



Anna standing at a Colors for Peace event. Colors for Peace is a non-profit association that promotes children's art internationally to reduce cultural, social, and economic distances between rich and poor countries.

Faces in the Crowd:

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

Anna Villalta

When Anna Villalta was growing up, her father often reminded her that education is an invaluable treasure, one that can never be taken away.

“I come from a rich cultural background as the daughter of Italian immigrants who had limited access to formal education,” she says. “Growing up, I witnessed their relentless dedication and received unwavering encouragement to reach for higher aspirations, commit to rigorous learning, and aim for accomplishments that exceeded their own.”

This experience gave her a profound appreciation for the value and impact of English public education in Quebec where she grew up. It instilled in her a strong sense of advocacy for English public education within the unique context of that province.

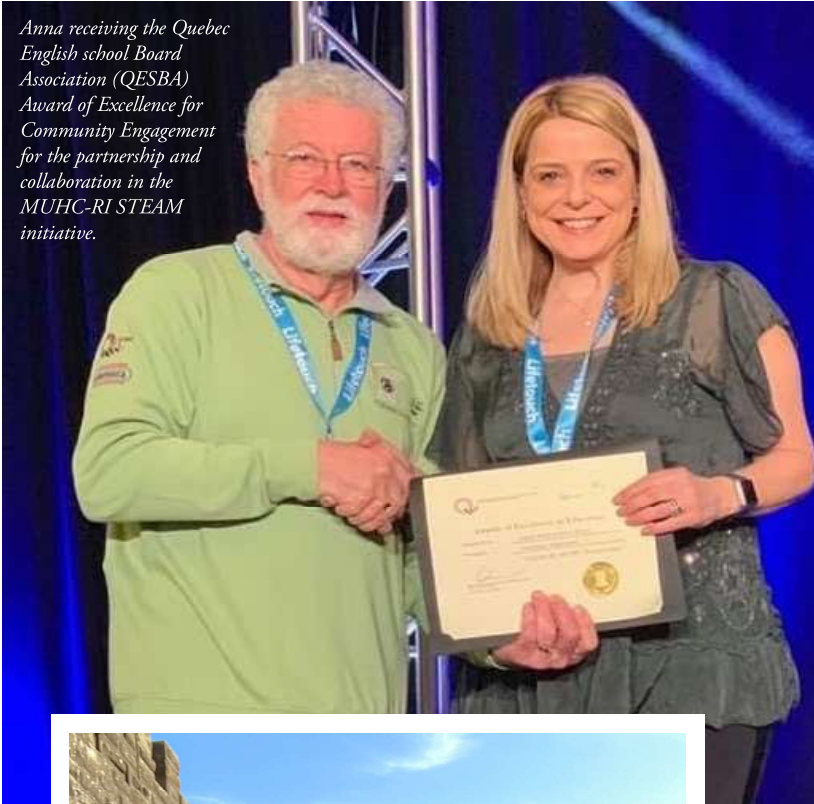
Having witnessed firsthand the transformative power of quality education, Anna says, she is deeply committed to making sure every student, no matter their background or circumstance, has the chance to access an outstanding educational experience. From a very young age, Anna has been driven by curiosity and a

love for learning, and school held a special place in her heart.

“I have cherished the opportunity to not only acquire knowledge but also to share it with others,” she says.

Anna's formal learning journey began in public schools and continued at McGill University, where she earned a Bachelor of Education specializing in Elementary Education. Teaching positions were in short supply when she graduated, so she honed her skills in language instruction while working as an English as a Second Language and French as a Second Language teacher in adult education. Her passion for

Anna receiving the Quebec English School Board Association (QESBA) Award of Excellence for Community Engagement for the partnership and collaboration in the MUHC-RI STEAM initiative.



Anna and her husband in France.

elementary education never wavered, and when the opportunity arose for teaching students from Grades 1 to 6, she enthusiastically took it. This hands-on classroom experience deepened her understanding of pedagogy and student needs.

Her commitment to continuing her formal learning led Anna to obtain a Master of Education with a focus on Curriculum Studies, also from McGill. At the same time, she began to explore the idea of becoming a school administrator. She served as a vice principal and then a principal at both the elementary and high school level for numerous years with the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board (SWLSB). The SWLSB serves schools in Laval and the Laurentides and Lanaudière regions.

“I’ve nurtured my passion for educational leadership throughout my tenure as a school administrator,” she says. “I view myself as an agent of innovation and positive change within the realm of education.”

Her career path eventually led her to the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), the largest English public school board in Quebec, in various senior management roles. She has served as a Regional Director, providing crucial support to principals. She provided educational support services for counseling services in the youth and adult education sector as the Assistant Director of Student Services and is currently leading a team of educational consultants as the Assistant Director of Educational Services at the EMSB. These senior leadership roles have given her the chance to gain exposure to a wide array of educational practices and approaches, she says, and afforded her a unique perspective on addressing challenges and driving positive change within the education sector.

“My journey into senior administration has been guided by the belief that educational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the future of our students and our communities. It is my unwavering belief that effective educational leaders not only recognize the inherent potential and promise within each child but also possess the knowledge, strategies, and actionable plans required to help every student achieve their fullest potential.”

Anna’s inspiration to work in senior administration within public education arises from her profound dedication to fostering a system where all students are equipped with the tools they need to thrive, grow, and contribute meaningfully to society.

“This commitment drives me to create a supportive, team-oriented, and self-reflective environment for all staff members where they feel personally and professionally supported to actively contribute to the continuous

improvement and excellence of our educational institutions,” she explains.

She describes her leadership style as having multiple approaches. “I primarily identify with the transformational leadership style, which is characterized by a strong commitment to inspiring and motivating teams toward achieving a shared vision. My empathetic nature aligns closely with the servant leadership approach, and my deep pedagogical expertise positions me as an instructional leader. Moreover, my resolute commitment underlines my identity as an equity-focused leader.”

Her leadership philosophy is deeply rooted in the belief that every child is inherently unique and deserves access to an educational environment that is tailored to their individual needs. “This environment should be equitable, accessible, inclusive, stimulating, and nurturing,” she says, “allowing them to flourish physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.”

As an educational leader, Anna sees her role as inspiring and guiding others, fostering collaboration within teams while maintaining a clear, shared vision and mission. “I approach leadership with unwavering commitment and integrity, translating these principles into action and infusing those I lead with enthusiasm and passion.”

This includes prioritizing transparency, effective communication, and collaborating with teams of educators to discover and enhance innovative practices, with the overarching goal of nurturing academic achievement and unlocking the full potential of each student.

“My aim is to prepare students to become not only academically proficient but also productive, responsible, ethical, creative, and compassionate members of society.”

In May 2019, Anna received the Quebec English School Board Association Award of Excellence in two distinct categories. She was recognized for innovation in teaching for her team’s contributions to the development of the RLTN Two Table Model, a ground-breaking approach that has positively affected teaching methodologies. She was also recognized for her work in community engagement for her leadership role in fostering partnership and collaboration in the Research Institute of the McGill



Anna Villalta, Assistant Director of Educational Services, English Montreal School Board.

University Health Centre (RI-MUHC) STEAM initiative.

Her dedication to the field of educational leadership continues to grow, as demonstrated by her current pursuit of a doctoral degree at McGill. Now in her third year of study, her research focuses on creating dynamic and interconnected learning environments characterized by sustainable practices and inclusive leadership.

“Throughout my doctoral journey, I have immersed myself in the intricate facets of leading schools toward equity and diversity, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that shape equity-focused educational settings and identity-conscious leadership practices.”

Anna notes her doctoral studies have enriched her knowledge of educational leadership and instilled in her a commitment to fostering critical consciousness. She bases her decisions not only on the most effective solutions but also on those that champion diversity, fairness, accessibility, and inclusivity within the educational landscape.

As part of her doctoral studies, she is also actively involved with a research team for the NEXTschool project. The project explores the reinvention of high school education, with a focus on structuring the learning environment around individual student interests and aspirations.

“NEXTschool aims to transform the high school experience to align with the evolving needs of future generations of learners, empowering schools to offer flexible and tailored learning experiences that resonate with 21st-century students.”

As well as her primary professional and scholarly responsibilities, Anna also devotes time to the work of the Administrators Association of English School Boards of Quebec (AAESQ) as a member of its executive team. In this role, she advocates for school and system administrators across the province. Her work with AAESQ goes back to 2006 when she first became a member and served in various capacities, including president at the local level within the Sir Wilfrid Laurier Administrators Association (SWLAA). She has served on the AAESQ board of directors since 2010, and since 2013, she has contributed to the executive team of the Association of English Montreal Board Administrators (AEMBA).

Anna is also a new member of the CASSA board, representing the interests of AAESQ. She joined in 2022. She notes her motivation to engage with the CASSA board stems from a profound desire to understand and address common educational concerns across Canada.

“I sought to gain insights into how different regions in Canada have tackled critical issues such as teacher shortages, their commitment to Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous education, post-COVID coping strategies in their respective districts, and their approaches to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion within schools. Additionally, I was keen to explore how they were building the capacity of teachers and school leaders to enhance the quality of education.”

Anna has always aspired to share her own learnings and experiences with colleagues from coast to coast to coast, and to promote collaboration and the exchange of ideas to advance education in Canada. An instructional leader driven by a passion for pedagogical research, Anna found a natural fit within CASSA’s professional learning committee.

“I am most looking forward to collaborating with educational leaders from across Canada, sharing insights, and collectively addressing the pressing challenges in our field,” she says. “Together, we can make a meaningful impact on education nationwide.”

Anna’s contributions to CASSA also include presenting a session at the 2023 conference (“Mirrors, Windows,

and Equity: A Reflective Workshop on Courageously Shifting Leadership Practices”) and will be writing an article (“Navigating School Change in times of Ambiguity”) for the *Leaders & Learners* magazine’s Winter 2023 issue.

“I view these endeavours not only as personal accomplishments but also as a profound commitment to giving back to our esteemed community of educators,” she says. “It is my firm belief that by sharing knowledge, fostering innovation, and advocating for positive change, we can collectively elevate the educational landscape and empower the next generation of leaders, both within and beyond the classroom. These contributions represent a heartfelt dedication to the continuous improvement of our educational system, driven by a profound desire to inspire, mentor, and guide fellow educators on the path to excellence.”

Through her work within the Italian community, Anna serves as the Ambassador in Canada for the esteemed Colors for Peace organization. She was nominated for this role by the Italian Consulate in Montreal. In this capacity, she leads initiatives that promote

children’s art and facilitate cultural exchanges between various nations. This work helps to bridge cultural and social divides on a global scale through the unifying power of children’s art.

In the last six years, she has also gained valuable governance experience through her nomination by the Quebec Ministry of Higher Education, where she represents school boards on the Dawson College Board of Governors as the vice chair of Dawson College.

Beyond her lifelong learning and professional pursuits, Anna is deeply passionate about spending balanced and quality time with friends and family. “I have been fortunate to share my life’s journey with my high school sweetheart for over three decades. My husband has been an unwavering pillar of support throughout my career as an educator and leader. Together we have built a loving family with two wonderful children.”

Their children are well on their way with their own journeys in education, she says. Their daughter is enrolled in an anglophone publicly funded Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel

(CEGEP) while their son is pursuing studies at the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University.

Anna’s roots as the daughter of multilingual immigrants have given her a deep appreciation for a multitude of cultural perspectives and languages, and she is fluent in French, English, and Italian. This linguistic diversity has allowed her to forge connections with individuals from various walks of life and engage in enriching cross-cultural exchanges. Her innate curiosity and desire for exploration have also resulted in a love of travel. Discovering different cultures, cuisines, and traditions has been a source of immense joy and enlightenment, she says.

“It is through these experiences that I have gained a broader perspective on the world and a deeper appreciation for the richness of human diversity,” she says. “In essence, my personal history is a tapestry woven with the threads of family, culture, education, and exploration. These elements have shaped my worldview and continue to fuel my commitment to lifelong learning and my dedication to the field of education.” ○




WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO WRITE FOR US!

The CASSA Board is looking for authors interested in writing for the upcoming Winter 2023-2024 issue of *Leaders & Learners* magazine. If you have an article idea that fits into a theme about leadership, please send an abstract to Jenna Collignon, editor of the magazine, at jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net, and copy ken_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca. We are looking for features and success stories from each region of Canada: Eastern Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Western Canada, and Northern Canada.

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