

LEADERSHIP LENS

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*This
month's
interview*

DAVID
JOHNSTON

PRINCIPAL
CHRISTIAN
BROTHERS
COLLEGE,
ADELAIDE, SA

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ADAPTABILITY, DEDICATION, AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING

“They’ve got to be a humble person; they can’t take themselves too seriously. There’s got to be a hunger there... teaching has to be a vocation, not just a job.”

David Johnston’s journey to becoming principal at CBC Adelaide has been marked by resilience, adaptability, and a passion for education.

Through teaching and leadership stints in Canberra, England, Rockhampton and Brisbane, Johnston gained a global and varied perspective on education.

He brings a thoughtful leadership philosophy, emphasising community-building, a pragmatic approach to tackling staffing and work-life challenges, and a steadfast commitment to nurturing the next generation of educational leaders. Through each stage of his career, Johnston has remained dedicated to student-centred leadership and to strengthening school communities across Australia.

Early Career and Unexpected Opportunities

David Johnston’s path to school leadership has been as dynamic as it is unconventional, beginning with a start as a Physical Education (PE) teacher in Canberra. Johnston spent a year teaching PE and coaching sport in England, before returning to Canberra where his leadership potential began to crystallise; albeit through an unexpected setback. When Johnston applied for a Head of Physical Education position, he didn’t get the role.

Instead, the feedback he received was that “the other guy hadn’t done enough wrong.” This disappointment turned into a defining moment for him, as he reflected, “I thought, okay, no problem at all. I’ll push forward.”

This willingness to forge ahead led him to apply for a position in Rockhampton. “I remember getting on the plane and asking my wife if Rocky was north or south of Townsville?” he laughed, highlighting the adventurous nature of the trip. His initial job application was for a PE teaching role, but during the interview, the principal had a different vision. Johnston recalled, “He said, ‘I’m going to interview you for the Head of Department and 2IC role in the boarding house instead.’” This rapid promotion accelerated his career, allowing him to dive deeper into leadership and curriculum work.

A Passion for Curriculum

While initially focused on sport, Johnston developed a strong interest in curriculum, especially during the initial stages of his leadership role at the Rockhampton Grammar School. “I walked into the role as Head of Department and knew nothing about writing work programs,” he explained.

Eager to bridge this knowledge gap, Johnston began working with curriculum panels and gradually built a strong understanding of curriculum development. His time in this role was so highly regarded that it led him to the Manager of Curriculum role with the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) based in Brisbane.

After a 3 year tenure, his decision to leave QSA and return to schools in a curriculum-focused role marked another turning point in his career. “I had to make a choice,” he recalled, “stay at the QSA or go back into a school role.” Johnston chose the latter, taking up the position of Dean of Learning and Teaching at Redeemer Lutheran College.



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“Trust can open you up to being hurt,” he admitted, “but it’s necessary for a healthy and dynamic workplace.”

He later transitioned to Nudgee College, where he served as Dean of Learning and Teaching before moving into the role of Deputy Principal for eight years. “To be a deputy principal or principal, you’ve got to have an understanding across pastoral care and identity as well as curriculum,” Johnston observed. This balance would become central to his leadership approach.

The Road to Principalship

David Johnston’s journey to principalship was shaped by ambition, adaptability, and a deepening interest in educational leadership. Early in his career, his initial goals were straightforward: he aspired to be either a Head of Department or a Director of Sport. Although he hadn’t initially aimed for a Deputy Principal role, Johnston ultimately embraced the position, finding satisfaction in the hard work behind the scenes that ensured the school ran smoothly. He appreciated supporting his principal as “the front man,” while he handled the compliance, staffing, and curriculum implementation.

As principal, Johnston emphasised the shift in focus required in his new role. Citing a quote from Simon Sinek, he said, “You’re not in charge; you’re taking care of the people in your charge.” Johnston’s dedication to fostering relationships has become a cornerstone of his leadership style. “The relationship development, being very aware of relationships, is critical,” he noted.

In fact, he credits this emphasis on relationships as a driving force behind his success in transitioning between schools and communities.

Building Community Connections

Moving from Rockhampton to Brisbane and then to Adelaide, has underscored the importance of embedding oneself in each school’s community. Arriving in South Australia in 2023, Johnston has strived to immerse and embrace all aspects of the CBC community. He does this through visible presence—attending Saturday sports, P&F meetings, and old boys’ gatherings, showing genuine interest in students, parents, and staff alike.

According to Johnston, each school community is unique, with its own values and dynamics. He describes Redeemer Lutheran as particularly welcoming, contrasting it with the longstanding traditions at Nudgee, where he noted a strong old-school culture. “It’s about getting to know what makes each community tick,” he said.

This commitment to community has proven vital in helping Johnston earn trust and acceptance as a leader.

Navigating Challenges in School Leadership

As principal, Johnston faces complex challenges, including staff retention and the availability of qualified candidates. “We advertised last term for a Head of PE and got zero applicants,” he shared. This difficulty in attracting talent has led Johnston to prioritise nurturing young, emerging leaders. Reflecting on his own journey, he remarked, “Unless we expose people to these experiences, we’re not going to develop the next generation of leaders.”

Trust plays a significant role in his leadership philosophy. “You’ve got to give trust before you get it back,” Johnston noted. This approach, while rewarding, has sometimes left him vulnerable to disappointment.

Despite setbacks, he remains committed to trusting others and offering them the autonomy to grow. “Trust can open you up to being hurt,” he admitted, “but it’s necessary for a healthy and dynamic workplace.”



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Balancing Work and Well-being

Achieving work-life balance in a demanding role like principalship is a constant struggle. “I’ve read somewhere that there’s no such thing as work-life balance,” Johnston said candidly. Instead, he focuses on maintaining his well-being through regular physical activity and family time. “If I am not getting my regular running in, I can be very cranky, very quickly,” he joked.

In addition to physical exercise, Johnston finds solace in reading for leisure, which allows him to mentally recharge. Embracing times for disconnecting has also been crucial for him, especially during family visits to Brisbane. “It’s about giving yourself those times to switch off,” he explained. Johnston’s approach to well-being exemplifies his balanced outlook, showing his commitment to personal resilience as much as professional dedication.

Priorities in Hiring: The Right Mix of Humility, Passion, and Emotional Intelligence

When it comes to hiring teachers, David Johnston emphasises a few core characteristics that he believes are fundamental to success in both teaching and leadership. Drawing on insights from Patrick Lencioni, Johnston looks for staff who are “humble, hungry, and smart.” As he explains, “They’ve got to be a humble person; they can’t take themselves too seriously. There’s got to be a hunger there... teaching has to be a vocation, not just a job.”

For Johnston, humility is about placing students first and approaching the profession with a willingness to learn and grow. He also highlights the importance of passion, describing it as a genuine commitment to the work and to seeing students succeed.

He adds, “You’ve got to know that you’re there for the students,” emphasising that teachers must have a drive to make a meaningful difference.

Finally, Johnston looks for candidates with “smart,” which he defines as emotional intelligence—an ability to read and respond to people effectively. “If you haven’t got those three things, you won’t survive, and you definitely won’t survive leadership,” he explains. He believes that these qualities not only support success in the classroom but are essential for navigating the demands of leadership roles.

AI as a Tool to Alleviate Workload:

The challenge of work intensification is something Johnston and his team take seriously. He sees AI as a potential solution to some of the administrative pressures teachers face, albeit with a balanced approach. “AI is not the answer to all our problems,” he says, “but I think it can solve some of the work intensification issues, which is the biggest challenge facing us right now.”

Johnston uses AI himself to manage tasks more efficiently. For example, he shared that he often drafts emails and then runs them through an AI tool “to make sure this is a polite and gentle email, for lack of a better phrase.” This allows him to save time and gain “peace of mind” by ensuring that communications are clear and considerate.

Similarly, he leverages AI for drafting policy documents: “I’ll write a policy document, throw it in AI, and ask it to clean it up before I send it out for feedback.”

The school encourages teachers to use AI to reduce their workload, particularly for repetitive tasks like report writing and lesson planning. Teachers can now use AI to draft lesson plans that integrate the curriculum, freeing them to focus on customising those plans to meet their students’ needs. However, Johnston cautions there is always the need for teachers to proofread, edit and add their own input to ensure clarity and accuracy.



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Teacher Shortages and Future Challenges

“Where Are We Going to Get the Teachers From?” Reflecting on the future, Johnston expresses concern about the growing teacher shortage, particularly in specialised subjects and rural areas. “Where are we going to get the teachers from?” he asks, noting that even his school struggles to recruit qualified staff in subjects like Accounting. “We need a senior accounting teacher for next year... zero applications,” he shares, pointing to a wider issue impacting schools across the country.

Johnston believes that the shortage isn’t simply about pay but is deeply connected to the workload teachers face. “Even though people say it’s about the money... it’s that work intensification,” he explains.

Many teachers are deterred by the administrative burdens, finding it hard to focus on what they entered the profession to do; teach. He notes, “We’re spending more time on admin than we are in front of the students, and that’s doing teachers’ heads in.”

This shortage is even more pronounced in remote areas, where finding teachers is particularly challenging. “If we’re struggling here, how do you go if you’re at Mount Isa or Broken Hill?” he wonders. For Johnston, the risk is clear: if the profession cannot attract and retain new teachers, schools may increasingly turn to AI for educational delivery. But he cautions against relying too heavily on technology, emphasising the irreplaceable value of student-teacher relationships and the role of teachers in developing “the whole person.”

A Legacy of Impact

David Johnston’s journey illustrates the many facets of school leadership—from building strong relationships to understanding complex curriculum demands and navigating the challenges of teacher recruitment. His story is one of adaptability, dedication, and continuous learning. Johnston’s advice for future leaders is both simple and profound: “You’re not in charge. You’re taking care of the people in your charge.”

This perspective has defined his career and continues to shape his approach as a principal committed to his school community and to the field of education at large.

What are you most proud of?

“I’m most proud of the people I’ve worked with who have gone on to achieve great things. I’ve been fortunate to mentor many educational leaders who are now in senior roles across various sectors, and I’m proud of the positive influence I’ve had on their careers.”

They are remarkable individuals making a real impact, and it’s rewarding to know I’ve played a part in their journey. To see them thrive and make a difference elsewhere, knowing they’ve learned something from me, is immensely satisfying.”

David Johnstone is the Principal at Christian Brothers College, Adelaide, SA

