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*this month's
interview*

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DEPUTY PRINCIPAL
DIFFERENTIATED
EDUCATIONAL
PRACTICE

MARYMEDE CATHOLIC
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CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR PEOPLE TO THRIVE

“You need to build those really strong and authentic relationships with parents, students and teachers to affect growth and change”.

For more than three decades, education has been at the centre of Michelle's professional life.

Having worked across five schools and held leadership positions early in her career, her approach has been shaped by a belief that people do their best work when they feel supported, valued and safe to contribute.

Now working in senior leadership at Marymede Catholic College in Victoria, she brings extensive experience across Catholic education, professional learning, change management and school improvement. At the heart of her leadership philosophy is the importance of relationships and the conditions they create for people to contribute, learn and grow.

For Michelle, this means creating an environment where teachers can ask questions, seek feedback, acknowledge challenges, try new approaches and continue to develop without fear of judgement.

A calling to leadership

Michelle was encouraged by strong role models who demonstrated what authentic, relationship-based leadership could look like. Those experiences shaped her aspirations and encouraged her to take on increasingly senior responsibilities.

Her journey has included director and deputy principal roles, reinforcing her belief that leadership is something she genuinely enjoys.

“I feel I've got something to contribute and I really enjoy leading people and leading teams.”

For Michelle, leadership is also a calling. Not every educator wants to move into leadership, but for those who do, it is about recognising that you have something to contribute and helping others develop their own capacity to lead.

Leading from within

Having worked across girls' and co-educational settings, Michelle has experienced a range of school environments. Yet she doesn't believe the fundamentals of her leadership approach have changed significantly. Instead, leadership needs to adapt to the context, the people and the students.

“It's more about adapting it to the setting, the people you're leading and the students.”

At the centre is authenticity. Effective leadership begins with understanding who you are as a leader and developing that approach as you move through different schools and roles. Staff need to understand what their leaders value and see that reflected in their actions.

That consistency is an important foundation for trust and open contribution.

The leaders who shape us

Michelle's early teaching experiences reinforced the importance of clear, consistent and authentic leadership. Strong role models demonstrated the value of relationships and influenced the way she would later approach developing others.

“We're always encouraging emerging leaders.”

Developing the next generation of leaders is one of the aspects of leadership she finds most rewarding. Throughout her career, Michelle has sought opportunities to build the capacity of teachers and encourage them to step into leadership.

“What I've really enjoyed in my journey is moving into leadership and then building the capacity of other teachers to become leaders.”

Michelle believes leadership is not about creating dependence on one person. It is about giving people the confidence and capability to contribute, take responsibility and develop their skills while knowing they have support around them.



“The key is building that teacher-leader relationship.”

Michelle Robertson.

“Building a culture of psychological safety means ensuring our teachers are feeling supported, encouraged and well-equipped.”

Creating a culture of psychological safety

Michelle believes that one of the most important responsibilities of school leadership is creating an environment where staff feel supported and encouraged to do their best work.

“We’re very conscious of building a culture of psychological safety.”

A psychologically safe environment does not mean removing accountability or lowering expectations. Instead, it allows people to be honest about where they are, what they need and where they want to improve.

“Our teachers are our greatest asset.”

At Marymede, regular check-ins give leaders opportunities to understand how staff are going and identify where additional support may be needed. Recognition and celebration also help strengthen belonging and show that contribution is valued.

For Michelle, wellbeing is not an initiative separate from school improvement. It is part of the conditions that make improvement possible.

Feedback without fear

One of the clearest examples of this approach is the way professional feedback is handled.

As part of Marymede’s instructional model, leaders conduct classroom observations and provide feedback on teaching practice. These observations are not simply about evaluating performance. Teachers can also invite leaders into their classrooms when they are experiencing challenging behaviour, want advice or would like feedback on a particular aspect of their practice.

The goal is to create a culture where asking for help is seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

Feedback needs to be honest, constructive and focused on helping the individual move forward. Psychological safety does not mean difficult conversations disappear. It means people can have those conversations within relationships built on trust.

Supporting teachers at the beginning of their careers

That same philosophy extends to graduate teachers. Beginning a teaching career can be overwhelming as new educators learn the realities of classroom teaching while understanding the culture, expectations and systems of their school.

At Marymede, graduate teachers are assigned a mentor throughout their first year. House leaders and learning area leaders also provide support, while induction sessions cover professional culture, compliance, reporting and other practical aspects of school life.

Just as important is the opportunity to connect with other graduate teachers. Bringing them together creates a space where they can share experiences, ask questions and support one another.

For emerging teachers, knowing that others are experiencing similar challenges can make a significant difference.

You don’t have to know everything, and you don’t have to navigate the profession alone.

Developing people, not just professionals

Professional development is another area where Michelle’s approach reflects trust and individual growth.

At Marymede, professional learning is closely aligned with the school’s strategic and annual action plans. The college has developed its own instructional model, with learning opportunities designed around effective teaching and learning.



But professional development is not entirely prescribed. Teachers are also encouraged to identify areas they would like to develop and pursue opportunities aligned with their professional goals.

This creates a balance between organisational priorities and individual aspirations. Professional growth is most meaningful when teachers have some ownership over it. The role of leadership is to create the conditions where teachers can identify areas for growth, access support and feel confident taking the next step.

Creating pathways into leadership

As a large college, Marymede offers opportunities to develop leadership experience, including learning area assistant leadership roles and acting positions. These allow teachers to step into leadership in manageable ways and gain experience before taking on greater responsibilities.

Leadership is not reserved for a small group of people who already have all the answers. It can be developed, practised and supported.

Leading through change

Psychological safety becomes particularly important during periods of change. Schools regularly navigate new initiatives, changing expectations and competing stakeholder needs.

"I'm proud of being in settings where we have been involved in establishing an instructional model or a shared understanding of learning."

This uncertainty can undermine trust if people do not understand what is happening or why. Successful change requires bringing staff and families with you. That means communicating clearly, explaining the reasons behind decisions and providing opportunities for people to ask questions and contribute.

"It's all about the building of relationships and open communication."

People are more likely to engage with change when they understand the rationale behind it and feel their perspective has been heard.

Faith, purpose and belonging

Working within Catholic education, faith is central to Michelle's understanding of leadership and school culture. Having spent her entire teaching career in Catholic schools, she sees Catholic education as a framework for developing young people who can contribute meaningfully to the world around them.

"My faith and being a faith leader is first and foremost."

Michelle believes Catholic education is about fostering hope, meaning and a sense of responsibility in young people. Those same values extend to staff.

Supporting one another, living the school's values and working together around a shared mission all contribute to belonging. A strong culture is built when people understand not only what they are doing, but why they are doing it.

Celebrating growth

Some of the moments that continue to inspire Michelle come from seeing students and staff challenge themselves. Academic achievement is one part of that, but she is equally interested in the effort, growth and determination behind it.

At Marymede, students are recognised not only for academic success but also for learning endeavour.

Staff achievements are also recognised and celebrated. Recognition is not simply about rewarding outcomes. It is about creating a culture where people feel seen and know their contribution matters.

The responsibility to keep improving

When Michelle reflects on her career, some of her greatest professional satisfaction comes from leading change that creates a shared understanding across a school. She has been involved in change management, differentiation and inclusion, and the development of instructional models designed to bring greater consistency to teaching and learning.

At Marymede, this has included a significant focus on differentiation and understanding where individual students are in their learning so they can receive the right level of support and challenge.

Michelle sees the achievement in creating a collective understanding.

"What is our practice and what's the importance of our practice and how we are in those classes day to day?"

That shared understanding allows teachers to work together, learn from one another and continually improve. It reinforces the idea that professional learning is not something done to teachers. It is something developed with them.

Leadership that allows people to grow

For emerging leaders, Michelle's message is grounded in continuous improvement. Every student should have the opportunity to experience learning success, with the right support for those who need it and appropriate challenge for those ready to go further. The same principle applies to the adults within a school. Leaders need to understand where their people are, what they need and what support will help them take their next step.

And that begins with relationships.

"For leaders, my philosophy is always that it's about relationships."

Strong, authentic and collaborative

Relationships create the foundation for growth and change. They allow leaders to have honest conversations, provide meaningful feedback and bring people together around a common purpose. After more than 30 years in education, Michelle's leadership philosophy remains centred on people. Psychological safety is not about making leadership easier. It is about creating the conditions for people to do difficult, meaningful work well.

When teachers feel trusted and supported, they are more willing to take responsibility, seek feedback and grow. When leaders create those conditions consistently, psychological safety becomes more than an initiative. It becomes part of the culture.

What are you most proud of?

"I'm proud of the opportunities to allow for continuous improvement in all the settings that I've been in."

"I've been involved in change management in terms of leading learning and making that really genuine commitment to differentiation and inclusion for our students."



Michelle Robertson is the Deputy Principal Differentiated Educational Practice at Marymede Catholic College. Connect with her on LinkedIn