this as we go through this workshop together. A lot of professional development of leaders and teachers in education, people are fascinated by the material, they enjoy the session, et cetera, but they get back to their school and nothing happens as a result of it. And so my challenge to you is this then: what's going to change because of what you learn today in this session? Bring that mindset with you. What are the a-ha moments for you as we go through this that are going to cause you to say, “Well, I need to do something about that when I get back”, and that will cause you within two weeks of when you return to your role that you will actually do those things and make note of that as you go along.

The second part of that challenge is how can you use what you've learned today to improve teaching, learning and wellbeing in your classroom school and network as we go forward? And, finally, how would you know if that was actually happening? I'm going to ask you to think about those things and be able to answer them in your work today. It takes work to change how we behave and function, so bring that perspective with you.

And now we are going to stop for just a few moments, more like about six minutes, and you'll have an opportunity to go to your first breakout room where you will have a chance to answer these questions. Thank you.

(Breakout session)

All right. Welcome back. I hope you had a chance to get to know the other people in your groups and where they're coming from. We have quite a diverse group. I should tell you that there are two additional breakouts later in this session and you will go back to the same group so that you'll have a chance to actually get into some of your responses and reactions and thinking about some of the questions posed, as opposed to having to re-introduce yourself each time along, and I'm hoping that that will help you actually build your leadership network so that you'll be able to possibly continue to talk to each other if you want to after this.

 Anyway, one of the things that I do here - and I noticed, by the way, a number of people that I know personally from my many visits to Victoria - and in addition to my work in Australia, I work in a number of other jurisdictions around the world - in Europe, in Australia in a couple of places, as well as in the US, California especially, but in some of the other jurisdictions too - and I want to tell you that it's my observation that, among all of the places I've worked with around the world, I think Victoria's done one of the best jobs of working their way through the pandemic and the impact on students. I know it hasn't been perfect and it certainly may not have felt that way to you but you've done quite well, and I think there are a number of reasons for your success. First of all, there's a clear commitment to your students - and that matters - but probably lots of places do that.

Your government has actually been pretty smart about funding additional things very quickly, like the tutoring initiatives and what not, to give you the resources that you need in order to move forward, and that is not traditional in a group of other places. Your department has been very flexible in their support. They've actually spent time listening to you - good leadership from the regional offices, listening to what principals and teachers have said they needed - and then very quickly putting those kinds of supports in place.

I have to tell you, one of my bits of evidence for that is that in no jurisdiction do you ever expect when teachers really need help doing something challenging that the first thing they're going to do is call their Department of Education and say, “We need this and can you please deliver it?”, and yet that's exactly what happened in Victoria. You are to be congratulated for that. There's also some really strong school leadership that has come to the table around it. I look at that and say, “Why is it that Victoria was able to demonstrate all of that?” and I will tell you that I believe a major amount of that credit goes to the relationships and the collaborative structures that were put in place in the last four or five years of your work in improving learning for students in your jurisdiction. That actually makes a big difference.

Now, the next thing I want to talk about a little bit is the impact of the pandemic on educators worldwide and what that means because certainly we've all learned a number of things along the way. First of all, we have a much clearer awareness of student, family and community need in our schools. You probably know more about your students’ home life right now than you ever thought you wanted to but also more than you ever did before as a result of some of the online learning. I think it's helped us around the world to understand that we need a broader vision of education, that education isn't just educating the academic side of the child, and that was made crystal clear in a number of ways. I think we acknowledge that equity, while it was something that we worried about and tried to work to resolve and to take on in the past, it is now a much more pervasive problem and a much more urgent problem because we see the gaps in the unevenness of learning during the online sections.

But we also realise that we can't get to where we can do our best work with kids if we aren’t also – and staff - if we’re not also paying attention to the wellbeing of our students and staff. And we also now understand that we have different relationships with the people around us and the partners in our community, and that's important as we go forward here.

So now as we think about school improvement and learning as we go along, what does all that add up to? Educators everywhere are talking about those things we've learned, but what does it really mean in terms of what we're learning? In my work around the world, starting actually early in my career but starting especially in the work we did in Ontario in improving learning for kids and outcomes, and teaching and learning in our schools, we probably set too narrow a set of goals, in fact, and we've learned a lot now about how to support and achieve success. We know that, for instance, we need to work on learning development and wellbeing.

We know a number of things now about how we go about actually achieving our improvement goals. It used to be in the early years we'd say, “Here's what we want to improve” and then we’d kind of wait down the road to see if it actually happened. We've got a lot more understanding of how to do that. We understand the importance of leading schools together and learning with and from each other. We've also learned over the years about how we can go about creating conditions in our schools that allow our students to be more successful. We've also learned a fair bit over the years of this detailed worldwide work on improving school outcomes, that so much of it depends on engaging students and staff, and we've been learning better how to do that. A lot of John Hattie’s research was instrumental in our early years in the Ontario work.

We've learned a lot about the role of collaboration and the importance of that as we move forward and the importance of connected autonomy. Now, at this point then what I would like to do is ask for help from our people at Bastow because we're going to run a poll at this point in time asking you to respond to these factors and tell us a little bit about how you feel about them.

ADMINISTRATOR: So this poll asks you to actually pick a concept that you think is relevant and drop it in the box available in there, and you can drag and drop in terms of relevance up and down, just to see what's more relevant in your school. You can see it in the chat in the image there.

MARY JEAN GALLAGHER: That's excellent. That's excellent. And as I look at that, clearly you're focusing your schools right on target with improving learning and development in creating the conditions for success. We really have to pay attention to a number of different things to take us there.

And so moving on from there, I want to talk about what I refer to as the double helix of progress. If we're going to lead a school and actually succeed in creating the conditions for success for students but also the conditions for success for staff so that they feel that they're making progress with the students and they're proud of their work and they’re energised by it as opposed to feeling overwhelmed by it, there are really two areas of things that we have to pay attention to, and the first is what is it that we're going to do, what is it that matters in terms of our establishing success? And the second half of that double helix is, in fact, how we go about doing it, and we need to pay attention as a leader or leadership team to both of those thing if, in fact, we’re going to be successful moving forward.

The ultimate goal, in accordance with what John Hattie has suggested, is represented in the following quote, that, in fact, we know that the best progression, the greatest influence we can have, is grouping our staff together as highly expert, inspired and passionate teachers and leaders, working together to maximise the effect of their teaching on all students in their care. And I want to talk about that because if we're going to lead expert teachers to be inspired and passionate about what they do, then we have to be prepared as leaders to be equally passionate about what we do and how we go about it. And, in fact, we can do that and approach it in a number of ways. First of all, it's not overwhelming. You can, in fact, do it quite successfully. I want to show you a diagram with which you’re probably familiar, that we look at data and evidence to develop the school's annual implementation plan. From that implementation plan and the priorities that are set, we establish strategies and actions and then we look at the impact, and it's a cycle. We go back through that. Now, we do that on an annual implementation of the overall school improvement plan. It’s a multi-year plan. But that's a tool. Think about that as a tool in your toolbox that you already have in your possession.

The PLC approaches you've learned in the past, all of those things, those approaches can all be used in very flexible ways to address areas in which your school needs to make changes. The approach can be used by teachers, in fact, in shorter sections when they're planning units of study. They can look at it from the point of view of planning, say, a six-week or a five-week classroom section or unit of study together and using this same kind of data analysis, et cetera, to take them there. It's the stuff that was referenced by Simon Breakspear when he talks about bursts of improvement in a school, making it more manageable and more concrete to students - or to teachers rather. You actually have all of those resources in your toolkit and you can use it to engage staff.

So your school's annual implementation plan, when you look at it, actually becomes a way to engage your teachers. Don't think about it as something the Department wants you to do. Think about it as: how can I use this planning framework to engage teachers? And I should tell you - I'm just going to go back one here for a moment - when I look at that and I think about that as a way of engaging my staff, we can start with a large staff group working on it or actually engage groups of teachers working in parts of it.

Now, this diagram, by the way, is going to come back to you in a handout set of worksheets that I've prepared and will be sent out to you afterwards that will give you a way of translating each of these areas into some action in addressing a problem. So I’d recommend you take a look at it.

So moving on from that, though, how do you do that in your school? Well, first of all, we have to acknowledge that the starting point for everything has got to be assessment. What do our students know now? If I'm going to try to teach them something about this unit, about fractions or whatever I'm doing, I have to know what they know about fractions beforehand. If half my class already knows perfectly well how to add and subtract fractions, why would I use that time to go through the basics with those people? Why wouldn't I differentiate? And that kind of skill and conversation among teachers becomes particularly important when you're dealing with kids who’ve all come to you with much more diverse backgrounds and understandings of topics because of the work and COVID. So teachers need to be able to assess where their students are before they teach a unit with regard to the learning during and afterwards to ensure, first of all, what did our kids know already beforehand. If they all already knew it, then let's move on. If they didn't, what's our strategy for differentiating it? Are they learning it as we go and how will I know? And afterwards, if we look at the actions we need to take afterwards, have they learned what we did?

Now, that assessment then should inform learning. But the point is it needs to inform not just students’ learning but also staff learning, and I want to go into that in a little bit more detail just to set some things up because this is all about what you have to move into place with groups of teachers in order to actually move your school towards that place.

So, moving on from there, I want to look at how we can do that with teachers, and you might be familiar with this from some of the work that Lyn Sharratt has done in your state as well. We start first with learning intentions, so we ask our teachers to come together in, say, a five-week section of work, so this is what we're going to try to teach in the next four or five weeks in our class around this particular content, and it might be an academic goal. It might, in fact, be something that you've noticed in a student's behaviour. A number of people I spoke to in Victoria said that the behaviour students demonstrated coming back into in-person learning was a whole range of behaviours they wouldn't have seen as age-appropriate in a long time, and that's happening around the world. So you could use the same model to address a behavioural issue in a positive way, to address relationships between kids, to address student wellbeing, et cetera, as well as some equity goals. What is it that I'm intending to have the students learn here? When I look at what my students are doing, how will I know they've done it? So we want some success criteria, and that success criteria may be something as a teacher we see in students' performance on a test or a quiz but it might also be observational from a point of view of a teacher seeing this happening in their class.

So we establish first what we want them to learn, then we want the criteria for their success, then we actually engage them in a learning activity. We need to plan that together as a group of teachers. Then we step in and we observe sometimes or we give a test or we look for what they're doing in their project work. We assess that learning problem and we go around and give the student, first of all, descriptive feedback, and also to be able to come up with effective questions and conversations in our planning meetings with other teachers and go back through subsequent days of that learning task. And so what we're going to be doing with this particular slide eventually - right now, as a matter of fact – first of all, we're going to use it to go back to modify learning intentions and move on.

Now, at this point in time, we're going to take another break and you're going to have an opportunity to talk about this. There will be another breakout group. So we’ll go to a 10-minute breakout discussion.

(Breakout session)

Welcome back, group. It's good to have you back. I hope those conversations are helping you come to own the information as well and talk about how it might fit in your school. Whatever issue you're dealing with – and, as I said, you can use this kind of a short-burst approach and this kind of a cycle - in taking on a wellbeing challenge, taking on a particular equity challenge with a group of teachers, or taking on that challenge of how you lift students to a higher level of understanding of an area. And it has to do - the efficacy with it, the success of the result that you will come to, is actually dependent on those early stages where you really start to identify with greater precision what it is you're trying to do and what is the challenge that you're trying to address, and that's a really important mindset to bring to the work that you're doing with that because the more you know about the problem, the more likely that your solution is going to be on track and be effective at doing it, and the greater your chance that you will engage all of those staff in working on that problem with you.

So moving on from there, I want to talk a little bit about the – it’s just trying to come up here now; all right - about the goals of what we're trying to do with this and the interplay among that. We know in schools we want our kids to do the very best they can do and we want them to not only be able to memorise and repeat back stuff to us but we want them to develop thinking skills, to develop judgment, to develop an understanding that allows them to deal with cause and effect and all of those higher order thinking skills and reasoning skills, but we also know that in today's day and age, our schools need to take on that wellbeing challenge, that many of our kids, and staff for that matter, came back from the pandemic – back from the pandemic? The pandemic is still with us - and also in the current world where some of the stable things we may have taken for granted that exist in our world are being seriously challenged in a very frightening way.

We know that we have to address that whole issue of wellbeing and I want to talk a little bit about the interplay between these things. Along with that is the equity challenge, that we need to pay attention to not just how the group is doing in terms of the class but how each child or student in the class is doing, and be able to have a strategy for how we can help them accelerate their learning or learn a different set of skills, et cetera, so that they can succeed.

Both the good news and the challenge is that those are all integrated together in what we do. We don't teach towards excellence and higher order thinking today and then pay attention to wellbeing tomorrow or maybe get around to equity next week. We have to be able to weave that into our school, into our program. And so when we look at it, we need to be able to put things together and do it all at the same time, and one of the ways to think about that is to first of all say, “Well, what is it that we're trying to do?”. We’re trying to really change the future pathway of learning for our students. We want to pay attention to age-appropriate development and we want to actually step up into a broader range of goals in terms of what we want to achieve in our schools.

One of the mistakes I think we made in Ontario - we know we made in Ontario in ours, and in a lot of the improvement since then - is that the use of the standardised tests and their impact, the use of that testing hierarchy and the impact, is that it tends to narrow what teachers are teaching, and sometimes I've seen classrooms both in Ontario end in Victoria where that focus on literacy or numeracy of the moment and the focus on NAPLAN results has ended up with teachers teaching a very narrow curriculum, and yet that's not the intention at all. In fact, we want to be able to teach those things - literacy and mathematics and science, et cetera - to a very high level, and that high level has to include being able to use those skills in a whole range of other areas. So we want this wider set of goals to be part of what we're talking about in our classroom and reaching for those kinds of things. We want excellence. We want challenging and interesting curriculum that gives kids a chance to analyse and think about what's going on around them and what they see in the media and how all of that fits and what's true when they see it online and what's not true, et cetera. So we want to do that.

 We know we also have to find ways to reach every one of our kids. And an interesting little story here. Michael Fullan and I actually have a hypothesis, and we're hoping some researcher somewhere is going to take it on, that, in fact, a lot of the higher order teaching and learning that we want kids to be able to do, putting things together into new information, is actually part of an equity agenda. We know that some of our kids don't get to practise that as much at home. But think about the classroom from the perspective of a child who doesn't have a lot of books at home, whose parental dinner conversation isn't about current events, who just doesn't have any of those socio-economic advantages that sometimes come with having university-educated parents or a library nearby and all of those sorts of things.

So what happens is that child generally comes to school every day not knowing the answers. The teacher asks a question which everyone pretty well knows if they've read a book or if they’ve watched TV or whatever and all the hands go up, but this child or several of the children, the hands don't go up and they don't know the connections. So they're used to just floating along and kind of trying to stay out of sight. But if, in fact, you start to ask higher order questions, questions to which the answers are not commonly known, then sometimes you'll see that child who is disadvantaged or more vulnerable suddenly shine because, in fact, they're the only one in the room that is an expert at not knowing the answer to something and figuring out how to try to get it or how to develop it or whatever. So there are opportunities in some of that higher order thinking to engage some of the more vulnerable children in ways that puts them on a more equal footing. And so what we really want to do - and there is a whole area of research here coming forward that suggests that if we get into that higher learning and we pay attention to robust equity and engaging all of our students in the work in the classroom, that, in fact, we create a group of kids who can thrive because even the brightest kid who gets all the answers in the class becomes less comfortable when they know that several of their colleagues feel stupid. They just sit there and they become insecure and they wonder what's going on. So it's important that we pay attention to those first two things if we're going to have the whole class thrive.

And here's the big influence on that. In fact, whatever that pattern is of working on those robust goals and engaging all of our kids and trying to create thriving kids, we can accelerate that by virtue of the relationships and experiences that the child has in the classroom and the school. I’m going to say that again because it's really important. This is how you deal with the wellbeing piece, that it's about relationships and experiences in the classroom, relationships among the students and relationships with the staff in the school. And if you take nothing else away from this talk tonight than that, there really needs to be some concerted conversation among the adults in our schools about how they create a culture that is supportive of the wellbeing of children as we go forward.

So as we think about that, “Oh, my goodness. You mean, oh, I've got to not only do all those things we were busy with before but now I have to do this too?”, well, guess what? In fact, the good news is that you can do them together. You can integrate equity in the foundational skills as you deal with the broader curriculum and the higher order thinking, and you do it by engaging your classroom in collaborative inquiry, in students working together to inquire about something, in students working together to build knowledge, and I would encourage you to take a look at those concepts and what that looks like in a classroom. I'm sure by now that the Academy already has some good resources online supporting those pedagogical practices because I know certainly some of those came up in as early as some of your early HITS documents.

But what you can do is use that collaborative inquiry and knowledge building as stepping stones not only to building the foundational skills and understanding why it's important to learn to read and to comprehend but also to get to a stage where students are actually learning how to learn and how to manage their own learning and how to learn for a lifetime. And, boy, those are important, important skills as we move forward.

I want to dig a little more deeply into the wellbeing piece. Here in Canada, our First Nations have produced their own mental wellness framework and I actually think that it's a really important model for us to think about in our schools. The First Nations people in Canada say that in order for a person to be well, it's actually about having a sense of purpose in our lives. It's about hope. It's about having a sense of belonging in our group. And it's about building meaning in our daily lives. Now, think about that as you focus on the wellbeing of your staff. As a leader, do we articulate the wonderful nature of the work that we do, because, boy, if you can’t find a sense of purpose in a school, teaching kids, then I think you have to be probably hiding under a cabbage plant somewhere. So it's easy for teachers to be reminded about their sense of purpose and I would encourage you as leaders to talk about that with a sense of optimism and a sense of passion because talking about it and telling that narrative in your school changes the culture. A group of people are likely to say, “Oh, yeah, she's talking about that again” but eventually they will suddenly have adopted it as their own purpose. If you keep it in front of them and you keep talking about it in that positive way, you can inspire them with that.

A sense of hope - I talked in the first of my talk today about the fact that you have an advantage in Victoria because you have all of these tools to do this work, that you also have an advantage because you have a government and regional offices who are responsive to your needs. Those things can and should give you a sense of hope. I actually believe that out of all the jurisdictions I've worked with, Victoria is best positioned to make a success of recovery from the pandemic and lifting their kids higher in their educational journeys. You need to communicate as leaders that sense of hope to your staff. It's how you keep them with their shoulders to the wheel. There’s a lot of research about how you get people to feel good about their jobs, and it isn't necessarily pay. It’s a whole bunch of other things.

So also this sense of belonging. Do you talk, when you talk to the whole staff, saying, “We here at this school believe in these things”? I realise that not every teacher may agree with you there but it's a way of bringing them along. Now think about those same criteria as they apply to your students. Is there a way in your communication with your students, in the narrative of your school, in the way in which teachers can talk to students, that they can bring those things into reality for all of your students as you go forward?

Moving on from there then, I want to talk about the educational goals because what's happened now is that our educational goals, as I said, may have been a little bit too narrow in the past but we need to talk about what we should be thinking about and talking about with our staff about their day-to-day lessons, because the only way we improve things for kids in our schools is in the work and relationships within the classroom and then, of course, relationships apply to the work outside of the classroom as well.

But these criteria for what teaching and learning should be about in each of our classrooms are worth taking some time to review with your staff. We want it to be meaningful, active, relevant, all about relationships, that it should be collaborative, that we should be thinking about and paying attention to not just whether this child can add and subtract fractions but also, in fact, whether the child is well, whether the child is learning, whether the child has a sense of belonging with the group around him, et cetera.

I think when you think about those wellbeing pieces, it's reasonable to talk to your classroom about it and to engage your students in helping that happen. I don't know whether they exist in Victoria or not, but in Ontario, we have special benches that are in place on the school playground and it's called a ‘buddy bench’ and it's talked about as a perfectly natural thing for a child who might be feeling alone or sad today to go and sit on a buddy bench, and the rest of the kids in the school have received some training in being supportive so that they know when someone's sitting on a buddy bench, they should go over and join that person and talk to them about what's going on in their life. So we start to teach our kids to help each other as well as we go forward.

Learning, in fact, should develop higher order skills. We've talked about that. We also want to make sure the students learn to master things as we go along. Now, it's an interesting question around that. You could, in fact, in a staff grouping ask teachers to look at these things and to reflect upon and assess in their own teaching the degree to which these six criteria are evident in their classroom and evident in their approaches to teaching and learning. It would be an interesting exercise in terms of then moving forward to talk about what teachers could be doing to improve the quality of their work as they move along.

We are going to talk about leading change in a school here as we go forward. So now how do we think about our school and act in order to move this forward? Well, there are really four areas we need to think about changing in our school. The first, in fact, is culture. Deep change in education is a change in culture. It will spread through your school really like a social movement. Teachers who are better at working at it are working in teams with teachers who have more to learn, not teaching them to do it but rather doing it together. In other words, you want to build that collaborative culture in your school, and I'm going to come back to each of these later.

Your work in leading your school to improvement should cause you to think more about people than anything else. You aren't going to change what happens on a student's desk. You aren't going to change the quality of learning or support for wellbeing or equity in your school without your teachers and staff, anyone around the school, being engaged in the job. So when you think about the work that needs to be done, many of us produce this task list: I have to get this plan done; I have to get this thing done; I have to send these emails; I have to do this; I have to do that. But if all we're doing each day is thinking about those tasks, we may, in fact, have a huge liability in terms of trying to have something successfully take place in our school because we have to think about: well, if these are the tasks, what am I doing and how's it going in terms of engaging my people to it? Do I have people who are being left behind, teachers who don't engage in some of these activities, and how am I going to circle back and pull them in as we go along? It's only then that you really think about the content and the tasks that have to be done and the process that has to take place to support that.

The processes you put in place - the group improvement planning and that sort of thing - are processes whose purpose is to engage the people, not necessarily to produce an outcome. They're there to engage people in conversation and developing an improvement to the outcome, and you need to spend time as a leader reflecting on that in your own school and in your own area.

Now, I want to come back a little bit to all of that and what it looks like when we do that. ‘Collective efficacy’ is the term we use to describe what happens when the staff as a group come to the realisation that they can change the world for their kids. What we see in schools where they do that is that, first of all, there is really good coherence. There’s shared expectations for what success will look like for our kids. Every classroom can be characterised by high-yield teaching and, in fact, staff automatically help each other with that. You'll find a staff member who might go across the hall, to the person across hall from them, and say, “Hmm, so I noticed that things seem to be a bit of a challenge in there for some of your students. I was wondering how you were thinking about that?”.

One of the things I've noticed in schools that actually have that kind of group ethic going on is that the conversations in the hallway and in the staff room change. Instead of the conversation being about “this kid who's just a pain and I don't know what I'm going to do and he just doesn't pay attention and it would be so much easier without him” and all of that sort of thing, the conversations are more positive and teachers come out in the hallway and say, “Oh, my goodness. I just did this in my class and you won't believe it. These three kids that were really a challenge caught on fire and life is so much better”. So they start to help pull and push each other along.

There's a lot of conversation about: how do we know that that learning is actually taking place? There’s that reflective business that says we don't just teach it and move on to the next unit. We teach it and we look while and afterwards to see if that learning that we intended is actually happening. School leaders have their sleeves rolled up and they’re in the classroom with teachers and in the school meetings with teachers talking about instruction, talking about pedagogy. It is the core of our business. If you're not spending time in your conversations with your staff talking about those things, how can you change so that the operational stuff takes less time and the instructional stuff can be given more?

There's a book by Donohoo and Katz that is actually quite spectacular that deals with collective advocacy that talks about this and gives you a lot of information about how you can get there, and I just have to say, knowing that good leaders, in fact, develop leaders, Jenni Donohoo is a former teacher in my school district and I was so excited to watch her career blossom and she's now produced several books and does a lot of work with John Hattie.

Anyway, moving along from there. A little bit of advice for you as we move forward in how we go about doing this. First of all, a little bit of a result from a study that was done some time ago by McKinsey & Company. It was a book they published in 2010 that said how the world's most improved school systems keep getting better, and they identified about 10 or 12 different school systems and tried to look at the culture and the criteria that moved some of them forward or that moved those systems forward as the most successfully improving systems in the world. And they had some that were just - where there was barely a school or enough schools for kids to attend all the way through to places like South Korea and Ontario, who at the time were judged to be great and on the journey to becoming quite exceptional, or good to great I think.

Anyway, one of the things they said was if what you're trying to change is something that is adequacy - how many books need to be in a classroom; how many teachers need to be in a school; or whatever, some of those minimum standards - if they're sort of the adequate standards for what your education system must have or your school must deliver in every classroom, you can prescribe that in a top-down way. But if what you want to do, and Victoria is already a really good school system and most of your schools are quite good - well, almost; there may be some areas that you need to think about, “What is it that I have to insist on taking place in my school as a leader?” - but if your school is, in fact, coming along pretty well, then what is it that we can do to inspire and unleash greatness? And it's along the lines of what we've been talking about here. We talked about this, that it's about having that balance of paying as much or more attention to the people as you do the task going forward. And I will tell you, I've been delighted to be reading a lot of the work by Tracey Ezard in her ‘Ferocious Warmth Leaders’. She has it right that the really good leaders develop collaborative cultures, create leaders within their teams, and so you do that by building that collaboration. You may know the answer already, or you may think you know the answer, and maybe you don't entirely, but by engaging a group of your staff and working on these big, complex problems and listening and talking to them as a leader, “Well, I think this but I could very well be wrong” or, “Oh, my goodness, I tried this in a classroom just the other day and it did not go well, so now I'm working on this”, by doing that with your team, you create that coherence and collaborative culture to work on problems. Teachers that you work with will step up. They will learn and they will begin to see themselves as leaders as well. She also talks about the fact that you lift expectations and build momentum and then you start to see transformations. She's a tremendous resource in Australia as an adviser to leaders, I think.

The other resource I'd like to share with you is, in fact, this wheel for leading school improvement, and we know there are a number of things in it. It's from the book that Fullan and I wrote on school improvement, ‘The Devil is in the Details’. I want to talk particularly – I mean, all of these things are important, the focus on learning, building coherence throughout your staff, and a lot of that is about the narrative, how you bring people together. You have to put time in place, by the way, for people to be collaborative. You can’t always expect teachers to meet after school when everybody's tired. Are there things you can do in your schedule that would provide time for the junior team, for instance, to meet together or for some of your teachers in the, say, entry year in secondary school to meet together?

Some of the ways to do that are when you're having a school assembly or something like that, in fact, only have half the teachers go with their classes. The other half then have some time to learn. I've seen schools do some really good things with reading buddies where the Grade 4 and Year 1 students are going to set up reading pairs and reading buddies, and one week for the 30-minute reading buddy session or 20-minute reading buddy session, the Year 4s go to Year 1, and the Year 4 teachers have a chance to meet, or the Year 4-5 teachers. So the same kind of thing happens the other way a week later, where the one teacher supervisors both classes and the Year 1 teachers have a chance to meet or the Year 1-2-3 teachers have a chance to meet. You can do, as a leader in the school, a number of things to provide additional meeting time and structure for that.

Moving on from there, the two that I really want to spend a little bit of time talking about is differentiating your support. When you think about your staff and you go in and out of their classrooms, you know that some of your staff already really know well how to do what they're doing and what they need to do, and they may be really good at diversifying their pedagogy. Others do not. So what can you do to differentiate your support? And some of that is differentiating with a nudge and some of it is, in fact, by simply entering into the relationship a little bit as a leader and working with them as they move forward. But understand that you don't have to treat - just as we don't treat all of our students differently, you don't treat all of your staff differently either.

I can remember as a principal, a group of staff coming to me and saying, “There are these four staff that are working on this project for first-year high school students” - I was a principal of a high school – “And you plan their prep time together and you're giving them round tables and new furniture, and you're giving them this and you're giving them that, and the rest of us don't get that”. And I said, “Well, yeah, you're right. If you want to start a project that's going to be really good for kids and put a lot of your heart and soul into it and you need resources to do that, I will supply all of those things for you too”. End of conversation. So sometimes you have to just be really honest with people in terms of nudging them forward. It's about communicating and influencing the development of things in your school.

The narrative and how you tell the story of the reforms and the improvement that you're trying to do in your school is one of the big factors because it sets the bar for the rest of your staff. They see what you're doing. You model it, you talk about it, you move forward.

Anyway, as we move along here – and how's my timing? All right. Okay. As we move along with this, what we want to do is build a learning and caring organisation as we move forward. Anyway, as we do that - and we're getting close to the end of our time here today - so let me take a higher view, et cetera; an overview. Building a learning and caring organisation is about ensuring that everything you do has that focus on learning and wellbeing. None of the other stuff that goes on around your school means anything if it's not by way of trying to actually provide more learning, better wellbeing, et cetera, for your students and staff. I'm not saying it's not important, all that other stuff. It has to get done because if the school doesn't have that organisational stuff done, it's chaos, and learning won't ever take place and no-one will feel well, but you have to keep it in perspective and you have to keep the focus in it.

You want to try to create a shared curiosity about evidence that supports improvement. So there's nothing wrong in a staff meeting or in a meeting with groups or even a conversation in a hallway as a leader to say, “You know, I wonder if we did this, would the result be different? Would it be better? Would it be worse? What do you think?”, and getting the staff to exercise their curiosity about what's going on in learning in their school. It's about looking for diverse and effective pedagogy. John Hattie was absolutely right. Direct instruction is a very effective and efficient means of instruction, but I've sat in classrooms and visited classrooms regularly in schools where that's the only way the teacher teaches, and I believe that you get a much higher percentage of those kids in the back of the room that are slouched on their desk and they've got their fists under their chin and they're falling asleep because there isn't that kind of diversity and effectiveness of different pedagogy and different ways of engaging and getting them back. At the same time, you probably can’t expect a teacher starting next week to suddenly make every day about project-based learning or collaborative inquiry, but where is their planning for diversity, to be able to engage all of the students in the classroom in learning to their best ability?

There are a lot of questions here that you could use with staff to have conversations about those things, and when you actually start putting things in place that bring the staff together, that allow them to start planning together, you have to find ways to take those processes and make them a normal part of the fabric of your school in order to do that.

So moving on from there, another quote here, and this one is a quote from a man who used his words to change a nation. He took the person who put him in gaol for years and years and helped him become the leader that his country needed at that time. You’ll remember South Africa was going through the ending of Apartheid. Things were very difficult. Mandela was released from prison, and instead of punishing the person who was the Prime Minister at that time, he helped him step forward and lead together and it made an incredible difference actually in the transformation that took place. Mandela's words can tell us a lot as well: “When you choose words which give others a sense of their own gifts, you create transformation”. So even the most challenging teacher in your school who pushes back against whatever you're trying to do, if you can find a way to turn it into something positive, it can turn things around dramatically. Watch for those opportunities.

So creating the system our students need, as we go forward here - some final thoughts about all of that. You don't have to be the appointed principal or assistant principal in order to provide leadership for improvement in your students’ learning across your school. Talk to a group of teachers, work with the teachers in the same grade or the same division or the same area as you. Always focus on students, all of them, and always be focused on not only learning but also wellbeing and engagement – all of your students.

In addition, you want to demonstrate how open to learning we are ourselves as leaders. If you're reading a book about something, let people know about it. You know, “I was reading this book by John Hattie the other day and he said this and this, and I'm not sure I understand it. I'm not sure I buy it. I don’t know. What do you think?”. Be open to seeking other people's views of things so that they will learn that they can be open as well, and that's students, schools, regions, department, teams, whomever. We want to have what I refer to as a persistent and insistent curiosity and action, all about the impact on students that we face.

Moving on from there, as we talk about building and respecting diversity in our work, we want to respect the diversity that our students and staff bring to us every day by virtue of who they are. We want to be respectful of people who think differently. Who knows what we can learn from them? We want to be respectful of diverse experiences and promote them; diverse pedagogy for students and staff to challenge themselves with; looking for the view of your school or experience from another perspective. I talked to a group of principals who actually went out and identified one student and spent the day following that student from classroom to classroom to classroom, experiencing their school from the student's perspective, and they all came to me with these really big eyes in the workshop to say, “Oh, my goodness. It was brutal” or “It was really good in some places and not so good in others”. Opinion. We want to also be respectful of all the skills that people bring to us as we go forward.

And so, as we come to the wrap-up here and our final breakout group, I want to say to you a few final thoughts. This process, in fact, has a beginning but it has no end, and you're probably, most of you, in the middle of it right now. It's important that at each step along the way we engage people, we measure the impact of our work, we check to see if our assumptions, that theory of actions of “If I do this, I think this is what students are going to be able to do”, sometimes we have to check our assumptions and go, “Oh, you know, I might been wrong with that”. Refine what we're doing and adjust, and do it publicly with your staff so that they see you as a leader exercising that same kind of professional attitude and growth in your work. Understand that when you can actually say, “Wow, this worked really well and here's why”, you end up with a group of people who say, “So now I bet we could do this”. That’s how you create that.

And the final bit I would say to you is don't stress about this. Understand that in your daily work, even on the days you're not feeling great, you are the angels of hope and action. You bring for your students their bright futures for each and every one of them and, quite frankly, I am quite upbeat about what I'm going to find when I next come to Victoria because I have great confidence in your school system, and that's based on having visited it, having been connected to groups during the pandemic and having been connected to a lot of other places as well.

So now we're going to move to a third breakout room and we're going to do that for a short period of time. I think - what was it planned for? – four minutes, four or five minutes, to just come back to those questions that I asked you at the beginning as we go forward, and that is: what's going to change because of what you've learned? What are you going to do with what you've learned? How can you use it in your classroom, school or network and how would you know if that's actually happening? So we'll go to the breakouts and then we'll come back to address any questions that have come up in the chat or elseways. Thank you.

(Breakout session)

Welcome back. I’ll move my slides. Here we go. And I want to thank you for your time today with me. I hope it's been of value to you as you think about how you can effect change in your schools.

A couple of things that we want to take advantage of at this point. First of all, I mentioned earlier that there was a set of worksheets that are really a placemat that you could use with staff. It includes the diagram of the improvement cycle as well as the wheel that I talked about with the six or seven pieces to leading change and then a series of questions that you could use to work with groups and for your staff to really focus in on something that they would like to work on together. So I would ask you to take a look at that and see if it can be useful to you.

The other reminder I'd like to give you is that, as I pointed out to you, every one of us learns by assessment, and so if you would give the gift back to me of your comments in the evaluation for this, it will help the Academy actually make sure that they plan really good pieces and workshops that are responsive to your needs but the feedback also comes back to me and it gives me a chance to sort out what's working and what's not working and what I could do to be better as well because we're all on this learning journey together in terms of learning how to better serve the students in all of our schools.

So I’ve got I think about a minute or two left in which we can talk about a question. One of the questions that came in is someone asked what I meant by connected or collaborative autonomy. It's a term actually that is used in a section of our system change ‘Devil is in the Details’ book that Fullan and I wrote together and it's a phrase we coined to describe the following, that if you're trying to do something in a school, if you’re trying to change something in a school or in a region or in your whole State in education, you can’t do it top-down. You just can't tell everybody what they're supposed to do every minute of the day. When a teacher closes the door to their classroom, it's their classroom and they have a certain amount of autonomy in that room and they can choose to do what the State would want them to do or not, to some degree. They have to teach the curriculum and there's some adequate standards kind of piece there but essentially there is autonomy in every part of the education system.

When you think about schools, principals have a fair bit of autonomy in decisions around their school, and so when you look at that - and for those, by the way, who want to email me, I'll put that information up here for you as well. Anyway, so we recognise that various parts of the system are autonomous but you also can't change what happens to students across the system from the bottom up, from a group of teachers in this school suddenly figuring out how to do it better and doing it, and that - putting the schools together, it doesn't work that way either.

Real successful change happens when all three layers of the system - the State, the regional offices and the school - are working on similar goals together and they’re moving along a bit like a group of aeroplanes in loose formation. The leadership comes from every part of the system, every layer of the system, people everywhere in the system, and they generally work on the same kinds of things but they get to set their own goals too and they get to sort of move along together, with each one having their own autonomy about the how and the what but somehow they're moving in the same general direction.

So the answer to leadership is: pay attention to what your colleagues are doing. Work with them across the network. Pay attention to what the layer above you in the system or below you in the system is doing and help to glue those things together, because if you get the system working together in that kind of loose formation, they will get additional lift and success from the lift of each other's wings as they fly along. That's connected autonomy - autonomy but connected to what's going on around them and interdependent with the people around them in the system.

Any other questions out there? I think we're pretty well at the end of our time anyway.

ADMINISTRATOR: You're on mute, Maria.

MARIA ODDO: There were lots of comments. Sorry? Oh, I was just saying we've got lots of comments for you in the chat and I just want to thank you again, Mary Jean, for a wonderful session and thank you, everybody, for being with us and we wish you a very nice day. Thanks again.

MARY JEAN GALLAGHER: And thank you to all of the participants here and a particular thank you to you and your staff, Maria, from the Victorian Academy. You make this easy for those of us who are presenting.

MARIA ODDO: It's been a pleasure. It was a great session, Mary Jean. Thank you very much for working with us.

MARY JEAN GALLAGHER: Thank you. All right. That's great and have a great day in your classrooms and in your schools today, folks. That's where the real action is.