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THE BRIEF

SPOTLIGHT

Inside Vinschool: The CEO of Vietnam's largest K-12 school system on how to successfully scale world-class education at a breathtaking pace

Phan Hà Thủy is CEO of Vinschool, the largest K-12 education system in Vietnam. Launched in 2013 with a single site, Vinschool now serves 60,000 students across 60 campuses spread across cities including Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, Thanh Hoa, and Ha Tinh.

Vinschool was the first Vietnamese school system accredited by the Council of International Schools, and, through its AP and Cambridge curricula-inspired programmes, aims to deliver a world-class education for Vietnamese students.

The group has grown at a phenomenal pace under Thủy's leadership.

Vinschool was founded as a not-for-profit social enterprise by Vingroup, the conglomerate founded by Vietnam's first billionaire, Pham Nhat Vuong. Vingroup's operations span everything from real estate to healthcare, and Vinschool has grown alongside it, with new sites established in every new town Vingroup builds.

Vietnam's private school sector only began opening around 2004–2005, before accelerating over the past 10-15 years. Meanwhile, the country's economy has more than doubled in size to over $527 billion over the past decade, with growth of 7-8% expected this year alone, driving demand for Vingroup's new towns and schools.

"We are very fortunate that Vietnamese parents invest a lot in education now," Thuy says. "Some families are willing to sell their only house and rent an apartment so they can send their kids to international school."

Thuy said her experience at global schools group Cognita was the perfect training for leading Vinschool's expansion.

"Before joining Cognita, I opened an international school by myself with some partners and learned a lot about world-class education, so my mission and goal at Vinschool was clear from day one," Thuy says. "The experience informed me on how to think about building Vinschool not just as a school network, but as an institution with the rigour and the architecture of a world-class system.

"The aim is to move away from rote learning and towards building students' independence, problem-solving and future-ready skills." Thuy explained that this perspective is particularly important because many Vietnamese school groups still rely on traditional exam-drilling models.

Opening any new school is difficult, let alone managing to successfully open ten schools in a single year. Vinschool has taken a strategic, system-led approach, and Thuy puts the group's rapid success down to a few key factors:

1

Delivering standardisation at scale

Thuy explained that to open schools on Vinschool's scale, groups need to establish highly detailed standards, policies, procedures and frameworks.

Thuy and her team built a highly codified "operating blueprint" covering classroom standards, teacher requirements, leadership routines and annual school calendars. It even has a "principal calendar" that tells every new school leader what needs to happen at each point in the year. This blueprint has become one of Vinschool's core strengths.

Vinschool has also put all its processes online, with examples, videos and guidance, so that every new school principal can access the system and learn from others.

Thuy says: "When we set it all up, it became much easier for us to open a school because we already have everything. We have the blueprint. We have a platform."

2

Hiring and training local teachers, not relying on expats

Thuy stressed how important recruiting and retaining Vietnamese teachers has been to Vinschool's success.

From the start, Thuy set out to prove that local teachers could deliver tier-one education if they received the right training, frameworks and support. The CEO taking this approach both boosted the local teaching ecosystem, and reduced Vinschool's reliance on expat teachers from abroad, who are more likely to churn faster.

"Expat teachers have limited long-term commitment," Thuy says, "So we trained and created a framework for Vietnamese local teachers.

"These teachers are very committed, and almost 80% of our first cohort have been with us for 10 years. They just need to be retrained and they can learn and relearn... They're committed, work hard and they are also sharp."

Thuy also credits Vietnamese students being "respectful and hard-working" with boosting teacher retention rates.

3

Working with partners to create an accessible world-class curriculum

Vinschool partnered with Cambridge University Press & Assessment to translate materials into Vietnamese, which means its students don't have to study the Cambridge programme entirely in English. This has been successful, Thuy said, because it means all students can access a top-tier international curriculum in their own language where needed.

4

Leading the market, not following the pack

Thuy believes that her experience scaling Vinschool shows how important it is that education leaders don't simply fall in line with expectations. She said that if Vinschool had only followed traditional parental expectations around exam results, rankings and competitiveness, it would have become "just a slightly better version" of a public school, rather than a system preparing students for a different, AI-powered future.

Thuy says: "One of the important lessons for me is that in this industry, you cannot just follow the market, you have to lead it."

The CEO also stressed that taking this approach means schools also need to invest in building trust over time with parents and stakeholders. Vinschool has done this through running a structured thought leadership programme and engaging parents in dialogue.

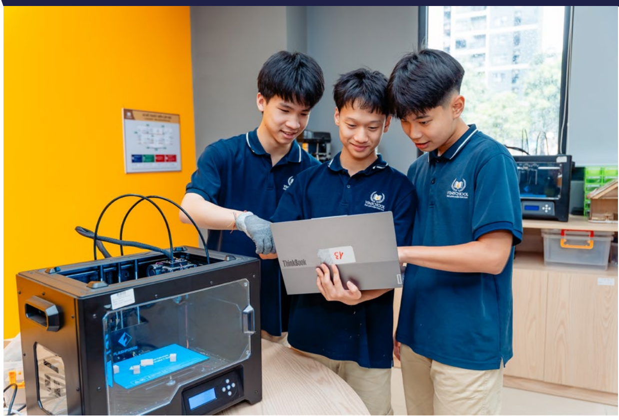
Thuy says: "Through this, we have proved that we are on the right path."

The 3 dynamics Phan Hà Thủy sees right now in the SE Asia education market:

1. A clear policy push: Governments are driving internationalisation and digital transformation through concrete digitalisation targets and cross-border policies.

2. A growing and mobile middle class push for quality: Parents are shifting to more outcome and competency-based expectations.

3. Tech-enabled teaching models are becoming a "must have": Previously they were seen as "nice to have" and now they're a "must have", so people are heavily investing into EdTech - we have our own platform at Vinschool.



PROFILE

‘I almost died in a plane crash’: Dr. Chris Howard on his stellar career and going global with ASU’s winning model

Dr. Chris Howard is Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Arizona State University (ASU). ASU has won the title of most innovative university in America for 11 years running, with 100,000 online students and around half a million more upskilling or reskilling.

Chris has had a unique career. He is a decorated US Air Force veteran who served in Afghanistan and went on to lead a $100 million initiative battling HIV/AIDS in South Africa. He also holds a Harvard MBA with distinction and is known for founding the Impact Young Lives Foundation (IYLF), which has opened up opportunities to thousands of young people.

Here, Chris talks about what he has learned from a varied career, why he calls AI “augmented intelligence", and how ASU is going global.

Dr. Chris Howard is an unusual education leader. Not many university VPs have survived a plane crash, let alone founded initiatives that have changed millions of lives.

Chris says that these diverse experiences have helped him hone attributes that come in useful at ASU.

“I was a pilot early in my career, and I almost died in a plane crash in 1995. If I wouldn’t have punched out, I would have perished,” he said. “I’m not glib or a fatalist, but experiences like that give you perspective and the ability to compartmentalise – to, as the Brits say, ‘be calm and carry on’.”

His experiences also made Chris determined to try to make the world a better place.

The leader first visited South Africa in 1993 as a Rhodes Scholar. There, he fell in love with his wife of more than 30 years, and with the country. He returned as a military adviser to then-US Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen, where he helped lead on Secure the Future, an $100 million HIV/AIDS initiative that funded both research for resource-constrained settings and grassroots public health work across five southern African countries.

In 2000, Chris established the IYLF, and the initiative has since provided thousands of mentorships and scholarships to disadvantaged young people, and funded health-focused non-profits in the region. He also brought this dedication to ASU. The university recently partnered with the Mastercard foundation to bring scholars to the US, and works with education projects in Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Being in the ‘human capital development business’ across contexts

Chris sees a common thread running through his varied career: being in the “human capital development business”.

“In the military, you’re taking privates or airmen or guardians or marines and helping them go from here to here with all the learning, education and training techniques that you can use to move them forward,” he says. “There, that’s for a greater good: national security. In higher education, it’s for learning and growth, personal satisfaction and job preparation.”

Chris joined ASU from Robert Morris University in 2022, and made the move in part because of its work with the military. For example, through its Military Learning and Innovation Initiative, ASU provides student information systems, learning management systems and training for professors at Air University.

“One of the reasons I came here was because we were doing really interesting things in this space,” Chris said. “I thought I could bring a lot to the fight.”

‘We see AI as augmented intelligence’: ASU’s proven ‘yes, and’ approach to AI implementation

AI is the hot topic in education today, and Chris explained how ASU has created a winning approach to implementing the technology.

The university launched one of the first mass Master's degrees in AI, and has already embedded AI through its Learning Enterprise and Career Catalyst reskilling programmes.

Chris says that ASU’s students are now starting to see AI certificates as "the new minors”, and he believes this will only become a more mainstream mindset going forward.

“ASU has always tried to be a ‘yes, and’ university,” he said. “People say, ‘We’re a big STEM school.. and we also have the largest humanities school in America.”

“It’s the same ‘yes, and’ approach when it comes to AI. We see AI as ‘augmented intelligence’. We call it that specifically because it is there to augment our intelligence, not take over, when it comes to learning. We see AI as helping people learn, grow, and become their best selves.”

‘ASU’s goal, Chris explains, is to turn out "master learners"

“We want people to be master learners, which means competent learners that are curious, that are competent as they move through their life, that are rooted in the human condition. And they need to have a level of AI acumen to be able to do that.”

ASU is ahead of the curve in ensuring students have that acumen. For example, the university is starting to teach biology not in wet labs but through Dreamscape Learn, an immersive "Alien Zoo" built with Hollywood producer Walter Parkes. More than 30,000 students have used it, and Chris says the least-prepared students are the ones seeing the biggest gains. To date, these students have seen their grades rise by a full letter-grade.

Taking ASU campuses global

ASU is about to expand its global physical presence, starting in London.

ASU London is a new independent entity offering three-year degrees, starting with engineering and business degrees. The move will see ASU deepen its ties with King's College London, and offer students from around the world a unique experience and a route into US graduate study at ASU in the US.

“To have the optionality for people to pursue a degree at ASU London for three years also provides a ‘yes and’,” Chris says. “It gives students a really good pathway to apply to come back and do a graduate degree here, and that’s just going to expand.”

Chris’ advice for any ELF members eyeing their own overseas expansion is to find a partner with experience in the new locality. ASU joined forces with Cintana Education as a strategic implementation partner for this and other international projects, and Chris says this has been invaluable.

"There are so many regulatory and cultural ‘unknown unknowns’," he says. "Without a seasoned partner on your side, it's going to be harder, more expensive and take longer than you imagine. Don’t be afraid to get help."

INSIGHT

Renaissance Global's Scott Van der Linden on deploying a next-gen AI-powered intelligence system and how to get M&A right as you scale

Scott Van der Linden is Executive Vice President and Managing Director of Renaissance Global, the international division of Renaissance. Founded in 1986 in Wisconsin with the Accelerated Reader program, Renaissance is now a global edtech leader delivering assessment, data, reading, maths and personalised learning tools to schools in more than 100 countries across six continents. The company's goal is clear: to deliver research-based, assessment-driven solutions that accelerate personalised learning at scale and drive measurable impact.

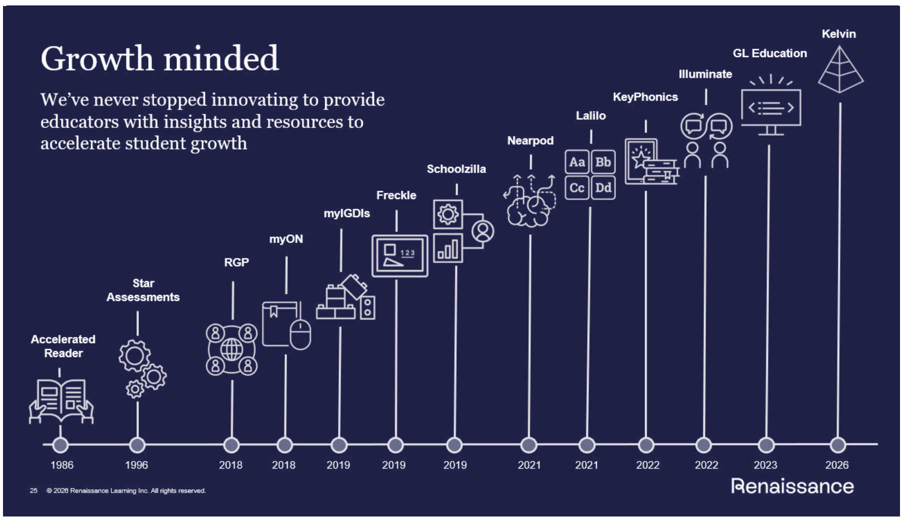
Scott grew up in Canada and has a background in investment banking, private equity, and operational leadership. He joined Renaissance four years ago to lead on the company's corporate development and M&A growth strategy. His successes include the 2023 acquisition of GL Education, the UK-based formative assessment provider.

The leader took on an expanded role earlier this year, and now heads up all international operations for the US-headquartered business. Now, he is about to spearhead the global rollout of a new flagship product, Renaissance Intelligence.

"It's a super exciting time for us as a business," Scott said. "Renaissance Intelligence is an AI-powered education intelligence system that's designed to unify assessment instruction and practice into a single actionable workflow.

"It's about how can we personalise learning for every student in a way that leads to improved student growth. It's about empowering teachers and providing them with actionable next steps that derive from high-quality assessments.

"We think Renaissance Intelligence is unique in the market because it's built on decades of psychometric research and very large learning data sets and long-standing educator partnerships. Our goal is to bring coherence to the classroom, which I think has been a challenge the last number of years in classrooms, as if there are too many disparate and disconnected tools, you just don't see the coherence needed across instructional types and instructional materials that many studies show is super important to student growth."



Renaissance Intelligence will have a phased rollout, starting in the US this month. A rollout for the English national curriculum and British international schools is planned for 2027.

Scott has spent recent months working with Renaissance's teams around the world. He shared that he believes the EdTech sector is now entering a new phase, shifting from delivering digitisation to demonstrated impact and evidence-based student outcomes.

He said: "For many years the conversation was more centred on general digitisation and getting technology into classrooms. So, how do you move processes online to be more efficient? We're past that in many areas, so today the focus from what we see really is on 'what's your impact?' 'What's the evidence behind that impact?' 'How do you help teachers and school leaders and schools get to the right outcomes?"

> ***"We're seeing our school leaders and our buyers becoming more selective. They want fewer partners, fewer vendors, and are really trying to pick the right ones."***

For this reason, Scott stressed that any edtech founder looking to succeed needs to recognise the importance of securing buy-in at all levels at a school, from teaching staff through to executive leadership.

"If you don't have both, you're not going to have a long term relationship," he said. "On the teacher side, teacher buy-in comes from trust, and teachers really trust the solutions that save them time, but also respect their professional expertise. That's a really key thing we talk a lot about here at Renaissance: that we are explicitly not trying to replace teachers."

Scott explained that the success Renaissance is having today, including launching Renaissance Intelligence, is in many ways a continuum of a 7-8 year strategy that involved making around 10 acquisitions. He said: "We've brought various different companies together, and we're now taking the very best of many different tools and bringing it into one cohesive solution."

Scott successfully led the company through this M&A process in recent years, some involving integrating companies with hundreds of employees.

Scott's top tips for ELF members include:

1. Start by setting an intentional approach and long-term vision

Scott said: "Start with a very intentional approach of that longer-term vision and where you want to go. I partner very closely with our head of product and broader team, and that's been a successful recipe for us to make sure we are trying to bring the best of breed solutions into what we're doing."

Scott also stressed the importance of securing buy-in across leadership structures early on. He said: "Even before you get to the M&A stage, depending on what type of business or your ownership structure, I would spend the time upfront and get full alignment with your CEO or with your board or with your investors - or all all three of those constituents - about what it is we're trying to solve via this acquisition strategy. Do kind of upfront work and then you can be very proactive in the types of companies you're looking for."

Renaissance completed this process, and also uses an assessment-driven approach to help it make decisions around acquisition targets. Scott explained: "Based on our assessment data we decide what to acquire next, whether it's a maths solution or a way to reach new markets."

2. Start integration planning as early as you can - and "expect the unexpected"

Scott said: "Post merger integrations aren't easy. It's the ultimate case study in change management…Even with the best people they are hard and can take over a year to bring teams together."

"So you can't start integration planning soon enough. Start it months ahead, even before a deal's closed...That pre-planning often goes a really long way. I don't think you can underestimate the challenge of culturally integrating teams and businesses. Even if on the surface cultures look very aligned, as you get into daily ways of working, there's just always more to it. You need to expect the unexpected. Things aren't going to go perfectly and to plan, and you've just got to be able to pivot quickly when those types of things happen."

"But if it's done right, and you've started with a north star and you know why you're bringing these companies together, large or small, and you're able to ground folks in a clear vision, it helps."

3. Hire a dedicated person to lead on your M&A process

Scott said: "As you naturally scale up and get larger and consider larger acquisitions, I would definitely recommend leading on M&A be someone's full-time job."

"For example, if you start thinking about acquiring international businesses, it opens up a whole host of new challenges that you need to be aware of and you need someone to be thinking through thoroughly. It comes back to that pre-planning element. Think about some of these things up front and it pays big dividends."

WHAT'S NEXT

Our Singapore Series: Join us in Singapore this October for a series of convenings that bring together our member CEOs and CxOs and many new members that we've onboarded through the year.

15 Oct | Transform (Higher Ed) at Raffles Singapore:

A closed-door, roundtable-led convening for higher education leaders focused on the practical "how" of transformation, from operating models and commercial innovation to workforce alignment (note: this is for higher ed businesses only).

16 Oct | Learning Journey:

A curated delegation-format day designed to help leaders understand the Singapore education market in context, through school & university visits and discussions with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and private sector operators native to the region / who have expanded.

17 Oct | ELF Global Summit at the Ritz-Carlton Millenia:

An ELF members-only global gathering for CEOs and C-suite leaders, built around deep-dive discussions on the issues operators are actually grappling with.

ELF 2027 Community Commitment Window

As we look ahead to 2027, we are preparing for ELF's most ambitious year yet, with more opportunities for members to connect, learn, build partnerships, and support one another across markets.

Our Community Commitment Window for 2027 membership will open in the first week of August 2026.

This window gives our existing members the first opportunity to confirm their place in the ELF community for 2027 before we open a limited number of places to the wider education ecosystem.

For new members, a small number of spaces may become available after current members have had the opportunity to renew. As always, we will continue to curate the community carefully to protect the quality, trust and relevance of the room.

Key dates to note:

Please note that membership confirmation and event registration are now separate processes. Confirming your 2027 membership secures your place in the community, while individual event registration forms will follow separately.

Our flagship gathering, the **Annual CEO Retreat and Fellowship Dinner, will take place on 19 to 20 January 2027 in London.** The Retreat is reserved for CEOs and founders of ELF Enterprise member firms, with only 150 places.

The Annual CEO Retreat registration form will be shared in the week commencing 24 August 2026. Places will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis, and we expect the Retreat to be oversubscribed. We encourage eligible members (enterprise members only) not only to block their calendars, but also to complete the registration form as soon as it is released.

MEMBER NEWS

8billionideas × Minerva Virtual Academy:

Minerva Virtual Academy and 8billionideas have joined forces to launch the 8billionideas Online Academy, an innovative initiative designed to sit alongside traditional academic study. This new academy will equip young minds with crucial life skills like resilience, adaptability, negotiation, and the capacity to constantly learn and pivot.

Shoelace Learning × Enko Education:

Enko Education and Shoelace Learning have completed the interim phase of a literacy pilot at Enko Dakar, with early results placing the campus among the strongest implementations in the Shoelace network. Across a five-week window, adolescent students who engaged consistently with Shoelace's game-based reading platform gained roughly seven months of reading-comprehension growth.

Carter Fleet × T4 Education:

Carter Fleet led the international media campaign for T4 Education's World's Best School Prizes for the fifth year running, generating 1,500+ articles with a readership reach of nearly two billion.

HP × Dukes Education:

HP and Dukes Education have announced a new agreement to bring HP's novel AI capacity-building fellowship programme, HP NOVA (Nurturing Outstanding Visionaries in AI), to Dukes schools across the UK and Europe.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment × Studyportals:

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has teamed up with Studyportals to launch a new global report 'Talent Beyond Borders: The Global Impact of International Graduates', which will combine Studyportals' dataset tracking over 1.1 million graduates with Cambridge's assessment and research heritage.

ETS acquires ACT:

ETS acquired ACT in June in a move that united two of the world's biggest assessment organisations. Together, the teams will build the next generation of evidence-based measurement, deepening opportunities with states and districts across K–12 and higher education, and across college and career readiness.

Dukes Education acquires Canada's MacLachlan College:

Dukes is one of the largest private school operator in the UK and has a significant European presence. The acquisition in Oakville, Ontario, marks the group's first Canadian school and the start of its North American expansion.

Minerva Virtual Academy secures new capital to power growth:

Minerva Virtual Academy, the award-winning online school, has secured significant investment through a partial acquisition by Phoenix Equity Partners to power its next phase of growth. MVA has more than 1,500 full-time students across 60 countries, delivering a flexible British curriculum education including live teacher-led lessons.

Kids Planet Nurseries goes international:

Kids Planet Day Nurseries, the second largest childcare provider in the UK, has expanded internationally for the first time. The group has acquired Irish nursery group Tigers Childcare, one of the biggest childcare groups in Ireland with more than 640 staff and more than 3,200 children. The move takes Kids Planet to over 300 nurseries and is an "enormous milestone" for the group.

AcadeMedia acquires Chestnut Nursery Schools:

The acquisition of the British preschool group includes 21 preschools with 2,100 children in East London, Norfolk and Cambridge, and will strengthen the Nordic education leader's international early years footprint. It is AcadeMedia's first UK acquisition, and aligns with the group's international growth strategy and ambition to broaden its geographic footprint over time.

CEFA Early Years School secures backing from Riverarch Equity Partners:

CEFA is the leading private school offering children aged 0 to 6 a holistic and proprietary early childhood education program. CEFA is already growing rapidly in Ontario, Canada, and the move is a strategic partnership that will provide the company with the financial strength to accelerate its expansion across North America, with particular focus on the US.

Enko Education enters East Africa:

Enko Education, the largest network of international schools in Africa, has announced that Kitengela International School (KISC) - a group of seven school sections across three campuses - has joined its family of schools. The move marks the group's entry into East Africa and means Enko now serves 10,000 learners across 11 countries.

ISP acquires Bangkok school:

The move means ISP, the leading and growing group of 120 private international schools operating in more than 26 markets, is further deepening its global network, and Thailand's international schools market.

8billionideas partners with the UAE government:

8billionideas has partnered with the UAE's Federal Authority for Government Human Resources to launch a new professional development programme on Jahiz, the UAE's digital upskilling platform for federal employees. The programme will support more than 54,000 government professionals with short, flexible modules focused on practical leadership, innovation in public service, problem-solving and workplace confidence.

Etio launches CatoAI:

Etio has launched CatoAI, which applies AI to transform the consistency, transparency and efficiency of school inspection, based on the outputs of Etio's 2024 feasibility study and work with regulators such as Ofsted. The release marks a shift in how education systems around the world are quality assured, and Etio is already working with early-adopter regulators, major school operators, and quality assurance agencies to embed AI into inspection systems in a controlled and purposeful way.

EDGE Tutor International reaches a milestone:

EDGE Tutor, the company working with leading EdTech platforms and global education brands as a strategic workforce partner, has announced it has delivered four million online lessons across 30+ countries, with a 99.8% lesson success rate and 97% teacher retention.

Renaissance Learning x White Rose Education:

Renaissance has announced a strategic partnership with White Rose Education to bring Digital White Rose Maths into its Nearpod interactive teaching and learning platform. The partnership will give English schools and British curriculum international schools worldwide access to curriculum-aligned digital maths lessons that combine White Rose's pedagogy with Nearpod's tools for engagement, formative assessment and personalised learning.

Fusion Academy partners with Japan's N High School Group & the Murakami Foundation:

Fusion Academy has partnered with Japan's N High School Group and the Murakami Foundation to launch an online Global Leadership Bootcamp for high school students across Japan. The 10-day programme, running from 27 July - 7 August, will bring students together in small, all-English online classes led by Fusion Academy teachers. With one teacher for every five students, the programme will focus on English communication, critical thinking and leadership through discussion and global social issues.

Stanford GSE + Lemann Center:

Andre Nudelman's new book, The Business of K-12 Educational Excellence, will be published by Routledge on 11 August and is available for pre-order now via this link.

LingoLift offers early access to ELF Members:

LingoLift helps educators support every student through 3,000+ short, engaging, standards-aligned lessons across English language arts, science, social studies, and ESL. Drawing on real-world content and stories from trusted sources, LingoLift supports English learners across 15+ languages, with every lesson ready to teach.

CEFA Early Years School announces opening of two new schools in Western Canada:

CEFA brings 25+ years of experience in early education and has over 54 schools operating or in development. The openings of CEFA Calgary - Northland and CEFA Victoria - University Heights CEFA come as the group continues to expand its North American network and bring its premium, research-informed approach to early education to more communities.

Raleigh brings 50 years of expedition heritage to schools

Raleigh, the expedition brand with 50 years of heritage in life-defining challenge, is entering the schools market for the first time, bringing its leadership adventure model directly to pupils through a new partnership with Camps International. The programme will offer school expeditions in Costa Rica, South Africa and Borneo, focused on building resilience, confidence and leadership.