

# **ARISE Principal Forum Webinar**

**May 17, 2025**

## Executive Summary

ARISE launched the much-awaited ARISE Principal Forum—a pioneering leadership platform tailored exclusively for school principals and leaders—at the National School Education Conference in December 2024. The Forum aims to address the critical and evolving demands of school leadership through structured engagement, peer learning, exposure to global best practices, and strategic guidance from experts. The dipstick survey that was conducted prior to the launch of this forum met with an overwhelming response from School Promoters and Principals, and reflected the key challenges that plagued the sector, which the ARISE Principal Forum aims to bridge.

To build momentum and initiate a national dialogue, ARISE hosted an Open House Webinar on May 17, 2025. The session was designed to introduce the objectives, structure, and opportunities of the Principal Forum. Curated under the theme "*Vision, Voice, and Leadership*", the session featured prominent Indian and global thought leaders.

The webinar included a special segment by **ISTE+ASCD**, a globally acclaimed organization known for its expertise in leadership development for educators. They introduced a leadership development program adapted to the Indian context, reinforcing the Forum's commitment to global benchmarking with local action. This segment aptly named "From Follower to Leader: Nurturing Leadership" was the first of the "Knowledge Series" for School Principals and met with a high level of participation both in terms of quality and numbers. This session was conducted by **Ms. Opal Davis Dawson**, a renowned educational consultant and leadership coach, who identified core challenges and emphasized the importance of adaptive, distributed leadership in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

The webinar also featured renowned Indian educationists Ms. Abha Adams and Ms. Amrita Burman, whose presence and insights further amplified the powerful message delivered by Ms. Dawson.

## Welcome Address by Mr. Vinesh Menon

Director-General & CEO, ARISE

Mr. Menon welcomed the participants and set the context by reaffirming ARISE's mission to bring strategic reforms to school education through policy advocacy and capacity building. He introduced the ARISE Principal Forum as a dedicated leadership platform for school heads, aligned with ARISE's broader vision of reinventing school education in India. The forum was conceptualized after a dipstick survey with principals across India, which identified key challenge areas ranging from second-line leadership and teacher recruitment to student well-being, digital compliance, and AI integration. He further stated that this session marked the **first of a curated knowledge series** under the Principal Forum, aimed at equipping school leaders with global insights, peer learning, and transformative strategies.

## Opening Address by Ms. Abha Adams

ARISE Fellow | Director, Ahvaan Education Foundation

Ms. Abha Adams delivered an insightful opening address to mark the inaugural Knowledge Session of the **ARISE Principal Forum**. Addressing an audience of school leaders, she reflected on the growing complexities of educational leadership, describing it as "one of the most challenging and often loneliest roles in the sector today."

Drawing on Alvin Toffler's concept of "future shock," Ms. Adams highlighted how the last decade has been marked by a rapid acceleration of change—outpacing traditional systems and demanding constant adaptation from individuals and institutions. She emphasized the need for school leaders to adapt to an increasingly **VUCA** (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world. Traditional hierarchical models, she argued, must now give way to more **collaborative, equitable, and distributed leadership structures** within schools.

She highlighted key systemic challenges in the sector:

- The lack of certified educational leadership programs
- Limited autonomy for school heads
- Insufficient investment in professional development
- The absence of coaching and mentoring frameworks
- Talent deficits in the evolving teaching profession

Ms. Adams pointed that while leaders are expected to support their teams, **they themselves often lack a 'holding space'** i.e. a structured support system for their own growth and well-being. In this context, she positioned the ARISE Principals Forum as a timely and crucial initiative:

*"A space to learn from one another, to share challenges, seek mentoring, and walk together on a journey of collective leadership."* With optimism and conviction, she concluded by underscoring the Forum's potential to foster a community of empowered, future-ready school leaders.

## **Session on From Follower to Leader: Nurturing Leadership by Ms. Opal**

### **Davis Dawson**

**Global Education Strategist, ISTE & ASCD | Author, Leadership coach & Award-winning Former School Principal**

The keynote session of the inaugural ARISE Principals Forum Knowledge Series featured Ms. Opal Davis-Dawson, a globally recognised education expert and leadership development coach. Drawing from over 30 years of experience in K–12 education, including 18 years as a school principal, Ms. Dawson offered a powerful session titled *'From Follower to Leader: Nurturing Leadership.'* Her presentation provided a comprehensive framework to support the development of leadership pipelines in schools, combining international best practices with local relevance for Indian educators.

## Understanding the Leadership Challenge

Ms. Dawson began by contextualising the urgent need for structured leadership development. She highlighted that leadership turnover in progressive schools is significantly higher than in traditional institutions. Many principals, especially in promoter-led schools, step into leadership roles without formal training, operating under increasing regulatory pressure and with limited support. In such environments, burnout and attrition are common. She stressed the importance of succession planning and intentional development of future leaders to ensure long-term institutional resilience.

## The Four-Stage Leadership Development Pipeline

To address this leadership gap, Ms. Dawson introduced a four-stage development model: *Discovery, Preparation, Practice and Transformation*. She explained that the discovery phase involves identifying leadership potential within both traditional and non-traditional roles. These may include teachers, coordinators, wellness mentors and even parent engagement leads. The preparation phase focuses on building competencies through professional development and mentoring. The practice phase involves assigning real-world responsibilities to develop leadership capability. The transformation phase embeds leadership as a cultural norm within the school, supported by coaching, reflection and shared accountability.



**Figure 1:** Four-Stage Leadership Development Model

### **Building Distributive Leadership Ecosystems**

A key emphasis of the session was the transition from hierarchical models to distributive leadership. Ms. Dawson argued that school improvement is driven not by individual leaders but by empowered, collaborative teams. Effective school leaders, she noted, are those who actively nurture leadership capacity within their teams, enabling shared decision-making and innovation at multiple levels. Distributive leadership fosters organisational sustainability, helps identify future leaders early and builds institutional strength over time.

### **Redesigning Professional Learning**

Ms. Dawson highlighted the need to move beyond isolated workshops and instead develop comprehensive, job-embedded professional learning ecosystems. She encouraged school leaders to evaluate all professional development initiatives by asking three questions:

- Do they align with the school's transformation goals?
- Do they balance innovation with sustainability?
- And are they embedded in daily practice rather than offered as one-off training?

She introduced a Professional Learning Pathway Planner designed to help schools structure development activities across an academic year, ensuring alignment with leadership goals.

### **Evaluating Educational Technology with Purpose**

Addressing the increasing use of technology in education, she cautioned against adopting EdTech tools that are not aligned with clear pedagogical goals. She introduced a four-part vetting checklist focused on *Purpose*, *Need*, *Evidence* and *Risk*. Leaders were encouraged to prioritise tools that support local languages, meet privacy standards and demonstrate proven impact. She emphasised the importance of selecting technology that empowers educators rather than overwhelms them and highlighted the role of digital tools in enhancing, not replacing, the human aspects of school leadership.

## Measuring Impact and Tracking Leadership Growth

Ms. Dawson discussed how leadership development must be measurable in order to be effective. She introduced metrics such as leadership readiness ratios, internal promotion rates, faculty retention data, and the speed at which pilot projects are scaled across the school. She also advocated for establishing feedback mechanisms including *peer coaching protocols, reflective portfolios, and student voice dashboards*. These tools can help track whether leadership initiatives are contributing to improvements in school culture and educational outcomes.

## A Case Study in Leadership Transformation

In an inspiring success story, Ms. Dawson showcased how The Heritage School reduced faculty turnover from 26% to 8% in three years by:

- Mapping leadership competencies
- Running a 16-week micro-course on pedagogy and design thinking
- Offering pilot project budgets
- Integrating reflective portfolios and peer coaching.

This structured pipeline led to 38 teacher-led innovations and 9 internal promotions—proving the value of intentional investment in leadership development.

## Closing Reflections and Next Steps

In her conclusion, Ms. Dawson encouraged school leaders to initiate at least one actionable step within the next 30 days, whether by *identifying emerging leaders, launching a mentorship program or auditing current professional development practices*. She emphasised that leadership pipelines are not built overnight but require consistent investment, clarity of purpose and a culture of coaching and feedback. Her closing message was clear: leadership must be grown intentionally and collectively, and the time to act is now.

The session received enthusiastic feedback from participants who appreciated the clarity, practicality and global applicability of the strategies shared. Ms. Dawson's contribution

aligned seamlessly with the vision of the ARISE Principals Forum to cultivate a national ecosystem of empowered, future-ready educational leaders.

### **Closing Remarks by Dr. Amrita Burman**

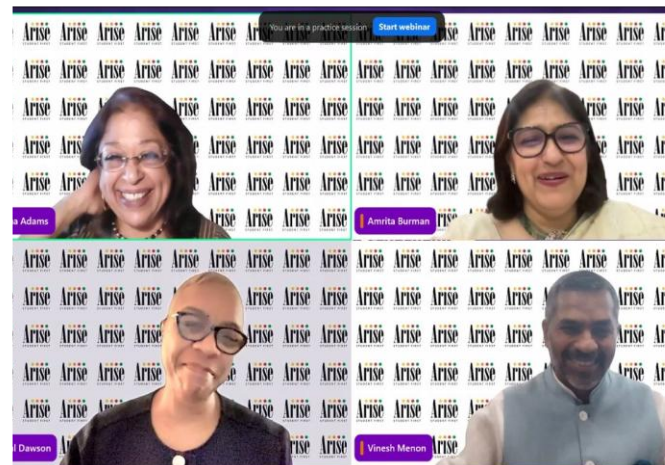
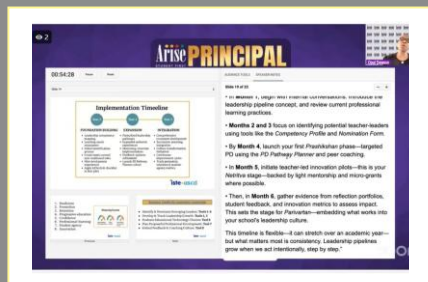
**ARISE Principal Forum Committee Member | Director, Sunbeam Group of Educational Institutions**

The session concluded with reflections by Ms. Amrita Burman, who reiterated the vision behind the *ARISE Principals Forum*: to serve as a dedicated space for nurturing and empowering school leaders across India. She emphasised that school leadership must go beyond current heads of institutions and include the identification and development of emerging second- and third-line leaders. This aligns directly with the session's focus on succession planning and distributed leadership.

Ms. Burman highlighted that one of the most valuable takeaways from the session was the practical leadership toolkit shared by Ms. Opal Davis-Dawson, which provided clear steps for recognising, mentoring and sustaining leadership talent within schools. She noted that the session offered actionable strategies that could be implemented immediately, especially around building leadership pipelines, fostering team culture and embedding coaching and feedback into everyday school processes.



## Glimpses from the Webinar



## About ARISE Principal Forum

The ARISE Principal Forum is a platform dedicated to empowering school Principals and Academic Leaders in India by providing access to unparalleled opportunities for professional development, collaboration, and global networking. Recognizing the evolving challenges faced by educational leaders, the forum seeks to add value to their pivotal role in shaping students' educational journeys from formative years to higher education readiness.

ARISE invites you to join our Principal Forum – a platform dedicated to celebrating outstanding principals and fostering collaboration to drive meaningful change in education. Submit your interest here-

<https://registration.ariseedu.org/join-the-arise-principal-forum/>

## About ARISE

**ARISE (The Association for Reinventing School Education)** is an autonomous body that brings together some of the country's most progressive and intellectual minds including School Promoters, Edupreneurs & Leaders who remain committed and focused on serving as a beacon for change within the diverse and dynamic landscape of India's school education system. Living up to the motto '**Student First**', ARISE recognises the complexity and the unique challenges faced by both independent private schools and public / government schools and will continue to play an important role to be a collaborative platform to bring together forward-thinking school founders, educators, policy makers, think tanks, educationists, civil society experts and technical experts. **As a collegium, ARISE represents over 1800+ schools, 95,000 teachers and 1.5M students.**

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