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this month's interview

PENNY PACHOS

PRINCIPAL
ST EUPHEMIA COLLEGE, SYDNEY, NSW

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WHERE EVERY STUDENT IS KNOWN: LEADING WITH HEART & PRESENCE.

"Children still need guidance, consistency and the assurance that adults genuinely care."

For Penny Pachos, Principal of St Euphemia College, leadership was never a distant ambition so much as the natural extension of a lifelong calling to education.

She describes herself as someone who has "always felt a calling to education," finding joy in the everyday moments of school life: a student's face lighting up in class, laughter in the playground, and the energy of young people at play.

"Becoming a principal was just a natural progression for me," she reflects. "You love what you do, you're good at what you do, you take opportunities as they come your way, you give it your best, and it just sort of happens."

Stepping into principalship has simply widened the scope of her influence, allowing her to support not only individual classes, but an entire community.

Early lessons: Boundaries & consistency

Penny began teaching more than 30 years ago, in an era before smartphones, social media and complex digital landscapes reshaped school life. While the tools and context have shifted dramatically, the core lessons from those early days still underpin her leadership. As a young teacher, she quickly learned that students feel safest when they understand their boundaries and when expectations are clear and consistent.

She also discovered the power of listening. Students who feel heard and acknowledged respond positively, and respect becomes mutual. "They respect the teacher who listens and who knows their content, that walks into the classroom and has control of what's happening and is aware of everyone and their individual needs," she explains.

Today, that philosophy translates into a very deliberate presence. On walkthroughs, she makes a point of speaking to every student so that "children know that they are known, that they feel that they're known and that they're valued," whether the issue is grooming standards for older boys or kind words on the playground for younger children.

Despite COVID disruptions and the rise of social media, Penny believes that "some things don't change." Children still need guidance, consistency and the assurance that adults genuinely care. These constants shape her expectations and her daily practice.

Staying close to the classroom

In a demanding role, Penny's motivation "always comes back to students." Her focus is on strengthening learning, enriching the school environment, and supporting students' wellbeing and spiritual growth. When the pressures of the office become too much, she does not stay behind the desk. Instead, she leaves.

"I go out and I go for a walk. I either go into classrooms and visit classrooms or I go out into the playground and I'll have a game of handball with the kids," she shares.

As a mathematics teacher by background, she will sometimes walk into a maths class, send the teacher for a coffee and take the class herself for twenty minutes. "That's where I get my energy from," she says. "Being in amongst them, seeing the action."

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Penny Pachos

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Her inspiration also comes from staff, particularly early career teachers with "great ideas, big ideas." Penny is intentional about giving them agency to create, experiment and try new approaches. Listening to their ideas and supporting them to bring those ideas to life keeps the school learning and keeps her inspired.

Finding balance in a demanding role

As a relatively new principal, Penny is candid about the challenge of balance. The role can easily become "a 24/7 responsibility" and fatigue is a real risk. Her biggest leadership challenge, she says, has been finding a healthy balance between work, wellbeing and family life.

To address this, she has had to become intentional and disciplined about switching off. "I realised that I need to be intentional about putting the computer away, about switching off and just taking some time to rest," she explains.

Concretely, that has meant booking herself into Pilates classes ahead of time so she is compelled to go, and borrowing books from the library to read purely for enjoyment.

These small but deliberate habits help create "switch off time" and ensure that the demands of leadership do not consume everything else.

Listening first: Leading through change and crisis

When asked how she balances the needs of students, staff and parents-particularly during times of change or crisis. Penny's answer is simple and consistent: "You need to listen and talk to people." She maintains an open-door policy; if her door is open, any parent, staff member or student is welcome to come in.

"Communication really is the heart of this role," she says. Everyone brings different perspectives and priorities, so taking time to listen is critical. Staff and student wellbeing and safety remain the non-negotiable priorities, which can be challenging when "forces" seem to pull in different directions.

In complex situations, Penny has learned to slow the pace down deliberately. "You don't need to solve it right now on the spot," she notes. Instead, she advocates pausing, listening, and considering everyone's perspective rather than rushing decisions.

She recognises that everyone believes their issue is immediate and most urgent, but she has found that slowing things down and giving people space to think and reflect leads to better outcomes and stronger relationships.

Hiring for attitude, energy and alignment

Recruitment at St Euphemia begins with transparency. From the moment a position is advertised, Penny wants candidates to be clear on who the school is and what it stands for.

"We're very clear about who we are, what we stand for at the school, what our values are," she explains. People are unlikely to apply if they do not already feel aligned.

In interviews, she listens carefully for passion, energy and a commitment to ongoing learning. "For me, it doesn't matter if they haven't ticked every box," Penny says. "It doesn't matter, they haven't read that document, they'll read it.

They'll learn. It's about discovering if they have the right attitude?"

She recalls being drawn to one staff member's excitement, ideas and positivity, noting that such qualities quickly become evident in conversation. In her view, cultural fit and attitude far outweigh a perfectly matched checklist of experience.

Qualities that matter most in educational leadership

Reflecting on how leadership has changed over three decades, Penny is clear that today's leaders need to be strong listeners and deeply empathetic. "Empathy is really important as a leader," she says. Leaders must recognise that they do not have all the answers and that they will make mistakes.

Communication and transparency build trust and respect. Without that trust, even the clearest vision will falter: "You have your vision, but if your people don't come along with you, there's no point." Adaptability is also crucial. Every school is different; leaders must read their context and respond accordingly rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

"They shouldn't feel like they're navigating it alone."

Growing early career teachers: Agency, support and networks

Penny is acutely aware that starting in a school can be overwhelming and that workload can feel enormous for early career teachers. "They shouldn't feel like they're navigating it alone," she insists. To help, new teachers are paired with experienced colleagues who are similar enough in age and temperament to build rapport, so they feel comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance.

Mentoring is underpinned by regular check-ins, simple conversations like "How's it going? What do you need?"which normalises asking for help. Equally important is giving young teachers opportunities to grow. When leadership or project roles arise, Penny encourages them to put themselves forward, even if they do not feel entirely ready. If a young teacher comes with a "crazy idea," her default position is to say yes.

A recent example illustrates this philosophy. For UNESCO's first World Greek Language Day, the school's young Head of Cultural Studies proposed dressing a student in traditional costume and filming a playful Q&A using a wooden spoon as a microphone. Penny's response was immediate: "Go for it." The resulting video went viral on social media, attracting over 500,000 views and energising both the teacher and his colleagues.

"Social media is not my world. It's their world," she says with a smile. Her role is to ask the right questions, ensure ideas sit within school parameters, then step back and give agency. That sense of ownership fuels creativity and commitment.

Professional learning extends beyond the school gates. Penny is keen for staff to attend external professional development, network with educators from other schools, and realise that their challenges are shared. She sees "so much value in listening and sharing with other people outside of our community," especially for early career teachers who gain both perspective and encouragement.

Where needed, she will adjust timetables or remove classes to give young teachers extra time for planning, assessment or reporting, recognising that they may need more time than experienced colleagues.

Retaining teachers through everyday care

Teacher retention, in Penny's view, is driven by the "little things" that communicate genuine care. Knowing staff by name, asking how their day is going, and listening to their concerns all matter. The school has introduced small but meaningful gestures such as coffee vouchers for birthdays and shared morning teas when possible.

Wellbeing workshops, staff surveys and responsive changes to processes help address "pinch points" where teachers feel overwhelmed. Crucially, the school has a clear expectation that emails stop outside of hours, protecting staff personal and family time. "People need to feel valued," she says. "They need to be acknowledged and they need to know that people notice." In many ways, she sees staff as similar to students in this regard: both want to be heard, acknowledged and known. That recognition underpins loyalty and contributes to a positive culture.

Evolving Leadership: From control to trust

Penny describes her leadership style as "somewhere between instructional and transformational." She is deeply interested in how teaching happens in classrooms, how facilities can be improved, and how the learning experience can be strengthened. At the same time, she is attentive to the culture of the school and the emotional climate in which staff work.

She focuses on the desired outcomes and invites staff to find their own path: "This is the outcome. Get there however you get there, but this is where we sort of want to be." Trusting the team, trusting the culture that has been built, and trusting the process are central to her evolution as a leader.

What are you most proud of?

"I'm proud of the lives I've changed," she says simply. Hearing from others that she was "the best teacher" someone ever had, or knowing that she supported a student through an especially difficult time, confirms that her work has had a tangible, positive impact.

"It's not even about leading a school or being a principal," she reflects. "It's about education and the impact that you have as an educator in a school… that you've made a difference and that you've contributed somehow to society." That enduring impact on young lives is the legacy she values most.

Penny Pachos is the Principal at St Euphemia College, Sydney, NSW. Connect with her on LinkedIn.