

## EP 01 - Support to Thrive: Bolstering Resilience and Mental Health in Schools

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:10]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC .

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:19]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:23]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K to twelve education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:40]:

We hope that leadership talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy, and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:00]:

Today we're going to be speaking with Kingsley Hurlington about bolstering resilience and mental health in schools. It's definitely a priority consideration for school leaders at this time.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:11]:

Kingsley, it's great to have you here. To start us off, I'm just going to turn it right over to you to tell us a little bit about yourself and the journey that brought you here today.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:01:20]:

Thanks everyone. It's a pleasure to be here. My name is Kingsley Hurlington and I'm a vice principal in the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board and that's one of the many hats that I am privileged to wear. I was an educator for the York Region District School Board for many years and just recently started my journey as an administrator in the last four years. I'm also a

practitioner and a researcher. I hold a PhD in resilience and youth, and particularly looking at youth in rural communities. And as I said as well, I'm a practitioner. I work with Kids Help Phone when I have a few minutes to spare.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:02:00]:

And I'm a parent, so I feel like I'm really well invested in the mental health space that we live in as a school system.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:02:11]:

Thanks Kingsley. So I know that you've done an extensive amount of research and work in this area of resilience and mental health. So I'm just wondering if you could just expand on that a little bit and tell us a little bit about some of the work and research that you've been involved in.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:02:27]:

The world of resilience research has been around for a fairly long time in terms of this work was first sort of conceived as a structure in psychology and sociology in the 1960s, and it's been around in various forms ever since. So let's start off then with what we should do as good researchers, which is we need to define our terms and when we're doing that, when we're talking about what is resilience, it's used so often in so many ways that it can be really confusing to define. But in the context of youth, we often think of it as the capacity to thrive through adversity. So to face difficult circumstances and yet be able to come out on top of them. That's a very thin, traditional definition. When we look at more complex and more involved definitions, it really is about being able to manage adversity in ways that allow you to navigate and negotiate for well being. And that's more of a postmodern definition, but a really important one, because it helps us to remember that resilience is not the same thing as grit. Grit is sort of an internal psychic phenomena that exists within individuals.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:03:49]:

But resilience is really about the ecology of spaces. So it's actually about how we construct environments where kids can thrive, where they can see themselves, they can navigate for what they need, they can negotiate for what they need, and that allows them to really thrive in the moments when challenges are facing them.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:04:10]:

So, Kingsley, with all of the research you've done, and you're secondary, is that correct?

Kingsley Hurlington [00:04:15]:

Yes, I'm secondary.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:04:17]:

I just wonder, what does it look like day to day, in your interactions, working with youth and creating environments where you are really supporting inclusion, supporting good mental health? Can you give us some examples or things that you've done that you know, have impact and you've seen a difference?

Kingsley Hurlington [00:04:40]:

Thanks for asking that, Susie. It's an interesting point that as somebody who has a lot of theoretical knowledge, the question is always about how do we turn that into action and how do we move from theory to praxis. In my school, I am lucky because I get to see a lot of kids, and I make it a part of my journey to try to talk to all 800 of my students each day. And that allows me to have a really positive interaction with them that leads to that unconditional, positive regard. So each day, one of the things that I do, that's a simple thing, but allows me to put my finger on the pulse of how kids are responding is I do something called a question of the day. And it's usually a silly or a zany question that allows me to talk to kids outside of the scope of discipline, outside of the scope of all the things that we get involved in as school administrators. It's fun. They like it.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:05:42]:

It's silly and zany, as I said, but it allows me to talk to every kid and get a sense of how they're doing on any given day. So an example of a question like that is, I might choose a superpower and ask students what their superpower would be if they could pick one. I've had a lot of strong response from kids on issues like, how ripe should a banana be in order for you to enjoy it in its maximum ripeness? And one of the things that it does is it really allows kids to recognize that their choices are probably pretty different from their friends' choices, and yet they're still friends with them. And it gives people an ability to say, we are different, but we're still friends. And so it's a really simple introduction to a conversation that needs to happen over and over and over again regarding matters that are far more complex than how ripe you like your banana. Because when it boils down to it, that's the same conversation we're having when we're trying to help manage bullying around the LGBTQ community or trying to help kids to be empathetic towards racially charged circumstances. It really is, "We're different, but we're okay, and we can respect each other."

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:58]:

So, Kingsley, you mentioned about the really wide range of different tasks that administrators have to be involved in on a day to day basis. So what recommendations or how would you prioritise this work in the scope or across that domain of different responsibilities that you have

as an administrator? And how do you keep this a priority? How do you centre this in your work as opposed to all those other demands on your time and attention?

Kingsley Hurlington [00:06:57]:

Yeah, if I knew that there was a simple answer to that, I would be coming to whoever has that answer and taking guidance from them. I think it's very nuanced, it's very complex, it's very sophisticated. But when it comes right down to it, for me, I want to keep in the front of my mind that every kid deserves unconditional positive regard, regardless of what it is they've done, regardless of why they're in my office, regardless of what it is that I think that I saw them do or what I think that I heard them say. They need to be treated with unconditional positive regard. And when we do that, it allows me to model that not only in the student to student interactions as an administrator, as I'm watching those interactions, but it also allows me to model that for the staff and the rest of the administrative team that I work with because I want them to know that they are going to be treated with unconditional, positive regard and that they can hand that same level of care and kindness and love, if I can use that term, for kids and for each other. When I think about the number of interactions that we have every day, the opportunities to get things right with kids. Kids don't always remember your name as an administrator or as a teacher. They don't always remember the details of what you taught last day, but they sure do remember how they felt after the experience that they had with you. And I'm just thinking about today that there was a student that got into a conflict with a teacher and finally made their way down to the office.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:09:10]:

And by the time they were leaving the office, their response was, "Thanks, I really appreciated that you listened to me and I'll try to do better tomorrow." And for me, that was a pretty positive interaction because it allowed me to get back to that first principle of this is not a bad kid. This kid just experienced a stressful moment. They earnestly want to do better. Nobody wants to do badly. Nobody wants to feel frustrated. They want that opportunity to feel invested and cared for and supported.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:09:44]:

And when we're looking at the ecology of resilience, it really boils down—I mean, the research is legion—but it boils down to these three things. When we demonstrate caring relationships for kids, when we are able to help kids realise that they are being cared for in a deep and furtive way, that even though they've made mistakes, we are still supporting them and engaging with them. And we know that kids need lots and lots and lots of caring relationships that no one person can provide, all the caring relationships that any child needs, or any adult for that matter. So every kid needs to have those caring relationships, but they also need to be held to

high expectations. And those two things are not intentioned with each other, because each kid's high expectation is going to look different on different days, in different contexts, and in different sorts of structures. And then finally, every kid needs to know that they have an opportunity for meaningful participation. And what I mean by that is that everybody needs to know that the world is not fixed.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:10:53]:

It changes. And not only does it change autonomously, it changes because I can change it. I can do something or say something that will make the world a better place, either for myself or for others around me. And when we believe that the world can be changed and that we have the ability to shape our world, that is meaningful participation, because I'm more likely to lean into the activities that are around me, to lean into the opportunities around me, because I believe that I can help to shape things. So I think that when both staff and students believe about caring relationships and high expectations and meaningful participation, they care for each other better, they respond to each other better, and it allows us to prioritise that kind of resilience in a way that I think is pretty accessible to everyone each day.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:11:44]:

I'm glad you mentioned staff. I'm listening to you talk about your interactions with students, and these sound like amazing strategies for getting students to feel more included and to bolster their sense of belonging and so on. What kinds of strategies or approaches or resources are you using to help build capacity on your staff to do the same kind of work with students?

Kingsley Hurlington [00:12:10]:

I've always found that to be the harder of the two things. I think it's easier for me to talk to students. It's easy for me to be able to interact with students. I love working with teams and so I find that to be a pretty easy space, despite the fact that I suspect that that's not true for every administrator or every teacher for that matter. But I find it harder because adult problems feel more complex to me in many ways, and I don't want to dismiss them. But I also want people to know that they too can be cared for if they need time off, if they need support, if they need to leave the building to support their child or to care for somebody else in their family. That we have to do that, and we have to do it in a way that allows them the fastest, easiest, least stressful access out of the building when they need that, knowing that when they come back that we're going to continue to expect that they're going to perform as professionals and engage as professionals, and for them to truly believe that they have the opportunity to shape the school, to step into that role as a change maker in the school. I think that teachers often get frustrated that everything is fixed and there's nothing that we can do, and the board this and the ministry that and those things are certainly true.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:13:31]:

But we are called to this really powerful role in education to be change makers, that we can see a challenge, we can see a problem, we can see an issue, and we can take that and own that challenge and try to do something about it at the local level. And I think that for me, I hope each day, every day to inspire the teachers that I work with to be able to see a problem, not to shy away from it, not to feel like they can't do anything about it or that somebody else needs to do it, but that they themselves can take a step in the direction of helping to resolve that problem and to intuit their own solutions by being evidence driven. So just because a student doesn't like something doesn't mean that thing isn't good for lots of students. But if a student tells you that they're struggling with something, then it's incumbent for us to listen and be guided by their voices just as much as you want the school administration to be guided by the voice of the teacher. Those are pieces that I think about often, about how we can do that work as staff members and how I can help teachers to feel inspired. And one of the ways that I try to do that is I think a lot about success. And I like to start my conversations with teachers about the most powerful moments that they have had as educators, either in the short term or in the long term. What's something that really resonates with you? What was happening in the moment when that amazing thing happened? But most importantly, what was the environment like when you had that really great moment of success? And the critical piece out of that is when you can describe what that environment was like.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:10:53]:

Then we can agree on what might be necessary for you to be able to get back to that place. What do I need to do as an administrator to be able to say, you've had this incredible success in the last year or in the last school semester or whatever it is. It was really positive for you. You've really enjoyed it. You felt it was making a big difference what was happening at that time that made it possible for you to experience that level of success. And how can I help you to create the environment where you can have that experience of that success again? That's been an interesting strategy. Sometimes people need to take that away and reflect on it. But people have been really good at coming back and saying, "No, this is what was happening at the time that made it possible for me to reach that level of success." And then it gives me the opportunity to work towards creating that space where people can continue to improve, continue to grow, to continue to experience a level of success that they hope to have each day?

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:15]:

Wow. There's so many things you've said, Kingsley, that really resonate for me personally, and I would be surprised if our listeners didn't feel the same. Just to name a few. What you said about unconditional positive regard, high expectations, seeing the good in every student. I'm a parent,

too—you mentioned earlier that you're a parent—and you sound like the type of administrator that I would want my kids to see every day, talk to every day. And as far as the staff piece goes, it sounds like you're a really great role model, which I think is pretty powerful in and of itself. And you probably don't even realise that example that you're setting for kids and staff on a daily basis. So you said a lot.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:58]:

And I'm just wondering for our listeners, in terms of maybe one or two key messages from your story or from your own learning and your practice, what you'd want them to take away from this conversation.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:16:57]:

I think that as teachers, we are really good at delivering content. And the thing that I think that the resilience research indicates is that the most powerful kind of relationships that we can have with students are mentoring relationships. And the research on mentoring relationships are pretty substantial in terms of, it improves students academic performance. It enhances their sense of positive regard for themselves. In fact, shockingly, it causes a reduction in their delinquent behaviours and the use of drugs and alcohol. So we all need someone who is going to say, listen, I see you for who you are. I respect you for who you are. I just don't want you to stay the same person you are, stuck in the same space you are.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:18:07]:

So how do we get to the next stage? And a really great mentor really isn't so much about providing answers. They're really about listening carefully and bringing together a positive, forward direction. So if I were going to say something to anybody, it's work on those mentorship skills. Be willing to hear kids and staff when they are telling you that something is wrong, when they're telling you that they're struggling. Hear those things. But then you don't have to pretend to be the one who has all the answers to any of that. I routinely tell kids that's a really hard thing and, you know what, I have friends in guidance and they are great guidance teachers.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:18:49]:

Would you be willing to come over with me and meet one of them? Because they might have a better way of approaching this than I do. I encourage teachers to connect with HR and to connect with the external supports that we have for mental health as well. Because inasmuch as a good mentor will have good ideas, I think that the best thing that a great mentor does is they are able to connect you with the next best thing that you need. They are able to guide you and encourage you to take a step, even a bold step, in a direction that might feel really scary, but they promise to be there with you. When I do my own mentorship work, I remind my mentees

all of the time that my job is not to be a medical doctor or a surgeon. It's to be the friend that holds your hand in the ambulance when you're on your way to the doctors. And that's just as important a role. I don't have to pretend to do something that I can't do or to be something that I'm not.

Kingsley Hurlington [00:19:47]:

If I'm holding your hand in the ambulance, you'll be grateful for that, and we'll hand you off to the people who are really good at these other complex things that I'm not trained to do. So I think that mentorship is an important part of that journey and fits nicely within that scope of resilience.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:49]:

Well, I agree with Susie. Wow. Thank you so much, Kingsley, for sharing such powerful messages with us. I really agree that there'll be a lot of listeners who'll be wishing that their children attended your school, and maybe a lot of staff members who wish that they were working there as well. So I really want to thank you for taking time today to share your story and those amazing positive messages about caring for students. Much appreciated.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:20:31]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:20:46]:

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