

legacy





The architect of the collective school soul

Tribute to Andy Hargreaves

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Andy Hargreaves is a research professor at Boston College and one of the most influential academics in the international educational debate. He has served as an advisor to governments in Scotland and Canada, and has developed key concepts such as professional capital and sustainable leadership. The author of award-winning seminal works such as *Leadership from the Middle* (2023), his career is underpinned by the prestigious Grawemeyer Award and thousands of academic citations. His work combines cutting-edge research with a firm commitment to humanistic transformation and equity in schools.



by Impuls Educació

For forty years, he has been reflecting on educational change from within the teaching profession. Andy Hargreaves has dedicated his career to a coherent project: restoring teachers and middle leadership to the center of educational change and demonstrating, through rigorous research and a practical vocation, that no reform is sustainable unless it originates from—and for—those who inhabit it every day. Andy Hargreaves is one of the most influential thinkers in the field of educational change and school leadership of the last four decades. Professor Emeritus at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College, where he held the Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education, he is currently a Research Professor

at the University of Ottawa and a Visiting Professor at the University of Hong Kong. Co-founder and director of the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC Education)—an international network of educational systems committed to equity, well-being, and inclusion—he has presided over the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI). Across more than thirty books, Hargreaves has shifted the debate on educational change from a top-down, mechanistic logic toward an ecological, professional, and sustainable vision. Concepts now commonly used in specialized literature—professional capital, collaborative professionalism, leading from the middle, sustainable leadership—are largely owed to him and his most enduring collaborations.

A prolific author, his publications include the following:

Teachers, Culture and Postmodernity: Changing Times, Changing Teachers (1994). A foundational essay on the teaching profession and the impact of school time on the profession.

Sustainable Leadership (with Dean Fink, 2006). An internationally renowned framework for conceiving the sustainability of educational change beyond the tenure of the serving leader.

Professional Capital (with Michael Fullan, 2012). His most widely cited contribution: professional capital understood as the sum of teachers' human, social, and decisional capital.

Collaborative Professionalism (with Michael O'Connor, 2018). A comparative analysis of five collaborative teaching cultures around the world.

SYNTHESIS OF HIS THOUGHT:

Andy Hargreaves's closing keynote at the Congress became a true testamentary synthesis of his thinking on educational sustainability.

Seven rules for sustainable educational leadership

Depth, durability, breadth, diversity, energy, justice, and conservation: in collaboration with Dean Fink, the professor delineated these seven principles nearly two decades ago and now revives them to describe a leadership capable of operating in a world caught between global volatility and systemic hyper-standardization. Far from the misconception of sustainability as mere bureaucratic continuity, his proposal reclaims the original definition from the Brundtland Report: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The improvement-innovation matrix: an institutional taxonomy

To understand what truly sustainable leadership entails, Hargreaves proposes a matrix that intersects two essential dimensions: improvement and innovation. Improvement consists of refining existing practices and achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in what is already being done: this is the logic of best practice. Innovation, conversely, involves deploying radically new and different approaches: the logic of next practice. From the intersection of both axes emerge four

Improving without innovating: a racehorse. Innovating without improving: Pegasus. The goal is the iron horse

organizational archetypes, which the professor metaphorically represents as four types of horses. An institution with neither improvement nor innovation is stagnant: it is a dead horse. An institution that improves without innovating becomes a racehorse: highly efficient and fast, but essentially unaltered. An institution that innovates without improving resembles a Pegasus or a unicorn: it pursues magical and novel ideas that, nevertheless, lack practical efficacy and real grounding. Finally, an institution that simultaneously improves and innovates acts as an iron horse: a transformational entity that achieves traditional objectives through entirely new and powerful mechanisms. The goal of sustainable leadership is precisely to cultivate this transformational capacity.

The unsustainable context: between the VUCA environment and GERM

The urgency for sustainable leadership stems from the profoundly unsustainable environment in which schools operate today. Educational institutions are currently trapped between two opposing systemic forces. On one side is the VUCA environment—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity—a world that feels increasingly out of control due to pandemics, armed conflicts, climate change, and the global regression of full democracies.

On the opposite side is what Pasi Sahlberg termed GERM (Global Education Reform Movement). This force represents excessive control: standardization, rigid prescription, and high-stakes assessments. It is fueled by systemic panics surrounding metrics such as PISA results, which often provoke immediate interventions by international bodies, even though these tests measure past educational performance rather than the immediate reality of present classrooms.

This dichotomy—being simultaneously out of control globally and hyper-controlled systemically—generates an unsustainable psychological burden for both the student body and the teaching staff. A clear manifestation of this is the crisis of digital addiction: while educational systems attempt to ban smartphones for students, adults frequently model the exact same addictive behaviors. Addressing this issue demands a model of shared responsibility: schools and families must navigate the challenges of the digital age together, rather than placing the burden of adjustment solely on one party.

The teaching crisis: from the periphery to the core of the profession

This unsustainable environment has precipitated a global crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. In response, global commissions have published comprehensive frameworks regarding the future of the teaching profession, identifying the urgent need to improve peripheral conditions such as compensation,

status, well-being, and allocated planning time. However, these structural measures only address the outer layers of the trade. To truly resolve the retention crisis, what must be transformed is the fundamental nature of teaching work: making it more engaging and, above all, more joyful.

Schools, caught between the global VUCA environment and the systemic GERM: out of control and hypercontrolled

This transformation requires cultivating cultures of innovation within schools. Supported by strategic international partnerships, schools must generate environments where both students and teachers experience engaging and innovative learning. There is no student engagement or well-being without teacher engagement and well-being. This does not mean imposing technological disruptions from the top down; it means granting teachers the necessary autonomy to innovate. High-performing educational systems prescribe a core curriculum but leave a significant percentage of instructional time completely open for the development of context- and community-specific proposals.

Redefining sustainability: the legacy of the Brundtland Report

To reach this horizon, it is imperative to redefine what we understand by sustainability. In the educational sphere, sustainability is often confused with mere maintainability—preserving an ongoing program after funding or leadership changes.

There is no student engagement or wellbeing without teacher engagement and wellbeing

True sustainability, however, reclaims the definition coined by the Brundtland Commission: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Building upon this foundational definition, Hargreaves, alongside Dean Fink, has broken down the concept into seven core principles of sustainable leadership.

Sustainability is not maintainability: it is not compromising the capacity of future generations

The seven rules of sustainable leadership

1. **Depth: sustaining what matters.** Leadership must focus on truly meaningful purposes—deep learning, well-being, and genuine engagement—rather than fixating myopically on standardized test scores.
2. **Durability: will it endure over time?** Sustainable leadership demands meticulous succession planning. Some leaders destroy their own legacy by denying their eventual departure: they deplete resources before leaving, divide the institution into factions, or attempt to control the future by choosing a successor in their own image and likeness. Leaving leadership is an existential transition that must be managed with foresight, ensuring that the institution prospers beyond the tenure of the current executive.
3. **Breadth: shared responsibility and diversity.** Standardized and monocultural environments are fragile, both ecologically and organizationally. Sustainable schools require neurodiversity, diverse identities, and varied professional skill sets—integrating both visionary individuals and meticulous planners—to build a robust and resilient shared responsibility.
4. **Diversity.** Effective networks must evolve from centralized hub-and-spoke models toward nodal structures and, ultimately, toward crystalline networks, in which schools and educators interact and innovate independently, facilitated—not controlled—by the center of the system.
5. **Renewal.** Instead of viewing organizational energy through the prism of entropy—whereby energy inevitably dissipates and must be cautiously conserved to avoid burnout—sustainable leadership treats it as a renewable resource. Engaging the teaching staff in meaningful innovation generates self-renewing energy that actively combats professional fatigue.
6. **Justice: community impact.** Sustainable leadership transcends the walls of one's own department or institution. It implies a systemic commitment to equity, ensuring that the hoarding of resources or affluent demographics does not disadvantage neighboring schools and communities.
7. **Conservation.** Genuine sustainability is, in its most literal sense, conservative: it preserves the best of the past as a foundation for advancing into the future. Discarding previous practices at a stroke alienates veteran teachers and squanders invaluable institutional wisdom.

The integration of these seven principles equips educational institutions with the compass needed to

navigate the tensions of contemporary times without yielding to any of them. The horizon is to attain and consolidate the status of the iron horse — one that combines continuous improvement with disruptive innovation — in order to transform schools into genuine engines of educational and social progress. Highly efficient entities, capable of self-renewal and of generating a positive impact across the entire educational community. This is, without doubt, a fitting horizon on which to close a congress and to distil the legacy of forty years of pedagogical thought.

The seven principles turn schools into iron horses: not dead, not fleeting Pegasus

