

C21 Canada: A National Network Framework for the Diffusion and Scaling of AI in K-20 Education



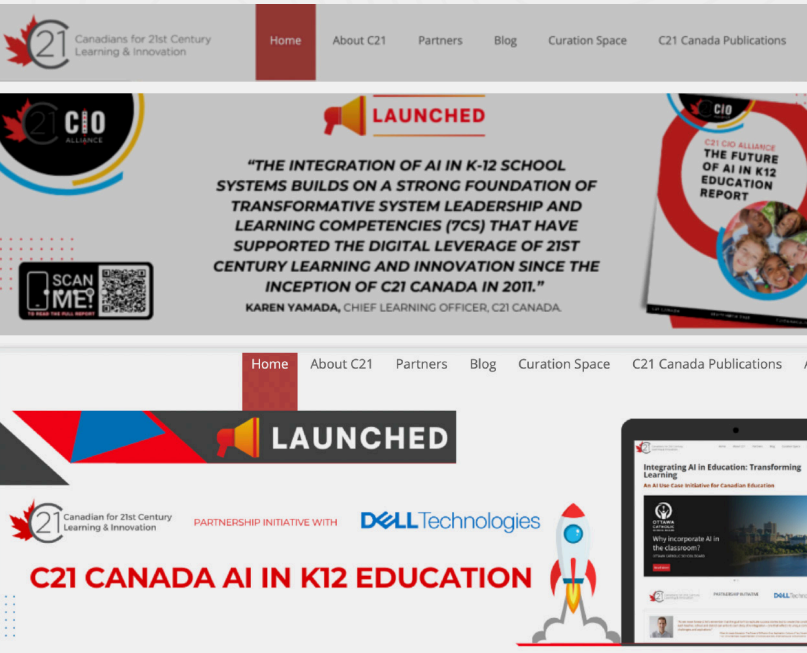
PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

In a country as geographically vast and structurally decentralized as Canada, system leadership can be an isolating role. Directors of Education, Superintendents, and senior system leaders are tasked with navigating governance, pedagogy, workforce wellbeing, public trust, technological change, and political pressure—all while ensuring learning remains meaningful and human-centered.

Unlike many other nations, Canada does not operate with a single federal department of education. Instead, leadership responsibility rests within provinces, territories, and local systems, often requiring leaders to make high-stakes decisions without the benefit of national coherence, shared infrastructure, or trusted peer networks.

As artificial intelligence entered education discourse, this fragmentation intensified. Leaders faced growing urgency and external pressure to respond to AI without a shared space to reflect, make sense, or learn from one another. Decision-making risked becoming reactive, isolated, and misaligned with core educational values.

In this context, the most powerful lever for responsible, sustainable change was not a tool or product—it was connection.



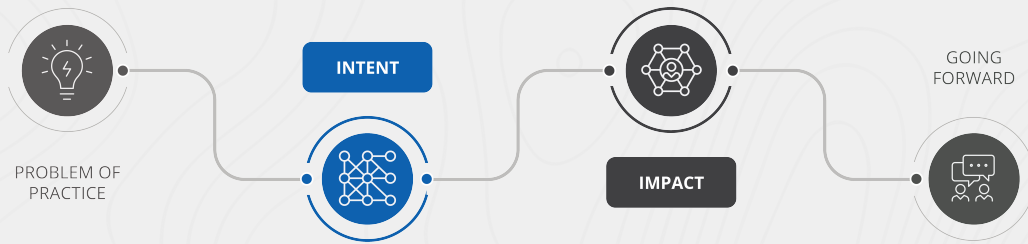
Canadians for 21st Century Learning & Innovation

Organization: **C21 Canada, Inc.**
Province: Canada
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Lead: Karen Yamada, C21 Canada Chief Learning Officer, CFO

C21 Canada: A National Network Framework for the Diffusion and Scaling of AI in K-20 Education. C21 Canada, Inc.

Integrating AI in Education: Transforming Learning — An AI Use Case Initiative for Canadian Education

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Intent

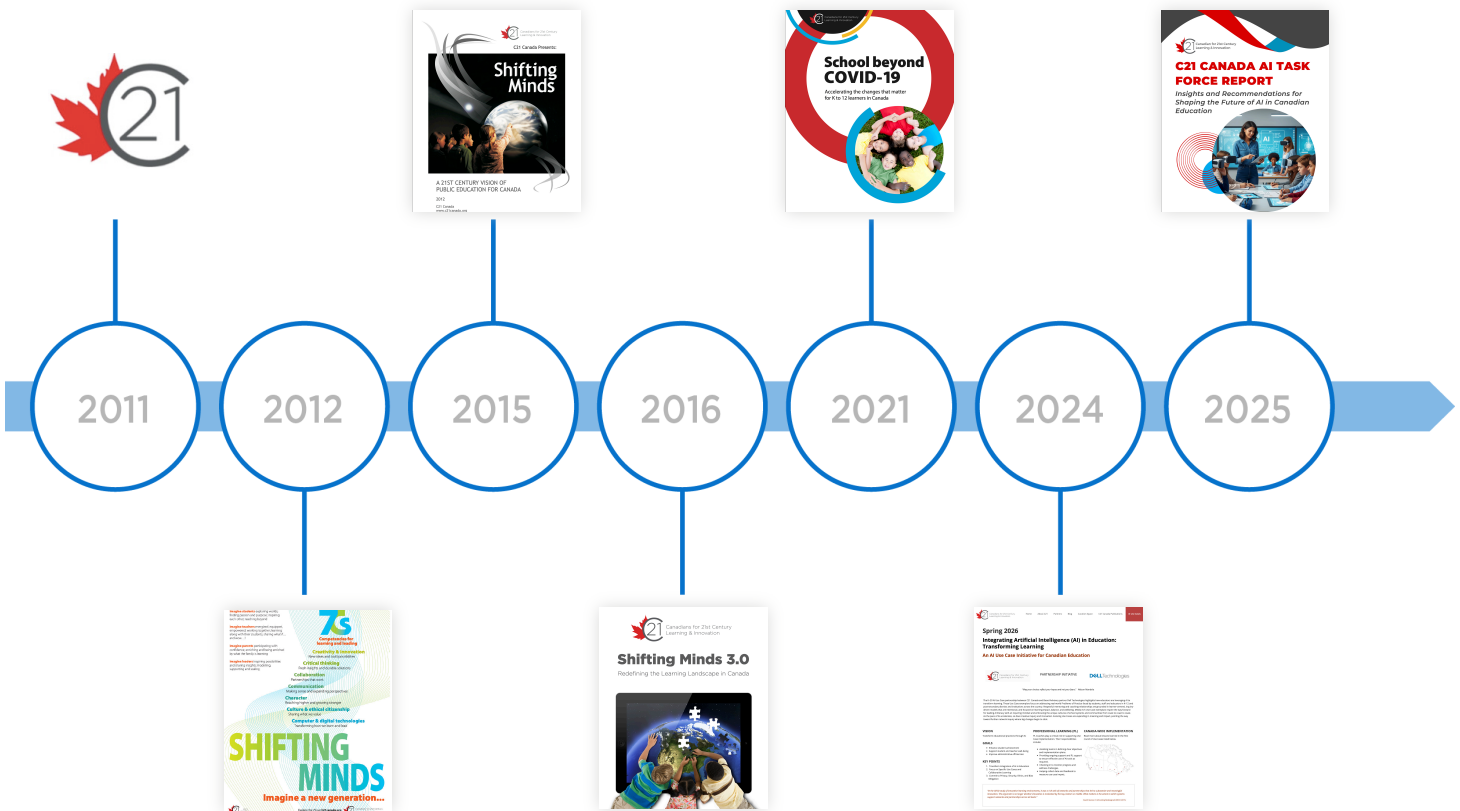
For more than 15 years, the goal of C21 Canada has been to support the integration of leading-edge skills and competencies, teaching practices and learning technologies into Canada's education systems.

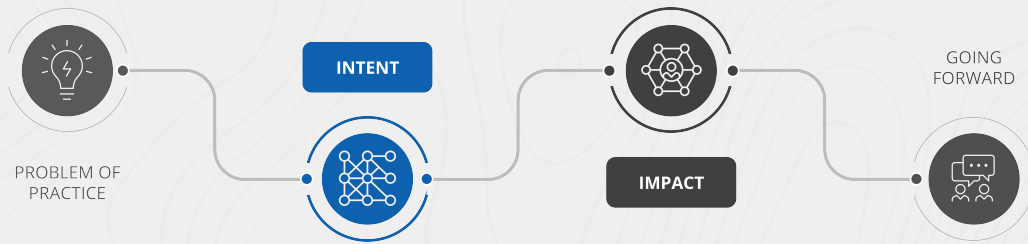


The CEO Academy began as a national network forum of K-12 School System CEOs to share a pan-Canadian vision and belief that education systems must be transformed to reflect ICT rich learning environments that respect the local culture and context in which 21st Century models of learning innovation can flourish.

In a country where education is constitutionally provincial, the CEO Academy build a national conversation that shouldn't have been possible, through intentional connections that focused on learning inquiry and system leadership.

The Past is Prologue. The First 15 years were the Argument





Intent

COVID-19, provided the ultimate pressure test of system change. Technology offered the potential to hold classroom learning together when pandemic restrictions broke the mold and meeting virtually changed collaboration forever. The pandemic amplified the importance of wellbeing, equity, and belonging and raising the question:

What could public education become after COVID?

As generative AI emerged, the intentionality of the CEO Academy was clear. Rather than centering conversations on tools, platforms, or deployment strategies, the CEO Academy anchored AI discussions in purpose-driven questions:

- What is our leadership intent?
- What problems of practice are we actually trying to solve?
- How might AI support—rather than distort—our values, judgment, and responsibility?

AI was positioned as a lens, not a destination. Leaders reflected on how AI intersects with deeply human concerns such as assessment, integrity, student wellbeing, staff workload, equity, reconciliation, and public trust. This approach deliberately slowed decision-making, creating space for reflection rather than reaction, and helping leaders avoid fear-based responses or unchecked enthusiasm.

At the heart of this intent was the CEO Academy itself a confidential, protected learning incubator designed for vulnerability, inquiry, and trust. Leaders were positioned not as experts expected to have answers, but as learners grappling honestly with complex, system level challenges.





Impact

The impact of this work emerged both individually and collectively.

Through sustained engagement with peers from across provinces, territories, and diverse system contexts, leaders began to recognize that while their environments differed, their challenges were shared. This realization reduced isolation and replaced it with collective sense-making.

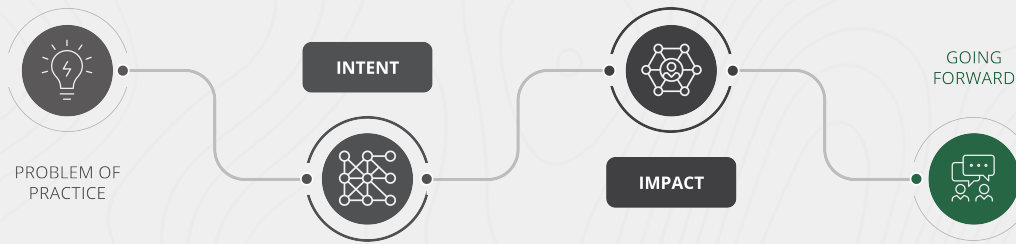
Practically, the impact showed up in meaningful ways:

- CEO Academy Leaders shared perspectives and wisdom to inform responses to public, political, and board pressures, while creating communication narratives to reflect local culture and context rather than geography.
- CEO Leaders shared emerging AI policies and practices and C21/Dell AI Use Case exemplars to build capacity and inform practice.
- AI conversations became grounded in purpose, ethics, and pedagogy rather than speed or compliance.

Structured touch points, regular CEO Academy ConCalls, annual in-person summits, webinars and a bimonthly “CEO Academy Friday Email” communications—created continuity and coherence without demanding uniformity. Leaders strengthened their judgment rather than adopting prescribed solutions.

Most importantly, the human impact endured. Participants described feeling less alone, more articulate about complex challenges, and more steady in their leadership. Confidence increased—not as certainty, but as grounded resolve informed by shared insight and trust.





Going Forward

In a time of accelerating technological disruption, the organization’s role is not simply to introduce AI into education systems, but to ensure that those systems evolve in ways that are ethical, sustainable, inclusive, and profoundly human.

Going forward, C21 Canada will continue to:

- Deepen and sustain pan-Canadian leadership relationships through intentional national conversations;
- Anchor AI sense-making in human intent, ethics, and educational purposes recommended in the C21 Canada AI Task Force Report ;
- Strengthen AI partnerships that centre on local problems of practice while respecting unique cultures and local diversity;
- Support leaders in navigating complexity with humility, empathy, and collective wisdom through the CEO Academy;
- This work demonstrates that sustainable innovation does not begin with tools. It builds on foundations of trust, inquiry, and relationships forged over time.

This work is evolving into the next phase of the C21 Canada journey through the launch of C21 National AI Education Network Clusters and the expansion of partnerships such as the Dell Technologies and C21 Canada AI Use Case Initiative.

“The way forward for education in an AI world is not about technology replacing human leadership, it is about strengthening interconnected human networks powered by technology,” said Robert Martellacci, CEO, C21 Canada.

This is not a story of rapid implementation or technological arrival. It is a story of a long. Canadian history of leaders learning together, create a culture of sharing and **Chéichenstway**. "To lift each other up, to stand and work together".



Going Forward

GOING
FORWARD



References

C21 Canada Publications:

- C21 Canada AI Task Force Report
<https://c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/C21-AI-Task-Force-Report-October-2025.pdf>
- The Future of AI in K-12 Education
<https://c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/C21-CIO-Alliance-on-the-Future-of-AI-in-K12-Education..pdf>
- School Beyond COVID-19: Accelerating the Changes that Matter for K-12 Learners in Canada
<https://c21canada.org/school-beyond-covid-19/>
- The Spiral Playbook: Leading with an Inquiring Mindset in School Systems and Schools
<https://c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Spiral-Playbook.pdf>
- Shifting Minds - Redefining the Learning Landscape in Canada
<https://www.c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/C21-ShiftingMinds-3.pdf>
- Shifting Minds: A 21st Century Vision of Public Education for Canada
<https://www.c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Shifting-Minds-Revised.pdf>

C21 Canada Archives:

- C21 Canada Learning Foundations
<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/C21-Canada-Foundations-for-Learning-and-Innovation.html?soid=1120110850141&aid=Qcu2DzFnltc>
- CEO Academy ConCalls
<https://files.constantcontact.com/d503fcbc401/a0d0d387-b154-4572-b002-2638009b8a92.pdf>
- CEO Academy Friday Emails
<https://files.constantcontact.com/d503fcbc401/840715c5-695e-49aa-872a-b44057bf3f8f.pdf>

Other:

- What is C21 Canada? What is the CEO Academy?
<https://files.constantcontact.com/d503fcbc401/962f3baf-43ee-431d-bc39-3658c37dcf6e.pdf>
- Fifteen Years One Question: What C21 Canada has been trying to tell us all along, Chris Kennedy, Superintendent, West Vancouver School District
<https://files.constantcontact.com/d503fcbc401/55ccd87e-59c9-4124-a7c1-647fba6b657f.pdf>

Media Releases:

- East Coast AI Cluster launch
<https://c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/East-Coast-AI-Education-Cluster-to-be-Launched-at-Advancing-AI-Leadership-Summit-Press-Release.pdf>
- “Assessment in an AI World” National Education Leaders in Vancouver, C21 Canada Convenes National Education Leaders in Vancouver for CEO Academy Summit on “Assessment in an AI World” Press Release
<https://c21canada.org/c21-canada-convenes-national-education-leaders-in-vancouver-for-ceo-academy-summit-on-assessment-in-an-ai-world/>

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