The Register

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

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The Power of Collaboration
Strengthening our collective voice

As I reflect on my tenure as president of the OPC, one theme stands out above all others: collaboration. In a year marked by changes and challenges, the power of working together has never been more evident. Whether advocating for appropriate pay for principals and vice-principals (P/VPs) across the province, uniting with a common voice or addressing the urgent issues facing our benefits plan, working through collaboration has strengthened our efforts and amplified our voice.

One of the most significant shifts this year has been in our provincial Terms and Conditions agreement. While this agreement is not perfect, it is nonetheless historic, achieving a pathway to pay parity for elementary and secondary administrators, a provincial grid and a real pay differ-ence between our VPs and teachers. Achieving these milestones was a big shift, and we have been navigating the details of a radically different contract throughout the year. The act of nego-tiations is, at its core, an act of col-laboration, and the result was due to our ability to work together with our partners provincially and locally.

We also used these relationships to bring together educators from across Ontario to discuss the biggest issues currently in education. Collaborating with directors, superintendents, teach-ers, trustees and education workers from all four sectors of the publicly funded education system in Ontario demon-strated that there is more that unites us than divides us. This significant first meeting was a powerful reminder of how important it is to come together, and the OPC was proud to be at the heart of it with ADFO and CPCO.

Collaboration is perhaps especially important during difficult situations, including dealing with our health and dental benefits (through ONE-T). The benefits plan was one of the most chal-lenging issues we faced this year, with the amount of funding received from the government not keeping pace with the needs. Throughout this year, we had challenging conversations. ONE-T Trustees and the board met with us frequently to support these conversa-tions, reinforcing the importance of working together on key issues. We also began expanding these discus-sions to include our Executive and Councillors, ensuring that a wide range of voices and perspectives were part of the dialogue. While the benefits plan remains a complex and ongoing chal-lenge, this spirit of collaboration has opened the door to real, honest con-versations – ones that will be critical as we work toward meaningful long-term solutions. Moving forward, this

openness and shared commitment will help us navigate the challenges ahead with greater understanding and unity.

This year has reinforced a fundamental truth: we are stronger together. The challenges we face as school leaders are complex, but through collaboration – whether in negotiations, learning from P/VPs from across the country or working with all education partners in Ontario – we continue to drive meaningful change. As my term as president concludes, I remain committed to ensuring that our collective voice is heard, our contributions are valued and our profession remains strong.

Thank you to all OPC Members for your dedication, resilience and unwavering commitment to Ontario's students and schools. Our work is far from over but, together, we are making a difference. ▲

Alison Osborne

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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.

Content Due		Edition Release
May 1	——————	October
October 1	——————	February
February 1	——————	May

The Register is the proud recipient of the following awards:

Happenings at the OPC …

In May, Provincial Council met for the final meeting of the year.

In March, Members participated in a workshop entitled A New Vision for STEM Leadership, held at the Lassonde School of Engineering.

In April, Members from Durham and Simcoe participated in the Central East District Regional Session.

In April, we welcomed Swedish (left) and Estonian (right) educators to the OPC office.

The Leadership Journey

The OPC offers continuous support and mentorship

Professional Learning opportunities at the OPC are structured to support principals and vice-principals at all stages of their leadership. Continuous transition support that is grounded in ongoing professional development upholds the Ontario College of Teachers' (OCT's) *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* and enhances the effectiveness of knowledgeable and effective P/VPs within increasingly complex and dynamic education landscapes.

As we continue to learn and deepen our understanding of human rights, Indigenous sovereignty and equity issues, our learning offerings are also evolving to offer more identity-affirming content and culturally responsive facilitation to recruit, engage and support diverse leaders across the province. We continue to learn with you. Most importantly, we acknowledge that insights and meaningful lessons come from many different places and individuals at all stages of leadership.

The recruitment of diverse leaders helps to ensure reflection of the student demographics, creating role models who understand and represent the experiences of under-represented communities. Our Emerging Leader Development Program (ELDP) is open to all teachers considering a role in formal school leadership. The ELDP is structured as optional five-hour modules on a variety of topics related to school leadership.

Our current cohort of the New Leader Support Program engaged 32 P/VPs across 12 school boards. This program provides P/VPs, within the first three years of their role, with the guidance and resources they need to navigate their responsibilities effectively, thrive in their roles and remain in leadership long term. It is a rich opportunity to network and discuss common issues and solutions while making potential long-lasting connections. We have had extremely positive feedback for this inquiry-based approach to building confidence and efficacy as new leaders, and look forward to the group for 2025–26.

Ongoing professional learning helps experienced leaders (regardless of the number of years of experience) with information, support and a network of colleagues to consult on unique challenges, and to grow their repertoire of strategies and approaches to help navigate uncertain and volatile situations. As experienced leaders grow in their roles, they can also develop and enhance their own skills as mentors to support succession planning by modelling a culture of support and growth.

One potential pathway for system leadership is in the role of a supervisory officer. Our Supervisory Officer's Qualification Program is framed with an anti-oppression foundation and is designed to proactively explore the dimensions of this role to increase attendees' capacity and efficacy.

No matter where you are in your leadership journey, we are here to support you in bringing your unique identity and gifts to the diverse students and families we are privileged to serve. ▲

✉ learning@principals.ca

By Haley Clark, Dr. Patty Douglas, Dr. Ian Matheson,
Jessi Lalonde and Ash Ward

Illustration by
Elise Conlin

Neuro-Vibes 2024

An evening exploring neurodiversity

In January 2024

the Limestone District School Board (LDSB), in partnership with Queen's University Faculty of Education and the Re•Storying Autism Project, hosted *Neuro-Vibes: A Night Exploring Neurodiversity.* The event brought together educators, students, administrators, community members and researchers to explore neurodiversity and expand understandings of neuro-affirming approaches in schools.

Neurodiversity Defined

Coined in the 1990s by autistic self-advocates, *neurodiversity* describes the diversity in human perception, experience and learning, akin to biodiversity (Botha et al. 2024; Walker 2021). When an individual is described as *neurodivergent* (e.g., autistic, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], learning disability), this refers to ways of being that are perceived as different from "normal" (Walker, 2021). The *neurodiversity paradigm* challenges the assumption of a mythical "normal" way to learn and experience the world, and instead understands neurodivergence as valuable – and even needed – ways of being in the world (Walker, 2021)

Key Strategies for a Neuro-affirming Event

1. Planning for All

Guided by the neurodiversity paradigm, the planning committee (see photo at top right) put theory into action to create a neuro-affirming event. The key strategies included

- **Access practices** – Registration surveys invited attendees to identify accommodations and access desires (dietary, sensory or other) before the event began.
- **Quiet spaces** – Presentations in the large auditorium were streamed into a quiet, sensory-friendly space in the library.
- **Affirming resources** – A visual access guide, door greeters and a sensory/fidget tool station were offered as resources to attendees.

This intentional planning demonstrated how to create neuro-affirming access and how to honour and value all attendees.

2. Collaboration and Community Engagement

We had anticipated an intimate gathering of keen educators, students, family members, service providers and community members. To our astonishment, more than 200 individuals and 25 community organizations from the Kingston area attended. The halls of Duncan McArthur Hall, where the event was held, were alive with the buzz of conversations between individuals making connections, finding and making friends and rejoicing in an affirming space to share their stories. There were several key takeaways.

- **Leadership involvement** – LDSB superintendent of education Scot Gillam and educational services principal Michael Blackburn attended the event alongside many LDSB leaders and staff, showing care and commitment in terms of advancing equity for historically excluded students.
- **Access to information** – Community organizations set up booths with information about affirming supports available in the Kingston and surrounding area for family members and neurodivergent individuals.
- **Interactive elements** – Staff from LDSB created several interactive displays highlighting neuro-affirming practices and tools. Popular items included strength-based student profiles and advocacy cards, neuro-affirming posters for classrooms (e.g., "The Future is Neurodiverse"), button-making and a photo booth.

3. Creating Positivity, Hope and Acceptance

We invited the co-creation of inclusive neuro-affirming space through interactive posters (see photo on the next page) with invitational prompts for educators, family members and neurodivergent attendees. Highlights from interactive posters included:

The planning committee of Neuro-Vibes 2024. From left to right: Ian Matheson (Queen's University), Patty Douglas (Queen's), Jessi Lalonde (LDSB), Haley Clark (Queen's) and Ash Ward (LDSB).

Fidget tool-making station with colourful beads, rings and wires.

- educators supporting students by "giving people the time and space to think for themselves" and "looking for the sunshine on rainy days"
- allies focusing on strengths – descriptions by educators and family members included words such as "patience," "kindness" and "knowledge" and
- neurodivergent attendees sharing lived experience – including that the best parts of being neurodivergent include "seeing the world in a different way," "connecting with students," "creative thinking," "working outside the box" and "being special in their own way."

Challenges shared included the wish that people knew every neurodivergent person is unique. These attendees also shared that love is a verb – an action word – and that a truly inclusive, affirming world would be "peaceful," "understanding," "wonderful" and "beautiful."

Highlights of the Evening and Actionable Takeaways

Learning From Research
Dr. Patty Douglas shared findings from the Re•Storying Autism in Education project on student experiences of inclusion and exclusion at school, emphasizing the need for education to shift from a Western deficit-based biomedical model, where disability is a problem to be fixed, to a neurodiversity paradigm or social model of disability, where disability is located instead in inaccessible environments (you can see the slides from that talk here using the password 'neurovibes'). Key takeaways included the following:

- **Creating safety** – Douglas invited disability "love stories" from the audience, ones that captured both the struggle and the joy, the hard work and the celebration of being neurodivergent in a world not built for you. Several high school students with autism shared stories about the lack of access

to diagnosis as girls and women, and the distressing mental health effects these barriers produced. Their stories captured why so many of us had gathered on this cold January evening: our shared desire to create access to affirming support and learning for all. This is often a life-and-death matter.

- **Dismantle barriers to diagnosis and affirming supports** – In addition to girls and women, Indigenous, Black and other people of colour have until recently been excluded from autism research and diagnosis. Research on culturally and neuro-affirming support has only just begun. Recognizing diversity within the category of autism is a key learning for school leaders and teachers.
- **Stigma, school violence and misunderstanding** of autistic communication and ways of being by teachers and peers is ubiquitous, showing that more work remains to be done in putting the neurodiversity paradigm into practice. See "Further Reading" below.
- **Compassionate educators** who try to understand students with autism on their own terms and who show kindness make a considerable difference in those students' well-being and academic success. A little kindness goes a long way.
- **A story archive for educators to change hearts, minds and practice** – Douglas shared digital stories made by students with autism, family members and educators on the Re•Storying project. These stories not only deepen insight into experiences of exclusion at school (e.g., overwhelming sensory environments, misunderstanding, stigma, valuing what is considered 'normal'), they also reimagine practice in affirming ways. To access publicly available stories, follow this link and go to the Gallery.

Panel of Neurodivergent Students and Educators
A key highlight of the evening was the panel of neurodivergent students (elementary and post-secondary), educators and administrators who shared stories, poems and reflections

A person with long brown hair shown from the back, with a service dog. They are standing in front of and looking at neurodiversity posters with hearts and rainbows.

Dr. Patty Douglas, a middle-aged white woman with curly blond hair is shown presenting at a podium on an auditorium stage, with a slide on "The Neurodiversity Paradigm" behind her.

on the systemic barriers they encountered, the impact these barriers had on their lives personally and professionally, and the affirming supports that have and continue to make a difference in their lives every day. Panellists told a story of hope for a future for neurodivergent individuals that is accepting, accessible and affirming. The panel also made space for dialogue with the audience on supportive, affirming and welcoming practices for their neurodivergent students. Key takeaways from the panel included the following:

- **Be an enabler of access** – Panellists emphasized that access to learning and support are human rights for all students.
- **Consult neurodivergent students as the experts** – Panellists shared supports they have found helpful, including service dogs, self-advocacy and medication. They also highlighted that care, compassion and friendship shown by others in their networks has been vital to their success.
- **Celebrate difference** – Patty Gollogy, LDSB superintendent of education, noted that "embracing my unique perspective has been both a journey and a revelation. Sharing my story isn't just about narrating the challenges I face; it's about highlighting the distinct strengths and insights that come from thinking differently.… I hope to foster understanding and inspire others in the neurodiverse community to celebrate their own paths, knowing that our differences don't just set us apart – they enrich us all."

Strategies for Educators

LDSB special education coordinators Jessi LaLonde and Ash Ward shared strategies for creating inclusive classrooms informed by the social model of disability and neurodiversity paradigm. They also shared a wealth of resources that have been developed by the board to support students, families and staff in understanding diversity in classrooms. The resources highlight both the struggles and strengths that *all* students bring, and cultivate supportive, inclusive learning communities where everyone feels seen, valued and accepted. These resources, available in both print and online formats, include affirming posters that have been spotted in many local schools, community agencies and events hosted by other school boards inspired to widen the reach of Neuro-Vibes' affirming message about inclusion.

In their presentation, entitled "Neurodiverse Affirming Strategies for Schools and Classrooms," LaLonde and Ward shared five key strategies.

1. **Focus on strengths** – Shift away from individual deficits to affirm diverse abilities and strengths.
2. **Know the learner** – Focus on building relationships with diverse individuals rather than offering generic supports.
3. Create a **relationship-based practice** – Prioritize building trust, safety and connection in classrooms and schools.
4. **Plan for all** – Include neurodiverse students in planning inclusive strategies such as Universal Design for Learning, advocacy cards and student profiles.
5. **Learn with and from neurodivergent individuals** – Centre neurodivergent students in planning and decision-making that will affect their lives and learning.

Creating a Ripple Effect: Lessons for schools and communities

Neuro-Vibes 2024 provided a platform for educators, school leaders and community members to access current research and affirming practice to make lasting change. As one educator shared after the event, they returned to school the next morning reinvigorated, ready to adopt an asset-based approach with their team, celebrate differences and "re-story" deficit narratives around autism and neurodivergence. One attendee shared feeling "inspired, safe, accepted and encouraged" at the event.
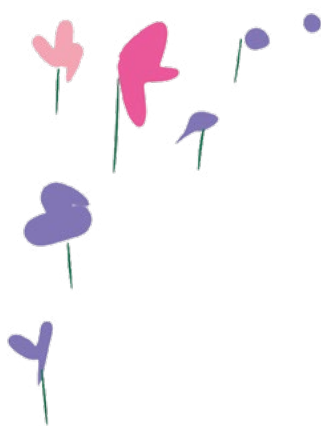
> "There was a powerful message of acceptance and understanding. Your commitment to creating a supportive space for all learners is commendable and reflects an education system that I feel proud to be a part of. As you recognized, there is much more work to be done by promoting empathy and understanding among all students and staff members. Thanks for starting this journey."

– Review from attendee (parent and educator) at Neurovibes 2024

Takeaways for schools and communities include:

- **Host similar events to cultivate waves of change** – Promote acceptance, understanding and tangible strategies for neuro-inclusion.
- **Shift deficit mindsets** to affirm and prioritize belonging and acceptance for all students, and improve student success and wellness.
- **Proactively create vital spaces for networking** with local supports and services.
- **Find ways to bring neurodivergent students together** – Encouraged by the stories and research shared at the event, students formed a neurodiversity alliance in LDSB high schools in collaboration with Dr. Patty Douglas. This is an important step for schools to take in honouring the experiences and perspectives of neurodivergent students.

Reflections and Future Directions

The planning committee received overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees, both in person and through an online survey. We are thrilled that many community agencies expressed interest in joining our Neuro-Vibes 2025 planning committee. We hope to hold the event annually and to inspire other school boards across Ontario to host similar events promoting neurodiversity-affirming approaches. The committee has also committed to expanding access, inclusion and representation at future events, including dismantling exclusion around race and other diversity (e.g., fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) in autism and neurodiversity research and practice. Planned improvements include adding interpreters and closed captioning, enhancing sound quality and providing accessibility and sensory-friendly information in advance. We look forward to Neuro-Vibes 2025! ▲

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Change and Conflict

Working with both in our schools

—

By the Protective Services Team

> ## "IN THE MIDDLE OF DIFFICULTY LIES OPPORTUNITY."
> ### – Albert Einstein

In our schools and school communities, we are reminded every day that change is inevitable. While we know that change leads to growth, not all of it is comfortable, clearly understood or welcomed or even positive. In our schools as elsewhere, change and conflict are often closely linked. Change can easily trigger conflict, and conflict can drive change. When you are involved in either, you may find yourself resisting, facing resistance, dealing with new ideas and unfamiliar experiences or trying to identify your and others' capacity to embrace the change and adapt and work with the new reality.

CHANGE LEADING TO CONFLICT

Change may lead to conflict when disruption occurs, whether it is planned or unplanned, particularly if this disruption involves changes to regular routines or practices, established ways of thinking or power dynamics within a social group, staff or the community.

At times, not everyone is impacted or benefits from change to the same degree, which can lead to resentment on the part of those who feel others have benefitted more, setting up competition and creating another form of conflict. Fear of the unknown or uncertainty about how change will impact individuals or the group as a whole can trigger conflict, as can a lack of clarification or poor communication about change.

For students, change comes in the form of physical, emotional and social growth. Moving from grade to grade or from the elementary panel to the secondary panel means change from the familiar to the new – with friends, family life, personal interests, schools, a new community and/or social environments – and this often leads to dysregulation, confusion, fear and social pressures.

School staff might experience changes in personal life situations, health and economic security, which occur alongside changes in their roles at work. They may experience change of role, changes in their job descriptions, regular increases in expectations and/or losses or transformation of their duties, all of which lead to a feeling of uncertainty, a fear of not being safe, anger at not feeling heard or respected by supervisors and a sense of loss of control over many aspects of their work/employment.

stakeholders work together in school boards, many of whom may have opposing agendas and may communicate differently.

Unclear Definition of Responsibility

When conflict arises from lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, or changes in roles, it is critical that time is spent identifying who is responsible for what. In schools where there is more than one administrator on site, role clarity between the vice-principal and principal can be extremely challenging. Without a clear division of tasks, accountabilities and deliverables, an unstructured approach to leadership and managing a school can lead to conflict when tasks are either not completed, completed poorly or, when there is an issue, ambiguity as to who should be taking

School leaders may also find themselves in a transition of roles – teacher to vice-principal, vice-principal to principal, or a move to a new school, following an administrator who may have been more experienced, was respected by the school community or who is only away temporarily.

The reality is that school leaders must deal with change on a daily basis, some of which may cause people to react in ways that lead to conflict in the school. Even the most seemingly settled schools with strong teams will experience conflict, making it critical to understand that how conflicts are managed at work will make a significant difference to the tone of the environment for the entire school community, to student success, to job satisfaction and to enjoyment of work life.

Conflict that remains unresolved creates tension and a deteriorating environment for all – students, staff, caregivers and the school leader. Such conflict continues to cause harm and will not lessen or stop without determining the cause and identifying strategies for resolution or removal.

> While conflict may be inevitable, resolution techniques can be used to grow, learn and become a more effective professional leader in schools.

CONFLICT LEADING TO CHANGE

Conflict can lead to change when it highlights issues or weak areas in school or board processes and systems, thus requiring closer examination to identify necessary solutions. Often, change results when parties in a conflict are forced to re-evaluate their relationships to identify appropriate ways to interact.

When conflict is examined carefully, it can lead to fresh perspectives and creative thinking, as those involved try to resolve problems and seek alternative solutions. A closer examination of the reasons behind the conflict also serves to engage people in finding ways to overcome opposition and resistance for necessary change, as well as to hopefully encourage more transparent and open communication. While pushing for a better understanding of factors that cause conflict, those involved have more opportunity for transparency, accountability and room to embrace needed change.

It stands to reason that if school leaders are able to anticipate areas of change in our schools that may lead to conflict, they would be in a position to prepare staff, students and caregivers to deal with conflict in a more positive, less challenging fashion.

ANTICIPATING SOURCES OF CHANGE/CONFLICT

Communications

Many conflicts stem from interpretation of information, lack of information, poor communication and/or miscommunication. Without clarity of information and expectations, conflict may arise. Understanding acceptable protocols or procedures for how to execute a new initiative or how the principal is operationally required to comply with an amendment to a law relating to the workplace requires a solid communication plan. Multiple

responsibility. Under the *Education Act*, the principal holds the statutory duty to manage the school site and the performance of staff. The principal also holds the authority to delegate tasks, specifically to a vice-principal, which can be a source of conflict if it is not clear which person manages each task. Conflict may also occur when one administrator ends up completing tasks that they believe the other is responsible for managing.

Conflicts of Interest

Not only do schools employ a vast variety of education professionals and support staff, they also serve the students, caregivers and the community. Differing personal, professional and institutional objectives of the different stakeholders can lead to conflicts of interest. Further, employee unions and professional associations also play an important role in positioning an interest through their members and local affiliates. Opposing objectives can lead to conflict, especially as the greater goal of the school board may get lost in the different interests of stakeholder groups.

DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT ISSUES

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* provides the definition of harassment as "engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome." In addition, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* provides the "prohibited grounds" to which individuals cannot be subject to discrimination. While the *Code* does not specifically define discrimination, the Ontario Human Rights Commission notes that it usually includes the following elements: (1) not individually assessing the unique merits, capacities and circumstances of a person, (2) instead making stereotypi-

cal assumptions based on a person's traits and (3) having the impact of excluding persons, denying benefits or imposing burdens.

Given the complexity and sensitivity surrounding matters of harassment and discrimination, if individuals believe they are being subjected to treatment or behaviour that could be perceived or can be classified as harassing or discriminatory, conflict between the individuals involved can be extremely serious and may lead to legal proceedings for the employer and for employees. These types of conflict should immediately be reported to senior board officials for attention and action to appropriately address the claims in accordance with board policies and procedures.

STRATEGIES TO EFFECTIVELY OVERCOME AND MANAGE CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE
Keep Calm and Carry On
Use personal de-escalation techniques to control anger and emotion before you speak, and choose your words wisely. Stick to the facts and try to gather information in a respectful manner. Separate emotions from the issue. Reflect and ask the right questions. What issue specifically caused people to react negatively and be displeased with one another?

Consider people's personal circumstances and perspectives. An employee who has considerable family responsibilities may be looking to perform at a competent level, while another employee with different family circumstances might be looking for a promotion and wanting to take on extra work.

"Listen and Learn" from the Individuals Involved
What are the concerns of each person involved? Narrow in on the root cause of the issue. Conflict outside of the school may be an indication that there are issues of conflict that arose in the workplace.

Be a Role Model of Professional Workplace Behaviour
School leaders hold a great amount of responsibility and are held to a high standard of professionalism, required to comply with school board policies and procedures. If you routinely lose your cool and raise your voice to exercise authority, it is likely that this behaviour will be reported as violating board policies and workplace statutes. In addition, as a role model, some staff will think it is acceptable for them to behave in a similar manner.

Attack the Problem, Not the Person
Focus on success and the future, not the mistakes of the past, to manage conflict. While it may seem appropriate to manage all issues, the energy devoted to being "right" may not always be the best strategy for success in overcoming conflict.

Learn from Conflict
Take the disagreement and turn the negative thinking into a positive opportunity for the school. This is where change helps a school take on a fresh approach. You have an ability to influence others and positively impact culture.

LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITIES TO PROACTIVELY AVOID CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE
Understand and Communicate Board Policies
Ensure that you understand and can articulate board policies, which may include those addressing the Respectful Workplace, Harassment and Discrimination, Workplace Violence and Human Rights and Equity. Train staff and review the policies on an annual basis to encourage professional development. Include conflict resolution tactics in staff training. Encourage staff participation and feedback in the development of framework guidelines for acceptable workplace behaviour, which may reduce workplace conflict.

Avoid "Avoidance" of a Problem
Conflict and harassing behaviour tend to escalate and are generally not resolved unless addressed. Confront the issues, investigate and ensure you ask for support from board leadership for intervention strategies and techniques to overcome conflict in the workplace. Spot trends. Low morale and motivation, increased frustration and higher sick time can be indicators that there are issues with workplace conflict amongst staff.

TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR ACTIONS AND THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS
Recognize your own actions in the conflict, and if they have been a component of the conflict, apologize and learn from your own behaviour. Praise others for their contributions to the school while stating there is conflict apparent in the workplace. Ask them what they believe is causing the conflict and how their actions may be contributing to it. Focus on outcomes and positive steps forward by encouraging those involved in the conflict to contribute to solutions. Ask staff involved in the conflict for specific actions that can be implemented to improve working relationships in the school.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST, CELEBRATE SUCCESSES!
After resolution is reached relating to a workplace conflict, take the opportunity to implement practice changes in school operations based on the learnings. Use the strategies applied to overcome the workplace conflict to influence your leadership development. Collaborate with others, inspiring leaders to understand that while conflict may be inevitable, resolution techniques can be used to grow, learn and become more effective professional leaders in schools. ▲

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RESOURCES
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Growing
Deep Roots

Transforming education through
process-oriented learning

By
Amanda Paul

Illustration by
Matthew Billington

The Challenge of Trust in the AI Era

In a world where artificial intelligence (AI) can generate essays, solve equations and mimic creativity, where does trust come from? As a high school business teacher, I've seen how tools like ChatGPT blur the lines between what students produce and what they genuinely learn. These tools are transformative, but challenge traditional educational approaches. For years, we've relied on essays, tests and projects as benchmarks of success. As AI transforms learning, educators must evaluate whether assessments adequately reflect both the product(s) students produce and the process. According to a *Think with Google* report, one in four grades 11 and 12 students and one in five grades 7 to 10 students use AI tools for schoolwork (Think with Google Editorial Team 2024). Many educators see education at a crossroads. We need to reimagine assessment – not just to adapt to AI but to prioritize curiosity, growth and genuine understanding.

The Intelligence Revolution: Balancing opportunity and risk

For many educators, AI's rise is both thrilling and unsettling. These tools unlock opportunities for creativity and efficiency, breaking down barriers to student success through translation, engagement and academic support. They can level the playing field, offering resources that once were inaccessible to many learners. However, AI also makes it easy for students to sidestep critical thinking and deep learning. This duality demands a re-examination of how we define and assess meaningful learning.

I've seen this unfold in my own classroom. A student once submitted a flawless, AI-generated business pitch. While polished, it lacked the messy, iterative process that fosters deep learning. It was what I often describe as a "cardboard tree" – something that looks well-crafted but lacks the deep roots required for sustained growth. Without those roots, the work remains superficial, failing to support the adaptability students need to thrive.

As Bjork & Bjork (2011) explain, learning thrives on "desirable difficulties." Dissonance isn't a hurdle – it's essential. Through grappling with challenges, students build resilience and problem-solving skills. Yet AI-generated outputs often bypass this process, offering polished but shallow responses. These "easy wins" feel satisfying but are ultimately hollow. It's our role as educators to guide students back to critical thinking, observation and dialogue – the core of engaged, adaptive learning.

From Improvement Plans to Learning Plans: A systemic shift

Balancing product and process is a challenge at both classroom and systemic levels. Schools have traditionally relied on School Improvement Plans (SIPs), which emphasize test scores and graduation rates. While these metrics are useful, they do not fully capture student learning. On the other hand, School Learning Plans (SLPs) take a broader approach, emphasizing engagement, well-being and curiosity alongside measurable outcomes. This shift aligns with a broader perspective that considers both academic achievement and personal development.

Administrators can help bridge policy and practice to help teachers implement this shift effectively. Ontario's *Growing Success* document (2010) supports triangulated assessment – gathering evidence through observations, conversations and products. This framework helps teachers integrate process-focused assessment into their classrooms.

SLPs provide tools for deep learning, allowing teachers to foster critical thinking, resilience and meaningful connections.

However, systemic support is key. Administrators strengthen this shift by offering professional development, resources and collaboration opportunities. With this foundation, teachers can confidently assess both outcomes and the steps students take to achieve them.

A balanced approach benefits the entire school community. Integrating SLP principles into classrooms fosters process-driven learning, supporting students' academic and personal development. With administrators guiding the way, educators and students can thrive in an environment that values both the journey and the destination.

Reimagining Assessment: Embracing triangulation

When I first introduced triangulated assessment, I was skeptical. Could observations and conversations provide the same clarity as traditional assessments? I found that triangulated assessment provided new insights that complemented traditional measures.

- Observations reveal problem-solving, collaboration and leadership skills in action.
- Conversations uncover students' reasoning and thought processes beyond written work.
- Products still play a role, but are no longer the sole measure of success.
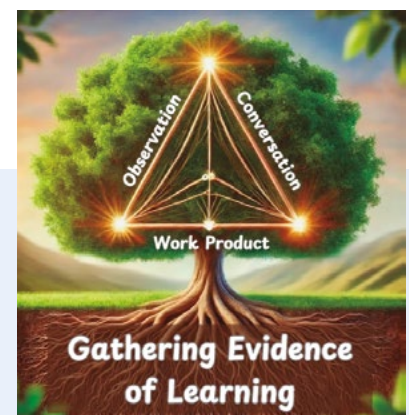
Ontario's *Growing Success* document supports this triangulated assessment.

> Educators must critically assess AI-generated content to ensure these tools support diverse perspectives and cultural responsiveness.

For example, I once saw a quiet student take charge of a group project, demonstrating problem-solving skills that wouldn't have appeared in a written report. Similarly, casual one-on-one check-ins – where I ask, "Why did you make this choice?" – often reveal deeper understanding than formal assessments.

AI, Equity and Cultural Awareness in Education

AI offers powerful tools for differentiation and accessibility, but its implementation must be intentional and equity focused. Adaptive AI platforms adjust content difficulty, supporting English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. Features like real-time translation and speech-to-text remove barriers, fostering greater participation.

Using AI to support Expectations-based Assessment (EBA) focuses on rebuilding educator confidence by emphasizing curriculum understanding, co-creating rubrics and embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into classrooms. AI can help educators develop EBA tools that support process-oriented assessment, ensuring all students can demonstrate growth in ways that align with their strengths.

However, AI is not neutral – it reflects biases in its data. Educators must critically assess AI-generated content to ensure these tools support diverse perspectives and cultural responsiveness.

### Suggestions for Administrators: Promoting ethical AI use

- **Recognize bias in AI tools** – Review AI-generated content for bias and ensure diverse representation.
- **Integrate global perspectives** – Use AI to expand cultural inclusivity, not reinforce dominant narratives.
- **Ensure ethical use** – Teach students to use AI as a support tool rather than a substitute for critical thinking.

When used intentionally, AI can enhance accessibility, differentiation and equity in learning environments.

Supporting Educators in the Transition

Shifting from product-driven to process-oriented assessment requires educators to rethink planning and grading. This transition moves away from traditional data-driven reporting toward a more nuanced, qualitative approach. For many, this shift feels like a departure from established norms, making systemic support valuable. Administrators can support this transition by offering practical resources, such as templates for documenting observations and conversations, simplifying implementation. Time for collaboration allows teachers to share strategies and adapt practices. These supports make the shift more manageable, helping teachers focus on engagement, problem-solving and interpersonal skills, rather than solely measurable outcomes.

Recognition also plays a role. Acknowledging the challenges and successes of adopting process-based approaches reinforces their value. When administrators highlight these efforts in professional meetings
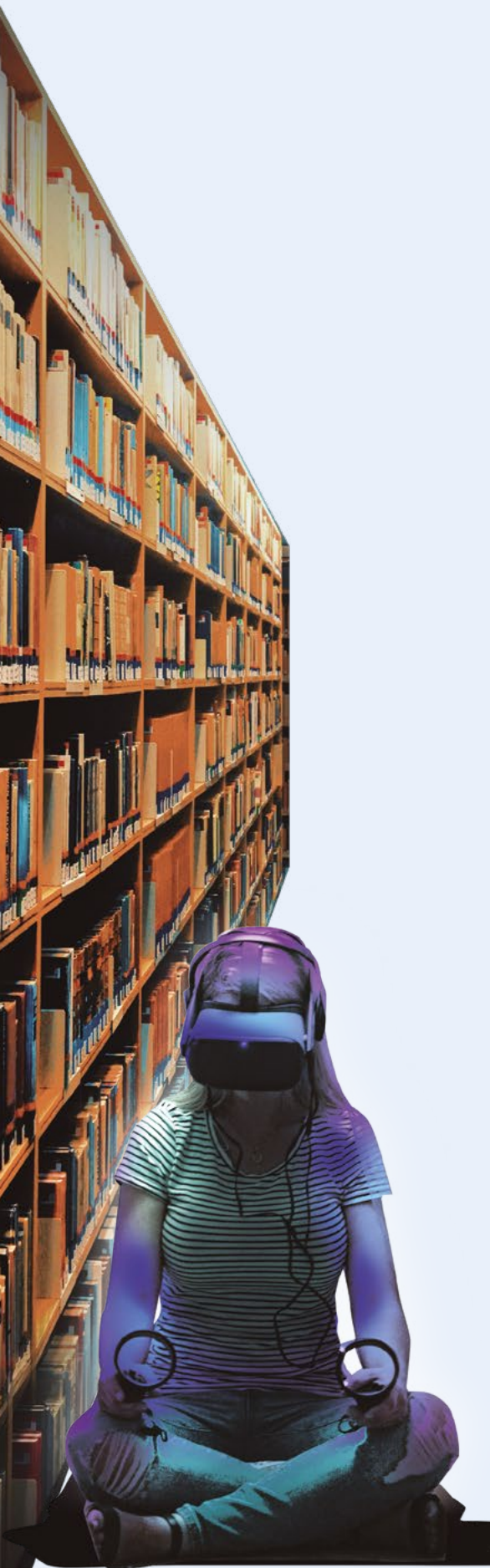
or formal feedback, they promote a culture where relational, process-focused learning is visible and prioritized. By providing resources, fostering collaboration and recognizing teacher efforts, administrators can help shift classrooms toward more inclusive and meaningful learning experiences.

Process and Application: Education in action

Process-oriented education extends beyond individual classrooms or moments – it encourages a mindset that values the steps students take to learn, grow and apply knowledge. By focusing on the journey rather than just the destination, administrators can help shift education from a transactional exchange to a transformative experience where students actively engage in their learning.

One effective approach in my business class has been encouraging students to explore entrepreneurship by developing start-up concepts with a focus on process over product. Assessment emphasized documenting brainstorming, market research and feedback, supported by process journals and one-on-one conferences with reflective questions such as, "What surprised you?" or "What might you try differently next time?" This approach fostered resilience, adaptability and critical thinking, empowering students to take ownership of their learning and see the project as an opportunity to grow, rather than just a task to complete.

In the broader K–12 context, process-oriented learning takes many forms. A Grade 6 student engaged in collaborative inquiry learns to ask meaningful questions, synthesize information and present findings creatively. A high school student earning 30 Your Way credits might personalize their educational journey through co-op placements, independent study or volunteering. These examples highlight how process-based learning cultivates self-direction and adaptability, essential traits for lifelong success.

The Role of Administrators in Driving Process-oriented Education

Administrators drive this shift by fostering flexibility, collaboration and qualitative learning. Key strategies include

- **Encouraging inquiry-based learning** – Supporting projects where students ask, explore and reflect ensures engagement and deep understanding.
- **Providing professional development** – Training teachers in process-oriented assessment, such as triangulation, enhances consistency and confidence.
- **Recognizing effort and growth** – Celebrating learning journeys through journals, presentations or projects reinforces application over grades.

Process-oriented learning embeds inquiry, reflection and application across programs and grades. When students engage in hands-on projects, community work or collaborative inquiry, they develop confidence and real-world skills. By championing this shift, administrators create an education model where learning is an experience, preparing students for success in a changing world.

The Role of Dissonance in Deep Learning

Dissonance is not a barrier to learning – it's a foundation for growth. When students face challenges and navigate discomfort, they build essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and resilience. However, this requires a shift in perspective, framing mistakes and dissonance as opportunities for learning rather than failures.

Carol Dweck's (2006) research on growth mindset underscores the value of effort and persistence over perfection. By embracing this mindset, educators can help students see challenges as opportunities to grow, fostering adaptability and a commitment to learning.

Administrators can support this shift by

- offering professional development (PD) on growth mindset and reflective questioning
- providing resources that encourage process-based assessment and
- recognizing the importance of productive struggle as part of learning.

When administrators promote these practices, they empower teachers to cultivate resilient, lifelong learners who see value in both success and setbacks.

▮ Personal Takeaways: Lessons from the classroom

1. Recognize that Student Success is Non-linear
Growth often includes setbacks, and learning occurs through failure as much as success. Supporting students means guiding them to embrace these moments as part of the process.

2. Document Observations and Conversations Like Assessments
Treat informal moments with the same professional rigour as formal assessments. Use an EBA rubric to consistently structure and record insights.

3. Embrace Dissonance in Teaching
Trying new strategies and adapting across subjects is key to discovering what works. It's okay to feel uncertain – it's part of professional growth.

4. Design for Universal Accessibility
Co-created learning goals, low floors, high ceilings, wide walls and multiple points of entry embody UDL. This aligns seamlessly with process-based education, fostering inclusive and meaningful learning experiences.

By focusing on these principles, we can build classrooms that value the journey as much as the destination, helping students and educators thrive together.

▮ Redefining Success in the AI Era

The rise of AI has prompted a re-evaluation of education, highlighting both the challenges of product-driven assessment and the potential of process-based approaches to cultivate curiosity, growth and resilience.

Educators must prepare students for an evolving world by prioritizing skills over outputs. By embracing triangulated assessment and supporting the shift from SIPs to SLPs, administrators can help create learning environments that meet students' immediate needs, while equipping them for future success.

This transformation is neither simple nor quick, but it is essential. With strong systems-level support, educators can foster meaningful, inclusive learning experiences that redefine success – not just for students, but for the entire education community. Together, we can build schools where process and growth take precedence, preparing learners for an unpredictable future. ▲

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Mentoring New Administrators

A multi-tiered approach to success

By Eryn H.T. Smit

Illustration by Adrian Forrow

Like many school districts across Ontario, the Lambton Kent District School Board (LKDSB) has experienced a significant amount of transition among its school leaders over the last five years. Many of our principals and vice-principals were in their first two years in the role and lacked a formal mentoring program that would provide training and build professional networks, and new school leaders identified isolation, a lack of onboarding and reduced opportunities for networking as key challenges as they transitioned into their role.

These challenges increased the stress placed on new administrators, so OPC District leadership in the LKDSB initiated conversations with the board's senior administration to begin developing effective supports for these school leaders. The end result is the LKDSB's New Administrator Mentoring Program, a multi-tiered approach to mentoring for all P/VPs in their first two years in the role.

Background

The LKDSB historically provided new P/VPs with a formal mentoring program, following traditional structures for mentoring. This model consisted of one-to-one matches between experienced and new administrators, who met primarily in formal release settings to discuss a variety of aspects of the role. Many of the connections made between mentor and mentee in this setting were invaluable to the development of leaders in the board, building a common language of operations for a generation of administrators.

This program faltered in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic and ceased to exist altogether by 2020. Challenges observed included difficulty finding mentors, a significant turnover of personnel in administration and shifting priorities at the senior table. While many of the mentor-mentee relationships were positive and beneficial, the challenge of creating successful matches in a geographically large district was always present.

With COVID-19 becoming the "new normal" for school districts across Ontario, the LKDSB revisited the idea of creating a mentoring program to support the many administrators who had transitioned into their role over the most disruptive course of the pandemic. As the project unfolded, a 2023 equity audit confirmed the need for a mentoring model that created a safe and supportive environment for school leaders from equity-deserving and rights-bearing groups. The district's mentoring model needed to have embedded flexibility to respond to emerging needs and challenges.

Mentoring Supports School Leaders

Mentoring is widely seen as an effective strategy to support new administrators as they transition into the P/VP role. Yirci and Kocabas (2010) note that pre-service and in-service education for administrators is typically theoretical in nature, with application of concepts coming with placement into the role. In their research, the value of mentoring relationships to help new administrators navigate these challenges is profound: "Simply, good principals are made, not born."

Alsbury and Hackmann's (2006) analysis of a state-funded mentoring program for nov-

> Current research on the impact of effective mentoring programs on equity-deserving and rights-bearing groups shows positive results.

ice administrators confirmed the importance of leveraging mentor relationships to translate educational theory into practice, using the increasingly scarce resource of time on critical learning and skill development, and selecting mentors who will not only perform at a high capacity but will benefit professionally from the experience as well.

Successful mentoring programs specifically designed for P/VPs contain several key elements including socialization, networking and the opportunity for professional reflection and introspection (Alsbury and Hackmann 2006). While onboarding with operational practices and expectations is not identified in this research as a beneficial outcome, that remains a goal of the LKDSB's New Administrator Mentoring Program in addition to the above elements.

Finally, current research on the impact of effective mentoring programs on equity-deserving and rights-bearing groups shows positive results. Dobbin and Kalev (2016) found that mentoring programs significantly increase diversity in leadership roles and foster strong retention rates. Further, they found that aspiring leaders who identify as cisgender and white demonstrated greater comfort than leaders from equity-deserving groups in establishing their own informal mentoring networks. The creation of formal networking programs greatly reduced this disparity.

From Research into Practice

Considering the potential of mentoring to benefit all participants and lead to a positive impact on the board, a revisioning of the LKDSB's defunct mentoring program was a meaningful endeavour. Our new administrators clearly needed a well-planned structure in which to build their professional network, access new points of view on topics, receive training on critical initiatives and develop their operational capacity beyond the theoretical framework of pre-service education.

The LKDSB's New Administrator Mentoring Program is the direct result of strong collaboration between local OPC leadership and the board's senior administration. While it is somewhat uncommon for a district to share responsibility for leadership development between the employer and a non-union professional association, both groups felt that collaborating to support new administrators was mutually beneficial. The board and the OPC agreed that forming a positive bond between

administrators and their professional association was of long-term value to the organization.

Keys to the success of the New Administrator Mentoring Program include intentional thought around structure and content. One of the most significant challenges of a traditional 1:1 mentoring program is successfully matching mentors and mentees. While many of these matches are positive and lead to achieving program goals, there is little margin for error. A successful match works while an unsuccessful match doesn't, and the middle ground can be hard to find.

To account for this drop-off resulting from mismatched participants, we chose to employ a pod approach to mentoring. Rather than matching individuals with each other, we focused on identifying a cluster of strong and experienced leaders in both elementary and secondary panels, then arranged them in mentor pairs. Each mentor pair was then matched with five to seven mentees, forming a mentor pod. In this setting, mentees have multiple built-in opportunities for connection and learning from their mentors and from each other. Mentees were never mentored by supervisors, and they were clustered wherever possible by panel and geographical proximity.

This structure allowed us to more effectively manage the sheer volume of new administrators who were eligible for the program. In the first year of the New Administrator Mentoring Program, 33 school leaders in the LKDSB were in their first two years in the role. A 1:1 mentoring program would have required almost two-thirds of all administrators in the district to be enrolled, a number that was wholly unsustainable. The pod approach reduced that number significantly.

Three Modes of Meeting

Utilizing the pod approach to mentoring, we focused on three main phases of the program: formal, informal and virtual learning sessions. Two formal release days were set aside in the school calendar for formal mentoring, ensuring that all mentors and mentees could attend these sessions together. Release was funded through the board's senior administration's leadership development portfolio, and the agenda for each day was developed collaboratively between the OPC and senior administration.

The goal of our formal release days was to focus participants' learning on key priorities for the board, and included equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) leadership; investigations; safe schools and leading healthy schools. These full-day workshops included guest speakers from within and outside the board, breakout time for mentors and mentees, and presentations by the director and superintendents where applicable.

The second phase of the program was informal mentoring, in settings designed to build and develop participants' professional networks. These sessions took place four times over the school year, with each mentor pod asked to schedule after-school sessions at local dining establishments, with dates blocked off firmly in participant calendars. Food was provided at each of these sessions through the OPC's System Investment Fund (SIP), and gatherings lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Informal mentoring meetings started with a check-in time to see how everyone was doing, then transitioned to agenda items created by the mentees. Mentors were not expected to act as the experts in the room in these settings, although their experience and knowledge were certainly identified as assets when applicable. More importantly, all participants were given the opportunity to speak to questions and issues raised, and possible pathways to the solution were identified.

The final mode of the New Administrator Mentoring Program was virtual mentoring. This mode focused on building participants' operational knowledge through a variety of departmental presentations. Ideas for presentations were generated by the planning team but were also gathered in a Microsoft Forms questionnaire distributed to mentees prior to the virtual sessions. It was clear in the planning of our virtual sessions that the needs of mentees were key to creating sessions that were meaningful and applicable.

We held virtual mentoring sessions five times throughout the year, each consisting of two 30-minute presentations. Unlike formal and informal sessions, virtual mentoring sessions were open to all administrators in the LKDSB and were recorded in Microsoft Teams to build a resource library for those unable to attend. Topics included the attendance support program, tragic event response, role of social workers, generating aspen reports, childcare partnerships, secondary and elementary digital resources and more.

Measuring the Impact

The LKDSB's New Administrator Mentoring Program has successfully met the needs of new P/VPs in several ways. First, it filled an existing gap in the board's Leadership and Development portfolio by creating a mentoring program for new administrators. It connected school leaders across the district and across both panels with experienced administrators and colleagues new to the role, developing a network of communication in which they can share experiences, find solutions and grow together in their role.

Second, the program developed a mechanism for sharing operational details with all administrators through the virtual mentoring sessions and resulting digital resource library on key operational topics. All P/VPs in the district have access to the library of topics to reference.
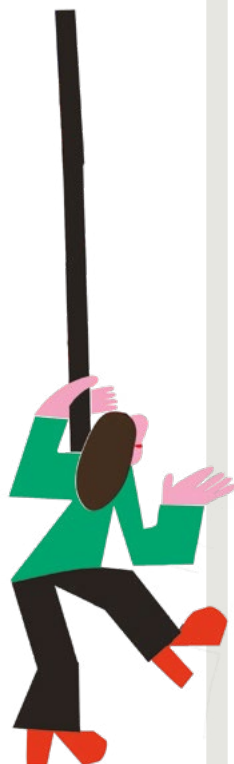
This mentoring program maintained a consistent focus on leading equitable schools, which, although it was not a priority goal articulated at the outset of the program, is an imperative element of serving our diverse schools and communities in Ontario's publicly funded education system. A variety of speakers from within and outside of our district spoke consistently to this topic in our formal and virtual sessions.

Finally, high levels of participation indicate that this program was valuable to participants. Attendance at all sessions was very high, even considering the challenge of finding supply administrators to cover more than 40 administrators attending full-day release sessions.

Feedback from participants at the conclusion of the program supports these findings. Mentors and mentees gave an average score of 4.21/5.00 for the question "Overall, how satisfied are you with the New Administrator Mentoring Program?" Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction on each element of the program, with the Figure 1 graphic showing very high levels of satisfaction for each element.

Responses to the question "What was the most helpful aspect of the New Administrator Mentoring Program for your development as a leader in the LKDSB?" focused primarily on the relational aspects of the program, as shown in Figure 2.

Finally, participants were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the use of pods rather than a 1:1 format, and the responses on this topic were overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 3). It was clear from participant feedback that the New Administrator Mentoring Program successfully achieved its objectives.

Figure 1: Participant feedback measuring value of mentoring elements on a five-point scale. Dark blue represents the percentage of participants who derived very high value.

Frequency of Meetings
Informal Mentoring Gatherings
Formal (full-day) Mentoring Gatherings
Virtual Mentoring Gatherings
Meals and Materials Provided
Planning and Organization of all Gatherings

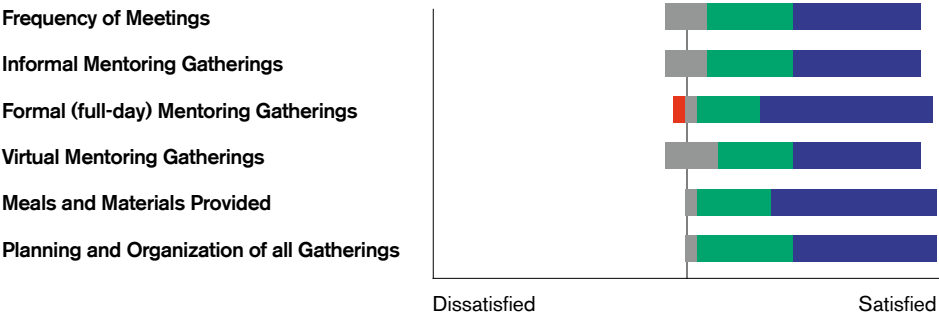Dissatisfied   Satisfied

Figure 2: A word cloud that identifies the most helpful aspects of the LKDSB New Administrator Mentoring Program. The larger font sizes indicate that several participants submitted those words.

Figure 3: A word cloud that identifies the benefits of pods for the mentoring program. The larger font sizes indicate that several participants submitted those words.
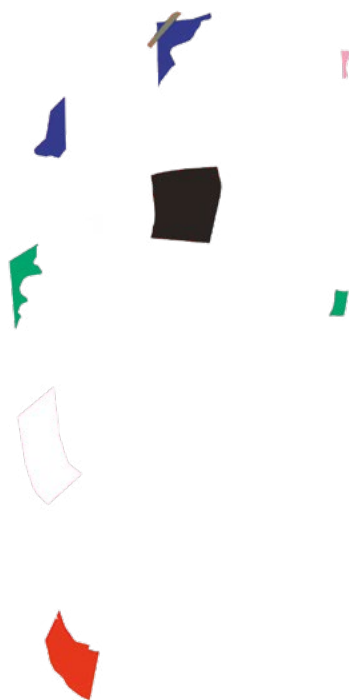
Moving Forward

Now in its third year, the LKDSB's New Administrator Mentoring Program continues to meet the needs of new school administrators as a collaborative endeavour between the board and OPC District 10. The superintendent responsible for leadership and development commented, "This partnership is reflective of the relationship the LKDSB senior team and the local OPC have in encouraging and welcoming new leaders into the role."

The LKDSB's grassroots approach to mentorship can be replicated in districts across the province, helping build capacity in mentors and mentees alike. Whether intended to increase operational knowledge, build networks of support for P/VPs or provide clear and intentional support for school leaders from equity-deserving and rights-bearing groups, mentoring for new administrators signals a strong intention on the part of system leadership that healthy leadership development matters.

Mentoring is a key element of onboarding P/VPs into their roles, helping them build and develop professional networks, communicate key board priorities and deepen participants' operational knowledge along the way. ▲

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Mark Your Calendar

June

24
Affinity Group Meeting – South Asian Administrators Group

July

2–31
Equitable and Inclusive Schools Qualification Program
Registration deadline: June 18

3
Special Education for Administrators Qualification Program
Registration deadline: June 19

6–8
Supervisory Officer's Qualification Program
Module 1 – The Personal Perspective
Module 3 – The Provincial Perspective
Registration deadline: June 8

7–8
Leadership Horizons: Vice-principal perspectives
Registration deadline: June 23

8
Mentoring Qualification Program
Registration deadline: June 24

9–11
Supervisory Officer's Qualification Program
Module 2 – The Leadership and Organizational Change Perspective
Module 4 – The System Perspective
Registration deadline: June 8

21
Principal's Development Course
Module 1 – Principal Legal Duties and Responsibilities (compulsory)
Registration deadline: July 7

August

11–12
The Equity Leadership Journey:

Self-reflection and facilitating courageous conversations
Registration deadline: July 21

19–22
Four Free Workshops – Navigating Leadership Transitions
Your First Month with OPC (for new Members), Setting up a Documentation System, Navigating the Transition from Vice-principal to Principalship (for new principals) and Making Time for Relationship Building

September

30
Education Law Qualification Program
Registration deadline: September 16

October

23–25
General Assembly Meeting

November

13–14
OPCLeadLearn Annual Conference
Registration deadline: October 30

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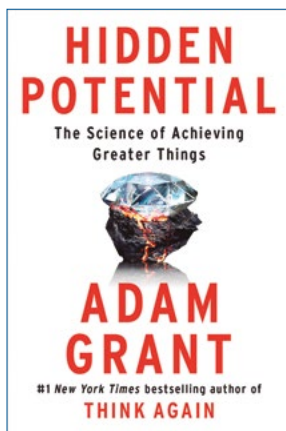# OPC Lead Learn

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Hidden Potential: The science of achieving greater things

By Adam Grant
Penguin Publishing Group
ISBN: 9780593653142
Reviewed by Dr. Kingsley G. Hurlington

Throughout our educational journeys, we've all experienced the transformative power of someone recognizing our potential. Whether it was parents, teachers or other caring adults, their belief in our strengths and abilities set the foundation of the success we manifest today. Most likely, you chose a career in education and educational leadership because you believe deeply in the potential of others. However true that is, it is essential to remember that "talent is equally distributed but opportunity is not." That means there is so much potential that remains hidden and untapped in your educational teams and the students under your guidance. How can you go about locating and operationalizing that potential?

Renowned psychologist Adam Grant's book *Hidden Potential: The science of achieving greater things* provides an invaluable road map to uncovering diamonds in the rough. It offers a plan to convert talent into capacity. Through powerful storytelling – including personal experiences – Grant adeptly illustrates the key qualities essential for success.

It is not clear if Grant intended to create a guide for educational leadership; however, each section of the book provides critical insight into the work of educational structures, strategies and pedagogical approaches. He reminds us that learning is uncomfortable and requires courage, being kind means giving honest feedback and perfectionism is fantasy. He highlights that practice must be fun, growth is non-linear and requires upward spirals, and communities of practices empower rapid growth. The book challenges educational tropes and highlights best practices in classrooms, teams and interviews.

These concepts are vital reminders for us as learners, teachers and educational leaders. Each day we face students who are seemingly resistant to attending school/class, or educators who resist engaging in meaningful work. If we keep in mind that they may be struggling with some (or all) of these elements, that can help us to be more empathetic and purposeful in our actions as we support them.

It is always easiest to recognize hidden potential in those whose lives and experiences mirror our own. Grant rightly reminds us that those who are marginalized in ways that are different from our lived experiences are also capable of exceptional potential. In fact, their potential may be even greater, given our blind spots. Recognizing potential when it manifests in unfamiliar ways can be challenging, but we must remember that a supportive community can transform adversity and disparity into strength – the very essence of resilience.

Our core mission as education leaders is rooted in aspirational hope. We cannot engage in this work effectively without acknowledging that we cannot journey very far alone. By recognizing and nurturing the hidden potential of others, we elevate collective efficacy, foster honour and respect, and bolster their willingness to work harder toward shared goals.

As Grant poignantly states, "Too many people spend their lives being custodians of the past instead of stewards of the future." This book serves as a powerful reminder that uncovering hidden potential ensures that we remain firmly committed to and focused on creating a better tomorrow for all. ▲

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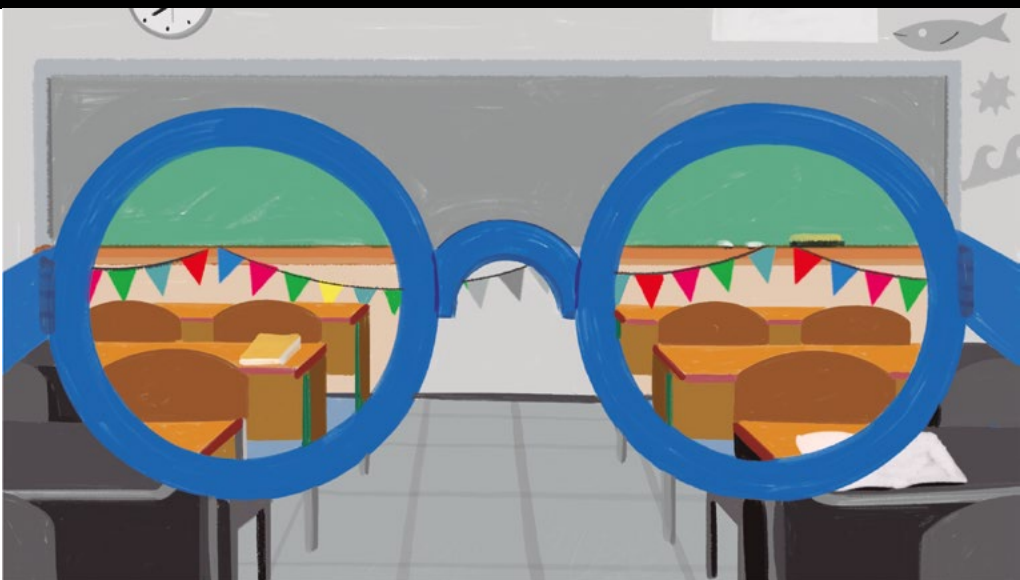
From Newcomer to VP

How I lead through an equity and anti-oppressive lens

As an elementary school vice-principal (VP), I am dedicated to creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment where every student is seen, heard, valued, respected and empowered to thrive. Leading through an equity and anti-oppressive lens is not only a moral imperative, but a crucial aspect of my role as a VP that requires ongoing self-reflection, courage and commitment.

As a Jamaican-born Black male educator, I recognize the historical and systemic barriers that have prevented marginalized communities from accessing equitable education, support and resources. I am a product of the Ontario education system in the '80s and '90s, and my family and I endured the obstacles and injustices of that period. Though my mother argued against it, I was held back a year when we moved to Canada because the school felt that the education system in Jamaica was not substantial compared to Ontario. I endured many hardships in a new space with very few people who looked like me and spoke like me, but I never gave up. By the end of Grade 4, I was at a Grade 6 math level. I received the French (a completely new language to me) award in Grade 6, the music award in Grade 8, and many other academic and leadership recognitions throughout my education.

As a VP, I continually work to dismantle biases and barriers for our youngest learners. This self-awareness informs my leadership and enables me to create spaces for authentic dialogue and growth.

I prioritize student voice and agency, recognizing that they are the experts in their own lived experiences. At my school, I run a student leadership committee comprised of students who are often underserved within the system, under-represented in many ways and in need of mentorship and guidance. Through restorative circles, student engagement and student voice initiatives, I help students have a say in shaping our school community. This empowers them to take ownership of their learning and become active participants in creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

I work to identify and dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate inequity; for example, I lead the combatting hate and race committee, where we examine our school's policies, practices and curriculum through an equity lens. I collaborate with teachers, staff and community members to develop strategies that address disparities and promote inclusivity. By acknowledging and confronting these barriers, we can create a more just and equitable learning environment. ▲

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