



**PROFESSOR GÜRAY ERKOL:
BUILDING THE FUTURE
OF THE SCHOOL WHILE
SHAPING THE SCHOOL OF
THE FUTURE**



Professor Güray Erkol, who has been serving as Director General of The Koç School since November 2025, shares his journey from his years as a student to his current role, his connection to education, and his approach to leadership. In this candid interview, he reflects on preserving the school's strengths as well as taking bold steps toward the school of the future.

Let's start with your school years. How did your personal connection to education develop? What drives you to work in this field today?

My connection to education is rooted in the deep curiosity that learning sparks in me and its transformative power. During my academic journey, particularly in my university years and throughout my time in the classroom, this connection became even stronger. Over the years, working with hundreds of students across different universities, often in crowded lecture



halls, I saw how a well-designed learning experience can create a genuine sense of connection. For me, education gradually became not just about teaching, but about design and leadership.

My focus then shifted from simply delivering content to building a holistic student experience. Developing courses, establishing systems to enrich the first-year university experience, introducing student support mechanisms, and using learning analytics to support students earlier and more effectively all shaped my perspective. I came to understand that quality in education becomes sustainable only when you consider both the individual and the system together.

What was the most transformative experience in your career, and how did it shape your perspective?

What shaped me most was learning to view the student experience from a holistic perspective. While teaching hundreds of students at university, I also took on responsibilities such as digitalizing education, working with learning analytics, supporting instructor development, and establishing and managing student support systems. I saw that what truly transforms learning is the design of an ecosystem, where the student's voice is heard, feedback loops function effectively, teachers are empowered, and data becomes meaningful when the right questions are asked. This experience shifted my perspective from teaching to design, and from focusing solely on outcomes to focusing on process and experience.

Looking back, what was the most critical decision that brought you to where you are today? How did it influence your leadership style?

The most defining decision I made was to extend the impact of education beyond the classroom and step into roles that shape teaching and student development at an

institutional level. This decision placed two principles at the core of my leadership philosophy: First, managing change not only through vision, but also through strong systems and disciplined practices. Second, moving forward by empowering teachers and educational leaders and keeping people actively involved in the process. Over time, I have come to define this approach through the triad of “people, system, and purpose.”

Today, I view my role at The Koç School through this lens. We are living in a time that calls for rethinking of education, from artificial intelligence and the climate crisis to equity, inclusion, and well-being. My leadership approach is shaped by this need. On the one hand, it focuses on preserving the school's strengths and steadily building the “future of the school.” On the other, it requires taking bold steps toward the “school of the future.” At its core, this means redesigning people, places, time, and technology around a meaningful learning journey for every student.

In your role as Director General of The Koç School, how do you define your leadership and impact?

I see the role of Director General at The Koç School as balancing the school's current success with preparing it for the future. It is not only about academic leadership, but also about unlocking the full potential of the institution and its stakeholders. At the core of my leadership approach is collaboration. Together with my colleagues, from academic staff to administrative teams, we work together to create a safe and inspiring environment where every student can reach their full potential. My ultimate goal is to send our young people—who have flourished as “sparks” within our school through the diligent efforts of all our departments—out into the world as “flames” that will illuminate the future of our country and the world, just as Atatürk envisioned. Our impact will not be confined to the school walls, yet will find its true



meaning in the outstanding changes our graduates will make in society.

How would you define “educational leadership” today? In a world of constant change, evolving expectations, and uncertainties, what instincts and priorities should guide an educational leader?

Today, I see educational leadership not simply as managing a school or a classroom, but as redesigning learning and making it sustainable through strong and trusted systems. Education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by rapid technological advancements, shifting social expectations, economic change, and environmental challenges. This transformation, on one hand, requires us, to evolve existing schools (the future of the school) and, on the other, to explore more radical models of learning (the school of the future).

Guided by our long-standing vision of being a “quality Turkish school”, we recognize our responsibility to contribute meaningfully to society and are dedicated to fulfill that responsibility. For us, meaningful social impact lies in raising individuals who can understand the dynamics of a rapidly changing world, challenge conventional patterns, and think critically - in short, individuals who will shape the future. We see our greatest contribution to the Turkish education ecosystem as preparing students not only for academic success, but also to apply their knowledge into real-life skills, create social value, and anticipate and adapt to what lies ahead. With this approach, we guide each student to become a beacon of light that illuminates our country’s future by bringing out the spark within them.

We are operating in an environment where expectations, learning styles, and the outcomes expected from education are rapidly evolving. In your view, what sets The Koç School apart from



its peers? What strategic priorities help sustain this difference?

I believe what sets The Koç School apart from its peers is its commitment to design “a meaningful learning journey for every child and a meaningful teaching journey for every teacher.” Today, the standardized education model, largely shaped by the needs of the Industrial Revolution, remains widespread. However, technological progress, social and economic change, and environmental challenges require us to rethink both the content and the experience of learning to meet the needs of the future. The Koç School’s distinct approach lies in embracing this transformation not merely as a passing trend, but as a matter of school design that



considers pedagogy, culture, and systems as an integrated whole.

Students today are preparing for a far more uncertain, fast-changing, and multilayered world than previous generations. Do you think schools are keeping pace with this transformation? Where are their strengths, and where do they need to improve?

I believe schools understand this transformation, but many struggle to adapt at the same pace. Many institutions are experimenting with hybrid and blended learning, project-based approaches, and technology-driven assessment. This shows that there is both momentum and room for change. One of the key areas for improvement is determining whether change requires refinement or a more fundamental redesign. I find a question often raised in OECD education reports particularly relevant: “To what extent do our current systems support our vision, and to what extent do they limit it?” In other words, should we modernize existing schools, or rethink people, spaces, time, and technology in a more fundamental way? Without clarity on this distinction, efforts often remain superficial or place additional pressure on teachers and students.

Another important area is placing learning and the learner’s transformation at the center. This means strengthening student voice, choice, and responsibility for learning, improving feedback and transparency, and connecting learning more closely with communities and real-world contexts. I believe this also requires a stronger focus on skills-based curriculum and pedagogical reform, (next generation skills, reducing content overload, and pedagogical transformation).

Technology and artificial intelligence present both opportunities and risks. AI can support personalized learning, automate routine tasks, and provide

insights that enhance instruction. However, its impact depends on pedagogy, teacher competence, and a strong ethical-safety framework. Therefore, technology should be used as a means, not an end. Schools need to integrate it in a balanced way, while also redefining the teacher’s role and supporting it through continuous professional development.

Do you think the role of educational institutions in creating social impact is sufficiently visible? How would you define The Koç School’s contribution and responsibilities in this area?

I believe the role of educational institutions in creating social impact is often seen as limited to within the school itself. However, the transformation we are experiencing today is positioning schools as key contributors to social resilience and a shared future. As technological advancements, social change, economic demands, and environmental challenges reshape education globally, issues such as equity, inclusion, mental health, and well-being are becoming central to education. Therefore, I see social impact not as something limited to specific projects, but as a responsibility embedded in the overall design of the school, from its curriculum and culture to its assessment approaches and well-being systems.



I would define The Koç School's contribution in this area under three main dimensions.

Raising individuals who are equipped with the competencies and values of the future:

This means placing problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability – skills demanded in a changing world and workforce – along with global and intercultural competencies and sustainability literacy at the heart of the educational experience. This creates direct social impact as every graduate of the school replicates this approach wherever they go.

Addressing equity, inclusion, and well-being as core responsibilities: This involves responding to diverse learning needs, eliminating systemic barriers to reduce socioeconomic inequalities, and promoting equal access to quality education. It also requires integrating the well-being of both students and teachers into the overall learning experience. These are the areas where the social impact of educational institutions becomes most visible.

Building connections across the educational ecosystem stakeholders and becoming an exemplary "learning organization": Embedding teacher development and quality assurance into The Koç School's culture, and integrating social contribution and sustainability into its vision, are key priorities. When supported by learning designs that connect students with the community and the real world, this approach can transform school-community engagement from activity-level to lasting partnerships.

In summary, I see The Koç School's responsibility for social impact as designing a learning journey that not only delivers strong academic outcomes but also enables students to understand and contribute to the world, while promoting inclusion, well-being, and sustainability.





ON THE MEANING OF LEARNING WITH PROF. GÜRAY ERKOL

My interactions with the new generation of students show that they are looking for meaningful learning experiences, not just well-taught courses.

They want more voice, more choices, and greater ownership of their learning. They expect learning to extend beyond the classroom and connect with the real world. They also look for a school environment where they receive timely feedback and feel safe. This calls for a shift in education, from passive learning to active engagement, and toward more personalized and interdisciplinary approaches. At The Koç School, we adopt an educational approach that responds to these expectations by moving beyond curriculum delivery and connecting learning with real-world problems, projects, production, and community engagement.

The teachers I saw as role models during my school years sparked my curiosity, cared about their students, created a safe and trusting classroom environment, and prepared us not only for exams, but for life.

Looking back, I see that this approach still holds its essence today. However, as the world evolves rapidly, the scope of teaching has expanded significantly. We no longer define teaching simply as delivering knowledge, but as guiding and supporting each student throughout their learning journey.

Technology, particularly artificial intelligence, is also driving a major transformation. AI has the potential to personalize learning, automate routine tasks, and generate insights, while learning data can further enrich teaching. However, this does not make the teacher less important. On the contrary, it makes the teacher's



pedagogical design skills, moral compass, and ability to understand each student even more critical. In this context, the role of the teacher is evolving from someone who uses technology to someone who uses it purposefully to support learning.

Teaching today goes beyond academic development. It requires placing well-being and inclusion at the center of the classroom. Greater awareness of student and teacher stress and anxiety calls for integrating well-being into the educational experience. Similarly, a focus on equity and inclusion requires learning environments that respond to diverse needs.

In essence, the core of teaching remains the same for me: building meaningful relationships and inspiring students. What has changed is the addition of a strong design dimension that uses data thoughtfully, relies on feedback, places the student at the center, integrates technology within an ethical and pedagogical framework, and recognizes well-being as a prerequisite for learning.

In education, the dream that excites me most is not a single project or outcome.

I define success as being able to apply this principle at different levels: building systems that work for people. It means turning ideas that make learning more meaningful into daily practices, measurable goals, and processes that teams can adopt. I believe this is where lasting impact in education begins. For me, the true measure of success is a school or institution that progresses through collective wisdom, transparent use of data, a strong culture, and a commitment to continuous development.

How does the Vehbi Koç Foundation's focus on community service and sustainable impact shape decision-making at The Koç School? What responsibilities does being part of this ecosystem bring to your leadership and institutional priorities?

The Vehbi Koç Foundation's community service and sustainable impact approach urges us to look beyond short-term operational goals and focus on long-term educational quality, resilience, and the holistic development of each student. It also reflects a broader expectation that schools should not only respond to change but help guide it. This perspective encourages The Koç School to follow a systemic roadmap for managing transformation.

Being part of this ecosystem brings two key responsibilities to my leadership approach. First, to embrace change in a way that prepares students for the future while preserving the school's academic strength. Second, to ensure that this transformation maintains in a strong "humane" focus. I believe real investment should be made in teachers and in pedagogical design. The Foundation's sustainable impact approach, together with the vision of our founders, requires us to evaluate every decision through an essential question: "Does this step make the student's learning journey and their contribution to the world more meaningful, more equitable, and more future-ready?" For me, leadership means answering this question every day through an approach that is both data-driven and people-centered.





ABOUT PROFESSOR GRAY ERKOL

Professor Gray Erkol, who was appointed Director General of The Ko School in November 2025, earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics at Middle East Technical University and completed his Ph.D. at the University of Groningen (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen). He pursued his postdoctoral research at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. Throughout his academic career, he has always advocated for an inquisitive and productive learning culture, centered on interdisciplinary thinking.

Before joining The Ko School, Professor Erkol served as a faculty member at zyein University for 13 years, starting from its founding. During this time, he held roles as Dean of Students and Vice Rector and received the university's inaugural Excellence in Education Award. He later served as Chief Executive Officer of the Health and Education Foundation (SEV) from 2021 to 2025, where he contributed to teacher development, inclusive education, and the strengthening of learning communities.