




Voices of Our Elders

Sponsored by the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association

Editor: **Tracy Barill**



“ Leadership in education requires humility, resilience, and a good sense of humour. Remembering those who led before us, supporting those who will lead after us, respecting everyone’s contribution, and celebrating our Catholic traditions—these are the building blocks of a thriving school community. And if we can do all that with a smile, a kind word, and a little laughter, we’re well on our way to making a lasting impact. Because at the end of the day, education isn’t just about facts and figures; it’s about inspiring lives. ”

– T J Fauteux



Introduction

Deuteronomy 32:7 – *Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you.*

The term “Elder” is commonly associated with Indigenous culture where those “with enough life experience and knowledge of Indigenous traditions to offer guidance and teachings grounded within that experience and knowledge”¹ are revered in the community. It is a great honour amongst First Nation, Inuit and Senator Métis to be given the title of Elder. Knowledge keepers, storytellers, healers and spiritual guides; Elders play a critical role in ensuring cultural continuity from one generation to the next.

Our Catholic faith embraces a similar concept of Elders as pillars of wisdom, tradition and spiritual strength. The communion of saints is just one example of our deeply held belief in the interconnectedness of the faithful across time and space. As Catholics, we inherently value deep listening to the voices of past generations, understanding “that in the New Testament, “saints” means not canonized saints ... but rather all the people of God.”²

At a time when 60% of Catholic Supervisory Officers and Directors of Education in Ontario are in their first five years in the role, OCSOA recognizes the need to preserve and share the wisdom and insights of former influential leaders in our Catholic Education Community. Collectively their professional contributions over decades of service have formed the shape of Catholic Education in Ontario. Acknowledging today’s complex challenges, the 2024-2025 OCSOA Board of Directors has launched “Voices of our Elders” to challenge and inspire all leaders as they continue this sacred work.

The reflections and advice of those who have previously travelled the path of leadership in Catholic Education are offered as support for the learning, growth, and professional practice of today’s OCSOA members. If nothing else, we hope that this compilation will serve as a reminder to current stewards of Catholic Education that they are part of a long tradition and they are never alone.

1 Indigenous Elders in Canada Article by [Karl S. Hele](#) Published Online January 14, 2021

2 What is the Communion of Saints - [December 2014](#) issue of U.S. Catholic (Vol. 79, No. 12, page 46)

Grounded in Faith and Values

Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

"Rooted in Faith" and Servant Leadership were two main leadership mantras I relied on during my career. Faith grounds you: words, behaviour, and integrity ensure you do not shy away from challenging, complex situations. Building consensus and collaborative decision-making benefits students, parents, staff and trustees. What you say, how you behave/act and the importance of personal connections help set the tone to engage and motivate others. "Leadership is spiritual work" (M. Wheatley) Reflecting daily on the OCSOA prayer is important. "It is simply impossible to lead without the aid of prayer" (Saint John Chrysostom).

– Corrie Gicante

After reflecting on my career, I can truthfully say that I was always at my absolute best when I was fully present to my situation and to those around me. When I wasn't present and when I wasn't working in alignment with my values and strengths, my service to others would inevitably suffer.

Be true to yourself. To be a good leader, you must be willing to put yourself out there, no matter the consequences. To do this successfully, you must be present, you must know your strengths (and deficiencies), and you must be rooted in your values. It isn't the easiest of paths to follow (I have stumbled more than once), but to me it is the surest way to do the best that you can for the people that you serve.

– John Mombourquette

This period in the history of the world and this moment in time is marked with rapid change and radical challenges to the institutions we have cherished for decades. The changes are real and the challenges not without warrant. To be successful in this environment, today's leaders in publicly funded Catholic education should be confident in their decision making so long as they rely on two timeless values: putting what is the very best for the student as the determining factor of every decision and visibly demonstrating every day our individual and collective faith in Jesus Christ.

– Frank Piddisi

The more things change, the more they remain the same. In a statement about Catholic Education Monsignor Dennis Murphy, posited that “We will destroy ourselves from within”. Each time I had to deal with those issues that tend to divide the Catholic community, I had this quote in mind. Controversy will always exist, and detractors will always seek our demise. We should not make it easy for them but rather strive for consensus as a Catholic community on key matters of faith.

The successful defence of Bill 30 in the late eighties meant that at long last Catholic schools were fully funded! I recall the words of a highly regarded Director of Education of the time who said - “Not on my watch”. His advice was meant to focus me on understanding the magnitude of responsibility that comes with the role of Director of Education. My paraphrase would be “Don’t mess up”.

– Kevin Kobus

In my leadership roles as Principal and Superintendent of Education I maintained a commitment to 5 pillars:

Shepherd Leadership - leading from the front when necessary, guiding from behind to nurture new leaders, shifting roles as required, demonstrating shared responsibility;

Integrity - openly stating I did not have all the answers, seeking input from others humbly, using that input wisely, trying not to let ego effect genuine relationships;

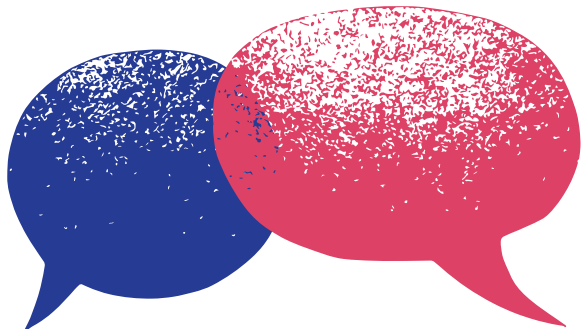
Listening - speaking less, respectfully staying engaged with the messages and intentions of others;

Smiling - bringing joy and humour to each occasion, authentically modelling a welcoming humanity; and

3 Fs - prioritizing Faith, Family and Friends to lead a balanced life.

These reflect the values I cherish- responsibility, availability, adaptability, quality and dignity, all of which are based in our Catholic teachings and demonstrated by Jesus as The Teacher.

– Jackie Bajus (HWCDSB)





Building Community

Hebrews 10:24-25: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Leadership is both a science and an art. Those called to lead within our Catholic school systems must navigate these two dimensions daily as part of their ministry. The goal of leadership is to make the mission of Catholic education visible in every interaction—with students, staff, families, and the broader community. At the heart of this mission is the recognition that leadership is fundamentally about relationships. We cannot lead or transform a school system unless people are in relationship with us. Positional authority holds little value without connection. What truly inspires is a shared passion for Catholic education and the willingness to be a cheerleader for the system's vision.

Our leadership role is sacred: we are called to bring people into relationship with Jesus. This includes students, families, and staff. Ideally, when others look at our school system, they see not just excellence, but the face of Christ in our decisions and actions.

Leadership is ultimately about service—not merely borrowing from corporate strategies or management theories, but embracing the deep, enduring work of serving our mission and community with humility and resolve. As Jesus said to Peter, “When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old, someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). Leadership often takes us to places we did not anticipate, but we go with faith, trusting that we are led by God's hand.

– John B Kostoff

As Director of Education, I was privileged to lead transformative initiatives that built strong relationships with the Ontario Catholic Directors of Education and the Ministry of Education through active participation in meetings such as the NOEL, the OCSOA AGM and the Regional MOE sessions. Serving on the executive for OCSOA and as vice chair of the ECCODE expanded my network and influence allowing me to advocate directly with the Ministry of Education for the unique needs of our region, secure funding for a new elementary school, a Multi-Skills Training Centre, and enhanced support for Indigenous education. My efforts also facilitated a stronger relationship between KCDSB Trustees and Ministry of Education staff resulting in additional funding.

Educational networking improved the effectiveness of KCDSB, provided the Ministry of Education with a greater understanding of the unique needs in Northern Ontario and of Catholic School Boards.

– Dr. Allan Craig

Know your culture. Get to know the system's history, its communities and the diocese. Learn to watch and listen deeply thus laying the groundwork for success when you do engage in change. Select and build your own team. I was fortunate to serve in a board that gave the Director the mandate to build and develop the leadership team without interference. Long before it was mandated, the board only concerned itself with one hire, the Director of Education. That's very empowering!

– Roger Lawler

Catholic schools are steeped in traditions that connect us to our faith and community. Celebrating these traditions—whether it's Mass, feast days, or service projects—reinforces our shared values and purpose. These moments of reflection and celebration are opportunities to reinforce the importance of faith, service, and compassion. And yes, sometimes tradition can be humorous, like the time I saw a student trying to “dress up” as a saint for a school event—complete with a homemade halo! It's these lighthearted moments that remind us school isn't just about academics; it's about forming hearts and minds.

– John Fauteux

Being a Champion for the Vulnerable

Galatians 3:28: *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

A Director of Education's leadership should focus on fostering an inclusive, innovative, and student-centred learning environment. Prioritize clear communication with students and their families, staff, and trustees ensuring that expectations and goals are understood and aligned. Stay adaptable to evolving educational trends, incorporating technology and blended learning approaches where appropriate to enhance engagement and accessibility. Be a champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ensure that all students, regardless of background or ability, have access to high-quality education and support services. Create an environment where students feel safe, valued, and empowered to succeed.

– Domenic Scuglia

Respect in education is non-negotiable. When we recognize and appreciate hard work, we foster a positive environment where everyone feels valued. Respect isn't just a kind word; it's showing up on time, listening actively, and acknowledging the effort behind every lesson plan.

– John Fauteux

A strong focus on Indigenous education was a cornerstone of my leadership. At KCDSB, 25% of students come from Treaty Three Indigenous communities. As Director, I spearheaded initiatives aimed at overcoming the educational barriers faced by Indigenous students. Carefully recruiting the right people, investing in teachers to allow time for collaboration and professional learning, initiating and supporting principal leadership and developing partnerships with the University was critical to the significant success that was achieved.

At the secondary school level, we developed programs to address gaps in Math and Literacy, helping Indigenous students, with credit deficits to catch up and graduate. Mount Carmel Catholic Elementary School also achieved outstanding results in the Grade 3 EQAO tests. This success was the result of collaboration, innovative teaching, and a deep school and system commitment to Indigenous education. The Ministry of Education recognized our impact by inviting an Indigenous professor from Queens University to document and share our approach with other Boards.

My learning and leading Indigenous Education initiatives and practices with teachers, principals, and superintendents made me a more successful Catholic leader and Director and KCDSB a more successful school system.

– Dr. Allan Craig

Always Learning

Proverbs 1:5: Let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance.

The Board of Trustees must have a good understanding of their role as governors. Given that trustees are elected, there is no assurance they will come to the table with any experience in education or governance. Directors should establish joint professional development opportunities for Trustees and the Senior Team to build understanding in a non-threatening and informative manner. There are many agencies available that will provide that knowledge such as OCSTA.

– Dominic Scuglia

During my tenure as Director, it was imperative to prioritize our higher purpose of ensuring the present learners are prepared to address their future. This allowed us to accept the things we could not change, have the courage to change the things we could and the wisdom to know the difference. Truthfully, the Serenity Prayer guided us during challenging times, enabled us to keep our focus, and prevented us from spending time on other people’s agendas or activities that would not significantly impact a collaborative learning environment.

In a whole district learning environment, everyone is a learner. To foster such an environment, it is necessary to recognize and respect the experience and wisdom of others before proposing changes. As Director of Education, you exemplify lifelong learning in action.

A district-wide focus on everyone— students, teachers, administrators, and parents as lifelong learners turns school communities into engaged and vibrant hubs of activity focused on student achievement. Remember, you don’t have to take people home for dinner, but you must find their strengths (talents) for the good of all.

– Susan LaRosa

Surround yourself with brilliant people; empower them to lead from their expertise and learn from them! I have always loved debating ideas, sharing my thoughts and having them vigorously challenged by others. As Director I had to actively practice holding my tongue. Sometimes, even people in leadership positions will hesitate to contradict their boss. Regardless of my own comfort with dissenting opinions, when I wanted to know what people really thought, I had to let them speak first and be humble enough to listen.

– Tracy Barill

Integrity and Accountability

Luke 16:10: *Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.*

Be a Catholic servant leader who leads with faith, passion and conviction. Be visible and available. Daytime is for people - nighttime is for paper. Earn respect and trust by being a Catholic role model for those you lead and serve. Be true to the core beliefs and values that you were hired to exemplify, no matter the circumstances. Lead with truthful and compassionate integrity. Have the courage to mean what you say and say what you mean. Learn, respect and value 'big-T' traditions in the system that you serve. Take action that confirms and promotes the unique Catholic educational identity. Innovate – take risks to support students; evaluate and have an exit plan. Set high expectations for yourself, those you lead and students. Motivate and inspire. Focus on details; be prepared; have a plan, rehearse and constantly evaluate performance. Gather all the facts in making student-first decisions. Commit to decisions but be prepared to adapt to new information. A leader is not all things to all people. What is true today, may not be true tomorrow. Communicate through direct and truthful transparency. Celebrate achievements. Have fun! Cherish the opportunity to impact the lives of students and contribute to the rich history of Catholic education. Leaders briefly occupy the seat of those that came before them and for those who will follow.

– John Crocco

Your words, behaviour, and integrity ensure you do not shy away from challenging, complex situations. Work hard to build consensus and achieve collaborative decisions. What you say, how you behave/act and the importance of personal connections help set the tone and engages and motivates others.

Invite stakeholders to work collaboratively while embracing high expectations. Listen closely to those who share your opinion and closer to those who do not. Walk school halls, observe and listen. Stay connected to students, teachers and learning. Build trust by demonstrating competence, character, and compassion.

– Corrie Gicante

Although there are many leadership “buzzwords” that get used freely, I feel it is the application of those words that makes all the difference. It is imperative to know your personal values and hold firm to them. Model what you expect and allow others to see you for who you are (honesty, integrity). Share gratitude for all successes as they are not individual endeavours. Take ownership when things do not go as hoped (responsibility). Be yourself; take the work seriously yet don’t take yourself too seriously. Listen to all the voices around you and seek counsel from a variety of sources prior to making decisions while keeping your sense of humour; then make the decisions you feel are best for the organization (humility, motivation). Lastly, live in community, celebrate, be hospitable, and support all around you. By ensuring the success of those you lead, you are in turn assisting the team in meeting the goals that have been set.

– Ab Falconi

As I look back on individual leaders in so many fields, one thing stood out as common to all - they were not self-absorbed, or self-serving, but focused on their quest, and the audience they served. They were visionaries. The truly great ones were never constrained by the endless tides of ever-changing theories of leadership, or for that matter, dependent on the whims of others to define them. How were they different? They had an uncanny belief in themselves, self-affirming, self-reflective, innovative, risk takers, constantly trying to improve; passionate about life, doing the right thing, despite the consequences, and at the end of the day, they remained grounded. They did not need to be a part of cliques to feel valued. They held strong views, but did not impose them on others, taking a more collaborative non-judgmental approach, embracing all in a spirit of love, kindness, compassion and acceptance. And when the sun set on their career, they were able to bask in the warm glow of helping others and making a difference. What’s more Catholic than that?

– Norman Damaren

Adaptability and Innovation

Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I loved working in Special Education and as a Family of Schools Superintendent. Each day was an opportunity to be deeply grounded in the *raison d’être* for what we do... to nurture all our students to become the person God intends them to be. Our students with exceptionalities, and those who work with them were the source of many lessons learned. I learned quickly, if Plan “A” doesn’t work, don’t worry, there are 25 other letters. In my experience, the unique needs of some of our students could at times feel insurmountable. Enter a team of professionals... Teachers, Administrators, Speech Pathologists, Hearing specialists, Program support, Educational Assistants, parents...time after time, I witnessed true professional collaboration creating pathways of success. THE LESSON: There are unlimited ways to solve any problem. When you are facing challenges, step back, reassess what you are really trying to accomplish, and see if there is a different path to the desired outcome.

– Tamara Nugent

Throughout my leadership journey I tried to adopt a stance of humility, seeing my role as a steward of Catholic Education and the system I was serving. My goal was to honour those who had gone before me and do my best to leave my portfolio and/or the system in as good, and hopefully a better place than when I inherited the responsibility. That ethos informed how I worked with my colleagues and became a lens for virtually all decision making. I tried to “walk my talk” and not expect more from others than what I was willing to model myself.

I firmly believe that we must be true to our vocation as Catholic educators and be guided by a strong moral compass. This means having the courage to take principled positions, guided by faith and do what is in the best interests of the students and staff we serve. I valued strategic thinking and always tried to have our priorities top of mind when faced with a difficult decision. This also meant taking risks and being willing to listen to and consider dissenting voices, because if we all agree all the time, someone is redundant.

– Loretta Notten

Support and Mentorship

1 Thessalonians 5:11: *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Don't be afraid to admit you need help. If you are experiencing difficulties, connect with a mentor or coach to help you. Be an expert in at least one very specific thing. Share this gift generously.

– Tamara Nugent

The history of any school (system) is woven with stories of leaders who laid the foundations of excellence—those who dedicated their careers to nurturing young minds and building up community. Remembering their efforts isn't just about nostalgia; it's about honouring their legacy and learning from their wisdom. Recognizing their contributions keeps us grounded and reminds us that leadership is a marathon, not a sprint. Supporting future leaders means mentoring with patience, sharing our experiences (both the victories and the lessons learned), and giving them space to grow. It's like passing the baton in a relay race—if we drop it, the whole team suffers. And let's be honest: sometimes, the best leadership lessons come from those “oops” moments we'd rather forget, but which teach resilience and humility. After all, in education, we're all lifelong learners—even the leaders!

– John Fauteux

People without strong opinions don't typically end up in leadership. Ironically however, to be a future-focused leader you need to concentrate on building the organization by adopting a supporting role for your team as they learn. Simply giving direction may feel more comfortable but leaders who are interested in long-term system success need to adopt a coaching stance, create safe environments for risk-taking, be mentors and give their people room both to “fail forward” and to flourish.

– Tracy Barill



Most of what I learned about leadership occurred in my first two years as a vice principal. Fortunately, I was paired with an experienced Principal who believed in collaborative decision-making and that the legitimacy of a leader derives from their actions rather than their words. I watched as he dealt with all the stakeholders in the school with humility, common sense, and a willingness to see both sides of any argument. He was always transparent, never played politics, and was always very aware of what was good for the students. He willingly shared decision-making with me and encouraged me to experience all aspects of my new job. He was always available for any and all questions and treated me as a partner, often dispensing wisdom through stories of his own time as vice principal. He taught me that leadership, like good pedagogy is a shared experience, and the willingness to keep learning new things is the life blood of good teaching. When he implemented a new mathematics program at the school (about 7 years ahead of the Ministry), he went and taught classes in each division for the next three months. Our divisional meetings on mathematics were based on shared experiences and practical discussions on what worked and did not work. In his dealings not only with teachers, but parents, caretakers and students, he was always aware that everyone had an important role to play in creating a successful school. I carried his lessons on leadership with me the rest of my teaching career.

– John Shain

Engage a spiritual mentor: leadership literature outlines the need for leaders to have a mentor. My mentor was also my spiritual director. In a Catholic system, the Director is the Faith leader. YOU are responsible for setting the tone regarding the spiritual life of the school system! I was fortunate to have such a spiritual mentor; one I met with often; one who became a confidential listener and one who challenged me to ensure I was true to myself and the role I held.

– Roger Lawler



Companions on the Journey

Luke 10:1: *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.*

"If you want to go fast, travel alone. If you want to go far, travel together."

– African proverb

I gained the following leadership insights both as a Director of Education and most recently as a lay delegate to the Synod of Bishops.

Building Culture – establish throughout the district a culture of welcome, crossing the road to meet others where they are at and patient accompaniment, founded on the Gospels of the Good Samaritan and the Road to Emmaus.

Listening to Understand – ask ourselves *"Are we truly listening or are we just waiting to speak?"*

Being Adaptive – once we have listened, *"Are we willing to be changed by what we have heard?"*

Calm and unbounded optimism – share optimism emerging from the confidence that as a team we will be successful in finding creative solutions to the pressing issues facing us. *"Fog lifts, clouds break, storms pass, and sunshine follows rain."*

Personal Communication that Connects – communicate regularly to the system showcasing happenings throughout the district. Make time for office and school visits.

Grace – Grant others grace -- patience, forgiveness and understanding -- rather than judgement. *"Giving everyone the benefit of good intentions."*

Prayer and Reflection – Grant yourselves time for daily prayer and reflection. *"In the silence of the heart God speaks."* (Mother Teresa)

– Linda Staudt

Acknowledgements

Leadership can be a lonely journey with many challenges. As Superintendents and Directors, we are called, not only to manage large organizations but to set the tone and provide spiritual direction that inspires system commitment to excellence in faith-based education. This is an endeavour that can only be fully realized through the efforts of a whole community.

As part of its mission to further the interests of Catholic Education and to promote the professional development and welfare of its members, the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association supports the ongoing involvement of retirees – our community elders - through the Retired Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (ROCSEA). True vocations do not simply end when a person steps away from active employment. The members of ROCSEA continue in their dedication to Catholic Education and willingness to provide support, guidance and prayers for those in the field.

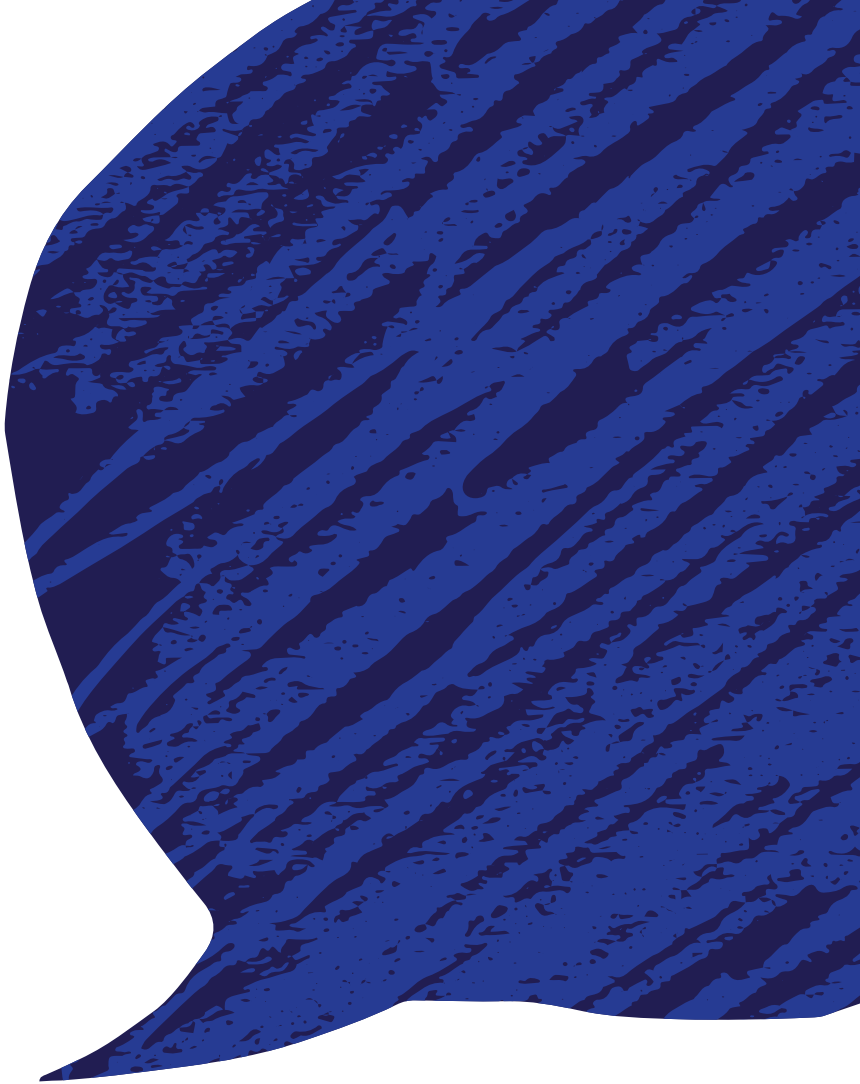
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- Jackie Bajus:** Superintendent, HWCDSB (2002-2014)
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REFLECTION

What leadership wisdom have you gained from your time in Catholic Education that you would pass on to the next generation?



730 Courtneypark Dr. W.
Mississauga, Ontario
L5W 1L9

T: 905.564.8206
F: 905.564.8210
E: ocsoa@ocsoa.ca
W: www.ocsoa.ca