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# The Register

THE MAGAZINE FOR ONTARIO'S PUBLIC SCHOOL

PRINCIPALS & VICE-PRINCIPALS



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# Networks for Learning

Professional learning in support of school improvement

**T**he OPC's International Exchanges Program provides a bridge to an inspiring journey to connect school leaders around the globe.

By facilitating international exchanges, the OPC nurtures authentic conversations focused on best practices in education, fostering a culture of vulnerability and growth among principals. This initiative not only breaks down communication barriers, but also builds a vibrant community of professional learners dedicated to student success.

We applied to the 2024 exchange roster to Finland and New Zealand, and were over the moon to be matched and start our adventures in education, culture and self-reflection.

### Perspectives from Finland...

During March break 2024, I had the privilege of participating in the OPC's International Exchanges Program: Ontario–Finland. This professional opportunity allowed me to experience being “Principal for a Week” in a Finnish, and specifically the Helsinki, school board.

The principal, Irinia Pellikka, allowed me the opportunity to gain an appreciation of her school's various buildings and learning structures. I also visited a smaller local school to appreciate various models of schools in such a diverse, urban area. This school, Siltamaen Vuosi, was a K–6 school with approximately 400 students, a principal and a half-time vice-principal. They had a very arts-based focus. The principal, Anna-Mari Jantinden, made this focus a priority, and it was evident in the work displayed around the building, in the fact that the whole school collaborated to write and perform a play, and in the resources afforded to all the arts programming.

All of the teachers, staff and students spoke about their experiences and day-to-day programming. There are a lot of similarities to the Ontario system, and some very obvious differences. From the administrative perspective, principals are responsible for the budget, not only for the school items and professional development, and they are also responsible for paying the teachers. This is a huge responsibility that includes hiring

I was so inspired by the care that the Finnish system pays to staff mental health and well-being.



Principal Lise Medd (left) and Principal Irinia Pellikka

the staff and budgeting for salaries as well as for the needs and direction of the school. It is a lot of work for Irinia on top of being responsible for three and a half buildings. Thankfully, she has two full-time vice-principals.

Another stark difference is the support staff allocations. The school has a full-time youth worker, social worker and psychologist. This is amazing and is so important for the social, emotional and mental health support for the students. In addition, I visited an autism program where the main difference from my autism program was the amount of resources the program had, including human resources: twice the number of support workers, plus the teacher and an occupational therapist on site.

There is a real emphasis on making staff rooms communal and welcoming spaces in all schools. All are well furnished, including not only modern furniture, but massage chairs as well. Food and coffee were always available. The staff all sat together and interacted cohesively. In all schools, the principal's office was near the staff room, so the administrators integrated with the staff. This was inspiring and a goal to work toward in my building.

When I got home, and prepared to welcome the principal from Finland at the beginning of October, I was happy to be able to share some of the changes we have applied to our school that had been inspired by my visit to Finland.

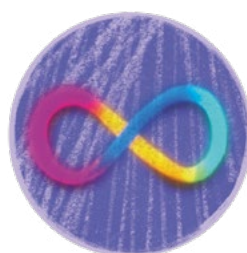
First, I was so inspired by the care that the Finnish system pays to staff mental health and well-being. With the support of a number of our teachers, we updated the staff room with some paint, plants, pictures, tablecloths and more. It has made it a more enjoyable place to be in and has resulted in many staff eating and sharing ideas together at lunch. We also moved forward as a school to decolonize curriculum night to be a more welcoming and supportive “Open House” evening with a barbecue and a more relaxing movement around the school to classrooms. It was a great success where teachers and families alike were more of the focus, making it a less stressful evening. Irinia, my Finnish partner, was very impressed by the kind and caring language she heard around the school from staff to students and vice versa. This, she mentioned, impacted the positive mindset in the building as a whole. It was nice to hear and it was a direct example I took from the Finnish system.

— Lise Medd

### Perspectives from New Zealand...

My travels took me to Auckland, New Zealand, where I found numerous parallels with Ontario. As Commonwealth countries, both nations share histories of colonization and celebrate vibrant Indigenous cultures. This shared backdrop enriches discussions around culturally responsive teaching.

As principal of Irma Coulson Public School in Milton, I oversee Canada’s only [climate ready playground](#), developed in partnership with the national charity Evergreen. Mission Heights School in Auckland is similarly committed to sustainable practices, creating equitable outdoor experiences for students. They boast a farm-to-table program that includes beekeeping. Students grow the food that is then given to members of the community who need it.



Principal Caroline Bush, principal of Mission Heights School in Auckland (left), and Principal Cheryl Hayles

Both educational systems emphasize culturally responsive teaching, focusing on the diverse needs of students, while prioritizing teacher efficacy and parent engagement. A highlight of my exchange was attending an “Improvement Network” meeting – a collaborative initiative aimed at driving educational equity. This is a group of principals who meet regularly to discuss and support each other in the learning goals they have set for their schools.

— Cheryl Hayles

### What We Learned...

Principals around the world are working through the same challenges of student success, staff development and creating supportive learning environments. We cannot emphasize enough what this opportunity has lent to our overall professional development and appreciation of other education systems. Through our observations, we have brought back ideas and models that will enhance the programming in our schools, including

- a greater appreciation for arts programming, which has a massive impact on all learning
- whole school programming, with its positive effects throughout the school
- the impact on learning of the country-wide nutrition program (in Finland, a fully catered hot lunch is provided to all students and staff every day, part of the national school meal program that has provided up

## These exchanges have influenced our leadership. This year our school leadership team is expanding the awareness of our relationship and responsibilities with Indigenous people.

to 850,000 students across the country with lunches and snacks since the 1940s)

- how to organize administration staff, focusing on staff strengths in curriculum and special education to ensure all students' needs are being addressed and
- insight into how Indigenous culture can be authentically integrated into programming.

A particular area of leadership that Cheryl is focusing on since her return from New Zealand is the introduction of authentic Indigenous language expression for our students. As a board, we currently deliver the land acknowledgement and share a reflection before meetings. However, this is articulated in English. Our school equity and inclusion team is now looking at experiences that will build our knowledge of Indigenous languages, particularly the languages that would have been spoken in our area before colonization. At Mission Heights School, the principal has budgeted for a member of the Maori tribe to teach the language and thus build cultural capacity in the school. In New Zealand, the Maori language is prevalent and is spoken widely within the country by non-Maori people, and that inspired Cheryl to develop more authentic Indigenous language opportunities in her school.

There were other observations that are similar to our experiences here in Ontario.

- The FSL programming is just beginning in Finland, and they appreciate the expertise of our ESL programs, which is where they are heading.
- Equity and inclusion is something that the Finnish system is working on, and they are focused on the same model as the Toronto District School Board.
- We all appear to value the opportunities that music, sports and the arts provide to enhance our students' academic experiences.

### Homestay Connection

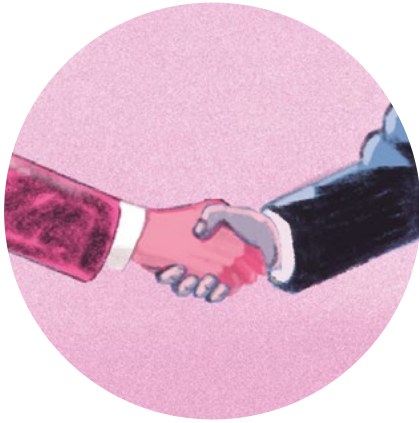
In addition to all the professional gains, we stayed in the homes of our gracious hosts, who provided the opportunity to live like a typical "Finn" or "Kiwi" to fulfill the whole cultural experience. In Finland, Lise enjoyed typical Finnish food including reindeer heart, Karelian pie and lots of yummy black licorice. She took part in a polar dip in the Baltic Sea and the sauna culture, explored Helsinki and took a day trip to historic Porvoo.

In New Zealand, Cheryl was able to tour the remarkable education and leisure spaces surrounding Auckland and the inner city. The Sky Tower provides a panoramic view of the Auckland cityscape. In Rotorua, she visited the Living Maori Village of Whakarewarewa and saw a live cultural show presented by members of the tribe that lives in that area. The village is punctuated by hot springs that support daily life and can be a danger at times. The traditional Maori weaving patterns are simply works of art. Hobbiton is a must-see for any *Lord of the Rings* fans.

Our hosts were so welcoming and hospitable. They opened their homes to a stranger and we are now not only networked colleagues, but friends.

Gaining professional friends and colleagues from halfway around the world has given us the opportunity to reach out and access their support and expertise as we move forward from this experience, and vice versa.

These exchanges have influenced our leadership. This year, our respective school leadership teams are expanding the awareness of our relationship and responsibilities with Indigenous people, in



particular with respect to the 94 Calls to Action called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. We are more intentional in our efforts to nurture relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people beyond the time frame of Treaty Recognition Week. This means being more intentional about familiarizing ourselves with the treaties which we are obliged to uphold as we occupy this land. This is a direct outcome from our experiences in Finland and in New Zealand.

**Conclusion: Building Lasting Connections**

The relationships and professional networks formed through this exchange are invaluable. We extend our gratitude to the OPC for facilitating this opportunity and to our respective school boards for their support. A

special thank you to Irinia Pellikka in Finland and Caroline Bush in New Zealand for their warm hospitality.

As we continue to foster these connections, we are not only enriching our professional lives, but also enhancing the educational experiences of our students. We encourage all principals to consider participating in this incredible program – it’s a chance to expand your horizons and bring fresh perspectives to your school community. ▲

Lise Medd, B.Ed, is the principal of William Burgess Elementary School with the Toronto District School Board. Lise was an international exchange participant during the 2024 school year. She will be applying for future exchange opportunities.

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Cheryl Hayles, B. Ed, Masters in FLE, is the principal at Irma Coulson Public School with the Halton District School Board. Cheryl travelled to New Zealand during the summer of 2024 as an international exchange participant.

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