

FALL 2025 VOL. 28 NO. 1

The Register

THE MAGAZINE FOR ONTARIO'S PUBLIC SCHOOL

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OPC's Governance Structure

The update will reflect the current landscape



We recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). As we reflected on our evolution – from a newly formed organization to a strong provincial voice for principals and vice-principals – it became clear that the time had come to align our governance with the complexity, scale and strategic demands of our next chapter.

This fall, a new governance model – developed through more than a year of consultation and guided by an experienced external consultant – will come into effect. While our governance structure is evolving, we remain committed to representation, equity, transparency and deep respect for the lived experiences and leadership of our Members and our values.

At its core, this change is about strengthening how we work on your behalf – how we listen, lead and respond to the rapidly shifting public education landscape. It's also about ensuring that the OPC can continue

to grow and advocate with integrity for the next 25 years and beyond.

One significant change is that the Provincial Executive ceased to exist as of June 30, 2025. In its place, we are introducing a streamlined governing Board of Directors, aligning with best practices in not-for-profit governance and allowing for clearer accountability and strategic oversight.

The new Board of Directors will focus on governance and fiduciary leadership. It is responsible for setting policy, approving the annual audit, hiring and evaluating the Executive Director and ensuring alignment between our mission, values,

strategic plan and operations. This shift clarifies the distinction between governance and operations – while continuing to draw on the wisdom of Members through the General Assembly.

The Board will include a blend of elected and appointed Directors: Regional Directors, Directors-at-Large, two Indigenous Directors, the Chair of the EDI Committee, a Treasurer and a three-year presidential cycle (Past President, President and President-Elect). The Executive Director will serve as Corporate Secretary.

Council is being replaced by a structure called the General Assembly (GA), which includes the same representatives as our current Council. Members across the province will continue to elect local representatives, with proportional representation based on membership numbers in each district. Your local voice remains important.

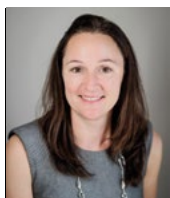
The GA will continue to be the place where essential conversations occur – about professional issues, working conditions and Member priorities. While its formal authority has shifted slightly, it remains deeply engaged in guiding the direction of the organization. Importantly, the GA will retain approval of the annual budget and any Terms and Conditions agreements, in accordance with our existing Negotiations Policy. These core responsibilities reflect the trust and expertise Members bring to their elected roles.

While our structure is evolving, our identity as a Member-led, Member-

driven organization remains constant. This new model increases our ability to make timely, informed decisions while ensuring that the voice of Members continues to shape our priorities and actions. It also reflects our commitment to resilient governance and organizational agility, as shown in our [Strategic Plan to 2030](#).

The [new governance model](#) will take effect at our Annual General Meeting in October 2025. Leading up to this transition, we will continue to provide Members with regular updates and opportunities to ask questions and engage with the changes. The process will be supported by clear policies, training and a strong communications plan to ensure a smooth implementation.

This new governance model is not a departure – it is a continuation of the best of who we are, updated for the future. It honours the voices of Members, strengthens accountability and ensures that the OPC remains a powerful, principled and inclusive force in public education. Together, we are laying the foundation for the next 25 years – and we thank you for being part of this journey. ▲



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The Register is published digitally three times a year and printed once each fall by the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). The views expressed in articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the OPC. Reproduction of any part of this publication must be authorized by the editor and credited to the OPC and the authors involved. Letters to the editor and submissions on topics of interest to the profession are welcome. Although paid advertisements appear in this publication, the OPC does not endorse any products, services or companies, nor any of the claims made or opinions expressed in the advertisement.

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SUBMISSIONS & IDEAS

Would you like to contribute to *The Register*?
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 ddina@principals.ca.

All submissions are subject to review and selection by the editorial committee.

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October 1	_____	February
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Happenings at the OPC ...



On July 1st, we welcomed our 2025–26 provincial president, Jeff Maharaj, for his one-year secondment from the Durham District School Board.



Our [Principal Profile campaign](#), highlighting OPC Members across the province, is featured on the Wonder Wall at the OPC office in Toronto.



In September, retired TDSB principal, Karl Subban, presented on the power of teamwork during an OPC staff learning session.



In June, Members from York Region DSB participated in a [Regional Session](#).

Visit the official OPC merch shop!



PL Opportunities

Engage in ongoing learning as an education leader

The [Ontario College of Teachers \(OCT\) Professional Learning Framework](#) serves as a guide for educators in Ontario, promoting a culture of continuous, intentional and reflective professional development. Rooted in the [Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession](#), the framework encourages educators to actively engage in self-directed and collaborative learning that aligns with the evolving and diverse needs of the families we serve. It emphasizes the importance of ethical practice, leadership in learning and a commitment to responsive and inclusive environments.

To support the goal of continuously building and enhancing our effectiveness as leaders, culturally responsive leadership involves recognizing, respecting and valuing the diverse identities, experiences and cultural backgrounds of students, their families and school staff. Leaders who embrace this approach may be better able to understand and dismantle systemic barriers,

ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and affirm unique identities in spaces where individuals feel that they truly belong.

Our professional learning offerings range from self-directed learning, mentorship and collaborative workshops to OCT accredited courses – ensuring that learning remains flexible, relevant and directly connected to supporting anti-oppressive and inclusive school environments. Our core programming can be accessed through the [Professional Learning web page](#) or the [PL catalogue](#). A few of the upcoming opportunities are highlighted below.

Calling All New School Leaders!

The [New Leader Support Program](#) is designed for P/VPs within their first three years in either role. It is comprised of eight virtual, inquiry-based collaborative learning opportunities grounded in a reflective lens of human rights and equity. Through facilitated conversations, case stud-

ies and networking, participants will explore and deepen their knowledge, confidence and efficacy in effectively leading school communities.

Design Your Own Additional Qualification!

For any leaders who have successfully completed their first two years in the role, the [Principal's Development Course](#) is a unique OCT-accredited course made up of five separate modules, each comprised of 25 hours of instruction. Module 1, Principal Legal Duties and Responsibilities, is compulsory. The remaining four modules are selected from more than 12 focused areas including mentorship, courageous conversations, special education and anti-oppressive school improvement. Modules can be completed in any order, and you have the option to complete one module or five to receive the OCT acknowledgement of completion on your official teaching record. ▲

✉ learning@principals.ca

New Year, New President

Jeff Maharaj begins his term to lead the OPC

By Peggy Sweeney
Photography by Stef + Ethan

When the OPC was established in 1998, one of the first things the planning group decided on was to have a practising principal in the role of president. A decision was also taken to make that position a one-year term, so that our presidents could leave their boards and homes for one year, move to Toronto and serve in the role on a full-time basis. That determination was largely based on ensuring that a practising administrator – one who had recently come from a school/board and would be returning to one less than a year later – could best represent Members across the province. While that one-year decision has been reviewed over the years, today we still operate based on the initial idea. In this article, we introduce you to Jeff Maharaj, currently on secondment from the Durham District School Board to serve as the OPC's president for the 2025–26 school year.

Jeff Maharaj is a city boy, born and raised in Scarborough in the east end of Toronto. His parents immigrated from Trinidad, and that country and culture were a big part of his upbringing, including yearly trips to the Caribbean island to spend time with his family and friends. After high school, Jeff attended McMaster University, graduating with a Bachelor of Kinesiology degree. His initial plan was to pursue medicine as a career. “I always joke that that was my immigrant parents’ dream – their son was going to be a doctor one day. But it didn’t work out that way.”

Part of that decision came from Jeff’s realization that he had always been drawn to working with kids. As a teenager, he worked in summer camps for the Toronto Parks & Recreation department. In university, he volunteered with the Sunrise Youth Group, an organization working with young adults with special needs, providing them with experiences such as dances, camping trips and recreation nights. “The result of these experiences made me realize that I wanted to work with kids, so by the end of my undergrad career, I thought I’d give education a try and applied to teaching.”

Jeff attended teachers’ college at Queen’s University. “I went in thinking I would apply to something else after, just to see if there was anything else out there. But I didn’t. It just stuck with me; I enjoyed it that much.”

Jeff started his career as a science and physical education teacher in the Durham District School Board, where he had completed his student placements. After a year in the elementary panel, he made the move to secondary. With a background in athletics, he also started coaching football and basketball, giving him the opportunity to get to know more of the kids outside of the classroom.

After teaching for nine years, he then transitioned to becoming a guidance counsellor, working with kids and helping them prepare for their post-secondary careers. “Becoming a guidance counsellor exposed me to administration. Often, I would get called upon to be a teacher-in-charge, work in the office or assist the principal and vice-principal. It was another path I wanted to pursue.” Since 2007, Jeff





I've seen our job change greatly, and the biggest impact has been that **our workload has become unmanageable.**

has been a vice-principal at three schools and a principal at two, and for the last two years he has worked centrally in Durham as a system lead working with a family of schools. "Despite the challenges, I have loved being a principal."

While he was still a new administrator, Jeff was approached by the local Durham OPC president to become involved in the OPC. "He really influenced me into becoming involved in leadership activities and thinking about how we can support our peers. And so I became involved, joining our local Executive and working up to the role of local president. Then I attended Provincial Council as an alternate from our board and really enjoyed that provincial experience."

"On a whim, I saw a call-out in the President's Message for people to join a group related to equity work. I was invited to be a part of the group. I really enjoyed that experience and started attending more events. I then became a Provincial Councillor and started my work for the OPC at the provincial level."

After three years on the provincial Executive, Jeff threw his hat in the ring for the president's role. "I wanted the opportunity to speak for and on behalf of our Members, and through my experience as a Councillor, I got to know a lot about the various needs and issues around our province. All of us experience what happens in our own boards, but we don't always get the opportunity to learn about what's happening anywhere else. Through my provincial experience with the OPC, I learned a lot about the challenges and issues across the province, and I wanted to bring a voice to that. I believe I have some of the skills not only to listen to people, but also to create action plans based on what some of those needs are. And I realized that the best way to advocate for those needs was to take on the role of the president, to speak for our Members and have some influence at the provincial level."

The year ahead promises to be a busy one for Jeff and the OPC. "We're coming off a year of implementing a new Terms & Conditions agreement, but there is still some operational work to be done to have the terms of the agreement translate in a positive way for our Members. So that's a starting point for me, picking up some of the issues that have been identified to us as problematic. I'm very interested in looking at our benefits plan and seeing what we can do, because we are hearing a lot from Members about concerns with the plan. But the issue that I really want to get into over the next year is looking at the workload for our principals and vice-principals, looking at ways that we can try and make it more manageable for them."

"As someone who has been a principal for some time now, I can truthfully say that I've seen our job change greatly, and the biggest impact has been that our workload has become unmanageable. We have Members who are literally getting ill because of the amount of work they're being given. They're not able to get things done, and that

is translating into physical and mental illness for some of them. The mental health of our Members is a priority for us. We need to make sure that we are taking care of people and that they have the supports they need to adequately do their jobs. So where we need to get started is looking at workload and how we can influence that and make it more manageable for our Members."

To advocate on this and other issues, Jeff and the OPC will need to work with Paul Calandra, the Minister appointed earlier this year. "I have met the Minister informally, as he is my local MPP. And in early July, in my new role, our Executive Director and I met with him in person. We discussed workload, staff shortages, our benefits plan and violence in schools."

"The first priority for me is establishing a positive and productive working relationship with him. We are partners in education, and we need to be heard. One of the things that I've made clear to him is that I want our meetings to be two-way – that we are both sharing information, listening to each other and having conversations about what we can do together to

improve education. And that means improving conditions in our schools not only for students, but for our Members as well.

“It’s critical that the Minister recognizes that the impact and influence of a principal/vice-principal is the greatest factor that will influence student and staff success. We need principals to be able to work under reasonable conditions and to impact and influence their schools in positive ways. That will translate into better results for our students. That is the approach I’ll be taking; we’ll work in partnership but, really, we are working to support public education by helping our administrators be successful.”

Internally, a significant change for the OPC over the coming year will be moving to a new governance structure. The Provincial Executive will become a Board of Directors, and the Provincial Council will become the General Assembly. All local OPC Districts will continue to be represented at the provincial level. The model has been put in place to comply with Ontario’s [*Not-for-Profit Corporations Act \(ONCA\)*](#).

“What I want Members to understand is that their day-to-day connection to and interactions with the OPC will not change. The new structure is meant to be more representative of our membership and to allow us to have more people who are able to connect with locals. The expanded Board of Directors will include regional representatives, working to bring more representation and a better voice to the provincial table.”

Outside of school and work, Jeff is first and foremost a family man. “My wife, who is also a principal, and I have two kids. We’re embarking

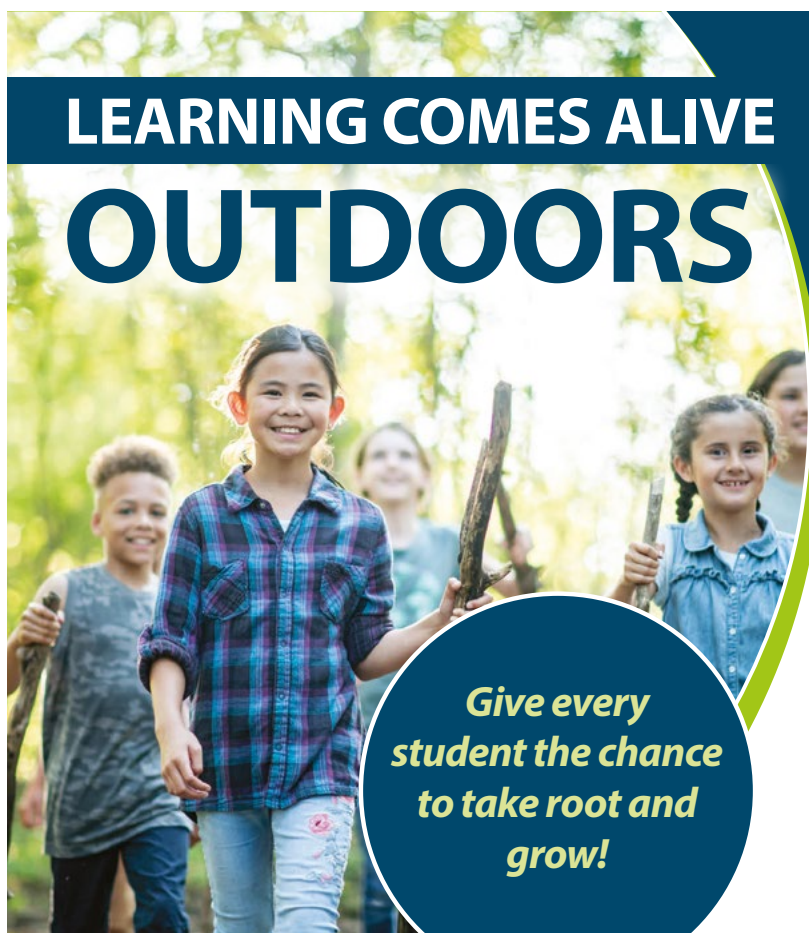
on our first ‘empty nest’ year. Our 22-year-old daughter is in her final year of an undergraduate commerce degree, and our 18-year-old son has just started his post-secondary journey.

“We are a close-knit family, and as parents we’ve been very involved in our kids’ lives. This year will be the culmination of being a supportive parent and coach of several sports teams for my kids. So I’m happy to hang up my whistle and find some new things to work on. I’m an avid sports fan and enjoy both playing and watching. I also know that I need to prioritize some personal time, now that I am this empty nester, to do other things, like focusing on my own fitness. I’m also a cinephile and have been spending more time reading as a hobby, instead of as a work responsibility.”

For those OPC Members who have not yet met Jeff, he wants them to know he is approachable and looks forward to hearing from them over the coming year. “I think of myself as personable and as a people person. Members can reach out to me and I’m more than happy to connect and have conversations about things they feel are important and impacting them where they are. I would like to get out to the different parts of the province and meet people in the local areas, to hear and see what’s going on in their boards, so that I can better understand their concerns and make those connections so I can advocate on their behalf.”

As Members begin a new school year, they will have a strong supporter in their corner, advocating on their behalf. ▲

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Reclaiming Equity in Education

■ A call to purposeful leadership

■ By Shahana Arain and Roy Cousins
Illustration by Lu Zhang





THIS ARTICLE IS A CALL TO RE-ENGAGE

with ourselves, our purpose and one another during a time of uncertainty. Equity, often framed as equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), is increasingly being sidelined, despite its foundational role in education. Once a widely embraced framework grounded in Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy and Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119, EDI is now experiencing a quiet retreat. While it may appear alive in policy, in practice there is growing discomfort and a noticeable shift away from EDI discourse in education.



At this critical juncture, we aim to reawaken the conversation and reaffirm our collective responsibility to create barrier-free learning environments. As administrators committed to addressing disproportionate achievement outcomes, we urge colleagues to resist complacency. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), and ministry and board policies, still mandate the removal of barriers and the promotion of inclusion. As racialized administrators, we recognize that this work belongs to all school leaders, across all identities. We challenge the notion that equity is divisive, while acknowledging that gatekeeping within the work can occur. To those striving to lead equitably but feeling unseen or misunderstood, and those unsure of how to proceed, this article aims to reflect our experience.

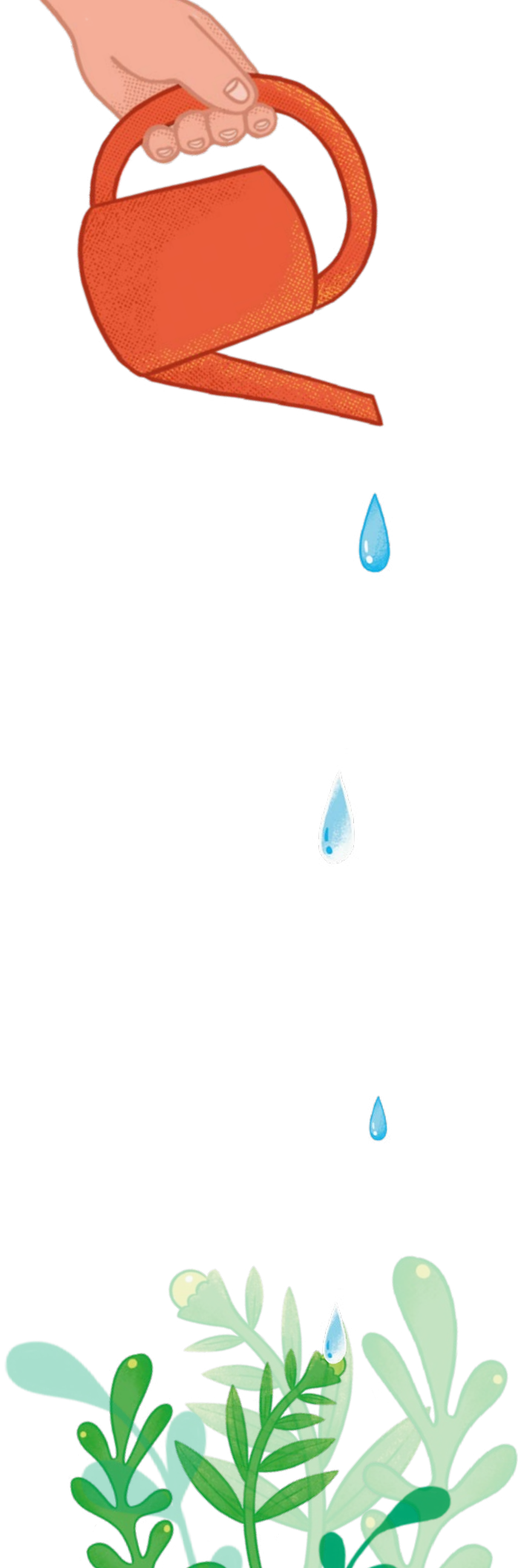
A Cold Morning, a Critical Conversation

The two of us arrived at our local library, bundled in sweats, ready for deep thinking. We were confronting an urgent problem: growing volatility around EDI values and its impact on public education.

EDI and human rights have long worked in tandem to foster safe, supportive and responsive learning environments. Human rights are protected against discrimination by law, while EDI proactively builds inclusive systems where students, staff and families feel seen and valued. Despite this, EDI efforts have become increasingly threatened under a lack of transparency, obscure evaluation strategies and generally weak policy implementation (Oladi 2024). This instability places school administrators in a difficult position.

Amid fiercely activated local and global politics – some of which are challenging the very existence of vulnerable communities – school leaders are left to navigate an uphill battle while remaining rigorous as duty bearers and anti-oppressive practitioners. However, a recent study of principal preparation courses reveals a gap in the skills principals require to be effective in actual practice (Spooner 2024).





The Weight of the Work

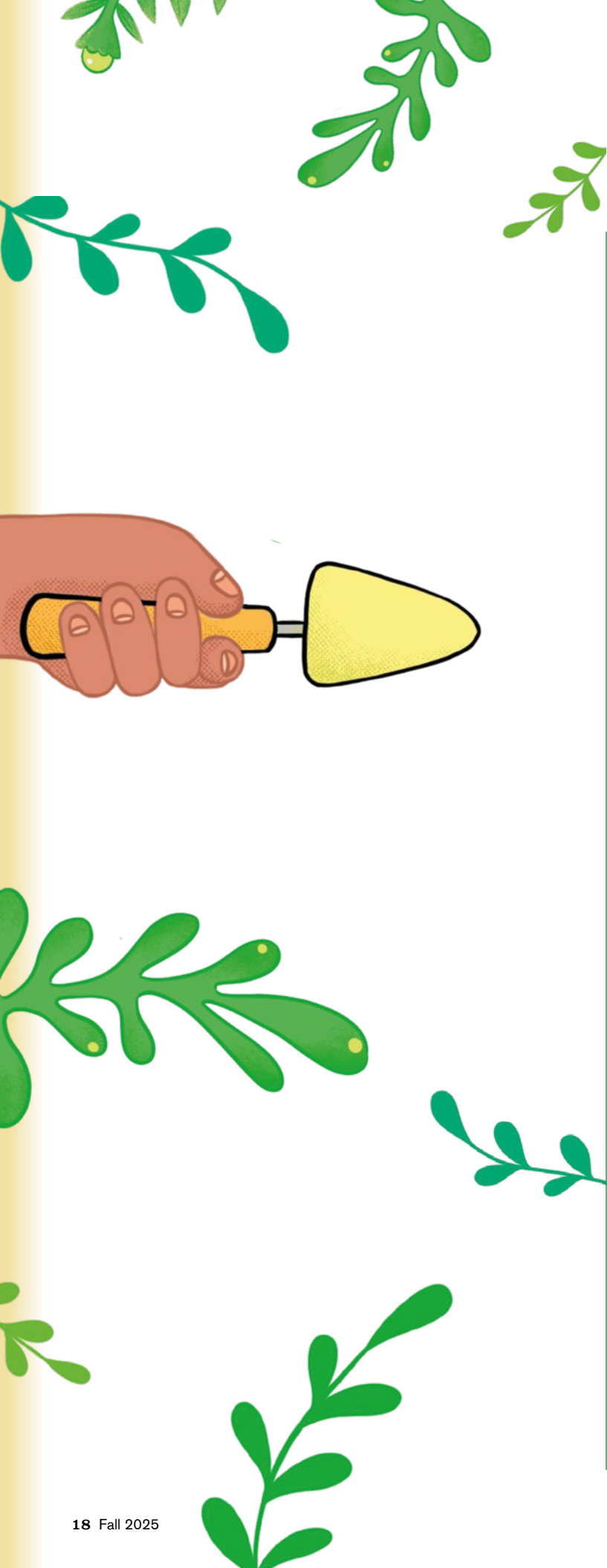
As we entered the room, there were markers and chart paper on the tables, ready for solutions. On the whiteboard was printed, “Ontario Leadership Framework, community envisioning, Critical Race Theory, inclusive leadership.” Words that had once excited us now made us cautious. After 20 years in education, we felt tired, even lost. Knowing that the work and the students matter, what we were searching for was hope, optimism and, perhaps, even a little bit of joy.

Roy, an experienced and equity-driven leader in his own right, was different. Anchored, with marker in hand, he took a deep pause. “I’m not sure all administrators are ready to engage in conversations about equality rights – especially substantive equality,” he said, referring to the differentiated approaches needed to address systemic barriers. His words hit hard.

A rush of the past five years came tumbling forward. Our curiosity for EDI leadership had taken us beyond public education, into other sectors. What began as an inspiring professional learning journey abruptly changed as the world tilted. Turning points such as the murder of George Floyd, the 1 Million March 4 Children, October 7th and the return of the Trump administration, among other events, shook us. We found ourselves dismantling systems of oppression while facing claims that equity fosters exclusion and creates harm. What had once been critical dialogue between colleagues had become awkward silences and vague responses like, “That’s interesting.”

Refocusing on Students

Since 2020, the inequities faced by marginalized communities have become increasingly visible, revealing the complexity of student needs and stretching school leaders in unprecedented ways (People for Education 2022). Overnight, the murder of George Floyd activated system-level responses to anti-Black racism, but, just as quickly,



abandonment followed. As we centred our thinking on students, we especially thought of those who remained underserved.

The Ontario Leadership Framework provides school leaders with strategies to analyze data and engage in courageous conversations that lead to improvements in student achievement and well-being. The data below provides a snapshot of ongoing disparities experienced by Indigenous and Black-identifying students.

- 2019–20 data indicates only 68% of First Nation students in Grade 9 are on track to credit completion compared to 87% of all other Ontario students (Gallagher-Mackay, et al. 2023).
- Black and Indigenous students, and students with disabilities, are disproportionately streamed into non-university courses (People for Education 2022).
- Demographic suspension data indicates Black (24.8%), Middle Eastern (9.2%) and mixed (18.7%) were suspended/expelled disproportionately higher compared to East Asian (4.5%) South Asian (12.3%), Southeast Asian (2.0%), and white (26.0%) (TDSB 2023).

Despite efforts to present schools as neutral spaces, this data confirms that schools are far from impartial environments. Are these questions of morality or politics? We are not sure, but we must ask: what issues are we creating space for, and which ones are we closing the door on? The danger we should all be concerned with is how easy it can become to view data and normalize the disparities experienced by certain communities.

EDI must be saved from becoming a political pawn. Our students are constantly navigating identity-based issues across systems and platforms. They are inundated with messages that shape their worldview and often reinforce hierarchies of whose identities are valued more. Thus, we must re-engage with equity not just as a trend, but as an ethical and professional imperative. We must create inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive – not just in theory, but in practice.

Equity Work Is Not Easy – But It's Essential

Equity work is not linear but it is necessary, and it belongs to all of us. From playground debates about global justice issues such as Israel-Palestine, to online advocacy about trans rights, young people are actively engaging with complex identity-based topics that affect their lives. What's concerning is how often they are doing so through self-constructed frameworks and without access to diverse perspectives or the critical thinking skills needed to navigate. In education we have a duty of care for our students, but is it possible that we might be interpreting care as shielding our students from difficult conversations?

Gone are the days of multiculturalism, as we've evolved toward a more nuanced understanding of identity, intersectionality and social



location. Equity, grounded in human rights, has become as foundational as reading, writing and arithmetic. Students need to engage with different viewpoints, reflect on their identities and develop an affirming sense of self to bolster critical thinking skills and survive in a world where identity politics are ubiquitous.

But this work isn't just for students. Administrators, too, benefit from engaging with diverse perspectives, challenging assumptions and embracing new ways of knowing. Through reflexivity, we also examined our own experiences, including "racial battle fatigue" (Gorski 2019), by considering how our identities may have been shaping the ways we were processing current challenges in school leadership. These reflections encouraged us to consider how our own experiences intersected with the challenges faced by colleagues of other identities who were also striving to lead equitably.

To address these concerns, we sought to gather the thoughts and opinions of equity-minded colleagues, aiming to reconnect and build a future vision of inclusive school leadership. From these conversations, two themes emerged: the **courage to speak hard truths** and the **imagination to dream collectively**. Leaders shared deeply personal insights into identity, leadership and the systemic barriers they face. Their reflections led to key insights and recommendations. The following is the result of our discussions.

Critical Leadership

Read Between the Lines

Equity means different things to different people. A human rights-based approach, grounded in legislation, provides clarity and accountability.

Pandemic Hangover

Many administrators who have been promoted post-pandemic may lack the training to address the increasingly complex equity issues that have emerged since 2020.

Quick Fixes Don't Work

Oversimplifying EDI for expediency often backfires. We should be paying attention to the rise of human rights complaints across systems.

Identity Jenga

Some communities feel excluded, accusing EDI of being selective. Consider how external influences may be shaping who and what is being prioritized.

Be Like Water

Avoid rigid, binary thinking. Equity work requires flexibility, nuance and thoughtful decision-making. It's not plug-and-play.

Administrators, too, benefit from engaging with diverse perspectives, challenging assumptions and embracing new ways of knowing.





Call a Friend

Don't go it alone. Consult with colleagues, board policies, the OHRC and Legal Services when needed. Collaboration is also strategic, fostering critical thinking and learning.

Tick-Tock Goes the Clock

The Ontario Leadership Framework remains a valuable tool – but it must be applied through a human rights lens to stay relevant.

Collective Interest

In It Together

System leaders have a duty to uphold human rights – not just for the public, but for one another as a professional community.

Many Hands Make Light Work

Equity work often falls on a few, usually from marginalized communities. In fact, it requires collective commitment, action and shared risk.

Numbers in Real Time

The active and regular collection, analysis and public reporting of data allows leaders to remain current and accountable to students and the community. It's a necessity.

Playing with Fire

Leaders who've been criticized for being "too equity-focused" remind us: no one should fear career repercussions because they are advocating for student rights.

Power in Humility

Equitable leadership isn't about ego or career advancement. It's about mutual respect, self-reflection and listening to understand.

Rights vs. Being Right

Centring the Ontario *Human Rights Code* helps distinguish legal rights from personal beliefs. Sharing learning is more powerful than debating opinions.

Leadership Identity – Key Takeaways

Representation Matters

In 2025, education sector demographics still lack diversity. Diverse leaders foster inclusive environments and improve outcomes for underserved students.

Beyond Recruitment

Hiring diverse staff is only the first step. Long-term mentoring and support that is culturally responsive is essential for retention and success.

Expect Pushback

Leaders who centre equity, regardless of identity, often face criticism or resistance, even from within their own communities.

Safe(er) Space?

Psychological safety is low among administrators. Leaders often feel pressure to present a "sanitized" version of their thoughts on equity issues. This limits honest conversations.

Know Thyself

Regular self-analysis, based on social location, lived experience and values, helps counter unconscious bias. Reflexivity is a powerful tool.

The insights shared by colleagues reveal the strength we possess when we unite as a professional community, leaving us as hopeful as we are grateful. From them we learn that "the system" isn't some abstract



Yes, the work is incredibly challenging, especially during our present era, but students deserve no less.

notion, but is made up of people like us. As administrators, we are not passengers but active participants in shaping public education. We thank our colleagues for reminding us that at this pivotal moment, we must summon the courage to speak up, ask hard questions and engage in open dialogue.

So, let this be a time for honest reflection and meaningful dialogue, especially with those whose identities and experiences differ from our own. We must resist echo chambers and lead with a firm commitment to equity, knowing that silence in the face of injustice is complicity. As duty bearers, we are ethically and legally bound to uphold human rights in education. Yes, the work is incredibly challenging, especially during our present era, but students deserve no less.

As the school year begins and demands grow, let's reconnect with the purpose and optimism that first brought us to this work, because we can do this together. Let's all reset by considering the following questions:

1. **What immediate actions would you take to reduce current barriers in education?**
2. **How does your personal identity shape your professional identity?**
3. **Polarization is a current reality. As an equitable leader, how will you intentionally create room for diverse perspectives while maintaining community?**
4. **(Share with a colleague) What is an experience from over the last five years that has shaped your outlook on equitable leadership? ▲**

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Supporting Our School Staff



Hearing, valuing
and acknowledging



By Michelle Newlands
Illustration by Deshi Deng



In today's classrooms, the focus is not limited to merely how well students are achieving curriculum goals and learning targets. Rather, student success now encompasses well-being as an equally important outcome (Van Petegem et al. 2007).

Educators make significant efforts to ensure that student mental health and well-being receive focus and attention. Although there is no universal definition of student well-being, there is a common understanding that well-being would include such things as happiness, joy at work or school, a positive outlook about the future and a positive self-concept. A popular technique used to support students with developing positive well-being is the [Two-by-Ten](#) (TBT) strategy, sometimes referred to as Save-One-Student (SOS).

The TBT strategy used in schools today evolved from Raymond Wlodkowski's research on the Two-Minute Intervention. This process of focused attention requires a caring adult to engage with one student for two minutes over 10 consecutive school days. When an adult takes just two minutes to genuinely listen to a student talk about his or her interests, it sends a powerful message: **you matter**. This small but intentional act affirms the student's identity, builds trust and fosters a sense of belonging. Over time, consistent and focused attention from a caring adult can help students form deeper connections with that adult and the larger school community. Connections play a critical role in a student's overall well-being and can significantly boost their engagement and commitment to learning.

While student mental health and well-being are undeniable priorities for school leaders, school staff's mental health and well-being also need to be prioritized. School staff are our frontline workers. They thrive and perform at their best when they feel meaningfully supported by leadership, connected to a collaborative and respectful community of colleagues and genuinely recognized for the diverse strengths they bring to the school environment. Education workers from equity-seeking groups may find it challenging to perform at high levels when their identity – whether in language, lived experience, sexual orientation, identity or gender expression – is not expressed or valued by the dominant culture.

When staff do not feel affirmed in who they are or what they contribute, it can lead to disengagement, burnout and a diminished sense of belonging. Creating a school culture that is inclusive means actively ensuring that every staff member feels respected, heard and supported in their role.

The strategies presented below are intended to assist school leaders in addressing complex problems and issues;

however, not all readers may be able to implement these strategies due to various barriers or constraints.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STAFF

Individualize Support

In order to feel a positive sense of mental health and well-being, school staff members require support that caters to their unique needs and experiences. This is especially true for those who experience intersectional identities in the workplace. Someone might identify as a woman, Jewish and queer, for example. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to acknowledge the interconnectedness and the impact of experiencing life through the lens of multiple identities, especially if many of them are stigmatized (Ryan & Briggs 2020). Each social identity results in the potential for either privilege or discrimination. When school administrators offer support to staff, they must do so in ways that recognize there will be differences in how individuals respond to certain stressors,



Leaders should engage with staff as individuals, recognizing the complexity of their intersecting identities, and tailor support accordingly.

as well as differences in what individuals require to feel supported.

School administrators should strive to avoid falling into the one-size-fits-all model of staff support, which might occur if leaders over-generalize from the dominant group (Ryan & Briggs 2020). While many staff members will appreciate having the opportunity for open and transparent two-way dialogue, not all staff will want to express their concerns. Some will prefer to listen rather than speak. It becomes important for school leaders to make those distinctions and to provide support in ways that are accessible and responsive to each individual.

Individualized support is best given

- during times of personal or professional stress
- when staff are transitioning to a new role or having challenges in a current position
- in response to equity-related needs
- during or after a conflict and
- when staff request it.

When supporting staff, it is essential to avoid treating groups as a monolith. Everyone brings their own unique experi-

ences, identities and needs – even within the same race or demographic group. Assuming uniformity can lead to oversights, misunderstandings and missed opportunities to provide meaningful support. Instead, leaders should engage with staff as individuals, recognizing the complexity of their intersecting identities, and tailor support accordingly. Here is where the TBT strategy might prove helpful with staff. Investing two minutes a day for 10 days in getting to know staff, before issues of concern erupt, is not only an effective preventative measure, but it may also ensure staff feel connected to their school community and supported by their principal.

In addition to offering individualized support when needed, there are several other effective strategies that can help promote staff well-being in the workplace.

Psychological Safety

Amy Edmondson (1999) developed the concept of psychological safety as a model for team learning (Kassandrinou et al. 2023). Psychological safety includes the ability to speak up, share ideas and provide constructive feedback,

both laterally and upwardly, to leaders. Psychological safety allows staff to feel safe enough to share their feelings or ideas without fear of a negative reaction or reprisal. When the school environment is psychologically safe, staff speak up, speak openly and share in ways that expose their vulnerability, including the admission of and accountability for mistakes (Maben et al. 2023). When staff feel psychologically safe, the organization can benefit from continuous and sustained improvement.

Creating a psychologically safe environment is a key leadership move because it strengthens team trust, builds cohesion among staff and fosters workplace well-being. School leaders can be instrumental in creating psychologically safe schools by avoiding judgments, maintaining an open stance to learning from others and leaning in when novel ideas are shared. Some staff members may feel reluctant to speak up, whether because of past experiences, personality differences or concerns about how their input will be received. To help foster a more open and inclusive environment, principals can encourage feedback through multiple channels – such as email, anonymous forms or simple tools like a “Ticket Out the Door” at the end of meetings. All staff members can contribute to building a culture where every voice is heard and every individual feels welcomed, respected and valued.

While it is important to experience psychological safety every day in the workplace, there are times when it is critical. Leaders should aim to create a psychologically safe environment when

- addressing equity and inclusion issues and concerns
- engaging in challenging group discussions
- providing feedback or evaluation and
- staff members are engaged in collaborative decision-making or problem-solving.



School staff want to feel heard, valued and acknowledged. Creating time to listen to their ideas, concerns and questions – formally or informally – can foster a deeper sense of trust and connection. Taking the time to acknowledge staff input demonstrates respect and reinforces that their voices matter. These small but intentional actions can help create supportive school environments.

Social Bonds

Staff who connect with colleagues are more likely to feel supported and valued than those who do not. Creating an inclusive work environment is therefore necessary for creating a supportive culture at work (Ryan & Briggs 2020). School principals can help facilitate the development of social bonds by encouraging group activities and projects through common prep periods or planning time. Additionally, principals can help create opportunities for staff to engage with each other through affinity groups or other groupings based on shared experiences, interests, values or responsibilities. While it may not always be feasible to devote time during the school day to these meaningful en-

gagements, school leaders can take intentional steps to make them possible. Time can be set aside before or after school, and designated, accessible spaces can be made available to facilitate group meetings or discussions. These efforts signal a commitment to collaboration, inclusion and staff well-being. School leaders can also support social bond development by encouraging teamwork.

Affinity groups should be considered when

- staff are seeking a connection based on identity or shared experiences
- there has been a significant incident that has impacted staff with a particular identity or experience
- leadership pipelines are being built for under-represented staff and
- there is a commitment to support affinity groups to ensure success.

At the heart of successful teams are individuals with a sense of inclusion and belonging. Affinity groups foster a sense of **belonging, validation and mutual support**, especially for staff who may feel isolated or under-represented in the broader school environment. By applying an intersectional lens, the unique needs,

experiences and values of identities that are often marginalized or stigmatized are brought to light. An intersectionality lens surfaces needs, values and conflicts that are different from those experienced by the dominant group (Ryan & Briggs 2020). Affinity groups support staff in feeling included – united by shared identity and grounded in common experiences.

Leader Accessibility

Being visible and available to staff may seem like a small management task, but it is critically important – especially when leaders intentionally create accessible and inclusive spaces where all voices, particularly those from historically marginalized or under-represented groups, feel welcomed and valued.

Leaders who are accessible to their staff can convey feelings of care, competence and engagement that go a long way toward ensuring staff feel supported and valued by their administrators.

It is not always possible to prioritize meetings with staff in a physical setting, and in those cases virtual meetings or phone calls should be considered. Another possibility is to schedule an appointment for a time in the future. This allows staff to feel that their concerns are important and worthy of designated time for discussion.

Leaders should be visible when

- uncertainty or change is occurring
- relationships are being built at the start of a new school year
- psychologically safe work environments are being created and
- equity and inclusion are being addressed.

When staff see their leaders present, engaged and actively responsive to the issues that matter to them – especially issues affecting equity-deserving groups



– it reinforces a sense of support, trust and belonging. Leadership that is both visible and inclusive helps staff feel seen in their full identities and contributes to the belief that **we're all in this together**.

Conclusion

Being an effective leader requires the school principal to be flexible and intentional in meeting the diverse needs of staff members. Support strategies will therefore vary as widely as the individuals on your staff. Recognizing and honouring the diverse backgrounds, identities and experiences each person brings means that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Instead, leaders must be intentional about providing tailored sup-

port that addresses the unique needs and identities of staff. This commitment ensures that every staff member feels valued, supported and empowered to contribute their best.

When considering staff well-being at work, what specific actions can you take to ensure staff feel supported? How well do you know their unique needs and preferences? If the TBT strategy works with students, why not use it with adults? What methods do you currently use to learn about your staff's individual needs and preferences? ▲

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Responding to Violence

* Strategies for administrators



School boards have a responsibility to create and sustain safe working and learning environments. This responsibility includes the expectation that administrators will be protected from harassment and violence.

The resource [*Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law*](#) (2023) and associated board policies outline the expectations for providing safe working and learning environments. The resource is derived from the [*Occupational Health and Safety Act*](#) (OHSA) (2022).

Note: The following has been adapted from the above-noted resource and includes information that focuses on protecting administrators from harassment and violence. To make the connection clear, we have replaced the term “worker” (as appears in the OHSA) with “administrator.”

Under the OHSA, workplace violence includes

- the exercise of physical force by a person against an administrator, that causes or could cause physical injury
- an attempt to exercise physical force against an administrator that could cause physical injury and
- a statement or behaviour that it is reasonable for an administrator to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force that could cause physical injury.

Workplace violence may include

- a one-time occurrence or repeated behaviours, such as hitting or pushing, that cause or could cause physical injury
- an attempt to exercise physical force against an administrator (e.g., an attempted hit) and
- behaviour that is reasonable for an administrator to interpret as a threat of violence (e.g., sending a threatening email or posting a threat on social media).



To protect the safety of administrators, the school board must develop a workplace violence policy that includes

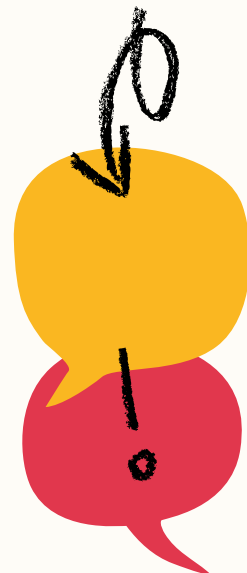
- measures and procedures to control the risks identified as likely to expose an administrator to physical injury
- measures and procedures for summoning immediate assistance when workplace violence occurs or is likely to occur
- procedures for an administrator to report incidents of workplace violence to the school board and
- details of how the school board will investigate and deal with incidents or complaints of workplace violence.

Note: It is important that schools post relevant information about the workplace violence policy in schools to remind staff, students, families and community members that workplace violence and harassment will not be tolerated.

In addition, the OHSA requires school boards to

- provide administrators with information related to the risk of workplace violence by a person with a history of violent behaviour
- develop and include measures and procedures to summon immediate assistance when workplace violence occurs or is likely to occur (e.g., administrators should carry a cellphone or walkie-talkie so they can summon immediate assistance if needed) and
- investigate and address incidents or complaints of workplace violence as part of the workplace violence program.

If a person is harassing and/or threatening an administrator, the school board must take every reasonable precaution to protect the administrator. If an administrator’s safety is in jeopardy, then the superintendent should collaborate with the administrator to develop a safety plan. The safety plan needs to follow the expectations outlined in the board policy on dealing with violent incidents. It should include concrete steps to protect the ad-





If a person is harassing and/or threatening an administrator, the school board must take every reasonable precaution to protect the administrator.



ministrator. When developing a safety plan, the administrator should also consult with the OPC.

Note: The Occupational Health and Safety Officer may have a sample template that can be used to complete the safety plan.

Examples of strategies/interventions that may be included in a safety plan include but are not limited to

- informing the appropriate staff about the person who is exhibiting concerning behaviour
- always carrying a communications device (e.g., a walkie-talkie and/or a cellphone)
- parking in a consistent spot that is monitored by a security camera (if available)
- scanning the parking lot before exiting the building
- walking to one's car accompanied by another staff member
- screening the administrator's calls
- keeping the administrator's personal information private (e.g., phone number)
- following the police/school board protocol and, if necessary, calling the police and
- in consultation with the superintendent, issuing a letter of expectation or trespass letter(s).



Proactive Strategies for Dealing with Students Who Demonstrate Aggressive Behaviour

If there is a student who demonstrates aggressive behaviour, it is advisable that families should be involved and a team meeting be conducted to develop a safety plan. The team meeting should include the staff who work with the student, including both school and board personnel. If the student is identified with special needs, the team needs to ensure that the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) has updated behaviour goals (e.g., teaching prosocial behaviours and self-regulation), and an associated safety plan with interventions. The interventions should focus on understanding the root cause to improve the behaviour.

A safety plan may be created for a student who demonstrates aggressive behaviour even if the student isn't identified. The safety plan should include strategies and interventions to help staff create safe environments and to help students make positive decisions and to support the safety of the student, other students and staff. Examples of interventions that may be included in a safety plan for a student include self-regulation strategies, identifying the staff who will intervene if the student demonstrates aggression, providing proper training for that staff, ensuring that staff wear protective equipment and ensuring that the process will be followed if staff aren't able to de-escalate the aggressive behaviour (e.g., steps to follow when the child escalates, including communication with parents). Following board policy, share the safety plan with staff who work with the student and/or who may interact with the student.

An effective safety plan is "fluid." It should be reviewed regularly, especially after an incident has occurred, to determine why the incident occurred despite the interventions, to review/revise the interventions and to see if the staff involved followed the safety plan.

If a student exhibits aggressive, harmful behaviour, consider implementing progressive discipline. Remember to reflect on mitigating and other factors.





An effective safety plan is “fluid.” It should be reviewed regularly.



Strategies for Dealing with Aggressive Behaviour by a Person Other than a Student

When dealing with a negative interaction and/or physical aggression, the safety of students, staff and administrators needs to be the first priority.

The following strategies will help an administrator address negative behaviour before the interaction escalates.

- Meet with the person in a safe space (e.g., a room with exits). Have another person in the room. Ensure that you have a strategy to exit the meeting if you feel unsafe.
- Be aware of situations that may trigger aggression (e.g., the implementation of progressive discipline).
- Address potential trigger points and try to calm things down (e.g., by thoroughly explaining how the investigation was completed, and how a decision was reached).
- Ensure that you are emotionally in control, and project calmness.
- Use de-escalation techniques (e.g., a calm voice).
- If the person continues to demonstrate aggression, tell the person that you will not accept the abusive behaviour, and will end the conversation if necessary.
- If the behaviour continues, end the conversation and ask the person to leave.
- If the person refuses to leave, walk away and don't return, especially if you believe the person continues to be a threat.

- Contact your superintendent to discuss the next steps. If appropriate, consider sending the person a letter of expectation. A letter of expectation should be created in consultation with the superintendent and/or legal counsel (refer to the OPC tip sheet [Managing Escalated Interactions with Parents](#)).
- Follow the police/board protocol and, if necessary, call the police and/or put the school in a Hold and Secure.



When the Administrator is a Bystander

There are also strategies that will help an administrator deal with a physical confrontation that doesn't directly involve the administrator.

- Do not intervene in a physical confrontation if there is the potential for injury.
- Get help or designate a bystander to get help.
- Follow the police/board protocol and, if necessary, call the police and/or put the school in a lockdown.
- If the presence of bystanders is a hindrance, ask them to stand back or leave.
- Keep your distance, if possible.
- Use a calm, authoritative voice and tell the person to stop and to leave the building.
- Make sure everyone is safe. If necessary, have a qualified staff member administer first aid and/or call emergency services.
- Consult with your superintendent to discuss the next steps.
- Contact the OPC for advice and support.
- Ensure that the appropriate forms are completed (e.g., a violent incident report).



When the Administrator is Directly Involved

The following strategies will assist an administrator when dealing with a physical confrontation that involves the administrator.

- Look for visible signs of potential anger (e.g., clenched fists and shaking).
- Be aware of possible escape routes. Don't stand in the way of the person, even if the person is trying to go somewhere they aren't allowed.
- Keep your distance, if possible.
- Use a calm, authoritative voice and tell the person to stop.
- Use de-escalation strategies to try and lessen the person's anger (e.g., tell the person that you care



about their concerns and are willing to meet and discuss those concerns).

- Consider apologizing to the person as appropriate in the circumstances. Sometimes, an apology is all that is needed to de-escalate the situation.
- If the person continues to demonstrate aggression and the administrator has tried to defuse the situation, the administrator should tell the person that the interaction is over and should then walk away (e.g., state, “I’m leaving now.

“We can talk about this later” and then, without being confrontational, calmly walk away).

- Go to a safe place where others can help if the person continues to escalate (e.g., the office).
- If the person follows, don’t engage. Always try and walk away. If the administrator can’t safely walk away, then ask other staff to get help and leave the building.
- Get help or designate a bystander to get help.
- Follow the police/board protocol and, if necessary, call the police and/or put the school in a lockdown.
- If necessary, seek medical help.
- Consult with the superintendent to determine next steps (e.g., sending a letter of expectation or a trespass letter). This should be done in consultation with the superintendent and/or legal counsel.
- Contact the OPC for advice and support.
- Ensure that the appropriate forms are completed (e.g., a violent incident report). ▲

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22

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24

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25

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29

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January

12

Equitable and Inclusive Schools Qualification
Program – Winter Session

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Principal's Development Course

Module 4 – Mentoring and School Leadership
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19

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February

5–7

OPC General Assembly Meeting

17

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Inclusive School

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20–22

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– Winter Session

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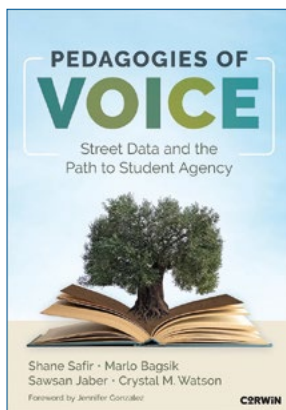
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Pedagogies of Voice: Street data and the path to student agency

By Shane Safir, Marlo Bagsik, Sawsan Jaber and Crystal M. Watson

Corwin Press

ISBN: 9781071947746

Reviewed by Stefano Fornazzari San Martín

Pedagogies of Voice: Street data and the path to student agency enters the conversation just as many educators are rethinking not only how they teach, but why. The authors ask

us to move beyond compliance-driven instruction and instead centre student voice, identity and agency. Drawing on the foundations of *Street Data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation* (2021), the book invites a more human, equitable approach to learning. We have seen how quickly students respond when they feel genuinely seen, and this book affirms just how powerful that shift can be.

From the start, the book feels practical and grounded in real classroom experience. Its structure is built around four key areas: identity, belonging, inquiry and efficacy. These themes help connect theory with what actually happens in schools. Each chapter shares strategies such as radical inclusion and microaffirmations, but what stood out to me most was the focus on reflection. The “awakenings” sprinkled throughout the book gave me space to pause and think. They had me considering more carefully how I lead and how I can make space for my staff to also reflect and grow.

The authors make a strong case that student voice is not something extra or optional; it is a foundational part of equitable practice. In a system that often

emphasizes quantitative data, they suggest a shift toward gathering “street data,” the kind of insight that comes from truly listening to students. The authors challenge us to listen more closely and respond with purpose.

Throughout the book, the authors emphasize the value of relational trust in helping students thrive. They connect this to culturally responsive practice, showing how strong relationships can shape both instruction and school culture. This connected with me as someone who has worked across the K–12 continuum in Ontario, from large urban secondary schools to small rural elementary schools. The practices shared in the book feel flexible and adaptable, which is critical. No two classrooms and no two educators are starting from the same place, so that kind of entry point truly matters.

The case study on Indigenous land-based education in British Columbia is especially poignant. It demonstrates how learning rooted in land, culture and community can reshape not only academic outcomes, but also students’ sense of identity and belonging. It also left me thinking about how many more examples like this could have expanded

the book’s impact: specific, grounded and deeply honest stories from a range of contexts. With rising class sizes, growing behaviour needs and limited resources, books like this need to offer clear, accessible strategies that teachers can use right away. An accompanying guide or online resource could help bridge that gap and make the ideas even more actionable.

This work is not simple. It requires a lot of time, openness and support. Implementing these ideas in high-pressure or under-resourced environments will not always be easy. But maybe that is where the work matters most. Recognizing this has encouraged me to continue growing as a leader who builds relational trust and remains committed to culturally responsive teaching.

In the end, *Pedagogies of Voice* offers more than just another education resource. It invites us to rethink teaching and leadership not as messengers of curriculum, but as co-creators of spaces where students feel seen, heard and empowered to lead. Whether you are just starting out or already engaged in this work, the book is well worth your time and offers many ideas worth exploring. ▲

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Equity Work

It's not just a value, but daily practice

I have worked in education for more than 20 years, as a teacher, vice-principal and principal, in two school boards. My leadership is grounded in who I am, a racialized, faith-identified

individual who shows up fully and unapologetically. I have never separated my identity from my work. While many are pressured to code switch (or shift how they speak, dress or lead in order to fit in), I have resisted that. I remain committed to showing up as myself, even when doing so is met with discomfort or resistance. When we lead from a place of authenticity, students, families and staff begin to see the value in diverse identities. They learn that success does not require conformity, and that leadership rooted in truth is powerful. I take pride in being that example for others who follow.

At the same time, I understand the importance of socio-political acuity. Effective leadership does not silence others; it invites them in. Leaders can be themselves while also being mindful not to offend others to the point that they disengage. It is about navigating so that one's truth is clear and honest, yet

delivered in a way that captivates the audience and encourages them to grow and be better. Leadership builds trust by creating space for honest, inclusive dialogue. When people believe in your story, they are more likely to imagine themselves leading with similar conviction.

Leadership is shaped by context. In some environments, a leader's identity and values may align with the dominant culture, allowing them to lead with ease and confidence. In other settings, those same traits can be perceived as a challenge to long-standing norms. When systems are not ready to embrace difference, leaders may experience harm resulting from collusion, isolation or resistance, not because of any flaw in their practice, but because the environment has not yet evolved to value their presence. I have learned that when someone misses the mark once, it may be a blind spot. When that misstep continues after being named, it moves beyond oversight

into active exclusion. At that point, it is no longer a lapse in judgment but a barrier that reinforces systemic inequities.

Searching for belonging, I turned to the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). It gave me space to contribute and connect. At a provincial meeting on violence in society, I focused the conversation on identity-based harm. I reminded colleagues that many leaders carry their own trauma while also navigating incidents that mirror the harm they have lived. This vulnerability is often invisible, but deeply impactful.

These connections strengthened my commitment to the organization. As a mentor, advocate and now board director, I encourage others, especially those from marginalized communities, to step into leadership. I believe the OPC can be a place of transformation, where equity is more than a value: it is a daily practice. ▲

Kulbir Singh Dhaliwal is the principal of Lake Simcoe Public School in the Simcoe County District School Board. He is chair of the OPC equity, diversity and inclusion committee.

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CONGRATULATIONS

Celebrating Retirements

We want to extend our congratulations to OPC Members who retired during the 2024–25 school year.

Amy Dahm

Renfrew County

Andy Parnham

Lambton Kent

Anne Marie McDonald

Limestone

Anton Walcott

Toronto

Arif Nathoo

Toronto

Barb Nixon

Toronto

Bob Blake

Niagara

Brian Panesar

Toronto

Bryan Baird

Renfrew County

Carla Robbins

Toronto

Carmen Spiteri-Johnson

York Region

Carolyn McLarty

Halton

Carolyn Salonen

Waterloo

Cathy Calvano

Hamilton-Wentworth

Cecilia Piques

York Region

Colleen Head

Toronto

Connie Hammond

Toronto

Dave St. Amour

Rainbow

Dave Williamson

Waterloo Region

David Cassar

Toronto

Dayna Scaletta

Hastings & Prince Edward

Deborah Tyrrell

Waterloo Region

Dominique Bertrand

Upper Canada

Doug Chester

York Region

Duane Wiltshire

Hastings & Prince Edward

Elisabeth Sorensen

Limestone

Eric Dallin

Toronto

Ginette Thibeault

Ottawa-Carleton

Greg Haber

Avon Maitland

Greg Nemcek

Lambton Kent

Heather Bender

Bluewater

Hillary Glass

Simcoe County

Jacque Pece

Halton

James Bonham-Carter

Limestone

Jane Brown

Niagara

Janice Lewis

Toronto

Jo Anne Knechtel

Avon Maitland

Jodie Hancox-Meyer

Waterloo Region

John Ioannou

Ottawa-Carleton

Josie O'Hara

York Region

Karen Rocca

Peel

Kerry Gore (Haines)

Toronto

Kim Esdaile

Ottawa-Carleton

Kimberly Lovatt

Ottawa-Carleton

Kristina Wessenger-Macdonald

Toronto

Laura Jones

Toronto

Lesley Reilly

Toronto

Linda De Medeiros

Toronto

Marc Green

Toronto

Maria Maiato

York Region

Mark Babi

Toronto

Mark Botnick

Peel

Mark Hooper

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Mark Patterson

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Mark Schenk

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Michelle Crawford-Eade

Durham

Mira Nam-Wong

Toronto

Neil Dyal

Toronto

Nicki Keenlside

Toronto

Nicolle Schuurman

Algoma

Padmini Padiachy

York Region

Pamela Marshall Gray

Near North

Patrick Knight

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Paula Borges

York Region

Ramona Meharg

Thames Valley

Reg Farnand

Halton

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