

Strategy as a Living System

By Pasi Sahlberg and Dave Runge

Could your new strategy process be the pathway to sustainable leadership and system transformation? Organization or system strategy is often viewed as a static document, an implementation plan or a guidebook for change. But what if it were something more organic and engaging? What if your education system strategy became a living expression of your aspirations – written and enacted in a way that reflects how you wish to lead continuous improvement in schools? Not just short-term wins, but impact that is system-wide, future-focused and enduring.

The question we have been asking here in Australia is – how could education system strategy empower sustainable leadership, strategy that drives improvement, builds capacity and outlasts leadership in schools?

In today's uncertain and rapidly changing world, rethinking how we build sustainable leadership in practice has never been more important.

Global Educational Landscape

Education system improvement strategies are still largely grounded in traditional approaches that focus on top-down control, compliance and standardization. This is not what we thought would happen when the COVID-19 pandemic shocked education systems around the world. But some education system leaders are brave enough to challenge the status quo. They argue that continuing to apply the same approaches, while expecting different outcomes, is not only ineffective, but morally indefensible.

Across the world, education systems struggle with declining student achievement, the eroding status of

being a teacher and difficulties engaging students in deeper learning in school. Too often, reactive leadership drifts with changing policies, instead of responding with a long-term, future-focused vision for schools.

While charismatic leaders can sometimes create lasting impact at the school level, truly sustainable system transformation remains rare. There are leaders who choose a different path, one marked by deeper collaboration, contextually responsive interventions and a commitment to professional teacher agency. These leaders are setting the stage for adaptive, long-lasting change.

Sustainable System Leadership in Action

An example of such leadership is unfolding in Western Victoria. The Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited (DOBCEL), under the leadership of Executive Director Tom Sexton, is intentionally building the capacity for sustainable leadership in about 60 Catholic schools. Their new 10-year strategic plan, *Pursuing Fullness of Life for All*, was developed with longevity in mind. Tom notes, "It will likely outlive my tenure" – a clear commitment to leaving a legacy beyond individual leadership.

DOBCEL's new strategy sets a clear vision through shared priorities and goals across the system. It reflects trust in teachers' professional agency and collective responsibility for learning and well-being in their schools. As a leader of a Catholic school system, Tom encourages schools to be bold and brave, but not reckless. He invites them to co-design the future of teaching and learning alongside him and his leadership team. DOBCEL is stewarding a system where shared responsibility and collaborative leadership are valued and celebrated.

Co-Design Is a Journey

At the heart of DOBCEL's approach to system transformation is co-design, a human- and community-centred process shaping both culture and strategy. Co-design values lived experience, honours local context and elevates collective professional wisdom as an important driver of school improvement.

Unlike rigid, top-down strategy models, co-design embraces multiple voices, iteration and the inevitable "messiness" of collaboration and change. By embedding co-design into the strategy process, DOBCEL is nurturing shared values and reflective practice. The values developed are visible in how people engage with the strategy and with one another.

Core principles of co-design in DOBCEL's strategic development:

- Building deep collaboration within and between schools and communities
- Honouring lived experience and local context
- Privileging relationships and community connections
- Designing for equity, inclusion and well-being
- Embracing the non-linear nature of change

Global Learning, Local Impact

DOBCEL's co-design process has been enriched through learning with and from global peers. A key relationship with Ontario's Ottawa Catholic School Board has helped spark a shared vision for sustainable change. As Tom D'Amico, OCSB Director of Education, explains, "Knowledge-sharing across systems builds the leadership capacity needed for ongoing, positive transformation." DOBCEL's team visited Ontario in 2024 to take some lessons home from the OCSB experience of sustainable system improvement.

Connecting internationally with thought-leaders like Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves not only inspired DOBCEL's leadership but also supported collective sense-making in schools and communities for deeper understanding of the new strategy. Together, these networks are helping to shape a theory of change for more collaborative and sustainable system of Victoria Catholic schools.

Collaborative Change for Sustainable Leadership

Lessons from successful education systems around the world show that collaborative cultures are linked with

improved educational performance. The theory of change, co-created with the DOBCEL community, has become more than an operational guide. It's a way to work together for better schools for all children. The following three practical principles underlying the new strategy inform collective action and create better conditions for productive educational practice in schools and sustainable leadership.

Deeper Collaboration: Building stronger cooperation within and between schools strengthens social capital and a shared sense of purpose. This principle is essential to system-wide transformation.

Networked Local Innovation: Empowering schools to co-design and lead improvement efforts. Purposeful investment in grassroots initiatives and ideas supports innovation from the ground up, allowing it to grow laterally across the system.

Collective Autonomy and Agency: Trusting schools to make decisions that matter for them and their communities. Professional autonomy is paired with shared responsibility to one another and to the governing authority. Student voice, agency and active engagement are central, not optional.

Sustainable Leadership as a Strategic Goal

DOBCEL's strategy recognizes that good ideas and innovation to improve the system already exist somewhere in the system. The primary challenge is to identify and share them across other schools. Initiatives emerge from within open systems when schools are allowed to take smart risks and learn from possible failures.

Active networking within and between other networks of schools exemplifies how DOBCEL is not just adopting new approaches but is investing in the capabilities required to sustain them. Lessons from OCSB and DOBCEL suggest that sustainable leadership isn't about one individual, but about cultivating a culture of continuous, collaborative improvement. It is about building collaborative cultures where innovation and improvement continue long after system leaders move on. 

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