

Leaders for the Future: An Innovative Program for Teachers Under 30

Br Kelvin Canavan, fms
Executive Director of Schools
Catholic Education Office, Sydney

The August issue of 'Perspectives on Educational Leadership' by Neil Cranston was a valuable reminder of the need to ensure a continuous supply of well qualified and highly motivated principals for the future. In this article, Kelvin Canavan describes an innovative response to this challenge from a large system of education by focusing on the leadership aspirations of young teachers.

School systems in Australia and in other countries are needing to plan for the replacement of a very experienced cohort of Principals who will retire in the next decade. However, recent research indicates that interest in leadership among teachers in various countries is not high.(Cranston, 2006, Gronn, 2003). A UK study found only 4% of teachers are thinking about becoming head teachers (Ross, 2006). Key factors in this perceived lack of interest in future principalship have been identified in a number of research studies (D'Arbon, 2003).

In response to this need to prepare leaders for the future, the Catholic Education Office, Sydney relaunched in 2001 its comprehensive six-stage Catholic School Leadership Program. At the same time the well established leadership succession program was strengthened with the launch of the Leadership Succession Series. This focus and strategy may have contributed to an improvement in the number of applicants for Principal vacancies. For the 2002 school year, Catholic systemic schools in New South Wales (NSW), with over 70 vacancies in any year, averaged 3.07 applications per vacancy. By 2006 this had improved to 4.16 applications. Nevertheless, many Catholic school principalships have had to be re-advertised, and many selection panel members express disappointment at the low numbers seeking leadership positions.

In the 1960s and 1970s many Catholic school Principals were appointed as young as 30. Custom and practice have changed over the years and Catholic employers have been seeking applicants with considerably more school experience than previously. This move towards older, more experienced applicants is also linked to the increasing legislative demands on Principals and the increasing complexity of the education environment.

Many young teachers leave the profession within five years of graduation. The reasons are many and varied, but anecdotal evidence indicates that some of these are gifted teachers who may not see much opportunity for early advancement or leadership opportunities. Against this background, the idea of a Leaders for the Future program emerged. What was envisaged was an innovative program that would be of interest to Catholic school teachers under the age of thirty and would provide a further motivation for them to remain in the profession and make a difference in education.

Specifically, the Leaders for the Future program was a direct response to: the shortage of suitable applicants for principalship; the ageing of the present cohort of Principals; the practice of not appointing many Principals before the age of 40; the need to stem the loss of young teachers from the profession within five years of graduation; the development of leadership potential in enthusiastic young teachers interested in advancement; and, the need to focus the attention of future leaders on the mission of the Catholic Church in education.

Getting Started

A letter inviting all teachers in Sydney Catholic Schools under the age of 30, 'who can imagine themselves as school Principals at some future time' to register for an information session to learn more about school leadership was the catalyst for this new venture. Some 272 teachers, representing 27% of all teachers in the system under 30 attended the information sessions and their support for the proposed Leaders for the Future program was overwhelming. A decision was taken immediately to begin development of a 30-hour program that would be equivalent to a single unit in a Master of Education degree.

A planning group consisting of senior Catholic Education Office staff and nine young teachers was established to design a creative and stimulating program. This group established broad content areas and generated names of some potential presenters. A decision was made to be creative and design a program with a focus on the personal and professional development of the teachers and on leadership skills that could be used in the classroom and with staff. In contrast to other Catholic School Leadership Programs, this new program was not aimed at the preparation for a particular leadership position.

Content

The following topics were determined: Embracing Curriculum Leadership; The Leading and Learning Equation; Faith Leadership; Leadership Styles in the Modern Organisation; Unlocking my Leadership Potential; Developing Leadership Capacity; Relationships, Relationships, Relationships; Viewpoints and Counter Viewpoints; Navigating the River of Change; Personality Profiling for Leadership; The Changing Face of Catholic Education in Australia. For each topic a presenter was identified, representing established female and male community leaders who were considered inspirational and able to contribute to the professional development of the participants. The presenters included: a former head of a national curriculum corporation; lecturers in Religious Education and faith formation; a former NSW Government parliamentary leader; a corporate speaker and motivator; a superintendent of police; a high profile NRL Rugby League coach; a recently retired Olympic and Commonwealth Games athlete; a current international mediator and negotiator; a personality profile workshop leader and a Director of Catholic Schools. Presenters were well briefed and the sessions were to include a lecture component, complemented by workshop activities in table groups. It was understood that the sessions needed to be enjoyable if the interest and attendance of the teachers was to be maintained.

Structure

The program was launched with the first two sessions at the Darling Harbour Convention Centre on a Saturday in October 2005. Some 265 young teachers commenced the program. Two inspirational presenters, an excellent venue and a fine lunch ensured the program got away to a good start.

The next nine sessions were held on school days from 4:00pm to 7:00pm, spread over ten months. Two additional sessions were offered in the October 2006 school holidays to enable those who had missed a topic to complete sufficient units to graduate (ten units required for award of Certificate on completion of the program). In fact, many of the young leaders who had already completed the course requirement went on to enrol in the two additional units.

This could be seen as evidence that the program had been a worth-while experience for these future leaders. At an early stage Australian Catholic University was engaged to evaluate the program and to provide an opinion as to the appropriateness of the program for other school systems.

Evaluation

At the final session each participant was invited to indicate in a confidential survey the extent to which each of the units had contributed to his/her development as a leader.

The responses are very encouraging and testify to the value of the program. Ninety percent of the young leaders indicated their intention of applying for a leadership position at an appropriate time. Ninety-one percent of the young leaders now have a better understanding of what is expected of leaders in Catholic education and 89% are more confident about their future in Catholic education.

The confidence of the participants in their own leadership abilities had improved (91% agreed), while the insights gained, had already been used at school (84% agreed) and outside school.

To gain a measure of the impact of the program, Principals of all Sydney Catholic schools were surveyed. They indicated that they have seen some early results. Seventy-five percent indicated that course participants were already demonstrating new leadership skills and were perceived to be more confident in the classroom. Seventy percent of Principals perceived the course participants to be now more committed to a teaching vocation and 85% responded that their teachers are now more likely to apply for a leadership position in the next 3-5 years.

Retaining the enthusiasm for and interest in leadership in these program all participants were invited to join an ongoing group that would work with the Catholic Education Office, Sydney in seeking further development opportunities during the next two years. So far 60 graduates of the program have nominated to be part of this continuing group.

Two hundred-and-twenty young leaders completed the program and received recognition at a Graduation Dinner on 24 October 2006.

Going Forward

Looking ahead, it is clear that employing authorities in Australia will need to work hard to ensure a steady supply of men and women ready to apply for principalships. Growing Australian Government and NSW Government intervention in schooling, with increasing compliance and accountability demands, will be a disincentive for some potential leaders.

As an employer of some 1 50 Principals, I am attracted to the idea of appointing some much younger applicants who exhibit considerable potential for leadership. This raises a number of human resource issues. In an earlier period many Religious as young as thirty were appointed Principal. After a couple of years, some of these women and men left principalship and returned to the classroom. In fast- tracking the appointment of some young lay leaders there would need to be some escape clause for both employer and employee. The issue of salary would need to be considered carefully in the event of a young Principal not continuing in this leadership position.

The development of the next generation of leaders for Catholic schools is clearly a responsibility of the present generation. The Leaders for the Future initiative is one way of exercising this responsibility. Today more than 20% of young teaches in Sydney Catholic schools are serious enough about future principalship possibilities to have completed a substantial development program.

References are available by emailing the author at: kelvin.canavan@ceo.syd.catholic.edu.au.