

LEADERSHIP LENS

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*This
month's Interview
with*

DEBORAH
LONSDALE- WALKER
STUARTHOLME
SCHOOL



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THE PATHWAY TO LEADERSHIP

“Having people to guide me professionally and personally has been essential in navigating both the highs and the challenging moments of my career.”

Deborah Lonsdale-Walker serves as the Deputy Principal of Stuartholme School, bringing with her years of experience in various educational leadership roles.

From her early days as a drama teacher to her rise through the ranks, Deb has consistently demonstrated a passion for shaping school culture and advancing educational practices. Her journey reflects a unique combination of policy expertise, relational leadership, and an unwavering commitment to empowering young people to become confident, capable adults.

A Dynamic Leadership Journey

Beginning her career as a Drama teacher and Head of Department, Deb quickly demonstrated her aptitude for leadership. However, it was her decade long experience working in government that significantly shaped her approach. Working as Director of Policy within the Education Department, she managed influential projects such as the COAG plan for literacy and numeracy, gaining critical skills in governance, project management, and policy.

‘My pathway to leadership has been a little different,’ she recalls, highlighting that stepping outside the traditional school environment gave her an alternate perspective. ‘Stepping back into the schooling sector gave me the courage to be much more open to career progression. I had to leave to develop the skills in governance and project management that simply weren’t available within schools at that time.’ This time away also deepened her understanding of the policy framework impacting schools, a unique lens she has brought to various leadership roles since.

Returning to the school environment, Deb embraced the opportunity to merge her newfound skills with her passion for teaching, becoming an advocate for change within the schooling sector. Her blend of executive level policy knowledge and hands-on teaching experience has allowed her to lead with a balance of strategic foresight and a grounded understanding of day to day school life.

Balancing Personal and Professional Life

A devoted mother of two university aged children and married for nearly 30 years, Deb’s career choices have consistently been guided by her values. Her commitment to family has remained at the forefront of her decisions, often requiring her to navigate difficult choices to uphold her role as both a parent and a professional.

‘It’s been tough to balance all of those things at times,’ she admits. Deb explains the importance of building an ‘artillery of support’. This “artillery” includes a personal career coach, professional mentors, and strong professional networks. Deb has worked with her career coach for seven years and consults with a psychologist twice a term. ‘That support has been invaluable,’ she explains. ‘Having people to guide me professionally and personally has been essential in navigating both the highs and the challenging moments of my career.’



“It’s really important to me that aspiring leaders see roles like mine as not only achievable but attractive,” she states.

“Teaching keeps you connected with that sense of purpose and the ‘why.’”

This commitment to balance is something Deb encourages in her staff, ensuring they feel supported in their personal lives while excelling professionally. She acknowledges that the pressures of educational leadership can be overwhelming, but her emphasis on a supportive, balanced workplace culture serves as an example to those she leads.

Keeping Motivation Alive

At the heart of Deb’s motivation is her deep belief in the transformative power of education. She describes teaching and connecting with students via the vocation of education as her enduring source of inspiration, recounting the joy she finds in teaching Year 7 drama. ‘On the toughest days, I walk into my Year 7 drama class, and they’re excited. It’s a chance to learn from them as much as they learn from me,’ she shares. Teaching, for Deb, is a way to reconnect with the core purpose of her work and a reminder of the joy and energy that drives her role at Stuartholme.

She explains that, in many ways, teaching Drama keeps her grounded: ‘Teaching keeps you connected with that sense of purpose and the “why.”’ Her hands-on involvement in the classroom is a reminder of her purpose as an educator and reinforces her commitment to student centred leadership.

Leadership in Action

Deb’s leadership approach is based in a philosophy of hope and empowerment, a perspective she aims to demonstrate in every interaction, from formal meetings to hallway greetings. She believes in “lifting people up” and in the power of small, meaningful interactions.

This ethos is especially important to her as a female leader in a field where women have historically been underrepresented in senior roles.

When it comes to mentoring aspiring female leaders, Deb emphasises the importance of authenticity, loyalty, and courage. ‘Show people who you are, not just what you know,’ she advises, drawing on her own experiences in balancing career advancement with integrity. Additionally, she stresses the importance of frank advice, a principle she developed during her time in government. ‘Good governance requires offering that alternate perspective, even if it’s challenging,’ she says. This approach has shaped her relationships with colleagues and particularly with her current principal, where a foundation of mutual respect allows for honest, sometimes difficult conversations that ultimately strengthen school governance.

Hiring for Values and Alignment

Deb places a high value on hiring teachers who can foster a relational and student-centred environment, qualities she views as essential to Stuartholme’s mission. ‘We prioritise teachers who place students at the centre of all they do,’ she states, explaining that candidates who emphasise relational skills and a passion for empowering young women stand out in the hiring process.

This focus on relational teaching is a reflection of Stuartholme’s Sacred Heart charism, which emphasises faith, respect, community and personal growth.

‘We’re committed to forming young women who can then shape the world,’ she notes.

By embedding this mission into the hiring process, Deb ensures that every new teacher is aligned with the school’s core values, creating a consistent, nurturing culture that supports both staff and students.

Innovating and Evolving

Deb believes that schools must seek innovation and be constantly evolving to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. She emphasises the need to challenge traditional models and to encourage forward-thinking practices. ‘Schools that don’t reimagine their models will be left behind,’ she asserts, advocating for a curriculum that prepares students for future jobs that may not yet exist.

At Stuartholme, this vision is actively pursued through partnerships with leading institutions, including Harvard University, and initiatives such as the Cultures of Thinking program.



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This commitment to innovation is balanced by a dedication to the school’s core values. ‘Maintaining our Sacred Heart mission while disrupting the edges keeps us ahead of the curve,’ she explains, noting that this approach allows the school to embrace new educational strategies without losing its identity.

Looking to the Future

Deb is acutely aware of the national and international challenges facing education, particularly around talent recruitment and retention. However, she remains optimistic, emphasizing that educational leaders have a responsibility to model an achievable and fulfilling career path. ‘It’s really important to me that aspiring leaders see roles like mine as not only achievable but attractive,’ she states.

This mindset drives her approach to leadership at Stuartholme and in her role as Chair of the Iona College Board, where she encourages the leadership team to cultivate a balance between work and personal fulfilment.

Looking ahead, Deb sees a future where education is increasingly shaped by flexibility and student agency. She believes that reimagining the traditional school day and embracing new models will be essential to meeting the needs of future generations.

‘Schools must be willing to challenge the industrial model,’ she argues, ‘and commit to preparing students with skills to navigate a much more complex future.’

Deborah Lonsdale-Walker’s leadership journey is a testament to the power of adaptability, courage, and a purpose-driven approach to education.

Her story offers a model of how innovative thinking, balanced with a strong sense of mission, can create meaningful change in schools and in the lives of young people. As Deb looks toward the future, her focus remains clear in striving to prepare students not just for the world as it is but for the world they will help shape.

What are you most proud of?

“What I’m most proud of is staying true to the guiding principles I set for myself. Looking back over 30 years in education, I’ve always worked to support young people in making a positive impact whether in the broader world or just in someone else’s life. I’m also incredibly proud to have raised a son and a daughter who, while not driven by wealth, have chosen paths where they can truly make a difference. And on a personal note, I’m about to celebrate my 30th wedding anniversary, a milestone that means a lot to me.”



Deborah Lonsdale-Walker is the Deputy Principal at Stuartholme School, Brisbane, QLD. The school is a Catholic all-girls Sacred Heart school with a heritage over 100 years old.
www.stuartholme.com

Connect with Deborah on [Linkedin](#)