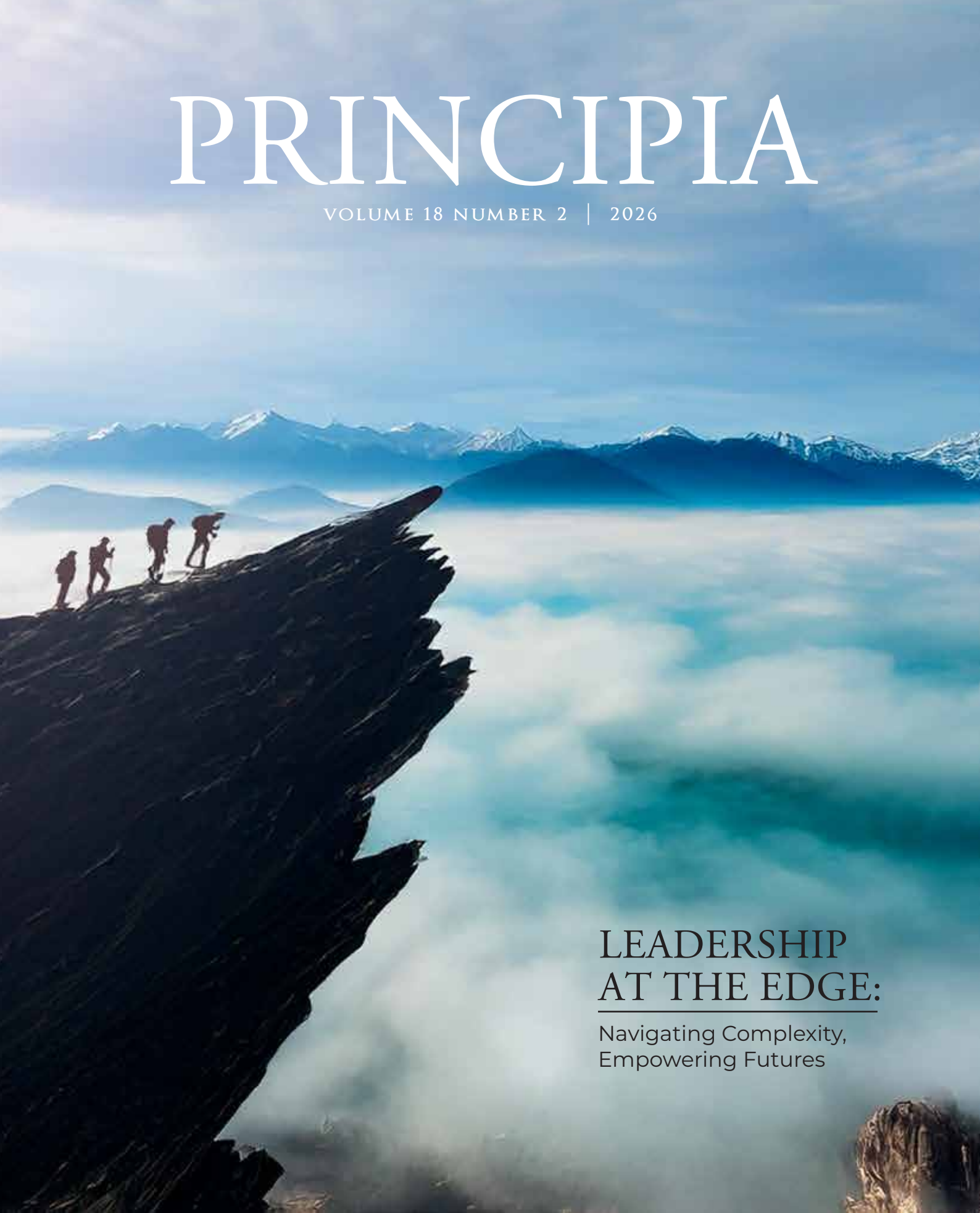


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LEADERSHIP AT THE EDGE:

Navigating Complexity,
Empowering Futures

—FEATURING—

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Begin?**

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WHEN DOES HOPE BEGIN?

Benjamin Kwok

Principal of Crest Secondary School, Benjamin Kwok, understands the post-PSLE agony of Singaporean parents more than most school leaders. His school, after all, only admits students whose PSLE Achievement Level (AL) scores place them in Posting Group 1. Unlike schools that accept all AL bands, Crest is purpose built for the Normal (Technical) stream. This means that many parents Benjamin meets are still coming to terms with the results, while their children are working through questions about their own potential.

“The students are unsure about themselves and about what comes next as they step into secondary school, yet their eyes light up when they see that learning at Crest is hands-on and alive. Their excitement reminds me that hope often begins the moment a child sees a pathway that makes sense for them.”

In the same breath, Benjamin reminds the parents that the majority of Singaporeans do not have a linear path to stable and meaningful lives. Every child shines differently and has to find their own way. Some will take much longer than others, meandering and reversing before progressing. At Crest, the entire curriculum is designed around this fact and thus the class sizes are smaller, a strong pastoral care system and personnel are in place, and authentic hands-on curriculum are modular and project-based to rebuild confidence.

Once parents attend the Open House and see the difference between Crest and other secondary schools, many feel reassured that this is a place their children can find their footing and thrive.

The school is well equipped and expertly staffed by practitioners, providing students with equal academic and vocational learning, thus opening up their interests and choices. Open a door and a fully functioning bistro complete with a retail space awaits. Step into the kitchen and be greeted not just with stainless steel prep counters but proper stovetops, air fryers, ovens, pots and pans. Industry partners provide the latest in smart technology for buildings so students learn about the Internet of Things with their hands as much as their heads. Vocational training at Crest is serious business, thus meriting a separate certification for those who complete their course.



There are five (5) vocational subjects: Culinary & Restaurant Operations, Retail and E-Commerce, Internet of Things, Mechanical Design and Automation, and Mobile Web Applications and the curriculum is jointly developed with ITE. Students can choose two subjects and will not only receive an Institute of Technical Education Skills Subject Certificate (ISSC) but also prepares them for early admission exercise for progression to Higher NITEC (National ITE Certificate).

“One of the highlights of the vocational programme is mandatory industry experience where students are attached to a company or agency that aligns with their chosen strengths and interests for four (4) weeks. The students usually return more confident and motivated as they come to understand the relevance of their learning in Crest.”

Benjamin recounts that one of their students had a particularly difficult time communicating and sometimes would respond only in grunts. Despite this, he nevertheless made the effort to write short greetings to Benjamin, some of which now hang on his office wall. A couple of notes include only a few words but with a large drawing of his hand as if he is waving “hi” or giving a “high five”. He had been posted to the Novotel Group and they had at first put him in the front of house as he was a very kind and sweet boy. When they realised that wasn’t a good fit for him, they arranged for him to work at the back of house where the other staff found him a delight to be around. He wasn’t the highest contributor, but he brought out the best in everyone as they couldn’t help but smile when they saw him and rallied around him, effectively raising everyone else’s spirits and productivity.

This same culture of caring is what Benjamin believes is at the heart of Crest and why the students are warm, spontaneous and happy. *“We closely look after all our students and even have an inhouse educational psychologist and counsellors. We want to provide holistic support, especially for those that have coping difficulties due to learning style and disadvantaged home environments.”*

Knowing the students will need more personal time with their teachers, classroom sizes are deliberately capped at 20 students. Two (2) form teachers support one another so that they are able to help and encourage everyone adequately.

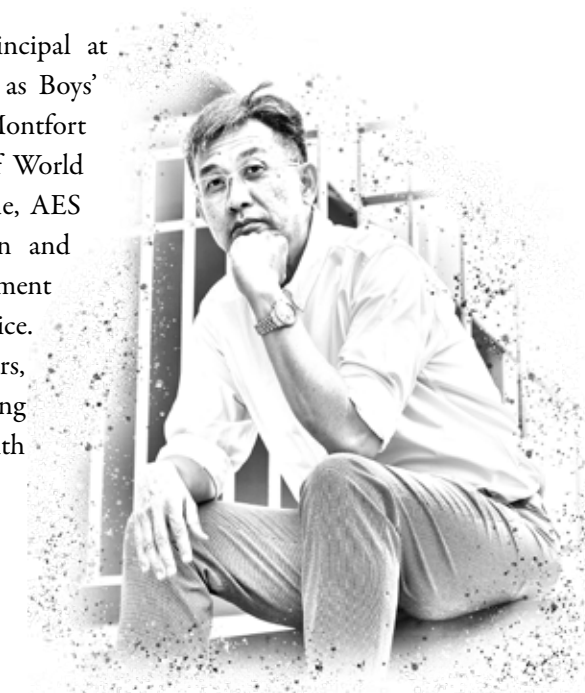
Benjamin also points out that around eighty percent (80%) of Crest Secondary’s teaching staff are direct hires, meaning they have not been assigned into the school by the Ministry of Education (MOE) but have personally chosen to be there. *“It makes a big difference that they sought out Crest and want to help our students in particular. They really go all out for them, taking the time to understand what a student needs and paying home visits is standard practice.”*

Likewise Benjamin has also chosen to be at Crest and sees it as a divine appointment and calling. When MOE informed him of his posting, he took the time to consider and pray for God’s will before accepting. Would he be the right person to lead the school? Would his vision and values align with the needs of the community and inspire both staff and students to reach their full potential?

“But you know, instead of me inspiring them, the teachers inspire me everyday. They have such caring hearts. They have such a great sense of mission and purpose.”

He shows me a small figurine of Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, the French Roman Catholic priest and missionary who founded the Montfort Brothers of St Gabriel. Etched on the base, barely noticeable unless one took the time, are the words, *“Those whom the world rejects must move you the most.”*

He received the figurine when he was posted as Principal at Assumption English School (AES). Originally founded as Boys’ Town English School, the school was started by the Montfort Brothers, established to care for boys in the aftermath of World War II as part of the Boys’ Town community. Over time, AES continued its mission to serve disadvantaged children and the community, providing them with a stable environment grounded in education, discipline, compassion and service. As Singapore navigated the challenges of the post-war years, the Montfort Brothers stood alongside those in need, playing a meaningful role in helping the community rebuild with dignity and purpose.



“I used to think education was about reputation and achievement,” Benjamin pauses as he recalls his early days as a teacher. “When I was at Catholic High School in 1995, the school received autonomous status and I was HOD (Head of Department) in PE (Physical Education). During that time, I wanted to expand the sports CCA programmes and achievements. I added cross country, track and field, and hired coaches who specialised in hurdles, throwing events, and pole vaulting. We did well against the top schools and even came first in some disciplines. I was so focused on raising the school’s profile, probably because it is also my alma mater.”

But after he was posted to Bendemeer Secondary School and saw students from diverse backgrounds, including those in stark poverty, Benjamin came to a profound realisation of the true purpose and power of education. While aiming for higher and better will always be part of schooling, for those who need it the most, education is not just a series of achievements but a vital lifeline. Done right, education can not only give a disheartened person self worth but also expand their capacity to break the chains of circumstance they find themselves in. The power of education, harnessed correctly, can turn hopelessness into actionable hope. He hasn’t wavered from this mission ever since.

Several boys walk past us, clearly on their way to practice. School is still out for the June holidays but some of the students are on campus to play football or floorball, hang out with their friends or participate in informal school programmes that the teachers have put together.

Benjamin proudly mentions that the floorball boys won the National C Division League 3 last year. Their achievement carries special weight, marking an exciting new milestone for his students to celebrate. More importantly, Benjamin believes that any encouragement that keeps his students physically active on their own initiative means increased capacity to learn in the classroom

“A lot of times people think movement is only for our physical health. But movement is also essential for our mental health and sports is crucial for character development. So we want our students to be physically active.”

However, if they choose to just lie down and watch the clouds go by, that is ok too. He mentions a boy who decided to do just that after flag raising while everyone else dutifully went to their classrooms. Instead of reprimanding or instructing the boy to get up and go to class, the HOD who is now the Vice Principal sat down and chatted with the boy to learn about what was going through his mind. As Benjamin observed their interaction from a distance, he was moved by this act of compassion.

“The students need to feel safe to be themselves. We need to give them room to grow in their own time. In fact, whether students, teachers, admin, guards or the estate team, we all need to be our genuine selves and grow in an organic manner. Otherwise, it is not sustainable.”

At the entrance of the school gates, Benjamin points out a green wall with the school crest and the words, “a place that feels like home.” It is a reminder for everyone, staff or student alike, that they are free to be themselves as they explore what is possible. It is a commitment to forgiveness and compassion after frustrations and missteps. It is a promise that setbacks will be met with support, and failures will be treated not with disappointment, but encouragement, knowing full well that they are but essential steps in the path to success that is uniquely their own. 🏡

