

Meet Deb Dunstone, CEO of The Learner First



As a leader who has grown up in education through classroom practice across a range of schools to leadership roles from Principal to Assistant Regional Director, Regional Director, and Deputy Director General, it is hard to think it all started in the heart of a young girl who dreamed of being a teacher one day. Her love for teaching was evident even in high school, where she developed a particular interest in home economics, a subject that allowed her creativity to flourish. Because along with her passion for teaching others, was a strong creative side – a love for sewing, crafts, and theater. Throughout her career, Deb's creative side has always been a significant part of who she is, how she fits into the world, her potential for success, and how she contributes.

Despite doubts from her teachers about her academic abilities, Deb's determination never wavered. She was driven to prove that success in life isn't solely determined by traditional academic subjects. Thus, after graduating from teacher's college, her career journey began as a teacher in Rockhampton, Australia where she quickly took on leadership roles within the school. She enjoyed the interaction with students and being part of a leadership team, which set the stage for her future career.

Deb's career progressed rapidly as she took on various roles, often being encouraged by others to step into new positions. She became a deputy principal and eventually a principal at a young age, navigating her way through predominantly male-dominated environments. Her leadership extended beyond individual schools as she took on district and regional director roles in rural and remote Queensland.

One of the pivotal moments in Deb's career was when she was asked by the director general of Queensland, Australia to lead a review of disability services in schools and create an inclusive education agenda for the state. This role brought her back to Brisbane and earned global recognition for her work. It was during this time that she met Joanne McEachen, who would later play a significant role in Deb's career.

After a series of roles, including deputy director general in early childhood education in Queensland, Deb decided to take a break, step out of those roles and focus on bringing policy into practice. She wanted to demonstrate that practical, grounded approaches could make a significant impact on contemporary education. This led her to review Joanne McEachen's company, The Learner First, and eventually take on the role of CEO.



2013: Education Queensland regional director Deborah Dunstone with students in a new full-day prep program for the region.



Joanne & Deb at Salzburg Global in 2024.

Deb speaking at IEI in Sonoma, CA, USA in 2023.

The Creative Gap: Transforming Policy into Practice

In the world of education, the push and pull between tradition and innovation is a constant challenge. Supporting leaders to think creatively within the boundaries of the system is crucial. **It's about finding the space in the middle—the creative gap—where true innovation can flourish.** Educational leaders who have the courage to step into this gap can inspire others to rethink their approaches, fostering a culture of creativity and community-focused education.

Deb Dunstone, CEO of The Learner First, emphasizes the importance of this creative space. She believes that school leaders must prioritize professional learning that encourages creative thinking and understanding of students' needs. Having someone else facilitate this process for a school community allows principals to be learners themselves, engaging in the design and implementation of innovative educational practices.

Often, school leaders feel pressured to have all the answers, missing the opportunity to be adult learners alongside their teams. By shattering assumptions and exploring the full intent of policy documents, educators can discover new possibilities for their schools. This approach helps create a space for magic, where rules are reinterpreted to benefit students and communities.

Deb's work in Queensland throughout her career highlights the importance of peeling back layers of assumptions and expectations to focus on what truly matters for students' career pathways and personal development. **The journey of transforming policy into practice is ongoing, but the gift of prioritizing creativity is where real learning happens.** By fostering a culture of innovation and supporting school leaders in their creative endeavors, we can create educational environments that truly privilege students and prepare them for a successful future.

Today, as the CEO of The Learner First (TLF), Deb leads a team of passionate educators worldwide who share her vision of supporting schools and making a difference in the lives of students, educators, and communities.

Building on the knowledge and expertise of TLF's founder, Joanne McEachen, the team works globally to empower educators and students to discover their unique identities, understand their place in the world, and actively contribute to a brighter future. Using proven processes, resources, and tools, TLF customizes its executive coaching and professional learning support to meet partner needs, enhancing student outcomes, improving engagement, and changing lives.

Deb's journey is a powerful testament to the importance of self-understanding—knowing one's identity, place, purpose, and capacity. By understanding who she is and where she fits in the world, she has been able to foster meaningful connections, embrace continuous learning, and develop her competencies, including her passion for creativity. Deb has woven a career that is both impactful and deeply fulfilling. Her unique contributions to the world of education demonstrate how embracing one's true self can lead to a meaningful and rewarding professional life.

