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TorchWay Education acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Australia on which contributors live, learn and work. We recognise the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, culture, language and community, and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this publication may contain images and names of people who have died.

TorchWay Education
torchwayeducation.com.au
admin@torchwayeducation.com

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About *The TorchWay Review*

A new initiative. A new priority. A new framework. A new expectation. Something designed to improve learning, strengthen practice, support wellbeing or respond to a challenge we can no longer ignore.

None of this is NEW to educators.

To do a little more, learn a little more, adapt a little faster, find another hour, add another responsibility. Become more efficient, more resilient, more innovative, more responsive. All in pursuit of excellence.

But at some point, we have to ask a different question: What if excellence that cannot be sustained is not excellence at all?

That question sits at the heart of the inaugural edition of *The TorchWay Review*. I created this publication because I wanted space for conversations about education that did not begin with another strategy, another program or another list of things schools should be doing better.

I wanted to begin instead with the conditions that make good work possible. What allows a teacher to keep teaching well? What allows a leader to pursue improvement without exhausting the people responsible for delivering it? What makes a practice strong enough to survive beyond the person who introduced it? And what might happen if, rather than asking educators to become endlessly more capable of carrying unsustainable systems, we became more ambitious about redesigning the systems around them? These are not questions with simple answers. But it is precisely why this *Review* exists.

Again and again throughout this edition, contributors explore how we can build sustainable excellence. Because sustainability should not be the alternative to excellence, perhaps it is what allows excellence to be repeated.

One of the things I hope this publication resists is the temptation to turn every promising idea into a model that must be copied. The better question is 'What can this help us notice about our own context?'

Some contributions may affirm what you already believe. Others may challenge you.

Some might give you something practical to try tomorrow. Others might leave you with a question that stays with you much longer.

That is the kind of professional publication I wanted to create. Not something to skim, agree with and place aside. Something to return to. Something that might prompt a conversation in a faculty meeting, leadership team, staffroom or classroom. Something that asks us not simply to work harder in pursuit of better outcomes, but to think more carefully about the conditions under which better outcomes become possible.

This inaugural edition has also been shaped by the generosity of the people who contributed to it. Researchers, teachers, leaders, practitioners and community members have shared their expertise, experiences and questions with remarkable openness. I am deeply grateful to each of them for trusting this new publication with their work.

As you move through these pages, I hope you find ideas worth discussing, practices worth examining and questions worth carrying back into your own context.

Most of all, I hope this edition creates room for a different kind of ambition. Not simply excellence at any cost, but excellence designed to last.



Rebekah Sharrott
Editor, *The TorchWay Review*

The Workplace, Not the Worker:
A National Dataset on School Staff Wellbeing

Adrienne Hornby
Staff Wellbeing Consultant for Schools

Wellbeing initiatives across Australian schools are plentiful: the dedicated wellness weeks, keynote speakers, morning teas and gratitude walls. But while wellbeing is front and centre, so is burnout. Between 2023 and 2026, approximately 4,536 staff completed our Staff Wellbeing Survey, spanning government, Catholic and independent schools in primary, secondary and specialist settings across Australia, and that data shows that 1 in 2 educators in Australian schools report feeling burned out often.

I've sat across the table from hundreds of school leaders over the past decade, and I have never met one who did not want what's best for their staff, the students and their community. What I meet instead is confusion: Why are all our well-intended efforts not working or having an impact? What's changed from when we first got into education? This work was never as difficult as it is now.

As we ask how to pursue excellence without exhausting the people creating it, I want to share a perspective the educator wellbeing data has slowly revealed to me over the past 5 years.

Excellence was never the problem.

On average, 49% of staff often feel burnt out and only 57% nationally say their workplace has a positive impact on their mental health.

The stressors behind these figures are well known and widely discussed across the media, networks, conferences, and staffrooms. But there is more to the story than the felt impacts. Stressors, hazards, and risks in schools give us insight into what is affecting staff, and staff-suggested controls indicate the approach our staff would respond to best.

Stressors Affecting Staff

1. Long working hours and/or an excessive workload (51%)
2. Administrative tasks (51%)
3. Catering for/to complex and diverse student needs (51%)
4. Challenging student behaviours (46%)
5. Communication between leaders and staff (46%)
6. Lack of planning time (45%)
7. Staff shortages (40%)

What Staff Are Asking For

1. The review, streamlining in, or reduction of workload (44%)
2. Improved communication with the school's leadership (41%)
3. A more focused approach to staff wellbeing (40%)
4. Flexible working schemes (40%)
5. Involvement in consultation and decision-making (38%)

Notably, 'Increased information, training and awareness about staff wellbeing' and 'access to occupational health or professional wellbeing support' are amongst the least suggested initiatives nationally, yet in many systems and schools, these are the strategies often prioritised, funded and applied. Very clearly, our staff are not asking for more professional learning to tackle their stress; they are asking for the conditions of work to change and for more involvement and control.

Our National Band Analysis report (2026) explores the national data by setting. We split the data across primary and secondary settings and explored the nuances and differences

below-average, at- and above-average ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage) primary, secondary, and specialist schools.

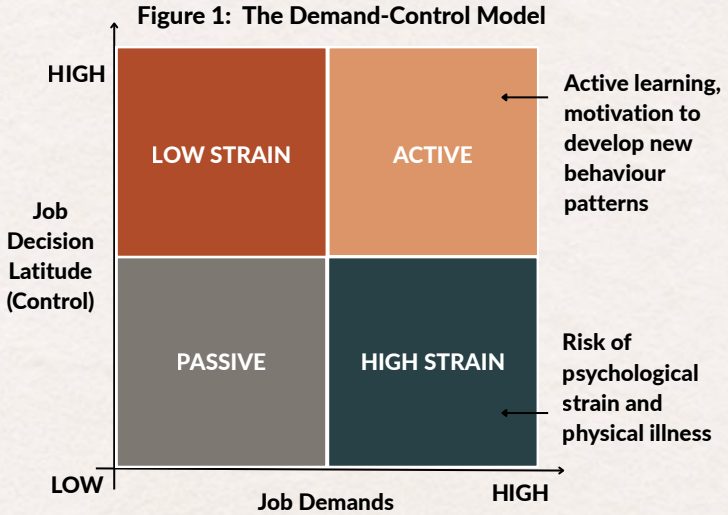
Ultimately, we determined that the national average was a mathematically fictional place. Nobody actually works there. The data segmentation found that the highest demands are not always found inside the schools or settings with the most reported damage or pressure. Data shows that:

- Above-average ICSEA primary schools report the highest stress related to catering to students' complex needs in the country, while also reporting the lowest burnout and highest work satisfaction of any group.
- Specialist school staff indicate staff shortages-related stress of 62%, and occupational violence contributes to their stress at almost three times the national rate, yet they are among the most likely settings to recommend their workplace to others.
- Nationally, 63% of staff agreed their workplace culture was positive.
- Trust in school leaders runs from 22% in some settings to 76% in others.

Not all damage follows demand. It follows conditions.

The research has explained the value of prioritising working conditions since the seventies, it's not new. Karasek's demand-control model (1979) showed that high demands paired with high control produce engagement, while the same demands without control produce strain.

Figure 1: The Demand-Control Model



Adapted from Karasek (1979). Recreated by the author.

Conservation of Resources Theory sums this up by explaining that the most depleted people cannot fund the discretionary acts, patience, check-ins, and benefit of the doubt that hold a staff and a school together (Hobfoll, 1989). This is why coping and resilience workshops for leaders, teachers and staff, with little adjustment to work design and working conditions, are a staff wellbeing strategy destined to fail.

We are not contending with a lack of self-care, coping, or self-regulation capability issue alone; we are also facing conditions that can be dysregulating in themselves and make coping a full-time job.

This is why staff wellbeing should be conceptualised as an ecosystem rather than a program or initiative to introduce temporarily.

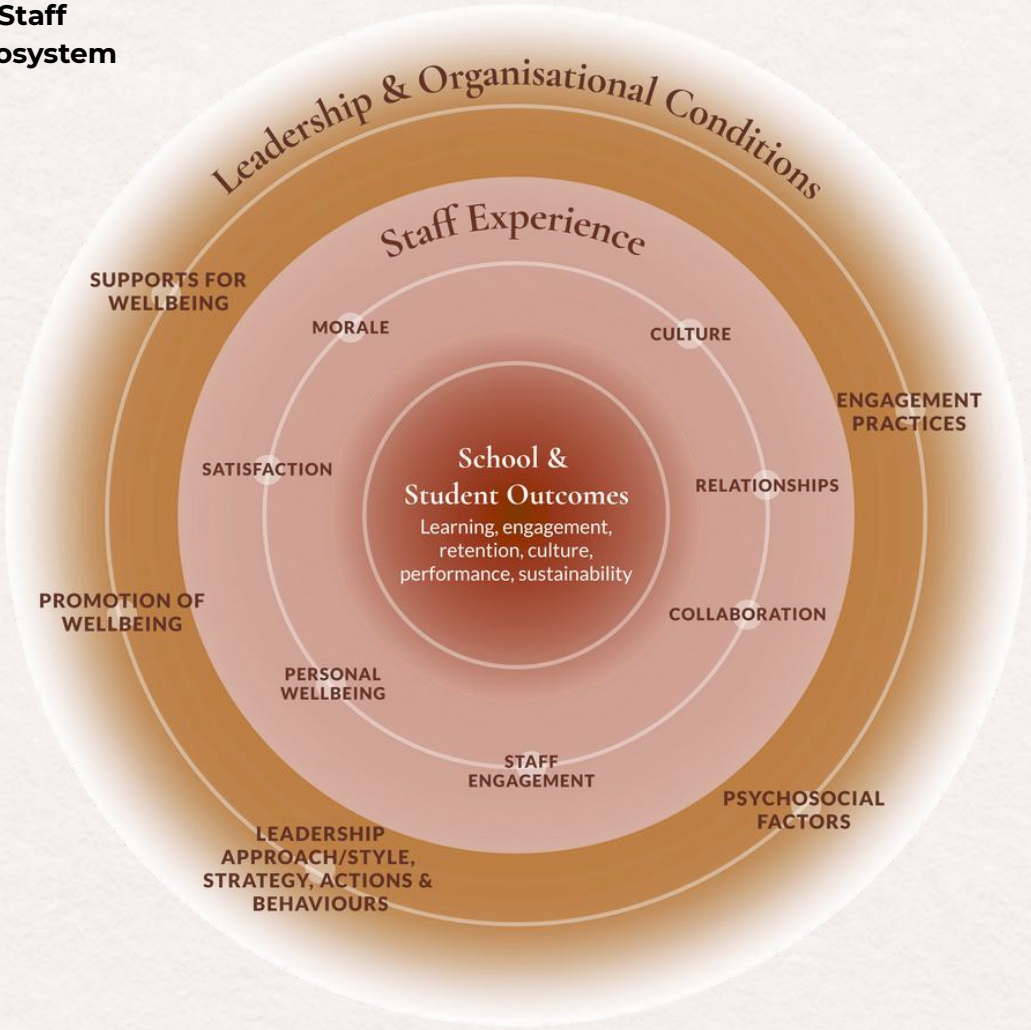
Educators' experience of work extends beyond personal wellbeing and mental health. Our staff's experience also includes satisfaction, workplace morale, relationships, collaboration, and engagement. The literature suggests that optimising all, or many, of these factors can influence student and school outcomes and drive excellence or growth (Hornby, 2025).

Alongside an optimal instructional and pedagogical focus, the literature asserts that schools should strategically enhance the educator experience through ongoing diagnostics of leadership and working conditions to improve school and student outcomes. Around every educator sit the conditions of their work: promoting and supporting wellbeing and leadership-led engagement practices and, most importantly, focusing on psychosocial safety factors.

A psychosocially safe working environment buffers against common hazards and risks in education such as high work demands, poor change management, low job control, communication breakdowns and poor support, all of which are both system- and school-based.

When staff are involved in shaping these conditions, and they are effective, improving and

Figure 2: The Staff Wellbeing Ecosystem



clearly communicated, staff can recognise and feel the support that produces the hope and optimism that trumps the energy drain of a taxing and emotionally labourious profession. When conditions are under pressure or fail, hazards become risks and stack into mounting stressors that eventually cause damage. Soon, civility, connection, trust, morale and eventually wellbeing fall like dominoes.

Unaddressed hazards cause injury. The answer lies in awareness and action, not in the demands themselves.

Excellence is not what exhausts people. Unsupported excellence or the pursuit of it is. The schools we work with that successfully pursue the most ambitious agendas, results, and outputs are not necessarily doing less; they are building and maintaining conditions that sustain and buffer it, and their staff can recognise it. Staff who feel heard, supported and valued feel the rewards of hard work and are retained year after year.

We have reported on and discussed burnout as the leading problem for so long that our strategies are built around it, and aren't always effective.

Burnout is exhaustion of energy. But the report names a deeper injury: an exhaustion of values.

Moral injury better fits what we are seeing and feeling in Education. It describes the lasting distress that follows being unable to act on one's deeply held beliefs (Litz et al., 2009). For educators, it means knowing exactly what a student needs and being unable to provide it (Levinson, 2015).

Research among school professionals links these experiences to guilt, burnout, and intentions to leave, and finds they are concentrated in the settings serving the greatest need (Sugrue, 2020).

This likely explains why the most complex settings (namely below-average ICSEA secondary settings and specialist settings) report some of the most at-risk states of personal wellbeing, morale, culture, and relationships.

- Occupational violence is reported at more than double and triple the national rate, respectively.
- Poor communication between leaders and staff is reported by 71% of staff in below-average secondary schools compared to 46% nationally, the highest reading of any stressor in any band.
- Staff in those same schools ask for more consultation and involvement in decision-making at 56%, compared with the national average of 38%, and only 20% in above-average ICSEA primary schools.
- Staff in these settings are also most stretched to meet complex needs and challenging behaviour
- Because of this complexity, leadership turnover and churn are higher in complex and specialist settings.

Moral injury concentrates in these settings because system and school conditions are so complex and complicated that they block care. This calls into question equity and access to resourcing and the impact it has on educator wellbeing. Ultimately, the cost falls hardest on the students who can least afford it.

Moral injury is ultimately the cost of caring so much. The staff most at risk are the ones who refuse to lower the standard, even as conditions make that standard much harder to achieve. This is why a focus on conditions as well as demands is urgent, and legislation now agrees. Managing psychosocial hazards is now an explicit, enforceable duty, and it sits with departments and governing bodies, not the principal alone.

Every recommendation made in the Band Analysis Report and this piece ultimately lands on a leader's desk, and overlooking support for school leaders would be an oversight. Evidence on Australian principals' wellbeing describes longer working hours, high exposure to threats, and stress well above community norms (Riley, 2019). Leaders are workers too, and they deserve the same protections they are asked to build and sustain.

School leaders benefit from both personal and professional development opportunities. The Australian Professional Standards for Principals name personal qualities and interpersonal skills, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation and empathy, as one of the three requirements of the role (AITSL, 2014). These are all malleable capabilities, not fixed traits, and they deserve the same investment that we give instructional leadership. Leader wellbeing is upstream of staff wellbeing, and we must build conditions together.

Staff wellbeing and working conditions are a joint responsibility. Well-designed, well-understood systems must support leaders so they can best support their staff, and every educator must contribute to and sustain their share.

By changing the conditions in which the work is done, rather than the people doing it, we can pursue excellence without exhausting the people who create it. We stop asking staff to cope better with what stays the same; instead, start building, with them, the conditions where staff and students can both thrive.

Of the wellbeing efforts or initiatives your school invested in this year, which ones changed the conditions of the work, and which ones asked people to keep coping with conditions that stayed the same?

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A Better Kind of Excellence:

The Problem Isn't How We Pursue Excellence, But What We Define It to Be

Lindsay Burns

Assistant Principal, Holy Cross Catholic Primary School



The traditional language of excellence is familiar. It speaks in the register of performance, productivity, and precision. It values results, consistency, measurable improvement, and accountability. Those things matter and are certainly important. They have helped schools sharpen practice, focus attention, and raise standards.

But when excellence is defined too tightly, it begins to flatten the richness of education. It can reduce professional judgment to compliance and leadership to enforcement. It can encourage a culture in which people are valued for how much they can carry rather than how wisely they can think.

Over time, that culture becomes normalised. Extra work is absorbed. Urgency becomes routine, and sacrifice becomes proof of commitment, and even a badge of honour. What begins as a desire to improve can slowly harden into a system that confuses overload with dedication.

This is where many schools become trapped in a cycle of reform without release. We keep adding priorities, demands and tools in the name of improvement. Yet the cumulative effect is often the opposite of what was intended: thinner attention, diminished agency, and a growing sense that the work is becoming less relational and less human.

Let's be honest, a school can be outwardly successful and still be internally unsustainable.

What gets left out

If we want a more truthful definition of excellence, we must name what has been missing. Achievement matters, but so do the conditions that make achievement possible. Test scores, implementation fidelity, and improvement data tell us something important, but they do not tell the whole story.

Human sustainability must become part of our newfound definition of excellence.
Cognitive capacity matters.
Emotional wellbeing matters.
Professional agency matters.
Relational trust matters.
These are not softer versions of excellence; they are the foundations that allow excellence to endure.

This is where leadership matters most. Instructional leadership should not be reduced to tighter oversight or more frequent monitoring. At its best, it is the work of creating conditions in which teachers can think clearly, adapt wisely, and grow in confidence. It is about enabling, not just directing. It is about building capacity, not dependency.

The evidence increasingly supports this shift. Research into teacher agency found that a teacher's capacity to act purposefully is shaped as much by the surrounding culture, relationships and structures of a school as by individual skill or will (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015), meaning agency is something leaders influence and help create, not simply a trait teachers either have or lack. A related body of research on distributed leadership backs this up empirically: a large-scale study of secondary teachers, found that giving staff genuine shared decision-making authority was associated with meaningful gains in teacher self-efficacy and wellbeing (Liu et al., 2023). That matters because agency is not a side benefit. It is part of the architecture of sustainable excellence.

So perhaps the real question is not how we pursue excellence, but how we define it. What if excellence were not primarily a measure of performance, but a condition of flourishing?

Flourishing is a richer and more demanding idea. It does not lower the bar. It widens it. Positive psychologist Martin Seligman (2011) argues that wellbeing is multidimensional rather than a single measure of happiness or achievement. Applied to schools, that framing asks us to hold growth, wellbeing, agency, and impact together. Under this view, an excellent school is not simply one that achieves strong results. It is one that enables students and educators alike to grow, contribute, and remain well enough to keep going with purpose.

It means we stop asking only whether our schools are effective and begin asking whether they are life-giving for all. It means we consider whether people are learning deeply, leading thoughtfully, and working in conditions that honour their humanity. It means we recognise that long-term success is inseparable from the health of the culture that produces it.

Schools that nourish agency, trust, and professional dignity are more likely to retain teachers, strengthen collaboration, and sustain the kind of reflective practice that improvement depends on. In that sense, flourishing is not the opposite of excellence. It may be the only way excellence remains real.

What this looks like practically

A reimagined model of excellence must be visible in everyday school life. It cannot remain a statement of belief tucked away in a policy or strategic plan. It must show up in what systems, schools and leaders prioritise, what they protect, what they start and stop doing, in very practical and real ways. These include:

Fewer priorities. Many schools are carrying too many initiatives at once, each one introduced with good intentions and each one competing for attention. But when everything matters, nothing gets the depth it deserves. Sustainable improvement depends on discipline: choosing a small number of high-leverage goals and staying with them long enough to matter.

Increased agency. If we want innovation, responsiveness, and sustained improvement, teachers must be positioned as contributors to the work, not just carriers of it. Trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility are not

soft leadership gestures. They are practical conditions for strong schools.

Improved energy design. Schools often talk about time management, but the deeper issue is energy management. That means leaders must pay close attention to culture, pacing, workload, and trust. It means resisting the temptation to mistake busyness for progress. It means noticing when staff are carrying too much, not only whether the data is moving. If excellence is going to be sustainable, school structures must leave teachers with enough cognitive and emotional capacity to do the work that matters most.

Intelligent use of technology. This is where generative technologies have a real role to play. Used well, it can reduce repetitive administrative tasks, support planning, and streamline parts of the feedback process, allowing educators to spend more time in the relational and instructional work that only people can do well. The point is not to automate teaching. It is to remove friction so human connection, professional judgment, and responsiveness can be more fully expressed. Technology should not pull educators away from their humanity. It should help return them to it.

A different kind of excellence ahead

Perhaps it is time to stop treating wellbeing and excellence as separate agendas. Perhaps we have spent too long acting as if care for people is additional to the core business of schooling, when in fact it belongs at the centre of it.

If we want students to thrive, educators must be able to thrive too. If we want strong outcomes, we need conditions that make sustained effort possible. If we want teachers to keep giving the best of themselves, we need systems that do not continually take more than they return.

That is why I believe the future of excellence must be re-imagined and redefined. Not as a relentless race toward more output, but as a disciplined commitment to growth, agency, and flourishing. Not as a performance that costs our people, but as a shared endeavour that strengthens them.

The schools that will matter most in the years ahead will not be those that simply do more. They will be the ones that learn how to do better without burning out the people who make better possible.

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Beyond Survival:
Hybrid Professional Flourishing and the Future of Teaching in the Age of AI

Dr Nashid Nigar
Faculty of Education, Monash University



Before the first bell rings, teaching has already begun.

A teacher notices that a usually confident student is unusually quiet. Another quietly reassures a beginning colleague after yesterday's difficult lesson. Someone rewrites the day's plan because a conversation in the corridor revealed something no assessment could detect. A multilingual teacher spontaneously shifts between languages so that a newly arrived student feels understood. Another spends their lunch break helping a parent navigate an unfamiliar school system.

None of these moments appear in performance dashboards or standardised test scores. Few features in policy documents. Yet they are the moments that make education possible.

This is the invisible work of teaching.

Across Australia – and indeed across much of the world – education finds itself at a crossroads. Teacher shortages continue to escalate. Workloads are intensifying. Artificial intelligence is transforming classrooms faster than policies can keep pace. Schools are becoming

increasingly linguistically, culturally and socially diverse, while expectations placed upon teachers continue to expand.

Our response has often been predictable. We encourage teachers to become more resilient. We offer wellbeing programs, mindfulness workshops and strategies for managing stress. These initiatives are valuable, but they also expose a deeper problem.

If survival has become our aim for teachers, we have already lowered our expectations of what the profession – and our education system – can become.

Sustainable excellence cannot be built by expecting extraordinary people to continually absorb extraordinary pressures. It is built by creating educational environments in which teachers can continue to develop, contribute and flourish throughout their professional lives.

Over the past decade, my research has explored teacher identity, multilingualism, professional recognition, educational justice and, more recently, the implications of generative artificial intelligence for education. At first glance, these may appear to be distinct areas of inquiry. Yet they converge around a single question that feels increasingly urgent: *What conditions enable teachers not merely to survive, but to flourish?*

For many years, educational policy has focused on teacher quality through standards, competencies and accountability. These frameworks have undoubtedly contributed to strengthening professional practice. Yet they often measure what teachers know and what they do, rather than asking whether teachers have the professional freedom, trust and institutional support to exercise their expertise in meaningful ways.

A highly capable teacher may still struggle to flourish if their professional judgement is constantly constrained by compliance requirements, excessive workload or cultures of mistrust. Likewise, teachers working in culturally and linguistically diverse communities may possess remarkable knowledge and experience but find that these strengths are overlooked or undervalued.

Professional excellence, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an individual achievement. It is also a property of the environments within which teachers work.

My earlier research introduced the concept of Hybrid Professional Becoming, recognising that teachers never simply ‘become’ professionals once they graduate or gain registration. Professional practice-identity is continually shaped through relationships, language, culture, reflection, experience and changing educational contexts. Teachers are always becoming.

Yet becoming alone is not enough.

A teacher may continue developing professionally while simultaneously feeling exhausted, isolated or professionally invisible. Professional development is possible without flourishing. This insight has led me to extend my thinking towards what I call Hybrid Professional Flourishing.

Hybrid Professional Flourishing recognises that sustainable excellence emerges when teachers’ ongoing professional becoming is supported by educational environments that expand rather than constrain their professional capabilities. It shifts attention from asking how teachers can become more resilient to asking how schools can foster the conditions that enable teachers to flourish.

Rather than measuring teachers primarily through performance indicators, this perspective invites us to consider whether schools create the professional conditions that enable teachers to exercise judgement, build relationships, respond ethically to diversity and contribute to educational change.

Hybrid Professional Flourishing rests upon four interconnected dimensions.

The first is *Recognition*.

Teachers flourish when they are recognised as whole professionals whose practices, identities, languages, experiences and expertise matter. Recognition goes beyond appreciation. It affirms professional credibility, dignity and agency. It allows teachers to contribute authentically rather than continually proving their worth.

This is especially significant for multilingual, immigrant and culturally diverse teachers.

Throughout my research, I have met teachers who bring decades of experience, multiple languages, rich intercultural knowledge and deep pedagogical expertise into Australian schools. Yet many also describe subtle experiences of exclusion. Their accents are questioned. Their overseas qualifications are undervalued. Their professional judgement is overlooked.

These experiences rarely appear in official reports, yet they quietly shape confidence, opportunity and career progression.

The loss extends beyond individual teachers. Every time schools fail to recognise the expertise of diverse educators, students lose opportunities to learn from broader perspectives, richer linguistic resources and different ways of understanding the world. Diversity is not simply something schools should accommodate; it is one of education's greatest intellectual assets.

The second dimension is *Relational Responsibility*.

Teaching is fundamentally relational. Every classroom presents moments that no policy document, curriculum framework or algorithm can fully anticipate. Students arrive with diverse histories, identities, languages, aspirations and challenges. Flourishing teachers possess both the professional freedom and the ethical responsibility to respond thoughtfully, compassionately and contextually to these complexities.

Relational responsibility is demonstrated when teachers adapt learning to students' strengths, engage families as partners, draw upon learners' multilingual and cultural resources, respond sensitively to trauma and disadvantage, and create learning environments where every student feels recognised, valued and included.

These responses are premised on professional judgement, ethical commitment and educational justice rather than procedural compliance. They reflect teaching as a relational, morally purposeful profession committed to enabling every learner to flourish.

The third dimension is *Professional Capability*.

Capability extends beyond competence. Competence asks whether teachers possess certain knowledge or skills, whereas capability asks whether they have genuine opportunities to exercise those capabilities.

Educational excellence therefore depends not only upon capable teachers but upon capability-rich schools.

The fourth dimension is *Transformative Agency*.

Teachers are far more than implementers of curriculum or policy. Every day they shape cultures, strengthen communities, mentor colleagues and advocate for more equitable educational opportunities. Agency transforms professionalism from compliance into collective leadership.

Artificial intelligence makes this framework even more important. Public debate often asks whether AI will replace teachers. This is the wrong question. AI is already producing lesson plans, drafting assessments, translating texts and reducing administrative workload. These developments offer considerable opportunities if used judiciously.

The more important question is this: What becomes uniquely human about teaching when technology performs many routine tasks?

The answer is not content delivery. Nor is it information retrieval.

The uniquely human work of teaching lies in recognition, ethical judgement, empathy, relational accountability, diverse cultural understanding and the ability to recognise potential in ways that no algorithm can replicate. Great teachers notice what data cannot reveal. They build trust before learning. They create connection before achievement.

Technology should therefore expand teachers' professional capabilities rather than diminish them. Its greatest contribution will not be replacing teachers but creating greater freedom for teachers to invest in the deeply human dimensions of education that matter most.

For school leaders, this represents an important shift in thinking. Rather than asking how teachers can become more resilient, perhaps we should ask whether our schools enrich the conditions that enable flourishing.

Do teachers experience genuine recognition?

Do they have time to collaborate? Are diverse languages and cultural knowledges recognised as professional assets? Do teachers have opportunities to exercise judgement rather than merely comply with procedures? Does technology create more time for relationships rather than more surveillance?

These are not additional initiatives competing for already crowded agendas. They are the organisational conditions that enable sustainable excellence.

Educational leadership, therefore, is not simply about improving performance. It is about cultivating professional environments where recognition, accountability, capability and agency can thrive.

When these conditions exist, teacher flourishing becomes more than individual wellbeing. It becomes a collective characteristic of the school itself.

. . .

The future of education will undoubtedly include progressively sophisticated technologies, continuing policy reform and ever greater social diversity. Yet the defining challenge remains profoundly human. Will educational systems continue asking teachers to survive? Or will they create the conditions in which teachers can flourish?

Hybrid Professional Flourishing offers one possible answer.

It moves beyond resilience as an individual responsibility and beyond narrow conceptions of teacher quality. Instead, it reimagines sustainable excellence as the outcome of professional cultures that cultivate recognition, relational accountability, capability and transformative agency.

Teachers are always becoming. Whether that becoming leads to exhaustion or flourishing depends not only on individual commitment, but on the professional conditions schools choose to create. When educational systems invest in teachers' flourishing, they do far more than support educators. They strengthen relationships, enrich learning, foster innovation and build more just, inclusive and compassionate schools.

Because when teachers flourish, students flourish. And that may be the most sustainable investment we can make in the future of education.

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Guiding Change, Guarding Wellbeing: The Leadership Balancing Act

Aaron Johnston & Alice Vigors
Deputy Principal NSW Department of Education & Principal NSW Department of Education



Educational leadership stands at a critical intersection: how do school leaders pursue excellence without exhausting the educators responsible for creating it? For too long, the default operational model has treated high performance and teacher burnout as opposite sides of the same coin, assuming that ambitious educational outcomes require unsustainable human costs. Realising sustainable excellence demands moving past crisis-driven management and constructing environments grounded in psychological safety, operational clarity and collective trust. When leaders move from asking "How much more can we expect?" to "How do we build the conditions for sustainable growth?", they begin navigating structural change with intention. By establishing relational trust and nurturing an inquiry-focused culture, school systems can cultivate environments where high standards and staff wellbeing reinforce rather than undermine each other.

Leadership Styles and Relational Trust

Nurturing relational trust, the connective tissue of a functional school requires leaders to move away from compliance frameworks and intentionally balance distinct leadership styles.

Transformational leadership provides the visionary direction necessary to inspire staff, while servant and democratic approaches ground that vision in empathy, accessibility and shared decision-making (Lomarda, 2024; Permana & Yuslimah, 2025). When leaders deploy these styles flexibly, they address the relational dimensions critical to trust: competence, consistency, integrity and respect.

Consider a principal navigating a systemic curriculum reform. A purely transactional leader might issue top-down directives, setting rigid delivery metrics that induce anxiety and resistance. In contrast, an inclusive leader combines transformational vision with democratic execution. During staff consultations, the principal explicitly acknowledges the challenge, validates staff workload concerns and invites faculty teams to co-design the implementation timeline. When an unexpected scheduling conflict arises, the principal steps in to cover class duty, demonstrating operational competence and genuine respect for teacher time.

These consistent, micro-level interactions build significant relational trust over time. When educators observe their leaders demonstrating empathy without compromising standards, trust shifts from an abstract value into a practical resource. Staff feel safe taking pedagogical risks, sharing classroom difficulties and offering constructive feedback, knowing their professional judgment is respected and their well-being is safeguarded (Baldonado & Villocino, 2025).

Strategies for Cultural Transformation

Creating genuine cultural change in schools can feel daunting, but it often begins with leaders who put relationships and people first. When principals and leadership teams actively listen and engage with staff, they lay the groundwork for a school environment where ideas are respected, and everyone feels ownership in shaping the community's future. School culture isn't just about slogans or posters – it's built through daily moments of trust, constructive feedback, and a willingness to share responsibility.

Collective responsibility works best when it's more than just a policy. Teachers, support staff, and leaders get involved in setting goals and reflecting on progress. Real progress is evident in schools where distributed leadership provides teachers with opportunities to lead initiatives that matter to them. When people have the freedom to contribute according to their strengths, they are more invested – and the results often speak for themselves (Spillane, 2006).

Equity is another cornerstone, demanding more than good intentions. It means being honest about barriers some students and staff face, and doing something about them. Leaders who use school data openly to identify gaps, and then invite conversation about solutions, help everyone feel seen and included (Theoharis, 2009). Equity becomes part of the culture, not a separate project.

Empowerment, finally, gives staff confidence to innovate and adapt. Professional learning communities are a practical way to encourage experimentation and reflection, and mentorship between new and experienced teachers helps build resilience and morale (DuFour, 2004; Harris, 2014). Teams tend to become more cohesive when wins are celebrated collectively and transparent communication is prioritised.

Ultimately, people-centred leadership is about consistent, authentic action – not grand gestures. Leaders who foster open dialogue, celebrate shared wins, and make equity a daily practice drive meaningful change, helping schools become places where excellence and wellbeing grow side by side.

Avoiding Burnout and Sustaining Excellence

Daily interactions in schools are inherently complex and deeply social, profoundly shaping how teachers and leaders experience their work. As Casey (2023) explains, the social environment significantly influences brain function – affecting cognition, emotion, and behaviour – especially in dynamic settings like schools where collaboration and multifaceted relationships are constant. Leaders who intentionally foster positive relational climates – prioritising connection, trust, and reducing social threat – create conditions where staff can better manage complexity, work collaboratively, and sustain resilience over time. This social attunement is essential for maintaining wellbeing and driving effective educational leadership in the face of ongoing challenges.

Relational trust remains a cornerstone of staff wellbeing. Evidence shows that leaders who communicate openly, demonstrate empathy, and honour commitments foster safer, more motivated teams and decrease burnout risk (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Collaboration and trust transform isolation into mutual support, especially when staff face demanding workloads and shifting expectations.

Inclusive leadership further supports this environment. By welcoming diverse perspectives and addressing individual challenges, leaders establish a sense of belonging and fairness that bolsters morale and engagement (Day & Gu, 2014). When professional development is tailored and resources are provided equitably, staff capability and commitment are strengthened.

Purposeful leadership centres actions on clear values and realistic goals, helping staff manage stress and work more efficiently (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). Professional learning communities and regular feedback offer space for sharing ideas and problem-solving, sustaining resilience and growth (DuFour, 2004).

In practice, schools that embed these principles see staff who are not only more resilient but also more inspired to sustain their commitment to excellence. It becomes clear that wellbeing and high performance are not opposing forces but complementary aspects of a thriving school community.

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As schools face growing demands and evolving challenges, purposeful leadership rooted in relational trust, inclusivity, and people-centred values becomes more important than ever. By fostering environments where staff feel valued, supported, and empowered, leaders can cultivate resilience and a shared commitment to growth. Inclusive and trust-based leadership moves the culture beyond compliance, encouraging collaboration, equity, and wellbeing – allowing high standards and staff wellbeing to thrive together.

By intentionally building foundations that honour the interconnectedness of wellbeing and performance, schools are empowered to sustain excellence without compromising staff wellbeing – even as they respond to increasing complexities and evolving challenges. The future of education calls for leaders who drive academic success while nurturing those who make that success possible. Now is the time for purposeful, inclusive action to create thriving, sustainable school communities.

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Worth Staying For:
Rethinking Teacher Retention

Nicholas Brice
Deputy Principal, Peninsula Grammar



A teacher friend of mine recently told me they were thinking about leaving the profession.

It wasn't an angry conversation. There was no dramatic resignation speech or declaration that they were going to “get a real job”. It was much quieter than that, which somehow made it more confronting.

They were tired. They were questioning whether the work was still sustainable and, more importantly, whether they still wanted to spend the next decade doing it.

What struck me was that they hadn't stopped caring. Quite the opposite. They cared deeply about their students, their colleagues and about doing the job well. They were a good teacher. They still wanted to be a good teacher. They were simply beginning to wonder whether the profession was giving enough back.

I haven't stopped thinking about that conversation.

We have become very good at talking about why teachers leave. We have the surveys, workforce reports and increasingly familiar conversations about workload, stress, behaviour, salaries and administrative demands.

Perhaps the question isn't simply, “Why do teachers leave?”

Perhaps we should spend more time asking, “Why do teachers stay?”

And, for those of us working in school leadership, perhaps there is an even more useful question: "What makes a school worth staying for?"

I'm conscious that I don't have a definitive answer to that. The longer I am in this profession, the less confident I am that there are simple answers to questions about professional culture.

But I have become increasingly interested in four connected ideas.

Teachers need to feel that their professional judgement matters. They need to feel that they belong to something and to people. They need to believe that they can continue to grow and have a future in the profession. And they need to feel that the conditions of the job allow them to keep doing it well.

In other words:
I have a voice here.
I have people here.
I have a future here.
I can sustain this here.
Perhaps that is part of the answer to why teachers stay.

I have a voice here

One of the most important things a school can give a teacher is a genuine sense that their professional judgement matters.

The 2024 OECD TALIS data is interesting here. Australian teachers reported levels of instructional autonomy broadly around the OECD average, but only 65% said their school provided opportunities for staff to participate actively in school decisions. At the same time, 89% said they could rely on other teachers. Australian schools therefore appear to have relatively strong collegial relationships, while formal participation in decision-making is less convincing.

A school can have a genuinely lovely staffroom and still be professionally disempowering. Teachers can like one another enormously, but still feel that important decisions simply happen to them.

There is a significant difference between consultation and influence.

Consultation can mean, "We'd like your feedback before we do what we've already decided." Influence means, "You are part of the thinking."

Of course, leadership sometimes requires decisions to be made. Not everything can be put to a vote. But teachers are more likely to engage with change when they understand why decisions are being made and can see that their expertise has genuinely informed the process.

I have people here

Belonging is often discussed in relation to students. It deserves just as much attention when thinking about teachers.

Teacher belonging is unlikely to be created by morning teas, staff trivia or the occasional compulsory 'fun' activity. Those things can be enjoyable, but belonging is deeper. It is the feeling that there are people around you who know you, value what you contribute and will stand alongside you when the work becomes difficult.

What I find particularly interesting is the relationship between belonging and professional contribution.

A beginning teacher invited into curriculum planning experiences something different from one simply handed a program and told to follow it. A teacher asked for their expertise experiences something different from one who receives the final email. A teacher trusted to mentor someone else is being told something important about their professional value.

These experiences send a message: you are not simply working here; you are part of this place.

And when the work is difficult, those relationships matter even more. Teaching can be emotionally demanding. A challenging class, a difficult parent conversation, a student in crisis or simply a week in which everything seems to go wrong can leave a teacher feeling depleted. In those moments, professional relationships become part of the infrastructure that allows people to keep going.

Sometimes the workload may not have changed, but the experience of carrying it can. Sometimes the difference is whether those hours are being carried alone.

The strongest professional cultures I have experienced have not necessarily been the places where everyone agreed. They have been the places where people trusted that disagreement could occur without damaging the relationship. You can challenge an idea and still respect the person who offered it. You can make a mistake without wondering whether the mistake has changed how people see you.

That is belonging too.

And perhaps it is one of the reasons people stay.

I have a future here

Belonging, however, isn't enough. A teacher can feel valued by their colleagues and still wonder where their professional life is heading. This is where professional growth becomes important.

Too often, professional learning becomes an event. Tuesday afternoon. 3.45pm. Everyone in the hall. PowerPoint. Someone says 'learning intentions' approximately 47 times. There is a nodding exercise. Someone makes tea. Everyone goes home.

Technically, professional learning has occurred, but I'm not convinced anyone has learned very much.

The more interesting model begins with professional curiosity: what is a teacher trying to get better at, what are they noticing in their classroom, what expertise could they develop and who could they learn from?

A 2025 review of 355 research outputs examining leadership and teacher retention found evidence that teacher autonomy, professional development and teacher voice interact to strengthen wellbeing, commitment and retention.

Schools therefore need to think about the architecture of a teaching career. A beginning teacher might need intensive mentoring and protected time. A mid-career teacher might need intellectual challenge, new responsibilities or opportunities to develop an area of expertise. An experienced teacher might want to mentor others, undertake research, lead curriculum development or simply become exceptional at their craft.

Not everyone wants to become a principal.

Perhaps professional ambition should not be measured primarily by how far someone moves away from the classroom.

Sometimes professional ambition looks like becoming the teacher everyone wants their child to have... and that should be enough.

Sometimes a teacher hasn't left the profession; they've left us.

Perhaps what they were really looking for was not a different career, but a place where they could still see themselves growing.

I can sustain this here

Eventually, though, culture runs into reality.

No professional community can compensate indefinitely for conditions that make good work impossible.

The latest AITSL data reports a median 50-hour working week for full-time classroom teachers during term. OECD data similarly shows Australian full-time teachers working longer hours than the OECD average, with significant time spent on lesson preparation, marking and administration.

Most teachers probably don't resent working hard as we recognise that teaching has never been a nine-to-five job. What wears people down is the feeling that the work is increasingly being displaced by everything around the work.

The administrative task becomes more important than the professional judgement. The documentation becomes more important than the conversation. The new initiative arrives without anything else leaving. The meeting about the meeting takes place before the meeting.

And somewhere in all of this, the actual teaching gets squeezed.

This is where the retention conversation needs to move beyond resilience. Teachers don't need to become more resilient so that schools can continue giving them unreasonable workloads. The more useful question is whether the work itself can be designed differently.

What can be stopped? What can be simplified? What genuinely requires teacher expertise? What would happen if every new initiative had to displace something else?

Excellent teaching requires energy and if that energy is continually consumed by tasks that don't require a teacher, there is inevitably less left for the things that do.

A teacher might tolerate a difficult week if they feel they have a voice. They might tolerate a difficult term if they know they have people around them. They might tolerate a difficult period if they can still see where their career is going. But if all four disappear at once, it becomes much harder to imagine staying.

Worth staying for

There is one other ingredient that doesn't appear often enough in conversations about retention: Joy.

Schools are serious places. We deal with complex situations, significant responsibilities and, at times, issues that carry enormous emotional weight.

But teaching (and indeed schools) should still be fun.

Young people are funny. They are unpredictable. Lessons sometimes go brilliantly. Other times they go so badly that you find yourself standing outside the classroom afterwards wondering whether anyone in the room was actually speaking the same language.

We should be able to laugh about that.

Some of the best professional teams can have an incredibly serious conversation about a student and, five minutes later, be laughing about something completely ridiculous.

That isn't a lack of professionalism. It is humanity. And perhaps it is part of what makes a difficult job sustainable.

Which brings us back to that teacher who was wondering whether to leave. They haven't stopped caring about teaching. They haven't necessarily decided to leave. They are simply asking whether the profession, as it currently feels to them, is worth the cost.

There may not be a neat answer. But instead of looking for the answer, reflection should be on the question.

Perhaps the question for schools isn't simply: How do we stop teachers leaving? Rather, it might be: What would we have to build here for an excellent teacher to look around and think, 'I could do the best work of my career in this place'?

A place where they can say:
I have a voice here.
I have people here.
I have a future here.
I can sustain this here.

That doesn't mean creating perfect schools. It doesn't mean removing every difficult day.

Perhaps it means creating professional cultures where good teachers can continue to become better teachers; where excellent teachers are trusted, challenged and valued; where people have meaningful relationships with their colleagues; where teachers can spend more of their energy on teaching; and where people can still find some joy in the work.

We shouldn't be trying to create schools that make teachers stay.

We should be trying to create schools that are worth staying for.

If we can do that, perhaps retention stops being the strategy... and instead becomes the outcome.

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Interview with Matt Hall

Images courtesy of Matt Hall Racing

At first glance, high-adrenaline aviation and classroom teaching appear to have very little in common. Yet beneath the roar of engines and gravity-defying stunts lies a familiar challenge: how do you sustain excellence when the demands never stop?

Matt Hall has spent a lifetime answering that question. From serving as the RAAF's Chief Fighter Combat Instructor to competing on the global stage and winning the Red Bull Air Race World Championship, Matt Hall has built a career around performing at the highest level in some of the world's most demanding environments.

In this interview, Rebekah Sharrott, editor of *The TorchWay Review*, sits down with Matt to explore what truly sustains excellence – whether in a fighter squadron, an aerobatic cockpit or a school.

The passion for flying that was passed down from your father and grandfather clearly stuck, because that teenage spark evolved into a career of absolute mastery. Today, when people see you at events like the Pacific Airshow, commentating your own flight while pulling insane aerobatic routines, it looks effortless. The assumption is usually that excellence like that comes from simply working harder than everyone else. Is that true? Or what actually separates elite performers from merely hardworking people?

"I think it's the quality of the work and where you prioritise. I know a lot of really hardworking people, who are probably working harder than me, but haven't had the success I've had. And that's because often they're working hard on things that you can either put aside or get someone else to do. But typically, pilots are control freaks and it's actually very hard to hand over stuff for someone else to do. But not handing over things leads to burnout or it leads to distraction and lack of focus on what is important."

In education, effort is often visible in hours: the teacher who stays late, answers emails at night, rewrites the unit again. But Matt's point shifts the measure of excellence away from sheer exertion. The question is not simply how much work is being done, but whether the right work is being protected.

Was there a moment in your career when you realised hard work alone wasn't enough in order to achieve excellence?

"I've had that lesson repeat itself a number of times throughout my career. And it's a lesson you have to keep learning because you end up successful and working harder and harder until you fall over. You go why was I focusing on that when I should have just handed that off to other people and focused on what I'm good at. You reset to your core values.

I think the accident that I had in the air race where I hit the water in Detroit, that's the prime example of trying to do everything yourself, even when you've got a team around you. Because you're taking on so much of everyone else's jobs, thinking that it's your own."

As the RAAF's Chief Fighter Combat Instructor, your role shifted from being the best pilot in the room to creating the conditions for others to succeed. In education, we often see strong outcomes achieved through individual effort and sacrifice. When you are training a squadron or leading a team at Afterburner, how do you build a system where excellence is sustainable and doesn't rely on people redlining day after day?

"I often say that up until I became a Fighter Combat Instructor, my success was largely based on my own work ethic and priorities. Once you become a Top Gun Instructor, you have to rely on the team to continue to build at that point.

You've reached your own pinnacle and it's about building the team now. And what you realise is with a good team, you can start going exponential.

"You do hit a glass ceiling on your own, but build a good team, and you can continue to improve."

You learn it's first of all about selecting the right team, then motivating the right team but then you're aware of who's doing what and there's a good balance in there of using people's skills to the best of their abilities, but also making sure they're getting downtime to rest and recover so they come back excited to be back at work."

With that idea of needing rest, what are the signs that a high-performing team is becoming unsustainable?

"When you have a high-performance team that's becoming unsustainable, you'll start to see short tempers. Because a high-performance team is there because they want to succeed: they want mission success, they want to learn and improve, they want to be able to rely on the rest of their team.

To get higher than 'individual success' you need to support each other. And when you get a mistake, and mistakes are always happening, you'll see a mistake turn into an argument or anger or frustration. Whereas it should be, 'okay, that's happened, let's reset, let's learn from it

and move forward'. Again, it's how a high-performance team should respond. That's how we try to respond but

"the short fuse is probably the first indication that the team needs to breathe."

Teachers might not be pulling physical G-forces, but they operate in an administrative and emotional 'high-G' environment. They make hundreds of split-second decisions a day while managing behaviour, curriculum, and compliance. In aviation, you call this 'task saturation' – when the brain hits its limit and can't process more data. When a pilot hits task saturation mid-flight, what is the protocol to shed secondary tasks and regain control? What can teachers borrow from that?

"You need to recognise you're being task saturated."

I think most people realise they're task saturated once they've been in it for a period of time, when they have no short-term memory of what's just gone on. Their brain's been so full that they've lost control of time. Driving a car is a classic example: I'm here but I don't even remember getting here because my brain was just so immersed in all the problems I have at the moment.

So, the best way to recognise task saturation is to identify key events that you know lead to task saturation. To say when we are in this period of time, you know we're coming into the start of the year or we're coming into exam time or we know two teachers are sick and we're doing these big extra activities, that is the time where I know that I have the potential to get task saturated. So that is the first step: to recognise that you have the potential right now, rather than waiting until I'm already task saturated.

When you realise you have the potential (or that you already are task saturated) the next thing we do is we deliberately load shift. We know specifically what are the 'can't drop' balls. And you focus on them and accept the fact that you're going to drop some balls. You're going to drop some things, life's not perfect, we're not going to get everything done we hoped we would, but these ones have to be carried. So, a deliberate load shift.

Because when people get task saturated, they have the inability to prioritise and manage timelines. And they drop all the balls at once, with no knowledge of what's important and what's not."

In schools, the danger is rarely that teachers do not care enough. It is that everything begins to feel equally urgent. Matt's distinction between the balls that cannot be dropped and those we consciously allow to fall offers a different way of thinking about workload: prioritisation as a deliberate act, rather than an admission of failure.

You've flown in situations where the consequences of mistakes are catastrophic. I try to do a reverse parallel park and my heart starts racing, so I can't imagine entering a high-speed chicane at 400km/h or flying low over that F1 on a bridge past a cliff. What happens to you mentally when you enter that high-pressure zone, and how do you prepare your mind before stepping into it?

"I'm very big into routines and checklists. So I plan aggressively on how I want it to work in a perfect situation. I plan aggressively on where my threats are and how I'm going to respond to them. Then I rehearse it in my brain over and over and over. So that when I do the event, it's just another day doing it, even if it's the first time I've ever done it.

And I follow reasonably strict routines preflight. The higher the stakes, the more dedicated the routine is – leading to hours before I fly if it's a very high-stakes mission. And the routine involves building myself up from a very low state. So, I'll generally start it with a bit of meditation just to completely calm myself down and then from that point on nothing is allowed to enter my thought process that is not involved in preparing for success.

And that's just rehearsal. It's mindset control. And if I don't do it for a long time, I suck at it too. But if you set a standard that every day, before you go into a high-pressure environment, you give yourself some time to prepare your brain correctly, so that you are focussed on success

(you're not worried about things going wrong). If you're going into something worried about things going wrong, your brain wanders into what else could go wrong and then you get fear.
So, prepare your brain for success, visualise success, knowing full well if something goes wrong, you have the skill set already prepared to solve it."

In schools, we sometimes celebrate the teacher who stays late every night or takes on everything. Yet in aviation, systems are designed to reduce reliance on individual heroics. What are the dangers of building success around exceptional individuals rather than strong systems?

"It's a weak point. Regardless of how good someone is, if everything is built around an individual at some stage they will make a mistake or they will get sick or break, and the entire system will fall over.

"Having width and depth in a high-performance team is incredibly important and I've learnt that lesson many times myself."

And we see that in education. People are so passionate, but that passion can quickly become a fast track to burnout. You're covering so much ground in your career – from the military to competition flying, business, keynote speaking and community work – it's very easy for these high performers to take on more opportunities than they can realistically manage. How do you decide what to say 'yes' to and when to say 'no'?

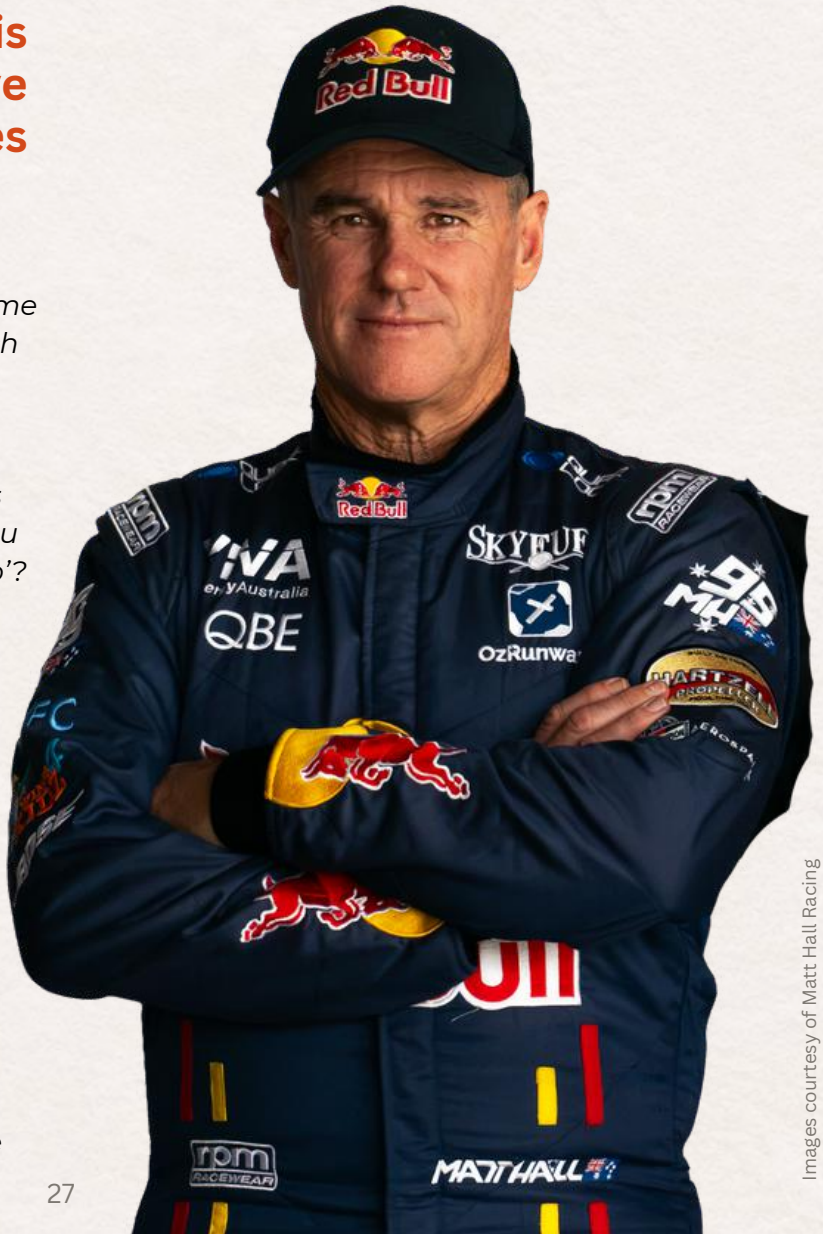
"I'm probably a bad person to ask that question to. I've always said is I want to be the dumbest person on my team. There's a lot of people out there who want to be the smartest person on the team and show everyone else how smart they are.
If I surround myself with people who are smarter than me, I can then hand all those decisions to them and they can look at me from the outside and gauge you are burning out or you've got too much on. That we, on your behalf, are going to say no.

It's very hard to say 'no' when you're passionate about something.

I am passionate not just about flying, but about helping people. I'm passionate about growing my business. When you're the figurehead of those three items, it's very hard to say no to opportunities. So, you need someone in your corner who has the ability to say no, that you trust is making the decision for the right reasons."

There is humility in deliberately surrounding yourself with people who can see what you cannot. For school leaders, that may mean treating distributed leadership not simply as delegation, but as a safeguard against the blind spots that come with carrying too much responsibility alone.

And we see a pattern emerging. That sustainable excellence is less about intensity than intention: deciding what matters, building the right team, rehearsing for pressure and resisting the urge to sprint simply because the opportunity is there.

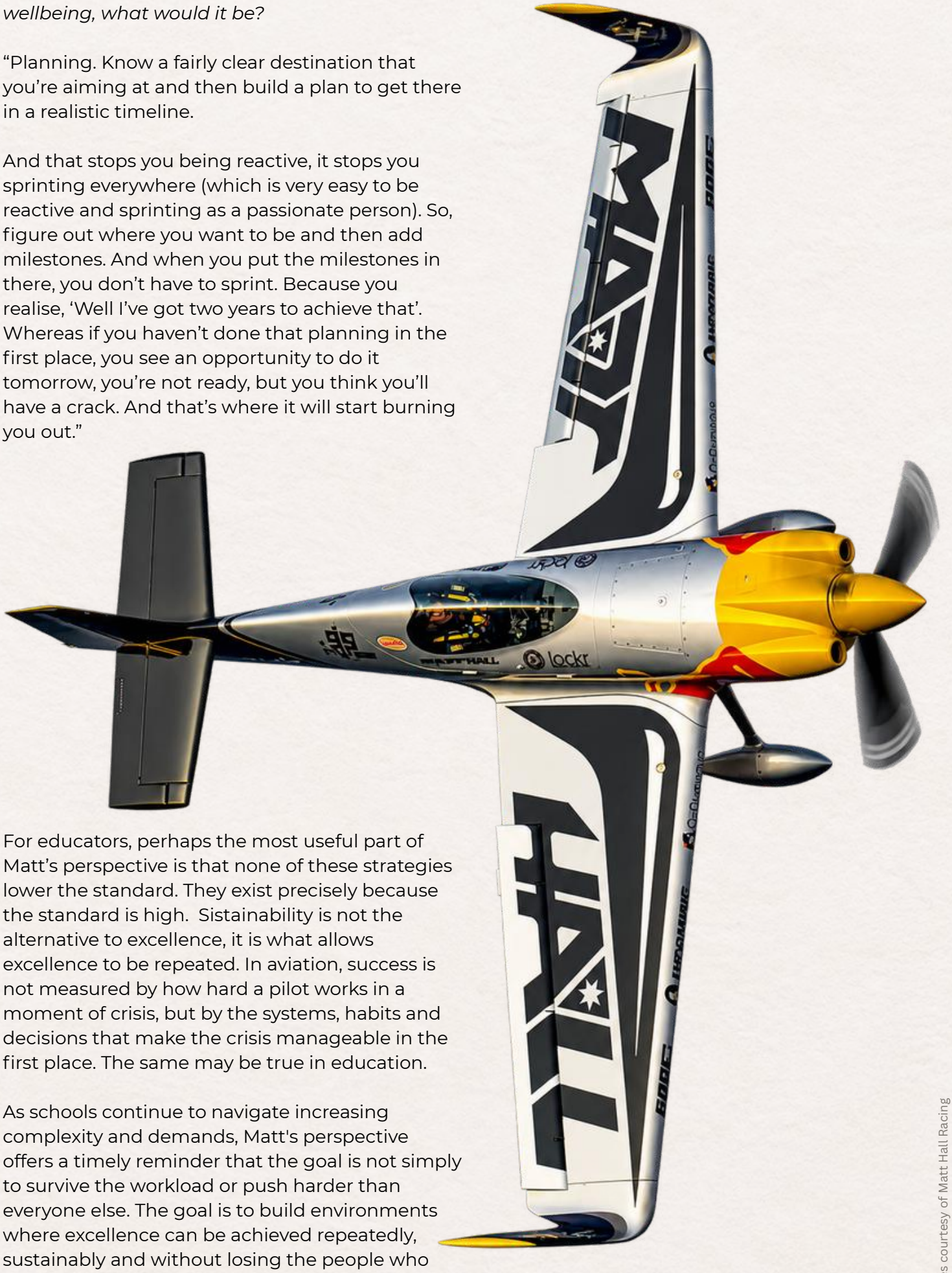


Images courtesy of Matt Hall Racing

If you could leave readers with one lesson about achieving excellence without sacrificing wellbeing, what would it be?

"Planning. Know a fairly clear destination that you're aiming at and then build a plan to get there in a realistic timeline.

And that stops you being reactive, it stops you sprinting everywhere (which is very easy to be reactive and sprinting as a passionate person). So, figure out where you want to be and then add milestones. And when you put the milestones in there, you don't have to sprint. Because you realise, 'Well I've got two years to achieve that'. Whereas if you haven't done that planning in the first place, you see an opportunity to do it tomorrow, you're not ready, but you think you'll have a crack. And that's where it will start burning you out."



For educators, perhaps the most useful part of Matt's perspective is that none of these strategies lower the standard. They exist precisely because the standard is high. Sistainability is not the alternative to excellence, it is what allows excellence to be repeated. In aviation, success is not measured by how hard a pilot works in a moment of crisis, but by the systems, habits and decisions that make the crisis manageable in the first place. The same may be true in education.

As schools continue to navigate increasing complexity and demands, Matt's perspective offers a timely reminder that the goal is not simply to survive the workload or push harder than everyone else. The goal is to build environments where excellence can be achieved repeatedly, sustainably and without losing the people who make it possible.

Images courtesy of Matt Hall Racing

Voices Across Australia

We asked educators: *What does sustainable excellence mean in your context, and what is one lesson you have learned about building it?*



Nicola Di Bernardo

Primary Teacher, Digital Facilitator & Podcaster
New South Wales

After over a decade in the classroom, and two years as a digital facilitator working across more than forty schools, I've come to believe teacher burnout rarely comes from lack of effort. It comes from invisible load and assumed knowledge: the skills, systems, and emotional frameworks nobody ever taught us, but everyone expects us to have.

The lesson I keep returning to is this: name what is invisible before you try to fix it. When we make it visible, we stop blaming ourselves and start designing better systems.

And we cannot do it alone. Sustainability is built through collaboration: sharing, reflecting, and iterating together instead of reinventing the wheel in isolation. That matters most in the early career years, which are so often make or break.

Sustainable excellence is not about doing more. It is about knowing what you are carrying, and building a practice, together, that can hold it.



Brad Gaynor

Educator, Author, Leadership Coach & PhD Candidate
Australian Capital Territory

I stood on a street corner in Phnom Penh, watching what looked like a disaster about to happen. Cars, motorbikes, tuk tuks and pedestrians converging on one intersection. No lights. No lanes. I braced for metal hitting metal. It never came.

It took days before I understood why. Drivers weren't fighting for space. They were reading one another and making room. No obvious signals. No written rules. Just a shared understanding that kept everyone moving. Teaching is much the same. Know your students. Build relationships. Teach well. Simple, but never easy.

Somewhere along the way we layered that purpose with frameworks, compliance and reporting. Each arrived with good intentions. Together they changed the work. Just like that,

“schools work best when people understand the purpose and trust one another’s judgement.”

Education might not need more layers. It might need more trust and dignity for the people already doing the work.

Dr Nick Jackson

Leader of Digital Technologies
South Australia

“Getting out of [the loop] means being willing to play, to experiment, and to get it wrong first.”

I think there are two fairly uncomfortable things sitting underneath sustainable excellence: The first is that the gains come after the investment, not before it. But that's a hard sell, because for most of us, the version is 'show me it works and then I'll give you the time'. And that loop, no investment so no gains so no investment, is a lot of what keeps teachers stuck. Getting out of it means being willing to play, to experiment, and to get it wrong first.

The second is that the investment doesn't count for much if we're busy protecting the wrong things. We've become obsessed with quantifying learning down to the percentage point, when what actually makes a teacher excellent (experience, expertise and judgement) has always been more sophisticated than any algorithm. Measuring the wrong thing more precisely doesn't make us more accurate. It just makes us more precisely wrong.



Bridget Ngui

Director of EAL/D and International Students
New South Wales

Australia is a super-diverse nation and multilingualism is no longer an exception for our classrooms to accommodate; it is simply a reality to embrace. Yet our systems still too often treat EAL/D students as groups needing extra support, rather than as vessels of linguistic and cultural assets we can actively draw on in classrooms.

There's enormous opportunity in shifting that lens. When educators develop their own language awareness and embrace multilingualism, teaching becomes more effective. This isn't about adding another task to teachers' plates - it's about recognising EAL/D as its own specialised field in leading linguistically and culturally responsive practices, as well as building genuine infrastructures including time, training and recognition.

When we invest in that foundation together, multilingualism stops being a challenge to manage.

"Multilingualism ... becomes an asset that is part of building sustainable excellence."

Kurt Walker

Teacher & Relieving Assistant Principal
New South Wales

"Teacher success is more than the system's data."

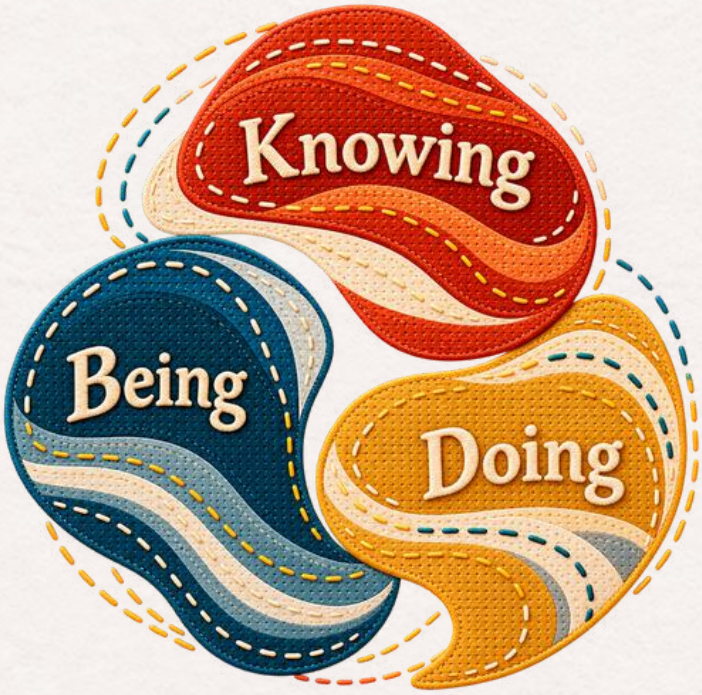
Education can be an exhilarating profession. You build connections with students, offering mirror moments of your own learning and life. You build connections with community. Your colleagues, families and carers.

Somewhere between the overhauls, the expectations and the noise of a system in constant motion, exhilaration can become exhaustion.

Remember why you stayed. The student sitting at the edge of the learning. You sit beside, guiding them. Building confidence, one guiding voice at a time. From discomfort to achievement. Every classroom holds a child like them. Waiting to see if this room will hold them. Waiting for someone to sit beside them.

Teacher success is more than the system's data.
Reflect on the lives you've impacted.
Document those stories. Both yours and theirs.

Stay curious. Stay present. Keep sitting beside the child at the edge.



Steve Chae

Secondary Teacher
Western Australia

For me, sustainable excellence begins with making attention the central work of the classroom.

“When students attend to a shared goal and experience a genuine sense of belonging, attention becomes less fragmented” and more integrated. It is in these conditions that excellence can grow.

I try not to blame students or society for the challenges of attention. Instead, I focus on cultivating my own capacity to hold attention and share it freely with others. Information is abundant; attention is scarce.

It is not something we learn once and possess forever, but a practice that must be renewed daily.

Deborah Belyea

Teacher & First Nations Consultant
Queensland

Best practice requires schools to adopt a whole-school approach, built on honest conversations and genuine partnerships with the local community. When communities feel heard and respected, their ways of knowing, being and doing can become part of everyday school life.

This may include co-designing attendance strategies or creating a meaningful, locally informed Acknowledgement of Country.

Sustainable excellence also means building staff capability through ongoing professional learning. Educators can confidently embed First Nations Perspectives by working alongside community to co-design authentic learning experiences that reflect Indigenous perspectives.

The greatest lesson I have learned is that meaningful change starts with a single step.

“While that first step may seem daunting, it is always better to begin than to do nothing.”

Charting the Course, Together:
How Can We Design Learning With Community, Not Just For It?

Rebekah Sharrott

In conversation with Dangatanga (Danny) Garrawurra, Shane Bailey & Isaac Jansens from the *Learning on Country* program.

Across 18 remote Northern Territory communities, Learning on Country (LoC) has spent more than a decade connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with learning that is grounded in Country, language, culture and real pathways beyond school. As a joint initiative between Aboriginal Ranger groups and schools, the program incorporates both Western and Indigenous knowledge systems to deliver culturally appropriate education and training to help students walk strong in two worlds.

In the Northern Territory, only 36% of Aboriginal students attained the NTCET in 2024–25, a target that remains improving, but not on track against a national Closing the Gap target. Against that backdrop, the outcomes emerging from LoC are striking. A 2024 evaluation by the Australian National University found that students participating in the program made up 74% of all NTCET completions across its 15 participating schools. It also observed growth in VET completion, Year 12 retention, school attendance, female participation, community involvement and access to employment pathways.

To understand what sits beneath those outcomes, I spoke with three people who encounter LoC from different parts of the model: Dangatanga (Danny) Garrawurra, who brings the perspective of cultural authority and governance through his leadership as Co-Chair on the LoC Steering Committee; Isaac Jansens, LoC Coordinator at Shepherdson College; and Shane Bailey, a LoC Program Manager who has spent more than a decade working across the wider network. Together, their perspectives offer a way into a larger question: what makes this model work, and what might other educators learn from an approach built with community rather than simply for it?

The students are steering the boat.

Not metaphorically, they are actually driving it.

They are Years 10 to 12 students from Shepherdson College in Galiwin'ku, travelling more than two hours down the coast towards a local sport-fishing lodge. Beside them is the ranger vessel. As reefs and exposed rocks appear, rangers radio instructions while the students navigate. As they approach the lodge, they make the radio call themselves. They negotiate a shallow sandbar, position the vessel into the wind and set the anchors so everyone can disembark safely – in crocodile territory.

Then they walk into the workplace and discover that the satellite phone is where they expect it to be. The equipment is familiar. The procedures are familiar. What they have been learning on the school vessel is not an approximation of the real world. It *is* the real world.

It would be easy to look at this and see an extraordinary excursion. A memorable day outside the classroom. Perhaps even an unusually sophisticated example of experiential learning. But that would miss what makes *Learning on Country* (LoC) interesting.

The students may be steering the boat, but who has helped chart the course?

Because what makes this learning possible begins long before anyone leaves the jetty. It begins with who is invited into the design of

learning, whose knowledge is treated as expertise, who carries responsibility for making the experience possible and, perhaps most importantly, who has the authority to decide where the learning should begin.

That is where LoC becomes more than a compelling program. It becomes a challenge to some of the assumptions we make about how learning gets built.

Schools are very good at starting with what students do not know: the syllabus tells us what they need to learn, assessment tells us where the gaps are, and curriculum planning identifies what must come next. But LoC begins with another question: What knowledge is already here?

At Shepherdson College, Country is not simply an engaging location in which a pre-written lesson is delivered. The expertise of Rangers and community is not brought in after the 'real' curriculum has already been designed.

The relationship comes first. This is what Danny describes as **"two-ways learning": different systems of knowledge and teaching travelling along the same pathway.**

Because too often, schools approach cultural inclusion through addition; add a text, add an activity, add an excursion, add a guest speaker, then add that new expectation to an already crowded curriculum and an already crowded teacher. The result may still be worthwhile, but the approach to the learning has not really changed.

Instead of planning a unit only by asking what the syllabus requires, what if we also asked: Who already holds the knowledge that belongs here?

Sometimes the answer will be cultural knowledge held within an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander



Images courtesy of Learning on Country: Shepherdson College



Images courtesy of Learning on Country: Shepherdson College

community. Here, knowledge and authority sit together: those who hold cultural knowledge must also have a meaningful role in deciding how that knowledge enters the learning. That relationship is culturally specific and not interchangeable with other forms of outside expertise. In another context, however, the broader principle of looking beyond the school for knowledge might lead to a scientist, writer, local historian, environmental organisation, museum, industry partner or community group.

This does not diminish the professional role of the educator. Teachers retain expertise in curriculum, pedagogy and the learning needs of their students. The shift is subtler. It is the difference between asking someone to contribute to a lesson and asking how their expertise might shape the learning.

The LoC model has endured beyond the novelty of an excellent excursion or an enthusiastic first few years. It now operates across multiple remote communities in the Top End, and after more than a decade, it continues to expand and evolve.

Shane Bailey, who has worked with LoC since its early years, says that the program's longevity does not happen because somebody designed one brilliant activity in 2013 and everyone simply kept doing it. So, **what allows a good idea to survive beyond the people who started it?**

Because when schools innovate, we often begin with the teacher. We ask the teacher to find the expert, build the relationship, develop the resources, organise the excursion, learn the specialist knowledge, map the curriculum, assess the outcomes and, somewhere between all of that, teach.

This is where I think LoC offers a useful alternative. It distributes expertise: school staff bring educational and pedagogical expertise, Rangers bring expertise in Country and vocational pathways, cultural knowledge sits with the people authorised to hold and share it, coordinators help hold these relationships across the program.

The teacher remains essential; they are simply enabled to focus on their core role. That may be one of the most quietly radical ideas in the entire model. Supporting teachers does not necessarily mean asking less of education. Sometimes it means surrounding teachers with more expertise.

Across LoC sites, the program does not begin from the assumption that the school decides what should happen and then asks community to endorse it. Local cultural authority helps direct the work. Ownership is not ceremonial, it changes decisions.

And perhaps this is why one of Isaac's comments stayed with me long after the interview: "It's not one particular champion." Education loves champions: the extraordinary principal, the passionate coordinator, the teacher who somehow makes the impossible work. Champions can begin extraordinary things, but systems built around champions are fragile.

LoC has cultural advisers, local committees, teaching teams, Ranger partnerships, coordination and broader governance. Knowledge is distributed. Responsibility is distributed. Authority is distributed. As Danny puts it, **"it has roots."**

What makes LoC remarkable is not that it has found a clever way to take school onto Country. It is that, over time, it has built a structure in which Country, cultural authority, community, Rangers and schools can genuinely participate in determining what learning becomes.

. . .

A school reading about *Learning on Country* should not finish this article wondering how to reproduce it. Country cannot be replicated. Cultural authority cannot be imported. Relationships with community cannot be downloaded as a program. And a model developed with Aboriginal communities across the Top End is not necessarily a framework able to be transplanted in other contexts. Within LoC itself, cultural knowledge and Country shape local iterations of the program. However there are certainly transferable lessons to embed in our own schools:

- Start with the knowledge that already exists around your students, and put the people who hold that close to decisions.
- Build partnerships before you build activities.
- Connect learning to authentic places, people and pathways beyond school.
- Create structures that carry logistics and external expertise so classroom teachers can concentrate on the work only teachers can do.



Images courtesy of Learning on Country: Shepherdson College

If we want students to take the helm and navigate towards their futures with confidence, we also need to think carefully about the crew and the conditions that make that possible.

The students may be steering, but they are not steering alone. Beside them is another vessel with Rangers, teachers, cultural knowledge, relationships developed over time and a community with genuine authority in determining where that learning should lead.

Perhaps that is the image worth carrying from Galiwin'ku.

The question for schools is not simply how we bring more community into learning. It is whether we are willing to build learning differently once community is there. And that is the distinction between education *for* a community and education built *with* one.

Built In, Not Bolted On:
How Do We Design for Student Voice?

Dr Alice Elwell
Head of Department, Queensland Academy for Creative Industries

It is a Tuesday afternoon, and my Year 12 English students are standing around a whiteboard, designing their final eleven weeks of classes. We have three columns drawn on the board: Content, Skills, and Experiences. Underneath, I've scrawled the class's ideas of what we should study as they approach Mock exams, reflect and regroup after Mocks, and then prepare for the last push before final exams. Two students stand by one whiteboard, working together to take the ideas we've generated as a class and turn them into a cohesive plan, with one idea per lesson. I ask the rest of the class, "Should that lesson go there? Do you think you'll be keen for a practice exam on a Friday afternoon?" and we make the necessary changes, because let's be real – no one is doing exam-condition writing in the last lesson of the week.

This is what co-design looks like in action: students and teacher working together to create something special, specific, and entirely suited to this class. The only prep I needed for this lesson was to count the number of weeks between now and the last lesson, and to make sure my whiteboard markers were fresh. Everything else was created in the moment, including the magic.

The 'problem' of student voice

Student voice occupies a tricky position in contemporary Australian classrooms. On the one hand, it is positioned as a vital component of healthy, democratic classes, with voice being defined as a student's right to be involved in decision-making (Gillett-Swan & Brodie-McKenzie, 2022). On the other hand, student voice can feel like yet another task for teachers to tick off, and there's also a danger of sliding into a 'customer service' model, where student voice can really mean student complaints.

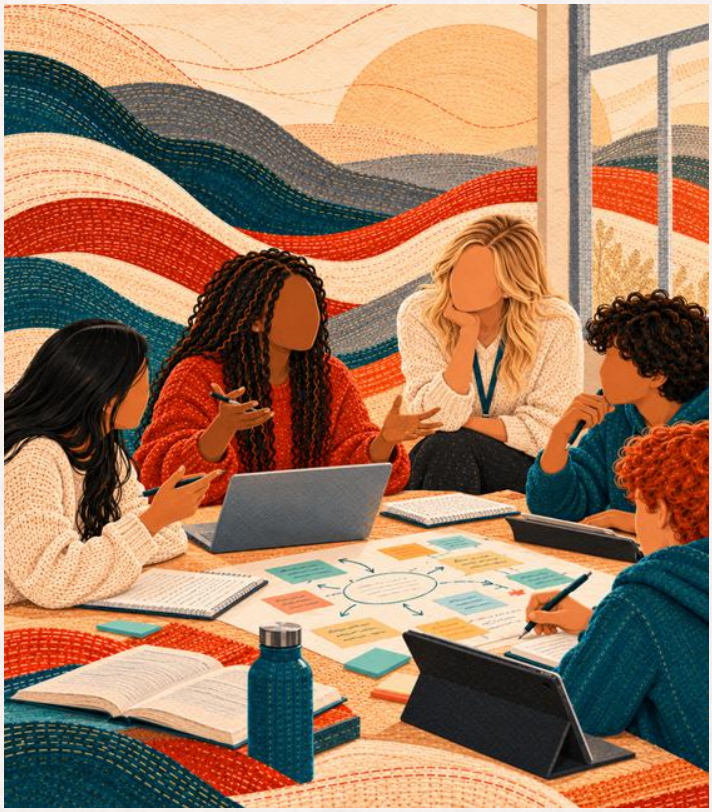
I understand both arguments. Teachers are time-poor, and it can feel frightening to open your teaching up to student voice because that can sometimes feel like student critique. But I would argue that you really can have your cake and eat it too, because student voice, when done well, can feel like a natural part of your ways of working, reduce workload, and lessen the likelihood of grumbles from unhappy students (because they feel heard). In my experience, the key is conceptualising student voice as a way of being and not an add-on. Or, to quote the title, built in rather than bolted on.

Why feedback surveys are not enough

I used to think that student voice meant giving my students feedback surveys. If I was giving them an opportunity to have a say, then they would be satisfied, and my teaching would improve. The problem with this kind of approach to student voice is that it positions student voice as something added on, rather than something driving the pedagogy. The same goes for surveys or consultation panels, because they are all passive forms of capturing information, whereas real student voice requires students to be active agents of learning. It's like checking the temperature after the lesson has finished, rather than adjusting the aircon while you are still in the room.

Voice by design

A much more sustainable and authentic approach to student voice involves reframing curriculum design as something shared between students and teacher, so voice doesn't become something to add, because it is about redistributing where the thinking happens. In practice, this can mean co-designing curricula with students, which Lundy (2007)



conceptualises as involving the space for students to express views, with voice being facilitated, listened to by an audience, and the voice being acted upon (which she calls influence). Co-designing can enhance engagement for students because of greater ownership (Bovill et al., 2020; Gillett-Swan & Brodie-McKenzie, 2022; Elwell, 2023). Co-designing is active citizenship in action, and it is one of the simplest ways to foster inclusion and education for democracy (Elwell, 2023). As Head of English, I brought in a co-design model in my school a few years ago, and we now co-design our Year 11 and Year 12 curriculum with our students. This means all classes are learning something entirely different – something that has been designed with them, not for them.

What can you do if you can't change your curriculum?

I understand that I might sound like I have well and truly drunk the Kool-Aid, and you might be thinking that it is all well and good for me, but what about a regular teacher with a busy load and a never-ending pile of marking? I recognise that not everyone has the ability to change their curriculum in terms of the texts or content you study, but student voice is absolutely something that every teacher can enact. In fact, you are probably already doing it. Consider the lessons where you adjust your lesson mid-flow because the direction has shifted for the better. Or informal feedback loops, where students say something and you really listen, and it changes what you do next. These are all examples of student voice in action. They are not separate from the lesson; they are the lesson. This is student voice as an active, in-the-moment process, rather than something bolted on afterwards.

Here are some simple shifts you can incorporate to bring student voice in so it becomes your default mode of thinking:

1. Give choice in process or product
Universal Design for Learning principles are great for differentiation, and they are also a way to incorporate student voice. Instead of specifying the exact product you'd like students to produce, provide a range of options, or ask what they would like to see. It takes the guesswork out of knowing what works for this group of students (not the students you taught last year).

2. Invite voice into classroom routines and rituals
You would be amazed at how much buy-in you can get by asking students what kinds of stickers they like. If you're going to buy them anyway, why not find out what they like? The same goes for things like seating plans – ask for input, and tell them how you acted upon it. It will make your life easier.

3. Expect input
This means asking students how long they think they will take to complete a task, because that makes them think about their next steps, but it also positions them as part of the learning process. At the end of the lesson, you can also ask them what they need next lesson and then, suddenly, your planning is done – and you know it will work.

4. Shift how you see classroom talk
I have had to teach my high school students that when I ask a question, I am not waiting for them to deposit the answer back to me; rather, I am looking for a contribution to a dialogue we create together. This means that I also have to be open to their contributions. I make a point of validating interpretations of novels I haven't considered, and I ask questions in ways that show them I genuinely want to hear what they think.

5. View assessment and feedback as a partnership
My students mark their own work before they see

my grades, because assessment is a dialogue, not an endpoint. The same goes for feedback: we conference, we compare judgments, and we talk about what quality looks like. It becomes less about receiving feedback and more about learning how to generate it.

6. Recognise that students need to be taught to use their voices
Student voice is not the default mode, so initially, students might struggle to communicate effectively. Or, they might slip into that customer service model I referred to earlier. You can help with this by modelling the kind of feedback you are looking for, giving sentence stems, and being explicit about the difference between preference and productive critique. Over time, students learn that voice is not about liking or disliking, but about contributing to learning.

Why this matters for sustainable excellence

The biggest shift for me with student voice has been recognising that I don't have to know it all, design it all, and carry it all on my own. The learners in my classroom can and should contribute, which actually makes my job easier. I don't waste time planning lessons that won't land, because I work with them rather than guessing for them.

When student voice is embedded, it reduces re-teaching, increases engagement, and builds independence. More importantly, it creates classrooms where responsibility is shared. This is what makes practice sustainable: not working harder, but working differently.

By the time this publication comes out, my Year 12s will have sat their final exams. We have spent two years together, and our time has been marked by a shared sense of ownership – over the texts we studied, the conversations we had, and the way we learned. That is what I will remember most, and it is what they will carry with them.

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Every Student Can Be Creative: How Can We Differentiate to Empower Every Learner?

Soya Thippawal
Teacher, St Gabriel's School

Music has always been a subject where students can communicate without necessarily having the words to explain what they are thinking or feeling. In my experience as a music teacher in a special needs school, I have seen just how powerful that can be.

But I have also learned that being given an opportunity to participate is not the same as being given an opportunity to succeed.

A traditional music activity might ask students to sing, play an instrument, compose or respond to a listening example. For some students, these activities are accessible and engaging. For others, reading notation, learning an instrument, communicating verbally or simply knowing where to start can create barriers.

This has led me to ask: What if creativity itself could be differentiated?

Rather than expecting every student to demonstrate creativity in the same way, providing multiple pathways into music-making can create more meaningful opportunities for communication, self-expression and engagement.

Moving beyond one way of being creative

Differentiation is often associated with modifying the difficulty of a task. However, the learning intention can remain the same while the pathway changes.

For one student, demonstrating musical understanding might mean performing a rhythm. For another, it might involve a visual prompt, assistive technology, moving to music or selecting sounds that communicate an idea. This is particularly important when teaching students with diverse learning needs. Inclusion does not mean creating a completely different curriculum for every student. It means considering what each learner needs to make the learning accessible.

In music, this could mean providing visual representations of rhythm instead of traditional notation, colour-coding instruments, modelling a musical pattern or allowing technology to provide an alternative way of creating sound. The objective is not to make creativity easier. It is to make creative participation possible.

Technology as a creative assistant

Assistive and emerging technologies have increasingly influenced my teaching practice. One example is my use of Suno AI, an AI music-generation platform that transforms descriptive prompts into songs.

I became interested in its potential because it creates opportunities for students who may have musical ideas but experience barriers with traditional composition.

A student does not necessarily need to play piano or understand music theory before creating music. Everything can begin with an idea.

Perhaps they want to create a song about an emotion, tell a story, or make something energetic, calming, funny or dramatic. Once the music has been generated, it becomes a starting point for discussion and experimentation:

Does this sound how you imagined? What should we change? Is the tempo right? Does the

instrumentation match the emotion? What would make this sound more like you?

The technology has generated the starting point, but the student is still making decisions.
That is where I believe the educational value lies.

AI doesn't replace creativity

There are understandable concerns about generative AI and creativity. If a computer can generate a song within seconds, are students actually being creative?

I believe this depends on how the technology is used.

If students enter a prompt, generate a song and submit it, there may be limited learning taking place. But if generation becomes part of an iterative creative process, the experience changes. Students can generate, listen, evaluate, modify and regenerate. They can compare versions and make decisions about which elements represent their original idea.

This is not fundamentally different from how musicians already work. We experiment, make mistakes, change things, listen back and decide what works. For students who find traditional composition inaccessible, AI can provide an additional entry point into this process.

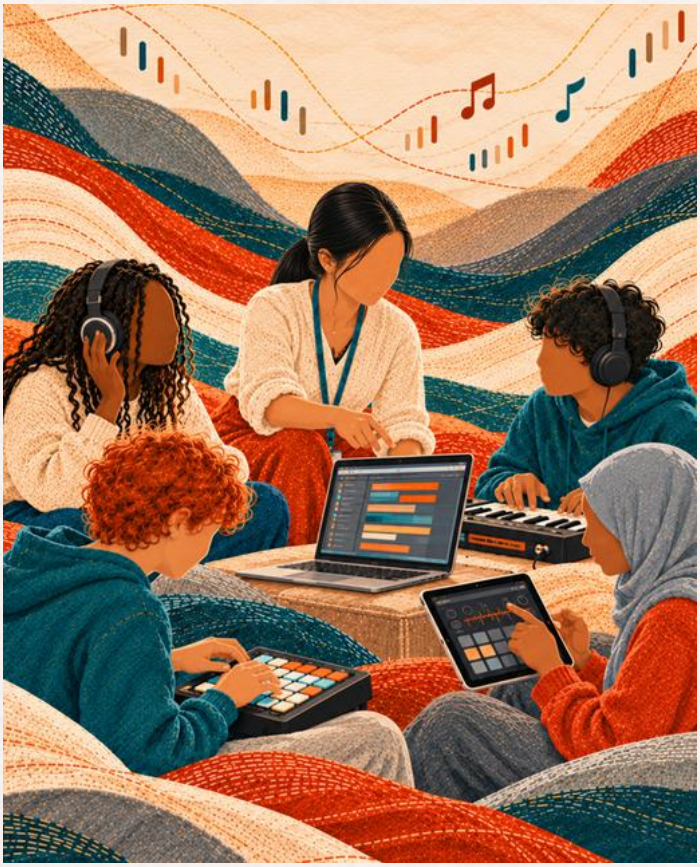
Engagement begins with meaningful choices

Another important lesson from my experience is the relationship between differentiation and engagement.

Students are more likely to engage when they can see themselves in the learning. This might mean choosing an instrument, selecting an emotion, deciding what a piece should sound like or connecting an activity to something they already enjoy. Technology can amplify these opportunities for choice.

With AI music generation, students can explore genres, moods, instruments and themes that reflect their interests. One student might create a pop song, another a cinematic piece and another an electronic composition.

The activity remains a learning experience, but the



creative destination can be different for every student. For students who struggle to connect with their own work, creating something connected to their own idea can build confidence and ownership.

There is something powerful about a student hearing their idea become real and being able to say: “I made that.”

Communication doesn't always need words

One of the reasons I am passionate about music education is that music provides opportunities for communication beyond spoken language.

A student may not be able to explain an emotion verbally but may be able to select a sound that represents it. They may struggle to write a paragraph but be able to create a rhythm. These are all forms of communication.

Differentiating creativity therefore becomes more than a teaching strategy. It becomes a way of recognising different forms of student voice.

Technology is one tool that can support this, but it is not the solution by itself. The teacher remains responsible for understanding the learner, identifying the barrier and deciding

what support will make participation meaningful.

What can educators take from this?

Although my examples come from a specific setting, these principles are not limited to special education or music.

When planning a creative activity, educators can ask:

1. *What is the learning intention?* What do I actually want students to demonstrate?

2. *What are the barriers?* Does the student experience difficulty with writing, communication, fine motor skills, attention, processing instructions or confidence?

3. *What alternatives could I provide?* Could technology, visual supports, modelling, movement, collaboration, or choice help?

4. *Where can I build in meaningful choice?* Can students make decisions about how they access, create or demonstrate their learning?

The technology does not have to be sophisticated. Sometimes differentiation is as simple as giving students two ways to respond instead of one. The important shift is moving from asking: "Can this student complete the task?" to: "How can I redesign the task so this student can meaningfully participate?"

Creativity should have more than one doorway
My experience has reinforced my belief that inclusive education does not require us to lower our expectations. It requires us to become more creative about how students reach those expectations.

For me, Suno is one example of what can happen when technology is used to remove a barrier rather than simply add another tool to the classroom. But the bigger lesson is not about Suno – it's about access.

Creativity does not look the same for every learner. Students need different ways to communicate, explore and express themselves. Success should not be defined by whether every student produces the same thing, but by a meaningful opportunity for students to contribute something of their own. We are giving more students the opportunity to discover that they are.

The Creative Pathways approach

A simple framework educators can use when planning a creative activity:

DEFINE: Identify the key learning intention.

IDENTIFY: Consider the barriers that may prevent individual students from participating.

OFFER: Provide multiple ways to access, create or respond to the learning.

EMPOWER: Build meaningful choice into the activity.

CREATE: Allow students to make something that reflects their ideas, interests or experiences.

REFLECT: Ask students what they created, what choices they made and what they would change.

The tool might be Suno, an instrument, a visual resource, a drawing program, movement or something entirely different. The tool is secondary to the principle: provide multiple pathways towards meaningful creative participation.

References

Suno, Inc. (2026). Suno [Generative artificial intelligence music platform]. https://suno.com/

Editorial note: *Use of Suno AI in schools should be subject to applicable age restrictions, privacy and data-protection requirements, and relevant school or system approval processes. Educators should review the platform's current terms of service and institutional policies before using it with students.*

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For future editions, we welcome expressions of interest from educators, school leaders, researchers, practitioners, organisations and community partners who have an idea, question, project or perspective worth sharing.

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You do not need to submit a finished article. Tell us who you are, what you would like to explore and why you think the idea matters.

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Lindsay Burns



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Aaron Johnston



Nicholas Brice



Dr Nashid Nigar



Matt Hall



Dr Alice Elwell



Soya Thippawal



Dangatanga (Danny) Garrawurra



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Rebekah Sharrott

