

# How can **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP** transform education?

AN EDUCATION EXPERT DISCUSSION





# HOW CAN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TRANSFORM EDUCATION?

On 17th March 2023, the Global Independent Schools Association (GISA) hosted a global call with teachers and education experts from around the world to discuss how school leadership can transform education. It was one in a series of calls that bring together school leaders, education experts, and business representatives to discuss key issues affecting education.

## THE PANEL

### HOST



#### **Antônio Gois**

*O Globo* education journalist and founder of the Brazilian Association of Education Reporters

### GUESTS



#### **Megan Tschannen-Moran**

Professor of Educational Leadership at William & Mary School of Education in the USA



#### **Kavita Sanghvi**

Global Teacher Prize Ambassador and school principal in India



#### **Rob Ford**

CEO and Director of Heritage International School in Moldova

## INTRODUCTION

**Antônio Gois** introduced the discussion with an observation from his own educational reporting comparing the work of school principals in six countries. While successful school systems differ from each other in a variety of ways, they all have good leadership in common. It is therefore worthwhile, he argued, to investigate the characteristics that set great school leaders apart, as well as to examine how the organisational approach of different school systems plays a part. Throughout the discussion, panellists shared their experiences of leaders who had inspired them, and commented on the qualities they felt defined a good school leader.

# TOP TAKEAWAYS



## 1 GOOD SCHOOL LEADERS INTERACT WITH EVERYONE

One of the key qualities of an effective school leader is their preparedness to get out from behind their desk on a daily basis. **Kavita Sanghvi** cited an inspirational school principal who “meets every student, every parent across the whole year”, and **Megan Tschannen-Moran** emphasised that, **even when school leaders had brief interactions with individuals, an interested leader meeting teachers, staff, students and parents can help unify the school community.**



## 2 PERSONAL QUALITIES THAT BUILD TRUST

Trust is the most important quality to build for a leader – in education or any other field. **Megan Tschannen-Moran** noted that in assessing whether a school leader embodies trust, people ask five questions: **“Is the person benevolent? Are they honest? Are they open? Are they reliable? And are they competent?”** These qualities reduce defensiveness among both teachers and students, as well as improving focus on learning tasks.



## 3 COLLABORATING TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

For leaders, the ability to collaborate with teachers both inside and outside one’s school is crucial to success. **Rob Ford** mentioned how important it was to “get out of our own comfort zones [...] and see what they’re doing in Indonesia or the United States or Argentina”, as well as emphasising that global networks allow school principals to confide in each other, to **“speak frankly with, openly with, share problems, be non-judgmental”**. **Kavita Sanghvi** saw the benefit of networks as providing “a glimpse into other schools”, as well as the opportunity to ask other leaders how they would approach problems based on their different experiences.



## 4 COMMUNICATION HELPS SCHOOLS THRIVE

Good communication – both throughout the school estate and with external stakeholders – is another key factor in successful leadership. One participant described a school leader they had known who had inadvertently created a toxic environment simply through poor communication – because staff “never knew what was going on [...] they were told one thing one week and then the system changed differently the second week”.



## 5 CONSULTATION MUST BE GENUINE

Shared decision-making and the ability to listen are crucial to a successful school culture. **Megan Tschannen-Moran** noted that holding consultative meetings when decisions had already been taken rarely fooled the participants, and that it was better to **“be honest about what level of decision-making teachers or other subordinates have”**. **Kavita Sanghvi** described how the success of her months-long school uniform consultation flowed from staff, parents and students all having input: when “stakeholders [...] feel that they’re part of the decision-making, the trust is developed.”



## 6 SUCCESS FLOWS FROM A HEALTHY CULTURE

Shared decision making and the ability to listen are crucial to a successful school culture. Panelists noted that **holding consultative meetings when decisions had already been taken was bound to erode trust and, furthermore, was usually obvious to the participants**. One panellist gave the example of a months-long consultation on introducing a new school uniform that succeeded because staff, parents and students all had input – as well as complete visibility of how the project progressed from start to finish.

## 7 FOR SCHOOL LEADERS, AUTONOMY IS NECESSARY

While school leaders must have proper oversight, they also need the freedom to change their institutions for the better. **Megan Tschannen-Moran** argued that **a balance was needed between giving school leaders freedom and having rules in place**. She noted cases where officials had stripped schools of their autonomy because of bad behaviour by school leaders, and had not reinstated it long after the school leaders had left: “We’re still left with the rules and regulations that emerge from their bad behaviour.”

While acknowledging the need to hold schools to account for poor performance, **Megan Tschannen-Moran** argued that removing a school’s autonomy permanently could “shut down” expertise and creativity needed within its learning ecosystem.



## 8 SUCCESSION PLANNING IS CRUCIAL

School leaders will not be in their positions forever – and they must plan for their successor to be able to hit the ground running. **Rob Ford** cited research looking at the “three- to seven-year period as being the optimum” in terms of length in post for an effective school leader, and emphasised that the aim was to “[hand] it over to the new school leader and a new team who were able to then build on the work”. **Encouraging others toward leadership positions was also seen as a healthy habit in a successful school environment**.

## ABOUT GISA

The Global Independent Schools Association represents, co-ordinates, and gives a voice to the global independent education sector - which educates 350 million children around the world.

We want to showcase the impact of the global independent education sector, and become a resource for the world's governments and international institutions to tap into, talk to, and, in times of crisis, lean on.

As a member of this association, you will join our network of educators, executives, public policy experts, faith leaders, philanthropists and more. You will be able to participate in GISA Advocacy Initiatives, Global Alliances, Working Groups and Events. As a leader you can help to shape our global agenda, gain access to influential decision makers and leaders, and strengthen your global and local networks.

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