

21st October 2015

ACEL Conference 2015 Setting the Learning Agenda – Courage & Commitment to Lead

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) held their annual national conference from the 30th September to the 2nd of October. The conference, Setting the Learning Agenda: Courage and Commitment to Lead, was held at the Hilton in Sydney.

Over 1200 delegates attended the three-day event including system leaders, principals, policy makers, teachers and researchers from all independent, catholic and public sectors. Delegates came from all states and territories of Australia and further afield, including New Zealand, China, Kenya, United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Keynotes at the ACEL conference included the following internationally recognised leaders in education: Robert J. Marzano (USA); Michael Fullan (Canada); Andy Hargreaves (USA); Alma Harris (UK); Yong Zhao (China) and Jan Robertson (New Zealand). Delegates also engaged with leaders in their fields who demonstrated and engaged with the conference theme of Courage and Commitment to Lead these included: Bruce Robinson (Australia), Cathy Freeman (Australia), Mark Donaldson (Australia) and Dame Jenny Shipley (New Zealand). Anthony McKay was the conference convenor and host.

The Governor General, the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove, who identified the value of education saying, “there is no higher duty than nurturing the young”, opened the conference. He introduced the theme of the conference, suggesting that teachers must have courage to lead us into the future, while leaders must balance the ability to inspire while being accountable for students.

ACEL President, Jim Watterston welcomed delegates to the conference and introduced the importance of empathy and the heart to improve outcomes, which became a sub-theme at the conference. Graham Stoop, New Zealand’s Deputy Secretary of Student Achievement also introduced a recurring sub-theme that professional learning communities (PLCs) are vital to improved student outcomes.

All the keynote speakers across the three days delivered key messages and insights that resonated strongly with the audience and brought to life the conference theme of ‘Courage and Commitment to Lead’.

- **Mark Donaldson VC** (Australia) engaged the whole conference audience with his powerful keynote address on courage and commitment at war. Mark shared his experiences in Afghanistan while identifying key examples of the conference theme
- **Robert Marzano** (USA) shared his High Reliability School™ Framework including the hierarchy of factors, with the delegates. He shared the importance of teaching beyond the ‘knowledge system’ and identified a number of factors that are critical to quality education: data collection (including quick data); leaders ensuring the quality of teaching and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- **Alma Harris** (United Kingdom) identified an aspiration for all educators, we want is success for EVERY child in EVERY setting. She shared the importance of being critical when examining system and international data, and asked delegates to reflect on how they identify high performance. Harris also asked leaders to reflect on the context in which the data is collected, and developed this further by suggesting we should adapt design principles rather than copying them.
- **Bruce Robinson** (Australia) spoke of the importance of identifying the needs of students and the importance of fathers or male figures in the growth of children. He identified that teachers and schools also have an important role in the care of children and that heart and empathy is key to this role.
- **Yong Zhao** (China) informed the audience of the current situation in education, that we are homogenising education and as a result the students to prepare them for employability. He revealed the need for educators to reflect on and harness the diverse and individual strengths in the classroom
- **Ian O Williamson** (Australia) shared with delegates the importance of innovation and creativity in the success of an organisation. He reiterated the theme that engaging with others is key to staying relevant and successful. Schools must move beyond their current way of working – that of being averse to risks, to creating and harnessing leading to change and innovation, and ultimately success.

- **Jan Robertson** (New Zealand) informed the delegates that individuals must identify moral purpose to move forward. She expanded on this by suggesting leaders need to know who they are before they can lead courageously. She also indicated the need for leaders to develop leaders better than them.
- **Cathy Freeman** (Australia) shared her thoughts on personal traits and experiences that lead to her success. She identified the role of key people, including school in the pathway to personal and athletic success. She also identified the role of the Cathy Freeman Foundation and the key to success with indigenous families and communities is to build trust with the elders, communities and families.
- **Andy Hargreaves** (USA) reflected on the importance of personal and professional integrity and effort in teaching. He identified the need for a focused approach to improvement. Hargreaves stressed the importance of leading from the middle to ensure context is reflected in change. He stated that collective efficacy leads to greater impact, and the pursuit of equity and empathy, while requiring courage, leads to excellence. His call to delegates was to, "Stand up, stand out, stand together and stand back".
- **Jenny Shipley** (New Zealand) identified the importance of leaders in education, stating, "Leaders are at the heart of all learning". She restated the subtheme of personal integrity and identity being key to successful leadership. She introduced the concept of cultural intelligence and the need to encourage every student to think, research and be curious.

The final keynote of the conference was the William Walker Oration, presented in 2015 by Michael Fullan (Canada). Fullan synthesised key concepts presented during the conference and reflected on the importance of building professional capability leading to accountability. He discussed that context can be changed through leadership, and that leadership requires a compulsion to act. Fullan also identified the need for external networks for success as well as the need to drive the change within the group. He stressed the need for pedagogies to drive deeper thinking as well as to lead technology.

The ACEL 2015 National Award Ceremony and President's Reception was held on the evening of 1st of October. Approximately 150 people attended the event to acknowledge and celebrate the leadership and commitment demonstrated by each awardee to quality education. New Voice Scholarships from each state and territory in categories of school leadership, educational leadership research and Indigenous voice in school leadership were presented with certificates. Fifteen educators from across Australia were acknowledged for their contribution to quality education and ACEL with a Fellowship of ACEL. Five educators from the ACT and South Australia were recognised for their leadership in education with an Honorary Fellowship. Keith Tronc awarded Andrea Stringer the award in his name for excellence in teaching. Scott Eacott was presented with the Hedley Beare award for excellence in writing in education. The Nganakarrawa Award for excellence in educational administration and contribution to ACEL was awarded to Michael Gaffney. Michele Bruniges AO received the highest accolade, being awarded the 2015 Gold Medal for the most outstanding study and practice of educational administration and leadership at a national level.

Another highlight of the conference was the inspiring Student Panel on the morning of the second day. Students from across schools in NSW shared the importance of positive relationships with their teachers as a key to success. They also identified the importance of extra-curricula activities to personal development, and that schools should be supporting these activities more.

50 Breakout sessions were presented by 81 thought leaders in education, over the 3 days of the conference. The breakout sessions included a wide selection of research and/or practice-based information. Leaders from all sectors and systems of education were represented in these sessions. Sessions informed, challenged and engaged delegates in current theory and research-based developments in education. These ranged from: the use of technology in leadership; to structures and frameworks used support leaders in schools; and engaging with the past to inform the future. Delegates walked away from these sessions with information to reflect on for their own context.

The key sponsor and partner of the conference was the NSW Department of Education. The conference was also supported by a number of key organisations and businesses, including Corwin and Harlequin School Bags.

The conference was closed at 1.30 by ACEL national president Jim Watterston, inviting delegates to join ACEL for the 2016 conference, Leadership with Insight and Innovation: Setting the Learning Agenda in Melbourne on the 28th-30th September.

For more information about ACEL visit www.ancel.org.au