

PX CONFERENCE REPORT

DETAILS

Date:	May 13-16, 2025	Conference:	2025 CAP Conference
Time:	9:00 AM-3:30 PM	Location:	RBC Convention Centre,
PX:	Joel Swaan		Winnipeg

SUMMARY

The RBC Convention Centre, Niji Mahkwa School, Children of the Earth School, Agowiidiwinan Centre, and The Forks are on Treaty One Territory, the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininiwak, Anishinini(wak), Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis nation. Shoal Lake 40 First Nation in Treaty Three Territory is the source of water.

CAP 2025: Meet in the Middle – Developing Centered Leadership is the national conference of the Canadian Association of Principals, and this year was hosted by the Council of School Leaders (COSL) of the Manitoba Teachers' Society.

I participated in both the conference and the pre-conference, which gave me the opportunity to tour Niji Mahkwa School (N-8) and Children of the Earth School (9-12) on the first day, as well as participating in the Treaty Relations Interactive Session at The Forks Market. Principals Reuben Boulette (Niji Mahkwa) and Jenifer Donachuk (Children of the Earth) served as our hosts for the morning. I valued my time at the schools greatly. It was wonderful to see holistic approaches to education. The blending of culture and education, plus the ways the schools were set up to teach both through a myriad of strategies – from the signage on the walls to the animals in the science lab – was inspirational.

The afternoon tour of various statues, monuments, and historical sites at The Forks also included time with Elder Chief Dr. Harry Bone. As a Saskatchewanian who has only lived in southern Manitoba during my dozen years here, I really appreciated getting to know some of the history of The Forks, which I had previously only read about in Wīnipēk. This was my second opportunity to hear Elder Bone, and I appreciated his recounting of the local history.

Due to a Special Meeting of the Provincial Executive, I missed the first Keynote Speech from Kevin Chief.

The land acknowledgement for the conference was delivered by COSL member Moyra Valletly (from my home local, GVTA), who is an Irish immigrant to Canada and as such has had to reconcile her positionality as a recent Canadian settler on Treaty One lands. It was meaningful and impactful.

With Premier Wab Kinew unavailable, we were fortunate to hear from the Honourable Nahanni Fontaine, Minister of Families, Minister responsible for Accessibility, and Minister responsible for Women and Gender Equity. Key quotes for me were “Children should be free to enjoy the right to access education” and “Educators’ work is sacred.”

Katherine Mahpiya Ska Whitecloud of the National Knowledge Keepers Council delivered the second keynote. Among many pieces of wisdom she shared, she discussed how children with special challenges are gifts to us: “they were gifted with something special to give to us.” “We have a responsibility to see their life from their perspective, not ours.” She also taught us to give compliments freely, that being kind is the simplest thing we can do, and that kids will work hard when you acknowledge the good they are doing.

Author Cale Birk was the third keynote speaker, calling us to think about what leadership leads to, not what leadership looks like. He encouraged the principals and leaders to “let your staff help you be great.” One should be able to communicate their “why” in “27 words, 9 seconds, 3 ideas” (27/9/3). He challenged us to be thoughtful in our leadership with the question “By the end of the next School Plan Cycle, what do you want to observe those you lead doing/demonstrating?”

Dr. Cindy Blackstock spoke on the Truth and Reconciliation’s Calls to Action, which she called the “survivors’ plan for the nation.” She gave a historical synopsis of how the mistreatment of students at residential schools was documented and publicized in a number of ways over the past 100+ years—looking to dispel the myth that people at the time didn’t know or know better. “Don’t replace your ethics with loyalty to the organization” is a key quote for me. Another poignant question was “How is it we can get clean, drinkable water on the space station, but not on reserves 1½ hours from Toronto?”

“Wide Awakeness on Dark Times” was the name of Dr. John Wiens keynote. A quote he presented from the National Commission of Excellence in Education (1983) was “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.” He defined schools as places “where humans can flourish in the presence of other humans flourishing.” He expressed the view that the biggest threat to schools right now is “Christian Nationalism” and declared that “prescribed practices and products of business have no place in education.”

In her keynote, Dr. Jen Schwanke, author of Messy Leadership, talked about leading with heart. In order for good people to thrive, the following should be in place: Shared Leadership (mutual goals, accountability, vision, trust, rewards), Collective Efficacy (knowing we’re better together makes us want to be better together), and Systems (processes for managing purpose, priorities, and patterns). Morale is a part of a shared responsibility. “The problems are the work.” “Hope is a mindset and a skill: hopeless students can borrow hope from hopeful teachers, hopeless teachers can borrow hope from hopeful leaders.”

The final keynote was from Carol Off, former co-host of CBC’s *As It Happens*. “A life dedicated to something larger than yourself is the most meaningful thing you can do.” “No meaningful gesture is too small.”

I attended breakouts on “The Power of Listening” (Kevin Reimer), “Trauma-Sensitive Leadership” (Angela Voutier), and “Leading Well: Micro-Actions for Sustainable Leadership” (Angie Balkwill, Lisa Wotherspoon).

In “The Power of Listening,” Reimer taught that “every conversation is a negotiation of some kind (even if the negotiation is only ‘what are we going to talk about in this conversation’).” “Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?” Reimer’s encouragement is to focus more on coaching individuals and less on solving problems; use “What” and “How” questions, rather than “Why” (which can come across as judgmental). The quote that stood out to me the most was “Leadership without emotional connection is risky.”

In “Trauma-Sensitive Leadership”, Voutier talked about how “Leaders take on the trauma of their people.” “Communicating during a crisis calls for honesty, clarity, and flexibility.” “Even when there’s nothing to say, you call everyone together and tell them there’s nothing to say.” “It’s about finding the calm in the chaos.”

In “Leading Well”, Balkwill and Wotherspoon told us that “As leaders, we have the potential to have more of an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our employees than their doctors or therapists.” (Forbes, 2023). More than talent and skill, Wellness is foundational to an organization’s success. “When we don’t allow ourselves to experience joy, we miss out on filling the reservoir of what we need then hard things happen” (Brené Brown).

It was an excellent conference. I don’t attend many conferences as a part of my professional development, so it was nice to connect with leaders and experience growth in a community setting. There is an aspect of learning that comes from the shared experience, and the dialogue around the sessions.

Congratulations and thanks to the COSL Team and MTS Staff who were essential in planning and hosting this event; your hard work is noted and appreciated.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Joel Swaan', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Joel Swaan
Provincial Executive