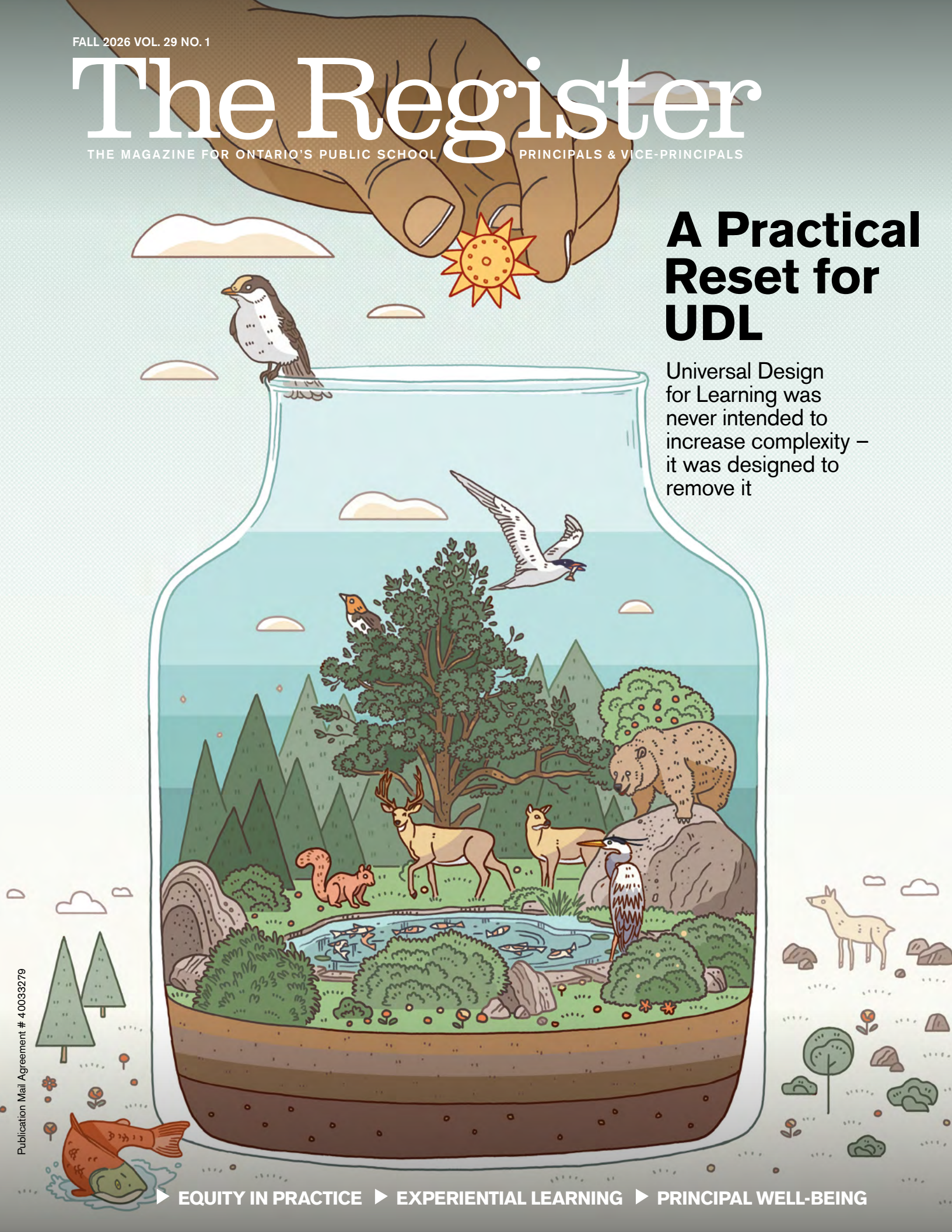
FALL 2026 VOL. 29 NO. 1

The Register

THE MAGAZINE FOR ONTARIO'S PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS & VICE-PRINCIPALS



A Practical Reset for UDL

Universal Design for Learning was never intended to increase complexity – it was designed to remove it

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What's Next?

Reflecting on progress and preparing for the next round



August 31, 2027. That date seemed far away in the early hours of the morning on August 10, 2024, when we signed the current provincial Terms and Conditions agreement. Now, less than a year remains before that agreement ends and we begin the negotiations process again. To prepare for that process, we need to look back to reflect on what went well, where we can improve and what we need to do together to be ready for the next round.

Looking back at past rounds of negotiations, we have made some significant gains. Simply gaining the right to negotiate is perhaps the most foundational "win," achieved in 2013. At each subsequent round, we made progress, developing our knowledge, understanding and strategies. In 2024, over a decade after our first round of negotiations, we reached an agreement that put us on a path toward parity for principals and vice-principals. Along with the gains, big and small, there were also lessons learned as we dealt with issues stemming from the agreement. In most cases, these were related to interpretation of the language in the agreement.

No matter how much clarity we leave the bargaining table with, or how detailed our notes are, interpretive issues always surface in the implementation process. That is the nature of negotiations. In many cases, these can be resolved through dialogue. Inevitably, there are issues that are not easily worked out through discussion. The best example from 2024 arose when a clause meant to require approval of compensation-related matters in each local agreement turned into a full review of each agreement and resulted in requests for changes outside of compensation. While we are grateful that, in most cases, we were able to work with employer representatives toward a mutually acceptable resolution, we were again confronted with the reality that we do not have access to a meaningful dispute resolution process at the provincial level. This must be a priority in the next round.

Since the end of the last round, we have also taken time to review the Terms and Conditions policies, both local and provincial, through a consultative process with General Assembly (GA) representatives. There is now a single policy, Provincial and Local Terms and Conditions Negotiations, to guide both local and provincial negotiations processes. The revised policy maintains the responsibility of GA representatives to approve the provincial list and any agreement reached. It also clarifies our responsibility and commitment to improved communications throughout the process, and includes principals and vice-principals working in alternate education programs or on term assignment, where appropriate. This work also connects directly to our strategic plan, which includes the objective to "enhance the bargaining power to improve overall working conditions for Members." To support this goal, we are planning a regional tour with visits meant to engage Members in discussions about negotiations, including possible labour actions as one

ILLUSTRATION: PUI YAN FONG

way we might enhance our bargaining power, as well as the risks and responsibilities associated with any such action.

Another next step is consulting Members to identify the list of priorities we will bring to the bargaining table, gathering the research and information needed to support our asks, establishing the caucus team and providing training, as needed, for those involved in the process. Our work has already begun. Since the last round of negotiations, we have kept a running list of potential priorities, including dispute resolution, the short-term disability benefit and the work year. We will survey principals and vice-principals across the province in the late winter or early spring to gain insight into Members' priorities. We have also created an email address, negotiations2027@principals.ca, where you can share your comments and suggestions. ▲



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Do you have an article, feedback or ideas?
Our editorial team would like to hear from you.
Deadlines for submissions are listed below.
Go to the OPC website under *The Register* for further submission and writing guidelines and considerations.
Send your articles, reviews, thoughts and ideas to communications@principals.ca.
All submissions are subject to review and selection by the editorial committee.

Content Due	Edition Release
April 15	October
September 15	February
January 15	May

The Register is the proud recipient of the following awards:

Happenings at the OPC …



On July 1, we welcomed Amy Johnson, 2026–27 Provincial President from the Renfrew County District School Board.



The Ontario Principals' Council is proud to support Friends of Ruby with a donation from our 2026 Silent Auction proceeds.







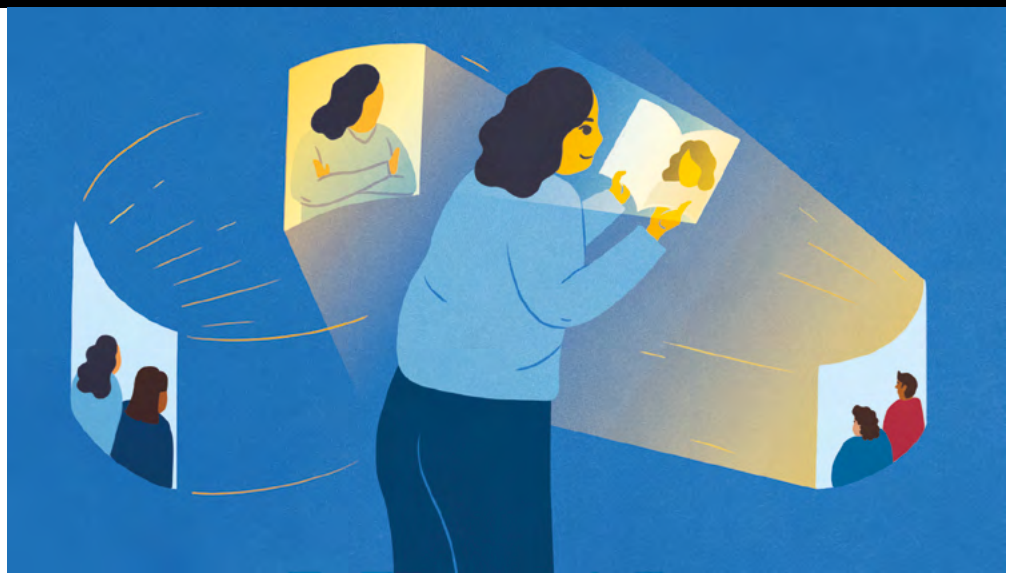
OPC Board members and staff met in August to connect, reflect and plan.



(L-R) Shannon Bailey, President, OPSOA; Amy Johnson, President, OPC; Sheila Builder, Past President, OPSOA; and Nadine Trépanier-Bisson, Executive Director, OPC, at the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) dinner in August.



District visit with the Trillium Lakelands District School Board.



Shaping Impactful Leadership

Reflective practice as a key leadership stance

Leaders who model vulnerability demonstrate that meaningful growth is an ongoing process that takes time and consistency. By acknowledging challenges, seeking feedback and reflecting on their practice, reflective leaders can create a culture where learning is valued over unrealistic perfection. This approach encourages staff to take thoughtful risks, embrace innovation and view setbacks as opportunities for professional growth. Educators are also more likely to engage authentically when they see leaders learn alongside them.

We are constantly reviewing our programming and your feedback so we can continue to offer relevant leadership learning that supports leaders who connect with the students and families they serve. Below are some opportunities available to build leaders' capacity to adapt to the evolving needs of diverse school communities.

ILLUSTRATION: PUI YAN FONG

Engaging Staff Through Inclusive Learning Spaces

Authentic engagement occurs when staff with varied experiences, identities and expertise feel psychologically safe to share new ideas, ask questions and meaningfully contribute to decision-making. Listening with empathy, recognizing individual strengths and responding thoughtfully to staff feedback reinforces a sense of belonging and shared purpose within a school community. When staff experience inclusion, respect and trust, they are better equipped to create classrooms where every student feels seen, valued and supported.

The Equitable and Inclusive Schools Qualification Program and the Principal's Development Course offer leaders the opportunity to connect with colleagues and expand their understanding of inclusive practices to reflect, adapt and lead in ways that have positive impacts.

Leading with Courage Toward Truth and Reconciliation

School leaders are uniquely positioned to lead meaningful action in advancing Truth and Reconciliation. It is not a single initiative but a sustained responsibility that strengthens relationships and honours Indigenous knowledge systems. This work is a shared responsibility, and requires leaders to move beyond acknowledgement and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to learning, reflection and connected action.

In collaboration with the OPC Indigenous Leadership Circle, the Leadership Conversation Series will focus on leadership for Truth and Reconciliation. The voices of Indigenous school leaders and guests will offer powerful perspectives and encourage reflection and guidance on leading school communities toward meaningful action. ▲

✉ learning@principals.ca



One Conversation at a Time

Introducing OPC President Amy Johnson

By Lori Horan
Photography by Stef + Ethan

Each July, a practising principal or vice-principal begins a one-year secondment to serve as President of the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). The role is intentionally filled by a current school leader, ensuring the organization's advocacy, leadership and support for Members remain connected to the day-to-day realities of Ontario's public schools.

This year, that leader is Amy Johnson, a principal with the Renfrew County District School Board and the first OPC President from the Renfrew board.

Over the course of her career, Amy has served as an elementary as well as a secondary principal, and as the board's System Lead for Equity, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression. Ask her what has mattered most in her career and she comes back to people.

"I became an educator because I loved books and I loved people," she says. "It is still people who motivate me every day."

Leadership often begins with a conversation. For Amy, those conversations have shaped her career, strengthened relationships and built trust throughout more than 30 years in education. Guided by a deep commitment to human rights, she believes meaningful change happens one conversation at a time.

As she begins her year as OPC President, Amy hopes to bring that same approach to Members across Ontario by listening first, building relationships and ensuring Members feel heard, supported and represented. With a commitment to human rights and respect for the profession, she believes meaningful advocacy begins with listening.

That belief began long before Amy entered a classroom. Growing up, family was at the centre of her life. Her parents, siblings, grandparents, aunties, uncles and older cousins taught her that people look after one another and that love and responsibility extend beyond the individual.

"The idea that we look after each other and have unconditional love for one another is a deeply personal tenet for me," she says. That belief has informed her leadership and given her a strong sense of responsibility to care for people as whole individuals and to lead with love and empathy.

Those values still shape how she leads. Whether she is supporting a student, working alongside staff, speaking with a family or listening to a Member, Amy wants to understand the person behind every question, concern or challenge. She believes every individual brings their own story, experiences and perspective. That understanding shapes how she listens, responds and leads.

> **The idea that we look after each other and have unconditional love for one another is a deeply personal tenet for me.**



A Journey Begins with a Teacher

Amy's path into education began with a teacher. In kindergarten, she wanted to be an artist. But then her Grade 5 teacher, John Orr, changed her mind.

"He was creative, patient, and he got to know each of us individually," she recalls. "Before there were terms like differentiation or culturally responsive pedagogy, he was doing it. He tailored our learning to who we were at that time."

From that year forward, Amy knew she wanted to become a teacher. Another educator would later encourage her to consider a future in school leadership. In her first year of full-time, permanent teaching, Principal Wilmer Matthews saw something in her that she had not yet imagined for herself.

"He said to me, 'You need to be a principal,'" she says. "He set me on my path very early in my career, and I will always be grateful to him for doing that."

While Amy loved teaching, Matthews encouraged her to take on opportunities she might not have sought on her own, including leading curriculum work during Ontario's significant curriculum changes in 1999. Those years gave her a strong foundation for leadership and showed her the broader impact she could have in education, both in the classroom and beyond.

Since beginning her career in Renfrew County in 1995, Amy has worked as a teacher, vice-principal, principal and system leader. She has moved between elementary and secondary



schools, built relationships in different school communities and welcomed opportunities to learn and contribute.

She has never been afraid of change. After spending much of her career in secondary schools, Amy welcomed the opportunity to move into elementary education. "Moving into elementary education made me a better educator and a better leader," she says. Each new role broadened her perspective and helped make her the leader she is today.

Falling in Love with People

Looking back, Amy does not measure her career by the roles she has held but by the people she has met.

"Throughout every role, I have fallen in love with the people," she says. "Supporting students, staff and families and making a difference in their lives continues to be a privilege that I hold close to my heart."

That sense of privilege is central to how she understands school leadership. The work can be demanding and the responsibilities can feel relentless, but Amy continues to see the opportunity to serve as a privilege. She is motivated by helping students overcome barriers, finding wraparound supports for families and working with staff to determine the next step.

Throughout her career, Amy has focused on removing barriers, creating the conditions for people to belong and helping others succeed. Grounded in the principles of human rights, she continues to build relationships and make decisions that reflect those values.

"It is simply part of who I am," she says. "It shapes how I approach leadership every day. It has always been part of my thinking and always will be."

Serving as the System Lead for Equity, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression was among the most significant roles of her career. She transitioned into the role during a period of profound social change in Canada, when schools and communities were engaged in important conversations about human rights, equity and inclusion. The work required courage, resilience and a willingness to stay engaged in difficult conversations. It reinforced Amy's belief that meaningful change happens one conversation at a time.

One conversation, in particular, has stayed with her. A parent strongly opposed flying the Pride flag at a school. The conversation did not end in agreement, but the parent left with a clearer understanding of why publicly funded schools have a responsibility to uphold the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and create safe, welcoming spaces for every student.

"Leadership is not about changing someone's beliefs," Amy says. "It is about listening respectfully, building understanding and clearly communicating our responsibility as educational leaders."

The role of system leader also tested her personally. Leading work in equity, anti-racism and anti-oppression sometimes meant having her own identity and leadership questioned publicly. Those experiences strengthened her ability to lead with compassion and conviction, even when the work was uncomfortable.

Amy believes her identity shapes how she leads. She describes herself as a non-Indigenous settler with ancestors from Jamaica, England and Ireland.

"I walk through the world with white privilege. I have strong ties to my Jamaican ancestry, and this is not a privilege that all members of my family have," she says.

For Amy, a commitment to human rights is visible in everyday decisions. Principals and vice-principals set the tone for their communities, and belonging must be intentional. Decisions about learning resources, budgets, professional learning and the physical environment all communicate whose experiences are valued and whose voices are represented.

"Creating inclusive schools goes far beyond saying the right words," she says. "It is reflected in the choices leaders make, the conversations they facilitate and the culture they intentionally build each day."

Growing a Network of Colleagues

As her leadership experience grew, Amy looked for opportunities to contribute beyond her own school and to support colleagues across the province.



Her involvement with the OPC began more than a decade ago when she became a Provincial Councillor. She was impressed by the support, learning opportunities and connections available to Members, and surprised by how little she had known about the organization before becoming involved. The experience inspired her to become more engaged, both provincially and locally.

Amy put her name forward for president with three priorities in mind. She wanted to help guide the OPC through a period of governance change, ensure smaller and rural school boards have a strong voice at the provincial table, and continue advancing work in human rights, anti-oppression and Truth and Reconciliation by centring Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQQIA+ and other marginalized voices.

As the first OPC President from Renfrew County, Amy brings a rural perspective to the role. Her relationships with school leaders across the province have shown her that the realities of school leadership vary across boards, regions and communities. Because of that, listening will be especially important. Amy believes Members need connection, belonging and support from a professional association that understands both the pressures and the joys of the role. Leadership can be isolating. Connecting with colleagues can restore perspective and remind school leaders they are not alone.

Advocacy, she believes, must begin the same way.

The experiences of principals and vice-principals across Ontario should continue to inform the OPC's priorities and be reflected in its messages to government and education partners. At the same time, Amy believes advocacy should always be clear, thoughtful and honest. There are significant challenges in school leadership and moments when the organization must speak plainly about the impact the decisions of others are having on schools, students and those who lead them.

"Our messaging needs to reflect the realities of the education system," she says. "We need to be respectful and collaborative, but we also need to be clear about what Members are experiencing and what they need to be successful."

Even as the role of the principal and vice-principal becomes more complex, Amy finds hope in education.

"In schools, big people need to help little people learn, develop and grow," she says. "There will never be an AI bot or app that will take the place of people."

She sees hope in four-year-olds learning to communicate, in 12-year-olds discovering who they are and in 18-year-olds who may appear ready for adulthood but still need guidance and reassurance.

"The kids, and helping the kids, always gives me hope," she says.

She finds joy in the profession: the funny things students say, the lasting relationships built with colleagues and the humbling opportunities to serve families during difficult moments. School leaders cannot solve every problem for every student, but they can make a difference for someone each day.

"We cannot help every child every day, but we can help a child every day," Amy says. "That is a gift."

Outside of work, Amy is grounded by her inner circle. Her partner, Bryan, a retired principal, and her sons, Lawson and Keilan, have provided steadfast support and encouragement through-

out her career and as she begins her presidency. Time with family and friends, especially while travelling, helps her recharge.

She is also a voracious reader, an avid sports fan and someone who believes physical and mental well-being are essential. Music has always been part of her life. She loves live music, dancing and singing, and she played the trumpet when she was younger. Every Remembrance Day, she still plays The Last Post in honour of her grandfather, who served in the Second World War.

During her year as president, Amy hopes to listen to and connect with as many Members as possible. She wants Members to know their work matters, they are not alone and the OPC is there to support them.

She also hopes Members will care for themselves. School leaders give so much of themselves to students, staff and families, but Amy believes they can only continue to serve others when their own well-being is protected.

"Make sure your own bucket is filled," she says. "We cannot pour from an empty cup. But when we are feeling happy, secure, loved and empowered, there is no limit to the number of people, big and small, that we can help."

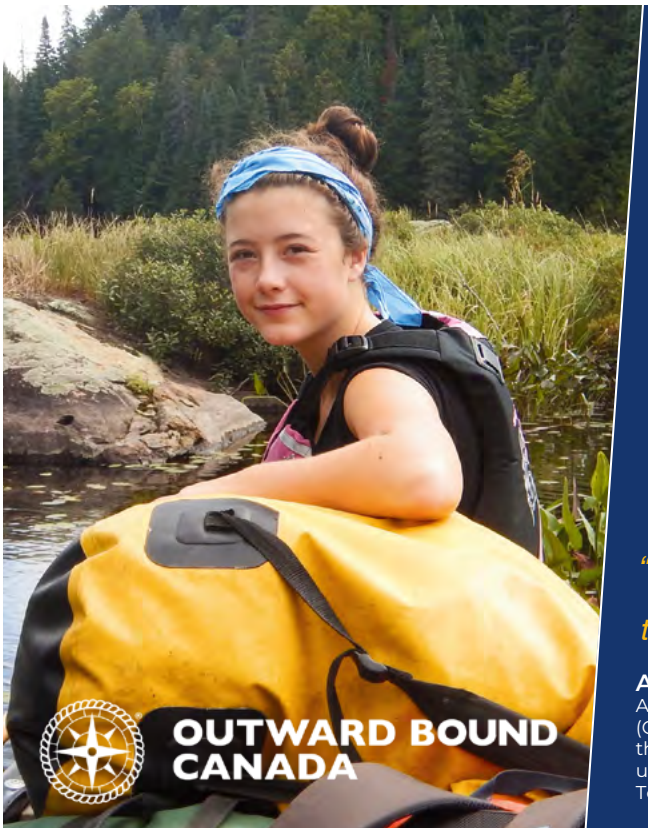
For Amy, that is why most school leaders entered the profession in the first place. They wanted to help people, strengthen communities and make a meaningful difference. The work is difficult, but it remains human and deeply important.

As she begins this new chapter, Amy returns to the values that have guided her from childhood through more than three decades in education: look after one another, listen carefully, make decisions grounded in the principles of human rights and never lose sight of the people at the centre of the work.

"It is an honour to be a principal. When I am feeling uncertain or discouraged, I remind myself of that." ▲

Lori Horan is the Director of Communications and Strategy at the Ontario Principals' Council.
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> **"Make sure your own bucket is filled. We cannot pour from an empty cup.**



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By the Protective Services Team

COMPLEX SUPER VISION

The school washroom

Navigating safety, supervision and student privacy

EACH SCHOOL DAY, Ontario's school leaders demonstrate their commitment to creating safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments for students and staff. In collaboration with teachers, support staff and board officials, principals and vice-principals (P/VPs) strive to ensure lunchrooms, school yards, gyms, hallways and classrooms are safe, welcoming spaces for the school community. However, student washrooms remain an area of school supervision that can be challenging, sensitive and, at times, controversial.

In Ontario, the supervision of student washrooms is legally governed by the *Education Act*, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and school board policies. School boards and staff have a legal duty of care to ensure student safety. This requires reasonable monitoring to protect students from harm while balancing privacy and accommodation rights.



Duty of Care and Supervision

Under the *Education Act*, educators have a legal duty to anticipate foreseeable risks and provide adequate supervision. Washrooms are considered "hot spots" where bullying, vandalism and safety issues are known to occur in both elementary and secondary schools. While exact supervision times aren't legislated, principals are mandated to monitor hallways, corridors and washrooms. Failure to do so can result in liability if a preventable incident occurs. Students, staff, parents/caregivers and P/VPs alike often express concerns about the degree and type of supervision required to keep washrooms safe and accessible to all.

An example of responding to foreseeable risk is the designation of school washrooms as "Students Only" to ensure the security of students of all ages by restricting adults and students from using the same facilities. In elementary schools in particular, parents and guardians should be reminded that student washrooms are for student use only and that their use is monitored to ensure safety. Information should be provided about the location of adult and staff washrooms, for adult use when necessary. In April 2026, the *Globe and Mail* published an opinion piece entitled "School bathrooms have gone down the toilet – and that's a serious problem." The article quoted concerned parents who were offering to supervise the halls outside the washrooms at their children's school. It also highlighted concerns from students who reported feeling unsafe in school washrooms. Some said they waited until they got home or used washrooms in nearby restaurants instead.

In the Professional Advisory *Student Physical Safety in Learning Environments*, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) reminds members of the importance of recognizing hazards, responding to potential risks and/or incidents and reporting promptly and accurately. Regularly reflecting on school practices when considering safety allows for the creation of an active and responsive plan based on evidence-informed approaches. It is also important to consider how past experiences of students, families and communities, as well as those of staff and school leaders, might shape how safety measures are developed, understood and experienced. The OCT advisory reminds us that "educator and student safety are inextricably linked."

The Human Rights Code and Accessibility

Under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, schools are classified as "services" and have a legal duty to accommodate students to the point of undue hardship. However, when creating rules on who can access washrooms, educators must remember that strict restrictions or lockouts that deny access can violate both human rights and educational equity, as washroom access must be safe, inclusive and accommodating.

Important to consider are the following:

- **Medical needs:** Students with physical disabilities, chronic medical conditions (e.g., Crohn's or colitis) or psychosocial disabilities require barrier-free and unhindered access.
- **Timely access:** Requiring a student to wait for extended periods or to undergo excessive questioning by staff can be deemed a failure to accommodate.
- **Gender identity and expression:** All people have a right to access a safe washroom and the right to use a washroom that best corresponds to their gender identity, regardless of their sex assigned at birth. Requests for accommodation may include the use of one or both gendered washrooms, or the use of a single-use, gender-neutral washroom, where available.

Student Privacy and Direct Surveillance

Expectation of privacy: Students are minors and have a reasonable expectation of privacy when using a school washroom. School staff cannot visually monitor the interior of washroom stalls without violating students' privacy and dignity.

As student washrooms are highly private spaces, direct surveillance (such as having cameras or staff inside washrooms) raises major privacy concerns. If schools use security cameras, they must not be installed in washrooms but be used only for monitoring hallways outside of washrooms.

Developing the School Supervision Plan

Concerns about washroom supervision highlight a significant balancing act between student privacy and student safety. The OPC Protective Services Team (PST) continues to support Members who are navigating complaints related to the supervision of student washrooms. P/VPs, along with local OPC executives, should consider recommendations in the OCT advisory on physical safety as they support the development or modification of school supervision plans. This advisory uses a 4-R approach (Recognize, Report, Respond and Reflect), and school leaders might reflect on the following:

- What is needed to ensure student washrooms are clean, safe, appropriately monitored and respect necessary privacy for all students at the school?

- What must be considered to centre accessibility, human rights and human dignity as we develop washroom supervision plans?
- Does the plan encompass the safety of both students and staff? What must be in place to support this safety?

As P/VPs work with staff to foresee risks and to identify solutions in supervision planning, the focus must be on enhancing safety measures for students in washrooms while also minimizing staff exposure to risks, complaints and false allegations.

Advocacy at the OPC Local Level

Board Policies

Local OPC executives and P/VPs are encouraged to determine whether their board has a policy that supports planning for safe and accessible student washrooms. Using data collected from Members regarding issues in their schools impacting safe and respectful use of washrooms, OPC locals can advocate to their senior team the need for clear expectations around washroom safety and supervision as well as guidance and support in addressing prevalent issues which arise. Members are encouraged to reach out to the PST if further support is required.

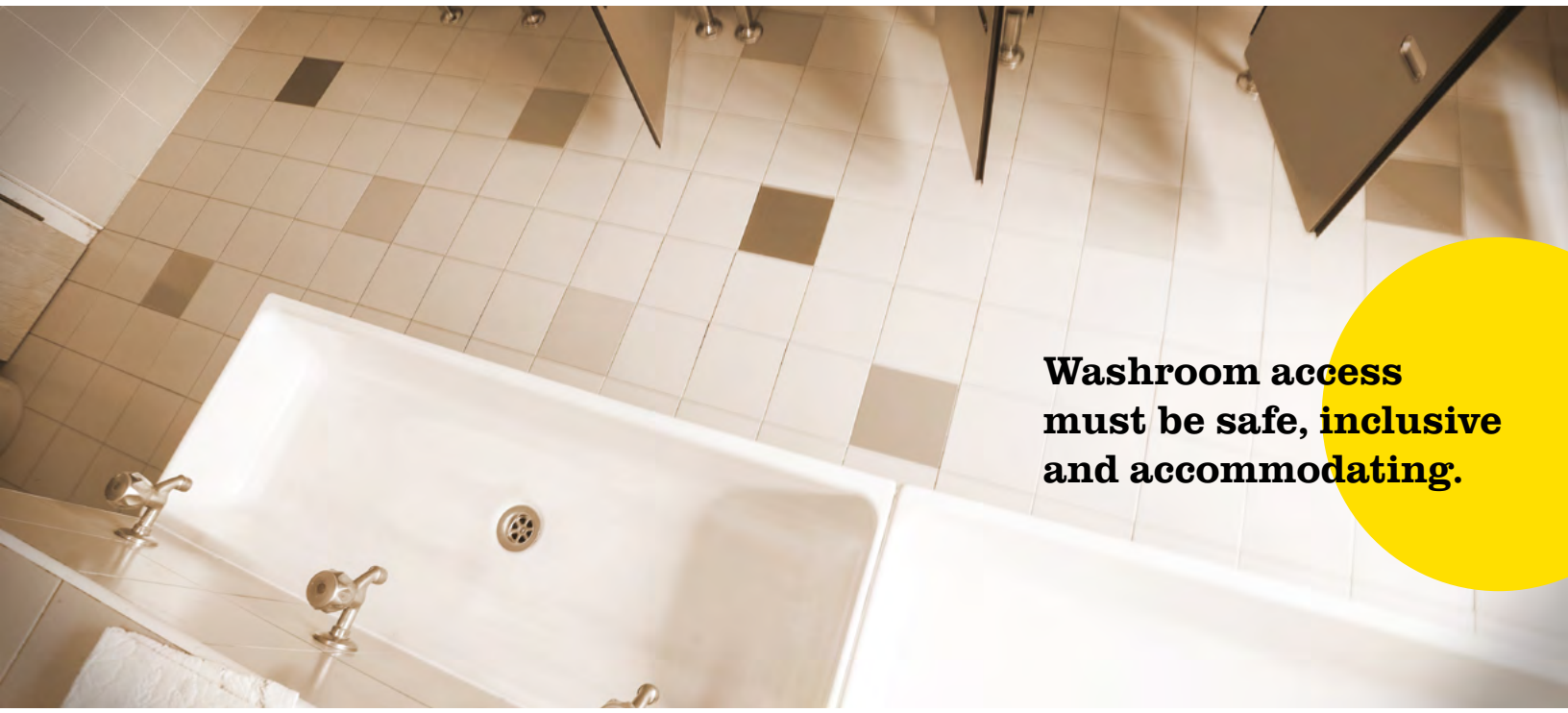
Clarifying the supervision plan with education unions

All school staff share a legal and professional responsibility to promote and maintain student safety and to respond appropriately to safety risks. OPC locals and P/VPs are encouraged to engage in conversation with local union leaders representing teachers and support staff to discuss perspectives regarding supervision, understanding that school leaders are required to follow board direction, policies and legislation.

Information from union partners can provide further clarity regarding staff concerns to be shared with the senior team, which will help inform a collaboratively developed local plan.

At the school level

The new school year provides an opportunity to review and update procedures around the use of student washrooms, and to identify and communicate strategies for effective and safe staff supervision. As P/VPs update washroom procedures, they are strongly encouraged to engage with those impacted, including students, teaching staff, support staff/caretakers, parents/caregivers, school council and superintendents. An open and consultative process is more likely to ensure support from the entire school community as changes are reviewed, communicated and implemented.



School and Classroom Protocols

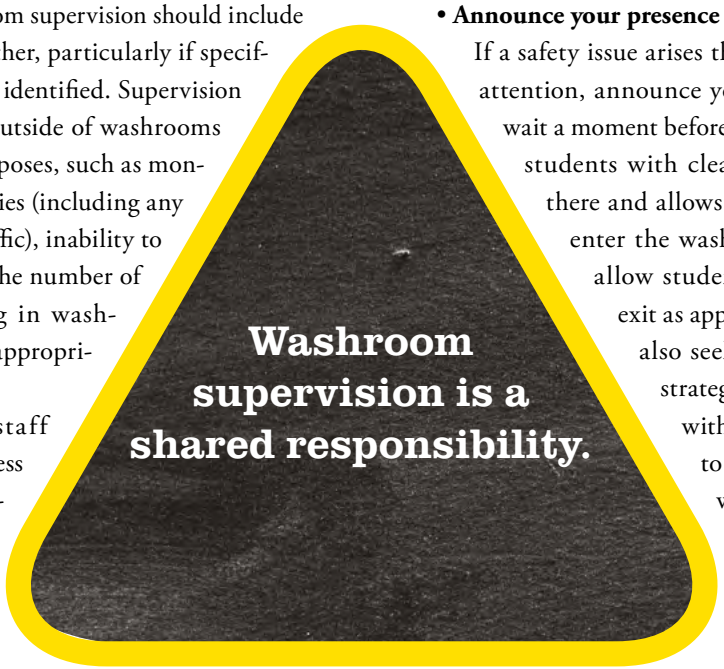
It is important for staff to develop and communicate protocols early in the school year regarding washroom use, including how and when students may access the facilities. The presence of P/VPs and staff in hallways encourages students to stay in class or to follow established washroom protocols and is critical to effective daily management of school washrooms. As part of this planning, school leaders should consider the following questions:

- Is there a sign-out system or pass system to provide some direction to students in washroom use?
- Is the system consistently used?

Staff Support

When possible, washroom supervision should include two staff working together, particularly if specific challenges have been identified. Supervision planned for hallways outside of washrooms may serve multiple purposes, such as monitoring use of the facilities (including any unusual increase in traffic), inability to access the washroom, the number of students congregating in washrooms and possible inappropriate behaviour.

When required, staff should attempt to address concerns while remaining at the washroom entrance or doorway. In a situation that requires immediate intervention (where there is a risk of harm, violence or illegal behaviour), staff should contact the office or a nearby staff member to request additional support before entering the washroom, if possible. To support student safety, as well as for accountability, transparency and protection for all involved, careful attention should be given to staff pairings, including the gender of staff available to respond where relevant and possible. Supervision plans should also address safety in gender-neutral washrooms and should be informed by student input.



Washroom Supervision Protocol

- **Tracking**

School staff need to exercise careful judgment when increasing supervision of students, ensuring that supervision requirements are met without creating the appearance of bias or discrimination, while maintaining their safe school responsibilities.

Schools are encouraged to work with staff, students and parents/caregivers to continually review and update how students are supervised when they are out of class during instructional time. Tracking tools can include classroom sign-in/sign-out processes, hall passes and observation data/supervision from all employee groups. When there is a serious safety issue in a student washroom, tracking sheets will support P/VPs with investigations and information gathering.

- **Announce your presence**

If a safety issue arises that requires immediate attention, announce your presence and then wait a moment before entering; this provides students with clear notice that you are there and allows for privacy before you enter the washroom. This time will allow students to respond and/or exit as appropriate. P/VPs should also seek support for effective strategies to support students with hearing impairments, to ensure they are aware when staff are required to enter the washroom.

- **Documentation is critical**

If staff are required to enter a student washroom for a safety issue, there should be clear and consistent documentation, which includes date, time, reasons for entering, staff involved and, if known, names of students who were in the washroom at the time of the incident. P/VPs should obtain this documentation, and retain it along with their own notes, so it is easily accessible if needed for further investigation.

Structural Changes

- **Vape detectors**

In many schools, student washrooms have become a preferred location for vaping. In 2024, the Government of Ontario committed $30 million for schools to begin installing vape detectors in student washrooms. In May

2026, the *Toronto Star* reported positive results in schools where vape detectors have been installed, with one board reporting a 68 per cent reduction in vaping alerts, a 40 per cent reduction in aggression alerts (loud noises) and a 63 per cent reduction in washroom vandalism. Schools and OPC locals should consult with their boards and the school council to see if installation of vape detectors might assist in addressing washroom concerns. It is important that schools follow board policy when sourcing and implementing technological solutions to address safety concerns in student washrooms.

- **Hallway Cameras**

Several schools use cameras to aid supervision in school hallways outside of washroom doors, while ensuring that surveillance technology is not impeding privacy in washrooms. When considering the use of cameras, P/VPs need to consult carefully with senior staff and review board policy to consider all implications.

School leaders play a central role in creating and maintaining safe, respectful, inclusive and well-maintained washroom facilities for the communities they serve. Washroom supervision is a shared responsibility, and careful thought and consultation with students and others involved is required for the development of reasonable and effective protocols that support the safety, dignity and well-being of students and staff. ▲

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A Practical Reset for UDL

Universal Design for Learning was never intended to increase complexity – it was designed to remove it

By Dr. Amanda Paul
Illustration by Hayden Maynard





Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has become a familiar part of Ontario education. It appears in Ministry of Education documents, board improvement plans and professional learning. Yet somewhere along the way, many educators began to equate UDL with doing more rather than designing better.

In many staff rooms, educators joke that UDL feels less like Universal Design for Learning and more like an "Unrealistic Daily Load." There is truth in that humour. When UDL is misunderstood, it can increase workload, blur professional boundaries and leave educators feeling as though they are falling short of a standard that was never intended.

Properly understood, UDL simplifies planning, reduces unnecessary barriers and strengthens learning relationships. Rather than asking educators to do more, it asks them to design more intentionally.

The challenge is not the framework itself but how the framework has been interpreted. Over time, implementation has expanded expectations beyond UDL's original purpose.

This article offers a practical reset, one grounded in classroom reality and informed by instructional leadership. It is not a call for educators to work harder – it is a call for school leaders to create the conditions where thoughtful, evidence-informed practice can flourish. It explores how leaders can create that clarity while maintaining high expectations, reducing unnecessary barriers, and supporting both students and educators.

UDL in Ontario: Purpose Before Practice

UDL is often viewed as a collection of instructional strategies. In Ontario, however, it is best understood as a planning framework rather than a checklist of teaching techniques.

At its core, UDL is about anticipating learner variability before instruction begins, meaning that educators intentionally design flexible learning experiences from the outset rather than reacting to barriers only after they have emerged. This shift from reactive accommodation to proactive design distinguishes UDL from many other approaches to differentiation.

Ontario's *Learning for All* guidance (2013) and the Center for Applied Special Technology's (CAST) UDL Guidelines (2024) emphasize that effective instruction begins with the assumption that learner variability is the norm, not the exception. UDL encourages educators to plan for that variability from the outset.

In practical terms, UDL asks three simple questions:

- How can students access the learning in different ways?
- How can students engage meaningfully with the learning?
- How can students demonstrate their understanding through flexible, appropriate pathways?

These questions are organized around UDL's three core principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression. They do not ask educators to create individual programs for every learner. Instead, they provide a framework for strong Tier 1 instruction that broadens access while maintaining common learning goals and high expectations.

Rather than asking educators to do more, it asks them to **design more intentionally**.

When understood this way, UDL becomes less about doing more, and more about designing smarter. For school leaders, that kind of clarity matters. It creates a shared understanding of effective practice, an idea that aligns closely with Lyn Sharratt's work on clarity.

Designing for Access Means Designing for Equity

If UDL begins with the assumption that learner variability is the norm, it also invites educators to think differently about equity.

Too often, access is viewed as something provided only after a barrier has been identified: a student struggles, an accommodation is introduced, and the system adapts. While responsive supports remain essential in UDL, it also asks educators to consider what barriers can be anticipated and reduced **before** they affect learning.

This perspective aligns naturally with an anti-oppressive approach to education. Rather than expecting students to continually adapt to existing systems or repeatedly advocate for access, educators examine how learning environments, instructional practices and classroom routines may unintentionally create barriers for some learners while benefiting others. The focus shifts from 'fixing' learners to improving the design of learning itself.

Importantly, this is not about lowering expectations or creating different destinations. Equity is achieved not by changing the learning goals but by ensuring students have meaningful opportunities to reach those goals. High expectations remain constant. The pathways become more flexible.

As Andratesha Fritzgerald (2020) argues, inclusive teaching is strengthened when educators intentionally consider whose experiences have traditionally been centred in our classrooms and whose voices may have been overlooked. UDL provides a practical framework for translating that reflection into thoughtful planning, flexible access and intentional barrier reduction.

Why It Matters

Understanding UDL as a framework for intentional instructional design extends well beyond individual classrooms. When educators share a common understanding of UDL's purpose, implementation becomes more consistent, collaboration becomes more focused and instructional decisions become easier to support.

For students, flexible learning environments create more equitable opportunities to access learning, engage meaningfully and demonstrate understanding. Clear expectations combined with flexible pathways can foster confidence, increase participation and strengthen belonging while maintaining rigorous learning goals.

Educators also benefit. Authentic UDL reduces the need for constant reactive problem-solving. Rather than continually redesigning instruction, educators can devote more time to responsive teaching, meaningful feedback and the relationships that have the greatest impact on student success.

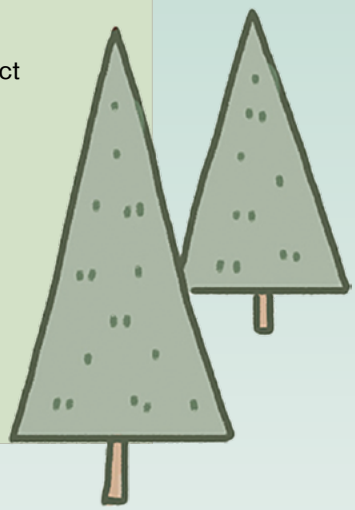
There is also a less frequently discussed benefit. Much of what makes schools exceptional exists beyond curriculum documents and instructional frameworks. It lives in the conversation after class, the thoughtful feedback provided on an assignment, the camaraderie shared in a lunchtime club or the quiet encouragement that helps a student persevere. These moments are rarely mandated, yet they help define school culture.

That discretionary care depends on capacity. When educators are overwhelmed by unnecessary complexity, the time and energy needed to sustain these moments begin to erode. In that sense, how leaders understand and communicate UDL is not simply an instructional question – it is a sustainability question.



What UDL Is • What UDL *Is Not*

WHAT UDL IS	WHAT UDL IS NOT
A proactive design framework	Creating dozens of assignments
Planning for learner variability in advance	Individualizing everything after the fact
Strong Tier 1 instruction	Special education programming
Flexible pathways to shared outcomes	Different outcomes for each student
A way to reduce barriers	Removing all challenge
A school-wide mindset	An added layer of paperwork



When UDL is implemented as intended, it creates learning environments that are more accessible for students, more manageable for educators and more coherent across schools. Helping educators develop that shared understanding is one of a school leader's most important responsibilities.

If leaders are to build this shared understanding, they must first separate the intent of UDL from the misconceptions that have developed around it.

Clearing the Fog

Much of the tension surrounding UDL stems not from the framework itself but from how it is interpreted. Over time, well-intentioned but misguided implementation can blur its original purpose.

At the heart of this confusion is a simple but critical idea: **access without dilution**.

UDL is not about lowering expectations or endlessly adapting outcomes. It preserves shared, rigorous learning goals while widening the pathways students take to reach them.

A helpful way to think about this is through a simple analogy. Imagine we all share the same learning destination: Sault Ste. Marie. Some people drive. Some take the train. Some fly. Others might even cycle or snowshoe. Someone leaving from Sudbury will arrive sooner than someone travelling from Windsor, Ottawa or Thunder Bay. The journeys look different, the travel time varies, and the supports needed along the way may not be the same – but the destination remains unchanged.

Authentic UDL keeps the learning destination shared while making the pathways intentionally flexible.

This does not replace educators' professional judgment. Rather, it provides a shared framework for making those decisions more intentionally.

When access is understood as flexibility around shared goals, both equity and rigour remain intact.

The Leadership Lens

For school leaders, this understanding is more than semantic. It shapes how educators understand, implement and sustain UDL across an entire school.

When UDL is interpreted as an expectation to individualize everything, educators can become overwhelmed by complexity. However, when understood as a framework for accessible Tier 1 instruction, implementation becomes more consistent, collaboration more focused and professional judgment stronger.

Authentic UDL keeps the learning destination shared while **making the pathways intentionally flexible**.

This emphasis on clarity aligns closely with Lyn Sharratt's work on clarity. Sustainable school improvement depends on shared clarity about learning, success and purpose. UDL complements this work by ensuring that while pathways may be flexible, learning goals remain clear and consistent.

Professional learning is strengthened when it reflects the same UDL principles expected in classrooms: clear learning goals, multiple ways to engage with new ideas, opportunities for collaboration and practical application. Perhaps the most powerful way school leaders can support UDL is to model these practices. When leaders design professional learning in this way, they reinforce the practices they hope to foster in classrooms.

Seen through this lens, UDL becomes more than an instructional framework. It becomes a leadership commitment to coherent learning environments where students and educators learn with greater confidence and purpose. ▲



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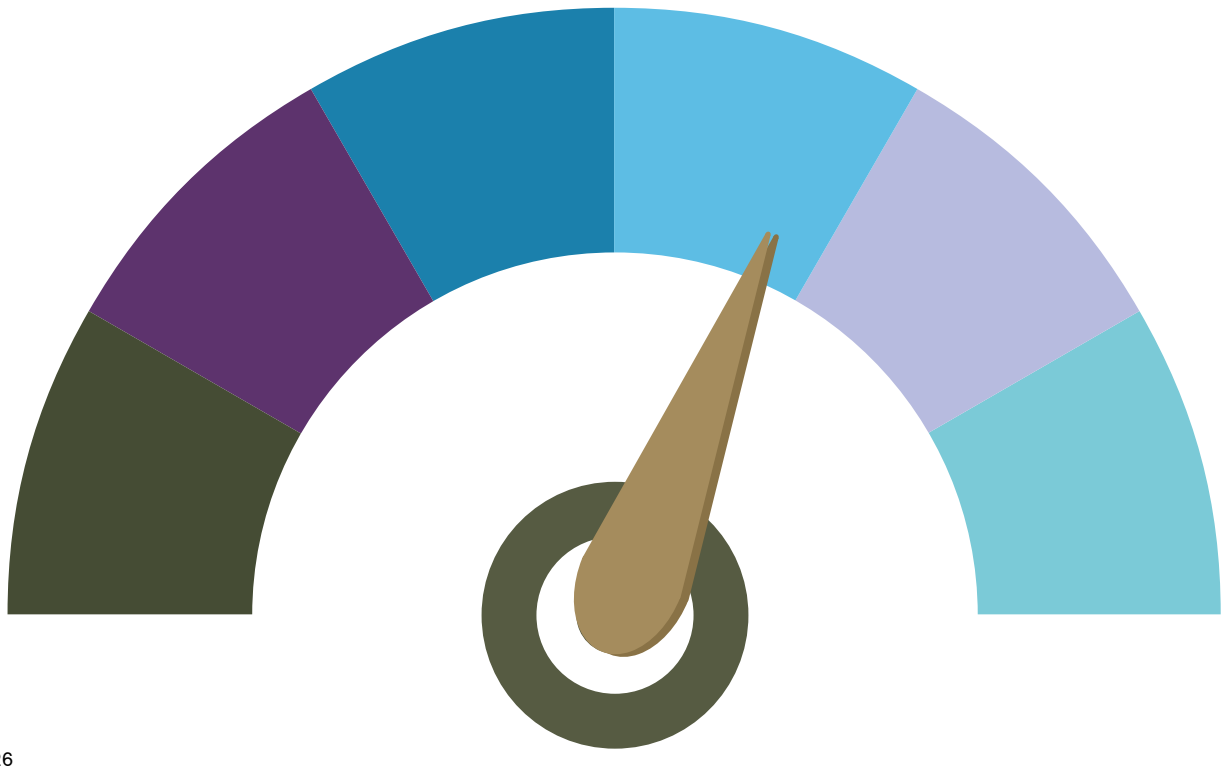
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What the data reveal about principals' working conditions

By Dr. Katina Pollock,
Dr. Nadine Trépanier-Bisson,
Rui (Rita) Sun and Mackenzie Smith

2026 Principal Barometer

Principals and Canadian Workers



Principals have always played a crucial role in supporting student success. The consequences of COVID-19, such as ongoing education staff shortages and pressure from parents and policy-makers to regain lost student learning, have made the principal's role even more vital. However, the principal workforce in Canada is suffering an occupational health and well-being crisis: burnout, high attrition rates and exceptionally low recruitment and retention. Without intervention, these forces will continue to create barriers to students' educational success in Canadian publicly funded education.

To more effectively support principals (and, indirectly, teachers and students), the Principal Barometer research project focuses on gathering information about principals' work and occupational wellness to provide policy-makers and researchers with actionable data they can use to improve principals' occupational health and well-being. The data collected from this survey will also be used as the baseline data for additional longitudinal research in years to come. This article provides a snapshot of how principals are doing across three separate and distinct jurisdictions, and compares principals' occupational wellness to the general Canadian population.

In winter 2026, more than 800 principals participated in an online survey on Canadian Principals' Work, Occupational Health, Safety and Well-being (CPWOHSW). The survey, which took about 40 minutes to complete, included demographic questions and several scales including the COPSOQ-III (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire), the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, an Eating Habits Screener, the Bergen Burnout Inventory and the Chronic Work Discrimination and Harassment scale.

This article focuses on results from the COPSOQ-III, a scale used worldwide to identify workplace trends related to psychosocial factors. Using the Canadian data from this scale, provided by Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW), we compared psychosocial factors for the general Canadian worker with those of principals.

Who Participated in the Survey

Respondents were from French-language and English-language schools in Nova Scotia, English-language schools in Quebec and English-language schools in Ontario. We invited 3,500 principals to participate, and 816 responses were included in the analysis. Response rates varied across provinces (49% in Quebec, 25% in Ontario, 21% in Nova Scotia).

We also collected demographic data to identify trends within demographic factors.

Age

Participants were represented across all age categories, with most (82%) being between 45 and 59 years of age.

Gender

Approximately two-thirds (66%) of participants identified as female.

Ethnicity

Most participants identified as white (89%), while almost 11% identified with another racial or ethnic group. There were 25 Black and 24 South Asian participants; these sample sizes are too small to conduct separate statistical analysis. We hope that in future years, policy changes, recruitment efforts and equitable hiring practices will contribute to a more diverse principal workforce, enabling additional statistical analysis.

Years of experience

Participants reported between 0 and 32 years of experience as principals, with an average of 7.9 years. This information may provide insight over time into growing retention and recruitment concerns.

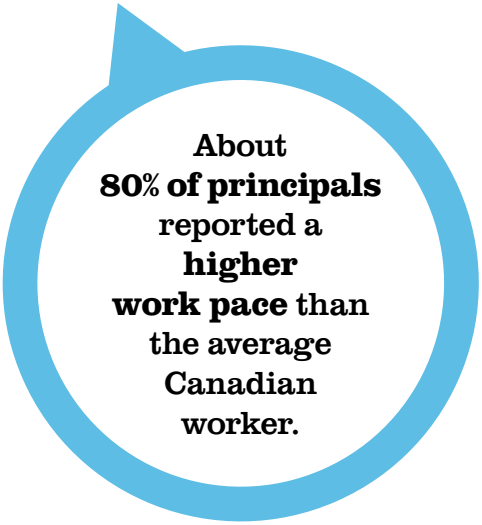
What We Found

After analyzing participants' responses, we identified four overarching themes: workplace conditions, work attitudes and engagement, health and well-being outcomes, and harmful workplace experiences. This article provides a snapshot of some of the workplace conditions derived from the COPSOQ-III scale. More detail will be available in the Ontario Principals' Council Annual Report in the fall.

The Principal Barometer findings were compared to findings from the OHCOW StressAssess survey, which included identical COPSOQ-III questions. Scores were classified as better, average or worse, by comparing each participant's score with the Canadian reference average. A difference of one-half of a standard deviation was used to identify meaningful differences. Below are some of the striking differences between principals and other Canadian workers.

Influence at work

To determine influence at work, we asked participants whether they have a large degree of influence over their work and whether they



Overall, 77% of principals reported higher workload demands than the average Canadian worker.

can influence the amount of work assigned to them. Overall, principals reported moderate levels of influence over their work decisions.

Comparison between provinces: Principals in all three provinces reported moderate levels of influence over their work. The scores formed a bell-shaped pattern, with most principals reporting moderate levels of influence and relatively few reporting either very low or very high levels.

Principals in Quebec and Nova Scotia reported having greater influence at work than those in Ontario. There was no significant difference between Quebec and Nova Scotia.

Comparison with other Canadian workers: Compared with the Canadian reference group, principals reported having greater influence over their work decisions. Overall, 58% of principals scored higher than the average Canadian worker, while only 5% reported lower levels of influence. Principals had an average influence score of 59, compared with 49 for the Canadian reference group.

These findings suggest that although principals face substantial job demands, many also report relatively high levels of autonomy and influence over how they perform their work. It is unclear whether principals have relatively high levels of autonomy and influence over how they perform their work by design so that they can meet their workplace conditions or whether these conditions drive them to exert this influence. A different kind of study would be needed to answer this question.

Workplace conditions

Our review clearly showed that principals in this study experience high job demands. Below, we concentrate on three aspects of their work: work pace, workload and emotional demands.

Work pace: The COPSOQ defines work pace as the speed and intensity at which employees must work to meet their job requirements and organizational expectations.

In terms of work pace, principals were asked

- Do you have to work very fast?
- Do you work at a high pace throughout the day?
- Is it necessary to keep working at a high pace?

Most participants reported the need to work quickly, with more Ontario participants reporting they "always" need to work fast. In all provinces, few principals reported they "never" or "seldom" need to work fast.

About 80% of principals reported a higher work pace than the average Canadian worker. Working at a continually high pace of work is a cause of stress and is also related to the workload principals experience.

Workload: This is defined as the amount of work, including tasks and decision-making, that individuals must do within a specific time period. Most participants reported a high workload.

When comparing Ontario, Nova Scotia and Quebec, more principals in Ontario and Nova Scotia indicated that they "always" have a high workload than in Quebec.

Overall, 77% of principals reported higher workload demands than the average Canadian worker. Principals had an average workload score of 73, compared with 45 in the Canadian reference group, representing a difference of 29 points. These findings suggest that principals experience substantially greater workload demands than Canadian workers overall.

Emotional demands: We investigated not only the volume of principals' work but also the kinds of daily work they do. Specifically, participants were asked about the emotional demands they encounter. Emotional demands include managing challenging interpersonal situations, responding to crises and supporting the emotional needs of others. Principals' work predominantly involves working with students, adults and youth within a bureaucratic system where there can be increased emotional demands.

Emotional demands were consistently high across all three provinces surveyed, with little provincial differences observed.

Overall, 82% of principals scored higher than the average Canadian worker on emotional demands. Principals had an average emotional demands score of 63, compared with 43 for Canadian workers. These findings indicate that the emotional labour associated with the principalship is considerably greater than that undertaken by the average Canadian worker.

82% of principals scored higher than the average Canadian worker on emotional demands.

Work–life balance

The COPSOQ-III defines work–life balance as the compatibility between an employee's professional responsibilities and their private or family life. Overall, principals in this study reported poor work–life balance in that work encroaches upon their personal and/or family time.

Ontario principals were more likely to report higher work–life conflict compared with both Nova Scotia and Quebec, suggesting less balance between work demands and a private life for Ontario principals.

About 71% of principals self-reported worse work–life balance than the average Canadian worker, while only 6% self-reported better balance. This suggests that work is taking up too much of principals' time and energy, making it harder for them to rest or focus on life outside of work.

What Now?

The provincial associations whose Members participated in this survey have each received an association-specific report with recommendations adapted to their jurisdiction. The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) report and final report are available in the resources section on the OPC website. We expect that there will be some overlap across provinces. The data from this research will be shared with education partners, including government and school boards. It is our hope that including the comparisons across jurisdictions and with the COPSOQ findings will help us in advocating for improved working conditions for school leaders across Ontario and across Canada. We'll continue to share data with Members, partners and the public through a variety of communications tools so that the issues facing principals remain at the forefront of discussions.

Acknowledgement: Special thanks to John Oudyk at Occupational Health Clinics For Ontario Workers, one of our Network partners, for access to the Canadian COPSOQ-III data and the initial comparative analysis. ▲

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From Equity Policy to School Practice

Leadership lessons from the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement

By Dr. Tanitiã Munroe and Karen Murray
Illustration by Cornelia Li

School leaders are often asked to respond to equity challenges that feel complex and deeply rooted in long-standing systems. Many principals and vice-principals believe strongly in creating inclusive school environments, yet a practical question often emerges: How do we translate equity commitments into everyday school practice?

In the Toronto District School Board, this question became increasingly urgent following years of advocacy from Black families, students and community leaders who raised concerns about disparities in educational experiences. Community discussions and research highlighted patterns such as racial streaming, deficit assumptions about Black students, disproportionate discipline and unequal access to enrichment opportunities (Dei 1996; James & Turner 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission 2025).

In response, the Toronto District School Board established the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement in 2020 as part of a broader commitment to addressing anti-Black racism and improving outcomes for Black students. The Centre was designed to bring together research, student programming, professional learning and community engagement to support schools in creating learning environments where Black students experience belonging, high expectations and opportunity.

While the Centre's work focuses on Black student success within Toronto, the lessons emerging from this work offer insights that are relevant to school leaders across the province. Over time, several key themes have become clear. Equity work requires intentional leadership; strong relationships among schools, families and communities; and structures that help schools translate commitments into action.

Building Structures That Support Equity

One of the first lessons from this work is that equity requires structure.

In many schools, equity initiatives begin with passionate educators who care deeply about supporting students. This commitment is important, but lasting change can be difficult when the work depends solely on individual effort.

Schools are more successful when equity becomes part of the way the school operates. This means integrating equity into school improvement planning, professional learning, leadership conversations and the opportunities available to students.

The Centre of Excellence approaches this work by connecting several areas of focus. Student leadership programs, mentorship initiatives, family engagement opportunities and professional learning for educators are designed to reinforce one another rather than function as isolated initiatives.

For school leaders, this highlights an important insight. Equity initiatives are most effective when they are integrated into existing school structures. When equity becomes part of school culture and decision-making processes, it becomes sustainable.

Belonging as a Foundation for Achievement

While academic achievement is often discussed in terms of curriculum and instruction, another critical factor shaping student success is a sense of belonging.

Research consistently shows that when students feel valued by members of their school community, they are more likely to be motivated, engaged in learning and resilient when facing academic challenges (James & Turner 2017; Osterman 2000). A strong sense of belonging has been linked to improved academic performance, stronger attendance and better social and emotional well-being (Allen et al. 2018; James 2021; Munroe et al. 2022).

For Black students, belonging is closely connected to identity, representation and the ways schools recognize and affirm students' cultural experiences. When Black students see their histories, voices and perspectives reflected in the learning environment, they are more likely to develop confidence, positive self-identity and a stronger sense of connection to school. Research has also shown that affirming racial identity and cultural pride can strengthen self-esteem and academic motivation among Black youth (Sefa Dei 2008; Sellers et al. 2006; George 2023).

Many of the Centre's initiatives intentionally create spaces where Black students can explore identity, leadership, creativity and personal growth while connecting with peers and mentors who share similar lived realities. Programs that incorporate storytelling, culturally relevant learning and leadership development provide opportunities for them to see themselves reflected in their education and to build a stronger sense of voice and agency.

For school leaders, creating conditions where Black students feel seen, affirmed and valued is an essential part of supporting their engagement and success.



Equity work requires intentional leadership; strong relationships among schools, families and communities; and structures that help schools translate commitments into action.

Leadership Lessons for Advancing Equity

School leaders play an important role in translating equity commitments into everyday school practice. The following approaches can help move this work forward.

Create structures, not just initiatives
Equity efforts are more sustainable when they are embedded in school improvement planning, professional learning and leadership structures.

Listen to students as partners
Student voice becomes most meaningful when students help shape conversations about school improvement.

Prioritize belonging
Students are more likely to engage academically when their identities, cultures and experiences are reflected in the learning environment.

Build community partnerships
Community organizations and families bring valuable knowledge, mentorship and opportunities that strengthen student learning and engagement.

Listening to Students as Partners in School Improvement

Positioning students as partners in shaping their educational environments is an important part of advancing equity in schools.

In many schools, student voice initiatives focus on consultation. Schools may gather feedback through surveys, student councils or occasional forums where students share their perspectives. While these approaches are helpful, they often capture only a limited view of students' day-to-day experiences.

The Centre's work suggests that student voice becomes far more impactful when students are engaged as active contributors to understanding and improving their school communities.

Through initiatives such as the flagship Black Student Summer Leadership Program and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Black students examine questions about their schooling, investigate issues affecting their communities, and share their findings with educators and system leaders (Cammarota & Fine 2008; Ozer 2017). In these spaces, students learn how to analyze systems, explore challenges within their schools and present recommendations for change. These opportunities strengthen student leadership while also helping educators better understand how young people experience school (Anyon et al. 2018).

Student voice also develops through programs that support identity, reflection and community building. The Black Girls' Book Club, for example, creates a space where Black girls engage with literature that reflects their histories, cultures and lived realities. Through guided discussion and reflection, students explore themes of identity, belonging, leadership and self-expression. These conversations support Black girls in developing confidence, voice and a stronger sense of self within school spaces (Munroe & Sylvestre 2022).

For Black students, belonging is closely connected to identity, representation and the ways schools recognize and affirm students' cultural experiences.



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Creating conditions where Black students feel seen, affirmed and valued is an essential part of supporting their engagement and success.

Similarly, the Life Education Program creates supportive environments where Black boys can participate in mentorship, wellness activities and conversations about personal growth. These sessions encourage students to build relationships, reflect on their journeys and strengthen their sense of belonging within their school communities (Rhodes 2005; James 2021).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that student voice can take many forms. Sometimes it emerges through research and public presentations. At other times it develops through dialogue, mentorship and identity-affirming spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

Creating Pathways to Opportunity

A central focus of the work at the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement is creating clear pathways for students as they move through secondary school and into postsecondary opportunities.

For many young people, navigating these pathways can feel complicated. Access to mentorship, guidance and exposure to career and postsecondary possibilities can play an important role in shaping students' confidence and aspirations (Perna 2006; Rhodes 2005).

Programs connected to the Centre emphasize leadership development, mentorship and experiential learning. Black students participate in leadership conferences, research symposia and partnerships with postsecondary institutions and community organizations that introduce them to new academic and career possibilities and increase postsecondary awareness (Crisp & Cruz 2009; Robson et al. 2018).

These opportunities allow students to expand their networks, explore their interests and imagine futures that previously may not have felt within reach.

Helping students recognize these opportunities and supporting them in pursuing their goals can make a meaningful difference. Mentorship initiatives, leadership programs and connections with community organizations can help Black students navigate the transition from secondary school to postsecondary education with greater confidence (Rhodes 2005; Robson et al. 2018).

Strengthening School & Community Relationships

Strong relationships among schools, families and communities are central to meaningful equity work.

For many families, particularly those from historically underserved communities, relationships with schools have not always been built on trust. Experiences of exclusion, deficit assumptions or limited communication can make engagement feel distant or transactional. Addressing this history requires school leaders to move beyond traditional models of parental involvement toward more reciprocal partnerships (Epstein 2001; Pushor 2007).

The Centre's work highlights the importance of creating spaces where families feel welcomed, respected and heard. When schools engage caregivers in conversations about student learning, identity and well-being, they gain valuable insight into the cultural knowledge and community assets students bring with them (Munroe et al. 2022).

Community partnerships play a similar role. Organizations, cultural leaders and postsecondary institutions offer mentorship, expertise and opportunities that extend learning beyond the classroom (Warren 2005; Valli et al.

Questions for School Leaders

School leaders may wish to reflect on the following questions as they strengthen equity practices in their schools.

- How do students experience belonging in our school community?
- In what ways are students involved in shaping school improvement conversations?
- What mentorship or leadership opportunities exist for students?
- How are families and caregivers engaged as partners in student success?
- What community partnerships could expand opportunities for students?

Reflecting on these questions can help schools create environments where students feel supported, challenged and inspired to succeed.

2014). Through collaborations with universities, community organizations and professionals across different fields, students can explore career pathways, connect with mentors, and see how their learning relates to the wider world.

These partnerships also help schools better understand the communities they serve. Investing in these relationships is not an additional task, but an essential part of creating schools where students feel supported both inside and outside the classroom.

Moving from Possibility to Practice

The experience of the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement shows that equity initiatives can move beyond policy commitments and become meaningful practices within schools.

This work often begins with small and intentional actions: listening carefully to students, strengthening relationships with families and community partners, and creating learning environments where students experience belonging, mentorship and high expectations.

While the Centre reflects the unique history, demographics and governance structures of the Toronto District School Board, the leadership lessons presented here are not intended as a one-size-fits-all model. School boards and leaders are encouraged to adapt the approaches discussed here in ways that respond to their own local contexts, community priorities, student populations and organizational realities.

Equity leadership is most effective when it is grounded in local relationships, evidence and community knowledge. By embedding equity into everyday school practices, educators can create environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive. ▲

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Growing More Than Plants

How a Northern Ontario public school's greenhouse is transforming school culture through experiential learning

By Aaron Fewkes
Illustration by Andrea Cheung

In Northern Ontario, we are no strangers to distance, scarcity and resilience. These realities shape our communities and our schools. At Schreiber Public School (SCPS), they have also shaped an unexpected catalyst for cultural change: a student-driven greenhouse.

What began as a simple question – "Could we grow something meaningful inside our school?" – has evolved into a powerful model of experiential learning that is reshaping how students see themselves, how staff approach teaching and how our school lives out the priorities of the Superior-Greenstone District School Board.

The SCPS Greenhouse is not just a space where plants grow. It is a living example of what happens when strategic vision, school learning goals, intentional leadership and student voice align.

Learning That Is Lived, Not Simulated

Experiential learning is often described as "hands on," but at SCPS it is better described as "hands in, minds on, hearts invested." Students are not completing hypothetical tasks or working toward a grade that disappears at the end of a unit: they are tending living systems that demand consistency, care and problem-solving.

Daily greenhouse responsibilities, including monitoring growth, adjusting nutrients, harvesting, packaging, pricing and distribution, have become authentic learning moments embedded across the curriculum. Science concepts such as photosynthesis and systems thinking are no longer abstract. Literacy emerges through reflection, persuasive writing, media engagement and communication with partners. Mathematics lives in measurement, forecasting, inventory tracking and financial planning.

These experiences directly support our school learning goals, which focus on increasing engagement, strengthening authentic literacy and numeracy, and building student agency. Because the work is real, students care deeply about doing it well.

Strategic Alignment in Action

The SCPS Greenhouse has become a practical expression of the Superior-Greenstone District School Board's Strategic Plan, particularly its emphasis on student engagement, well being, innovation and community connection.

Rather than existing **alongside** improvement planning, the greenhouse operates **through** it. Engagement is sustained through responsibility, not novelty. Well being is supported through belonging and contribution. Innovation is



modelled through iteration and problem-solving. Community partnerships are essential, not symbolic.

This coherence has mattered for staff. Strategic priorities stop feeling abstract when they are visible in student action.

From Classroom to Community: Learning with Economic and Social Impact

Students now grow and sell fresh herbs through a partnership with two local grocery stores on the North Shore of Lake Superior, serving the communities of Schreiber and Terrace Bay. In less than two weeks, students sold 100 units of fresh basil, generating excitement, confidence and momentum throughout the school. To date, thousands of various herbs have now been sold.

Students track demand, adjust production, discuss pricing and reflect on quality control. This is literacy, numeracy and citizenship learning woven together. It is learning that matters because the community is watching.

Putting Joy Back Into School: Students as Decision Makers

Rather than placing greenhouse profits into a general school account, the funds raised are returned directly to students to guide decisions about school improvement. Students are asked a deceptively simple question: What would make school more joyful for you and your peers?

This shift from adult-driven decision-making to student-informed improvement has been culturally transformative. Students are learning financial literacy, democratic participation and collective responsibility. More importantly, they are learning that their voices shape their environment. To date, students have used funds to establish and fill up a unique student lounge. The space includes hot chocolate machines, couches, a television and even a PlayStation 5 they can play on collaboratively during indoor nutrition breaks or when a special reward has been earned.

Intentional Leadership Moves That Made the Difference

None of this happened by accident. The greenhouse has been successful because of intentional leadership decisions grounded in trust, clarity and alignment. These decisions closely reflect the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) in practice.

Some of the most impactful leadership practices included

- **Choosing coherence over compliance** Rather than layering the greenhouse onto existing initiatives, we intentionally aligned it with school learning goals and board priorities. This reflects the OLF's emphasis on **setting directions** and **aligning resources**.
- **Protecting time and space for deep learning** Decisions were made to prioritize greenhouse work within the instructional day, signalling that experiential learning was not enrichment, it was core learning. This reflects the OLF's emphasis on **developing the organization to support desired practices**.
- **Redistributing leadership to students** Students were trusted with real responsibility for care, production, sales and financial decision-making. This reflects the OLF's emphasis on **building relationships and developing people**, including students.
- **Modelling risk taking and learning publicly** Challenges such as crop failure, logistics and regulations were not hidden but framed as learning opportunities. This reflects the OLF's emphasis on **leading the instructional program** through inquiry rather than certainty.
- **Leading with joy as a legitimate outcome** Decisions about how profits will be used were intentionally tied to student joy and belonging rather than adult assumptions. This reflects the OLF's emphasis on **creating safe, caring and inclusive schools**.
- These practices required letting go of some control. They required trust. They required resisting the urge to over manage what students were fully capable of handling.

Flipping the Narrative in a Challenging Climate

In the current educational climate in Ontario, public discourse often centres on constraint, including funding pressures, labour challenges, policy tension and system fatigue. It is easy, and understandable, for the narrative around public education to become one of limitation.

The SCPS Greenhouse offers a different story. Not a story of ignoring challenges, but of responding to them with creativity, coherence and courage. It shows that even within constraint, schools can be places of innova-



Because **the work is real**, students **care deeply** about doing it well.



tion and joy. That leadership is not about reacting to climate but shaping culture. That when students are trusted, they rise.

This matters, not just for our students, but for public confidence in public education.

Growing Forward

The success of the SCPS Greenhouse is not about hydroponics. It is about intentional leadership that aligns vision with action, strategy with culture and learning goals with lived experience.

For school leaders across Ontario, the lesson is clear: when we lead with clarity, trust and purpose, we do more than improve engagement. We change narratives.

And when we change narratives, we create schools where both students and educators can grow. ▲

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Mark Your Calendar

November

4
Webinars
Navigating Inclusion: A Leadership Compass for 2SLGBTQI Safety and Belonging

11
Leading the Way: Implementing Trauma-Sensitive Practices in Schools
Register by November 6

12-13
EDI Summit
Toronto

24
Seminar Series
Using a Human Rights-based Approach to Decision Making
Free for Members
Register by November 17

Leadership Conversation Series
Free for Members
Open Registration

December

1
Principal's Development Course
Module 20: Effective Literacy Programs
Module 22: Creating Inclusive Spaces for Black Students
December 1 to January 15
Register by November 17

January

11
Special Education for Administrators Qualification Program
January 11 to April 30
Register by December 28

12
Article Discussion Series
Free for Members
Open Registration

19
Principal's Development Course
Module 1: Principal Legal Duties and Responsibilities
Module 3: Leading an Equitable and Inclusive School
January 19 to February 19
Register by January 5

Seminar Series
Facilitating Engaging and Impactful Professional Learning
Free for Members
Register by January 12

February

6
Mentoring Qualification Program
February 6 to April 9
Register by January 23

17
Seminar Series
Safe and Caring Schools
Free for Members
Register by February 9

19
Supervisory Officer's Qualification Program
Module 2: The Leadership and Organizational Change Perspective
Module 4: The System Perspective
February 19 to 21
Register by January 23

23
Principal's Development Course
Module 10: Supporting 2SLGBTQQIA+ Students
Module 13: The Principal's Role in Mental Health Awareness and Trauma
Module 19: Leadership in the Age of Artificial Intelligence
February 23 to April 1
Register by February 9

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Forward, Together: Moving Schools from Conflict to Community in Contentious Times

By George Couros
Impress Books
ISBN (Paperback): 9781948334839
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Publication Year: 2025
Reviewed by Stefano Fornazzari San Martín

Forward, Together arrives at a moment when school leadership requires a high level of patience and a steady focus. With so many different voices and expectations to manage, the work of a principal is rarely simple. Couros dives into these complexities, providing a human perspective on leading when the answers are not always clear. It is a book written for those who believe that strong communities are built by leaning into difficult conversations rather than avoiding them.

Couros moves away from the idea that we need to win arguments or sidestep disagreements. He reframes conflict as a natural part of growth and a sign that something meaningful is at stake. In his view, leadership is not about making disagreement disappear. It is about creating the conditions where connection and shared progress can actually happen. In a time when school issues often reflect broader societal tensions, this perspective feels steadying and realistic.

The book is organized into two sections called Principles and Perspectives. What stood out to me most was the insistence that leaders look inward before reacting outward. Couros asks us to examine our own assumptions and biases as a starting point for navigating difficult moments. This focus on self-awareness over traditional authority aligns with a truth many of us have lived. Leadership is relational work, and that work begins with humility.

Couros writes with a level of clarity that makes it easy for any school leaders to see their own work reflected in his stories. His work has resonated with me because it encourages the kind of self-reflection that actually leads to growth. I remember leaving a speech he gave years ago feeling like I had heard from someone who truly understood the job, and this book has that same impact. It is not a list of theories. It is a candid look at what it takes to lead a community today.

My own career has taken me across multiple boards. I have led in both elementary and secondary settings while moving from large urban schools to small rural ones. Because of those experiences, his reflections felt deeply familiar to me. Every new school system offers a fresh start, but the real leadership muscle comes from staying present through the tough transitions. This book provides a steady guide for that exact journey.

Many know Couros for his work on innovation and technology through his books such as *The Innovator's Mindset* and *Innovate Inside the Box*. This book is a different kind of contribution. It prioritizes emotional intelligence and the human side of our schools. He provides a road map for fostering community while skilfully navigating the interpersonal tensions that define modern leadership. Even when he mentions technology, he positions it as a tool to amplify impact when used with intention. His idea that technology will not replace teachers, but that teachers using it effectively will be transformational, is spot on in this current AI moment.

This book is a timely reminder that leading together is an ongoing journey that requires us to serve alongside our communities. It offers both a thoughtful nudge for personal reflection and a clear road map for any leadership team committed to the long-term work of fostering a connected school culture. ▲

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A Reflection on My Years in Education

After more than 30 years in the field, I've learned that many things may change, but some lessons are timeless

I began my career in education in the early 1990s as a secondary school science teacher. At that time, there was a heavy emphasis on covering the curriculum, and that meant mostly chalk-and-talk, teacher-centred instruction, supported by the overhead projector, a video library and labs. Course binders provided teaching materials and guidance on the scope and sequence of instruction for each unit, and they felt like a lifeline as I struggled to find my way in what seemed like an overwhelming job.

The end of the decade brought major changes to secondary education through the Ministry of Education's Secondary School Reform. I transitioned from a classroom teacher to a resource teacher, supporting teachers and administrators with implementing the changes. Not surprisingly, there was some resistance from teachers, particularly to changes related to assessment and evaluation. Some of the most hotly debated topics included making assessment more about student learning and less about teachers' grade books, promoting a wider range of assessment tasks to give a fairer and more complete picture of students' learning, and bringing teachers' professional judgment to the fore in decisions about student achievement.

Five years later, I became a secondary school vice-principal. It was like I had been cast into a different world! Much of my time was spent investigating incidents where students had run afoul of the school's, or board's, code of conduct.

Whenever possible, we employed progressive discipline, such as restorative justice, to promote accountability and repair harm among the students involved. Sometimes the job demanded a different skill set than I had developed as a classroom and resource teacher. While I understood the importance of creating a safe, respectful learning environment, I also understood that my instructional leadership was necessary to support staff to engage students and improve student achievement.

Reflecting on my career, I think about the lessons I learned. First was the power of collaboration: no matter your role as an educator, working with others will open up a diversity of ideas and experiences that can make your work better.

Second, providing instructional leadership to change teachers' practice takes time and is often best accomplished by working one-on-one with teachers. Finally, I have been impressed with the capabilities of the students I have worked with. If we provide challenging and engaging learning experiences for all students in safe, respectful and accepting environments, they will succeed, and we will make a transformative difference in their lives. ▲

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ILLUSTRATION: PUI YAN FONG

Congratulations

Celebrating Retirements

We want to extend our congratulations to OPC Members who retired during the **2025–26** school year.

Ontario Principals' Council Est. 1998

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OPC Annual Silent Auction

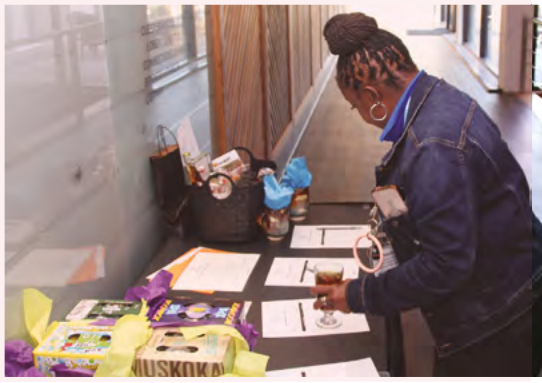
The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) held our annual Silent Auction at our General Assembly Meeting on May 8, 2026. Thanks to the generosity of Members and supporters, the auction raised over **$7,000** in support of **Friends of Ruby**, helping provide affirming mental health services, social services and housing programs for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.











Thank you to the school boards and individuals who donated auction items, placed bids and supported this year's Silent Auction.

Friends of Ruby is a Toronto-based charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and well-being of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth through affirming mental health services, social services and housing programs.
Friendsofruby.ca