

WINTER 2026 VOL. 28 NO. 2

The Register

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



Raise Your Roof

Seven steps to leadership in education

▶ SURVEY DATA ▶ CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS ▶ EQUITABLE LEADERSHIP RECRUITMENT



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Cover Illustration by Drew Shannon

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“Sir, What’s Your Background?”

Why equitable leadership recruitment matters



I was fortunate to grow up in a multicultural community in Scarborough, a large suburb just east of Toronto. Walking through my neighbourhood,

you could hear different languages spoken and smell a wide range of cuisines wafting from every home. My own family is from Trinidad. My parents spoke with strong Caribbean accents, and every Sunday we gathered around a spicy pot of pelau (a traditional one-pot rice dish).

Like many educators, I grew up loving school. I attended every day and found meaningful connections with most of my teachers. I valued athletics, enjoyed science and took on leadership roles – all of which set me on the path to becoming the principal I am today. What I didn’t recognize at the time, however, was that from kindergarten through my OAC year, I had **no administrators, no elementary teachers** and only **four high school teachers** who were racialized.

Our school staff simply didn’t reflect the diversity of the students sitting in the classrooms.

Academics and extracurriculars came easily to me, and I was fortunate to have a strong family network that encouraged me, but that wasn’t true for everyone. Many students in the 1990s struggled to find purpose, connection and belonging in school. Graduation success rates hovered around 70 per cent (Ontario Ministry of Education 2005). Fortunately, since then, many school boards have been intentional about improving programming and implementing equitable hiring practices to better reflect the communities they serve. One result of this is that graduation rates have risen dramatically

since the turn of the century (Ontario Ministry of Education 2025).

When I became a teacher, I quickly noticed that I was one of very few racialized staff members. I made it my mission to connect with all students – but especially those from marginalized groups who, like me years before, rarely saw themselves reflected in their teachers. I coached teams, led leadership groups and opened my classroom to anyone who needed a space to belong.

I’ll never forget one parent who approached me at a parent-teacher interview. She wanted to thank me because her son – who had never liked school before – had come home excited about his new gym teacher. He told her that I was kind and that I “looked like him.” Like me, he had gone all the way to high school before having a teacher who shared a similar background.

Years later, as an administrator, I became purposeful in my hiring practices and programming choices. I wanted to ensure that my schools created meaningful connections with all students. As my school communities became more diverse, students would sometimes approach me shyly in the hallway and ask, “Sir, what’s your background?” When I told them I am Trini – a person of Trinidadian descent – their faces would light up. They’d proudly tell me their families were also from the Caribbean and followed up with the all-important question: “Curry chicken or chicken curry?” (Of course, the answer is *curry chicken* – if you know, you know!)

These simple exchanges fostered belonging and made school a more comfortable, welcoming place to learn.

The Ministry of Education recognizes equity as a core leadership competency within the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF). Equitable hiring practices have helped identify and promote more leaders from equity-deserving groups into administrative roles across the province. According to the Ontario Education Equity and Governance Secretariat (2017–2022), diverse school leadership contributes to measurable improvements in both student engagement and achievement. Students from racialized backgrounds perform better and report a stronger sense of belonging when they see leaders who share and understand their lived experiences.

Today, as president of the OPC, I am proud to lead an organization committed to social justice, anti-oppression and anti-colonialism. A vibrant, representative membership is at the heart of our [Strategic Direction to 2030](#). It is imperative that we all recognize that **identity matters**. We must continue to recruit school staff and promote leaders who reflect the communities they serve. ▲



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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 October 2025, the OPC held our annual President's Dinner. Many of our Honorary Life Members were in attendance.



President Jeff Maharaj presented Honorary Life Membership to Alison Osborne, our 2024–25 Provincial President.



Honorary Life Membership was presented to Peggy Sweeney for 25 years of service to the OPC. (L-R) Peggy Sweeney, Allyson Otten and Sarah Colman.



The OPC Outstanding Contribution to Education Award was presented to Abhi Ahluwalia, founder and CEO of unlearn, an organization dedicated to dismantling barriers to equity. (L-R) Jeff Maharaj, Abhi Ahluwalia and Amy Johnson.



In November 2025, we held our annual Principal's Day at Queen's Park. Our Board of Directors met with 25 MPPs from all four parties.



Dreams Delayed Action Plan

Why it matters now

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) published the [*Dreams Delayed: Addressing Systemic Anti-Black Racism and Discrimination in Ontario's Public Education System*](#) Action Plan on March 27, 2025. This plan outlines some of the history of anti-Black racism in Ontario schools, the ongoing crisis, legal rights of Black students to an education free from discrimination and the responsibilities of all duty holders to take ownership and accountability for the necessary changes.

What is different about this plan, and why does it matter now? Over the years, numerous reports have been published with concrete data and stories from Black communities about their experiences in education. The *Dreams Delayed* Action Plan builds on what we have heard in the past by highlighting the ongoing harm and negative experiences of Black students in schools, and also brings attention to the historical [*Compendium of Recommendations*](#). We now have a re-

newed set of actions for implementation. How do we deepen our understanding of the issues – the “why” behind the change needed – so that we are learning and leading for intentional and impactful changes as school leaders?

As always, we are all on a continuum of learning. Some are just beginning, while others are further along in the critical reflections and understanding of how we are upholding the current system. To support implementation of the *Dreams Delayed* Action Plan, the PL department has created a virtual space for ongoing conversations about what we are **thinking** and **doing** to make a difference for Black students and families.

[Leadership Conversation Series 2025–26](#)

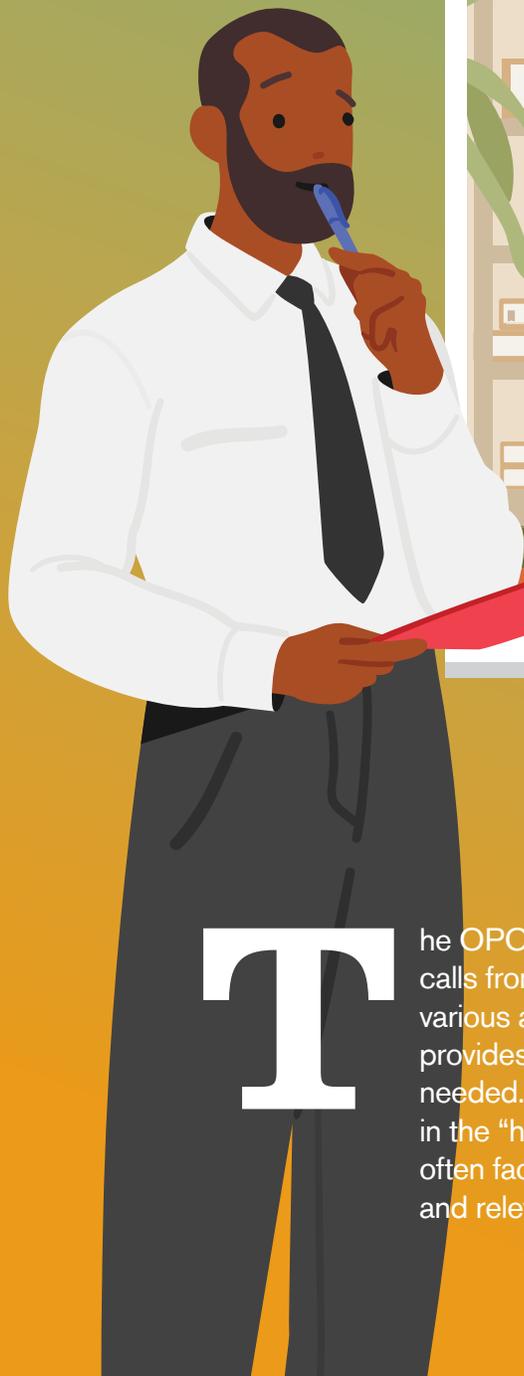
This six-part discussion series will unpack the *Dreams Delayed* Action Plan through the lens of equity and inclusion, focusing on concrete steps for leadership in schools. Each session will

engage special guests and participants in one area of the plan, focusing on how we can work together to disrupt systemic barriers and support inclusive learning environments. Together, participants will explore strategies, share practices and build collective capacity to move the plan from vision to action.

Meaningful change is sustained through ongoing conversations and critical reflection that challenges us to consider perspectives and experiences that are not our own. We hope these short but ongoing conversations will ignite other connections and confidence to bring more dialogue to school leadership spaces. As the evidence shows, change does not happen all at once. Through sharing, listening and reflecting together, we can continue to take intentional actions, however small they may seem, knowing that we have not done enough and there is still a long way to go. ▲

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WORKING PRODUCTIVELY AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE



T

he OPC's Protective Services Team (PST) receives calls from principals and vice-principals regarding various aspects of their professional duties, and provides advice, representation and legal support as needed. Using available data, we can identify trends in the "hot topics" and legal issues our Members most often face, and determine the most appropriate advice and relevant professional learning.

Manoeuvring through the turbulent waters of P/VP conflict

By the Protective Services Team

ATM



Over more than two decades, those trends have ebbed and flowed, with some case categories showing a steady increase over time. One area in which we have seen a consistent increase is that of conflicts between members of the same administrative team – usually between a principal and a vice-principal. Specifically, one party expresses a feeling or provides a tangible example of a fractured relationship between themselves

and the other party. These fractured relationships can and often do lead to feelings of hopelessness and resentment, ultimately resulting in a dysfunctional administrative team. This article will provide an outline of the most common conflicts that arise between principals and vice-principals, identify sources of such conflict and, most importantly, offer strategies for managing the conflict when it arises.

The statutory duties of a principal are clearly outlined and described in detail in legislation, most notably in the *Education Act*, Section 265, and O. Reg 298: Operation of Schools – General. In contrast, despite their unquestionably significant role, vice-principals have few statutory duties that are explicitly defined. Essentially, a vice-principal's role is as follows: 1) to substitute for the principal in the principal's absence, whether that absence is planned or unplanned, and 2) to perform duties as assigned by the principal. A vice-principal is also a principal-in-training. A principal is a supervisor and mentor (formal or informal) for the vice-principal. These multiple roles are inherent in the respective positions, but the interconnectedness and interdependency of such roles can often create significant ambiguity and confusion. Limited job-embedded training is available, for both principals and vice-principals, further impacting the fine balance between two highly educated and qualified professionals.

Managing conflict is an important and inevitable aspect of school leadership. Each day, school leaders are called upon to

mediate disputes, intervene in arguments and, sometimes, intervene quite literally in times of conflict. Conflict management is, however, particularly challenging when the conflict exists and manifests between a principal and a vice-principal on the same administrative team. These conflicts have their genesis in numerous and varied issues and tend to fall into one or more of several categories.

Intergenerational Context

- Stems from differing values, communication styles and work expectations between supervisors and their subordinates from different age groups
- Results in different world views, priorities and paradigms due to relative age and life experience
- Involves differences in how generations prefer to communicate (instant messaging vs phone calls), approach work-life integration (traditional, often lengthy workdays vs flexible schedules) and handle technology (comfort with email, virtual meeting platforms, shared documents, apps, AI)
- May lead to tensions, negative assumptions and misunderstandings.

Differing Levels of Experiences

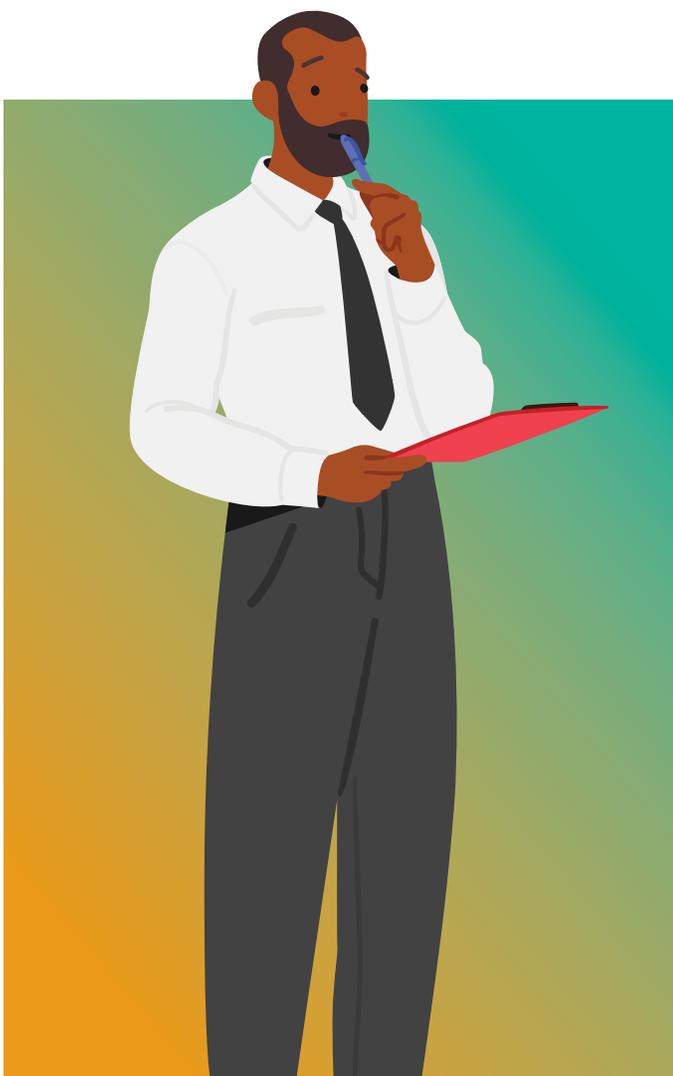
- Includes time in education, but can also include exposure to learning and growth opportunities
- Influences the length of time taken to enter the vice-principal or principal promotion track, including personal choice, family status and availability of support and mentoring
- May result in varied interpretations about which types of experiences are valued more than others and who is more experienced than whom.

Differing Leadership Styles

- Examples include autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire and transformational, which can each be affected by personality styles such as the visionary, the mentor, the protector, the inspector and the dynamo
- Can create challenges when the principal and vice-principal practise different leadership styles
- Can also affect conflict management styles such as collaborating, avoiding, competitive, accommodating and compromising.

Errors and Omissions (of one administrator, as identified by the other)

- Performance deficits – whether perceived or real – can be identified, formally or informally
- Assertions can be made that one party has been negligent in the performance of their essential duties, and such alleged



Conflict management is, however, particularly challenging when the conflict exists and manifests between a principal and a vice-principal on the same administrative team.

negligence may be reported to higher authorities such as the appropriate supervisory officer

- Misconduct can be alleged by one party against the other, often leading to formal investigations by human resources personnel
- Complaints of workplace harassment or discrimination can be filed, resulting in one party being assigned to home, with pay, pending the outcome of an investigation.

When a conflict arises, whether in general or between two administrators, we suggest the parties take a moment to view the situation through different perspectives; assess the situation as carefully, completely and objectively as possible; review and reflect on their respective roles and responsibilities; and, ultimately, act professionally, keeping in mind the best interests of the students, staff and school community. Giving and taking direction, consulting and making decisions, and respecting authority while being prepared to act unilaterally when necessary, are all integral steps in skilfully and safely manoeuvring through the turbulent waters of conflict.

As school leaders and agents of the district school board, both principals and vice-principals owe a duty of loyalty to the school board as their employer. Under the common law, employees in any organization must serve the employer with good faith and must not intentionally do anything to cause harm to the employing organization. However, both principals and vice-principals find themselves accountable to multiple partners representing varied interests, and they must manage the conflicting interests of all members of the school community, including themselves.

While it is true that principals and vice-principals hold the same basic and additional qualifications as required for their respective roles, vice-principals must understand and accept their subordinate position under the authority and supervision of their principal. The *Education Act* and its regulations are clear: ultimate authority and final accountability rest with the principal. Distributive leadership, shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making are all excellent practices with potential to foster strong leadership teams and positive working and learning environments for all involved. However, when the proverbial dust settles, the principal bears the ultimate responsibility for the operation of the school, for the safety and well-being of those who enter its walls and for adherence to policy, procedure and law.



Moving Past the Conflict

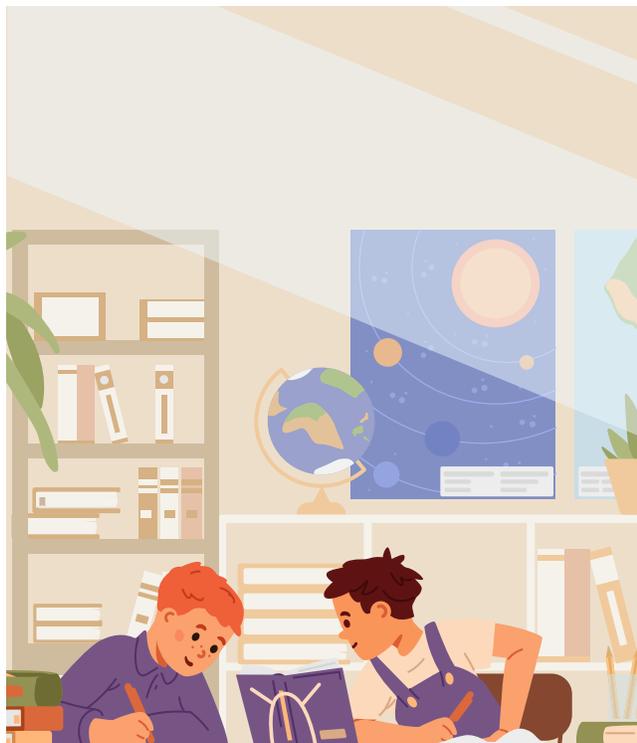
Success in managing conflict and successfully manoeuvring the daily currents of a school or office will depend on the parties' willingness to learn, develop, internalize and consistently employ a variety of strategies. The following are some strategies to help principals and vice-principals avoid conflict and/or manage conflict when it arises in the workplace, particularly between them. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but it includes some important advice.

Prepare entry plans together

An entry plan is a strategic road map for an individual beginning a new role. Drawing one up for the new hire should ideally be done collaboratively between both the principal and vice-principal, regardless of who is newest to the school/site. The entry plan forms the basis for the discussion and development of growth plans, career pathways and school improvement. It can allow for shared vision building, proactive and supportive discussions, and an opportunity to address discrepancies in philosophy and practice at an early stage.

Delineate roles and responsibilities of the principal and vice-principal

This delineation should not stem from a unilateral, "top down" decision by the principal. Rather, it should involve a meaningful discussion aimed at finding a symbiotic and mutually beneficial distribution of tasks and responsibilities between principal and vice-principal that ultimately enhances school operations and student learning. Strengths, experiences, interests, areas of performance needs and opportunities for growth should all be considered when developing role delineation charts. While distributive leadership is encouraged, the delineation of tasks, responsibilities and duties should always be done in a manner that considers the principal's ultimate responsibility and accountability.



Develop an agreed communication plan for the administrative team

This plan should ideally take into consideration the differing communication styles and preferences of all administrators involved. The plan should cover things such as daily operations, communication with families and caregivers, management of student discipline, supervision of staff performance and conduct, information management and emergent issues. Communication plans between the principal and vice-principal should also consider how information is shared with and solicited from the rest of the school community, including students, families, staff, senior officials and education partners.

Adopt a collaborative “win together, lose together” mindset

This is where principals and vice-principals face success and failure together, emphasizing unity and mutual support rather than divisiveness and individual blame. Where practicable and appropriate, decisions should be communicated from “the administrative team,” credit for successes should be shared by all, and responsibility for failures and missteps should serve as a learning opportunity rather than an opportunity for finger pointing.

Seek and engage in professional learning and development opportunities

Professional learning and professional development opportunities should be sought, balancing school improvement and system initiatives with the need for personal and professional growth. This helps to expand the repertoire of leadership, managerial and problem-solving skills and approaches. Visit [our website](#) to learn more about the OPC’s upcoming Professional Learning opportunities.

Solicit advice and guidance from your Supervisory Officer (SO)

The SO can often act as a skilled intermediary or, at times, can assist with any conflict that arises between the principal and vice-principal. Your SO has a duty to support a positive working relationship between you and your administrative colleague(s). Bear in mind, however, that the SO must maintain a neutral stance and cannot be expected to take sides.

Contact the OPC Protective Services Team for support with conflict management

The PST can play a role in assisting with the resolution of a conflict. Ideally, this can be achieved through consultation, advice and the use of resources such as [tip sheets](#), articles

and workshops. Where needed, the PST provides separate, confidential assistance for the principal and vice-principal should both call. An “ethics wall” is established in such cases to protect the interests of the individuals and ensure the best service possible.

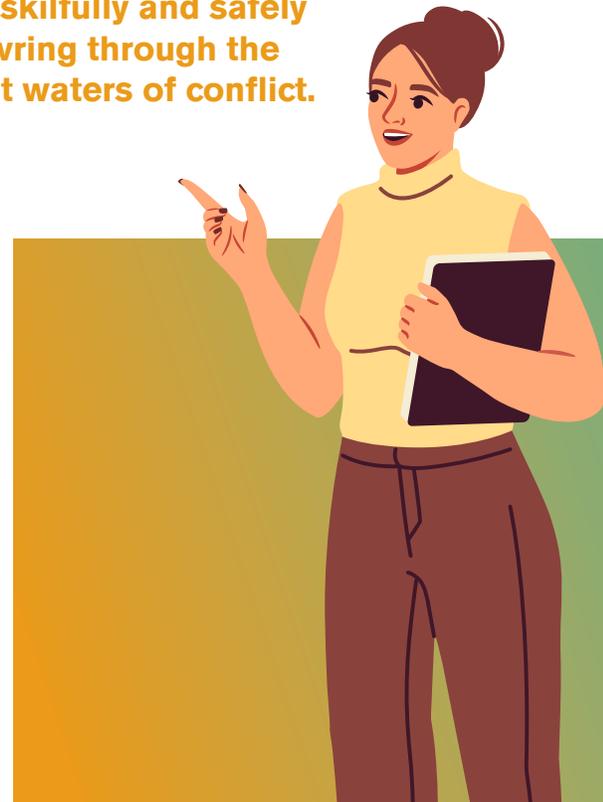
When Professional Duty of Loyalty Overrides Hierarchical Authority

From time to time, a vice-principal may disagree with the advice or direction given by a principal. A particularly difficult challenge for vice-principals is when they perceive the conduct of their principal to contradict board policy or legislation. When this happens, vice-principals find themselves caught in an uncomfortable conundrum between their subordinate role vis-a-vis the principal, and their duty of loyalty to the employer school board. Should this happen, it is important to note that the vice-principal’s duty of loyalty to the employer takes precedence. It is not considered insubordination for the vice-principal to respectfully question or even refuse to follow directives that are contrary to policy or law. The vice-principal should contact the appropriate SO to have an honest, open and confidential discussion about their concerns. The PST should be called for guidance and advice.

Take Hold of the Helm and Steer Your Ship Carefully

The experience of conflict in the workplace and other areas of life is not a matter of “if” but “when.” Conflict itself is not a bad thing. What is important is how we react and respond to conflict when it arises. Being proactive about your understanding of conflict management is not only advisable, but essential. In addition to accessing resources or engaging in professional development on conflict management, the PST encourages OPC Members to assess and understand their personal preferred style of conflict management. We do not endorse any one inventory or assessment tool: the key is to understand your style and the style of others with whom you work, and to use that understanding to navigate conflicts in a manner that is well-informed, self-reflective and focused on resolution. Consult the appropriate school board staff and contact the PST for support and advice if necessary. ▲

Giving and taking direction, consulting and making decisions, and respecting authority while being prepared to act unilaterally when necessary, are all integral steps in skilfully and safely manoeuvring through the turbulent waters of conflict.



PRINCIPALS

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By Karl Subban

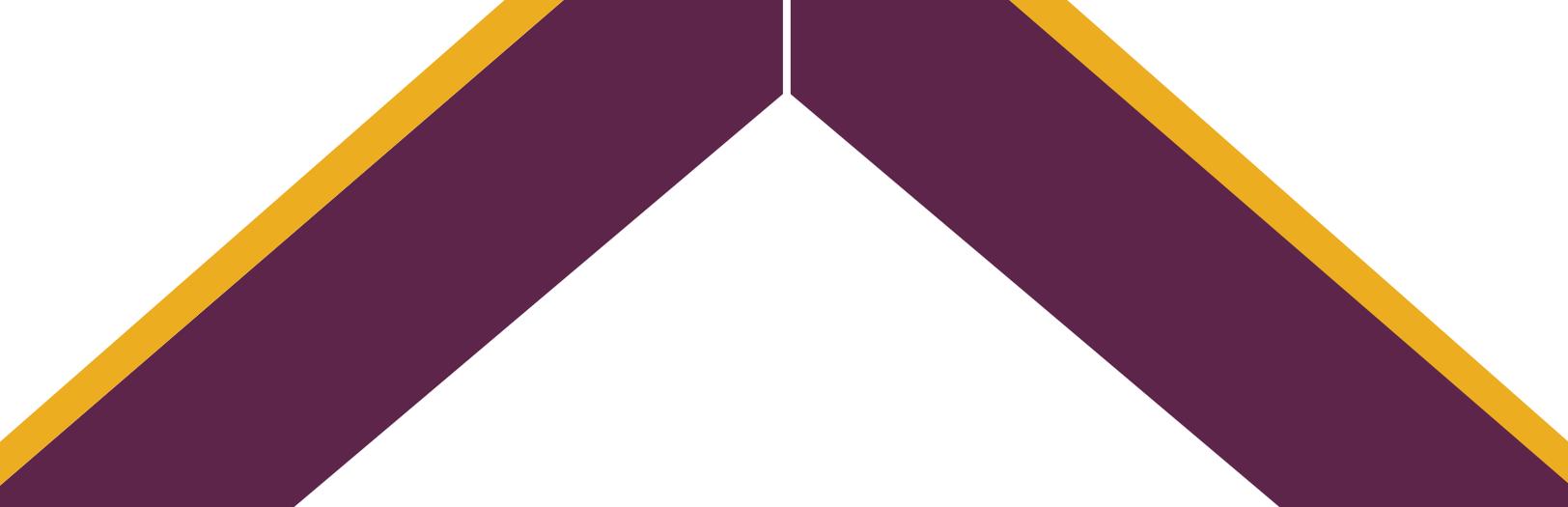


RAISE YOUR ROOF

Seven steps to leadership in education

Illustration by Drew Shannon





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**EVERY SCHOOL BUILDING – OR ROOF – MUST BE
HIGH ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE TO GROW AND
REACH THEIR MAXIMUM POTENTIAL.**

– Karl Subban –

”

Every school deserves to be led well. At the heart of effective leadership is not policy or paperwork, it's people. Yet the first and most important person we must lead is ourselves. As an education leader, I learned that if I didn't model growth, resilience and self-reflection, I couldn't expect those around me to do it either. Leadership is influence, and influence is earned through trust. Trust is not given; it's built brick by brick, moment by moment. It's built when you show up consistently, when your words match your actions and when you make people feel seen. Over time, those small acts of integrity form the foundation on which leadership stands.

Leading People Begins with Leading Ourselves

Our growth radiates outward; when we evolve, the whole school changes. I've seen it happen countless times. When a leader begins to listen more deeply, the staff meetings feel different. When principals take ownership of their mistakes, teachers begin to do the same. When leaders model curiosity, students catch that spirit like a spark. Our beliefs shape our behaviour and our behaviour shapes culture. If I want my school to be a place of optimism, courage and belonging, I have to live those values daily, especially when it's hard. Cul-

ture is what people feel when they walk through the door, and it always begins with us.

Connection Is the Heartbeat of Leadership

Some of my greatest leadership lessons have arisen from moments in the schoolyard. One day, a primary student said to me, “Mr. Subban, I love my dad more than I love you.” I laughed and told her I hoped so, and then thought about what that moment meant. Even in her innocence, she was saying, “I see you, you matter to me” – and that’s the heartbeat of leadership. Whether it’s a student, a teacher or a parent, people need to know that you’re there for them, and that the doors and windows to you are wide open. Leadership is less about having all the answers and more about being present enough to listen. When I talk about “raising the roof,” I’m not referring to a building (although I’ve worked in plenty that needed a new one). I’m talking about potential. Each of us lives and learns under a figurative roof that represents what we believe we’re capable of. Too often, that roof is too low, built from fear or past experience. My role as a leader is to raise that roof for myself and for others so everyone can stand tall and keep growing. In my years as a principal, I saw teachers rediscover their passion after burnout, students who went from failing to flourishing and parents who finally felt heard. These transformations didn’t come from policy changes; they came from belief.

Reaching our potential comes from seeing ourselves as leaders and understanding that we can actually **accomplish** what we **plan** to achieve. The contentment that we seek comes from achieving our goals, and it becomes the point at which we can relax. Reaching our potential is like the feeling of finally exhaling after holding our breath for a very long time. But part of the problem with actually accepting our own dreams is that the world we live in is so full of information and the rules of life are being rewritten every moment of the day. Even though we each have the ability to dream about any goal we want to set for ourselves, we sometimes forget that we are the only ones who can make that dream happen. The reality we all face, especially when we

face changes or hurdles in our lives, is that life requires us to keep learning and moving out of our comfort zones.

That’s why we have to see ourselves as leaders in our own lives, rather than rely on someone else to facilitate our dreams for us. Every time we give hope, time and effort to a dream, we can start to see the world from a new perspective. When we want to raise our roofs, the only thing we have to remember is that we won’t get it wrong if we

A healthy school is one where every voice matters and every person feels safe to be seen.



focus on our dreams first. Raising the roof begins with believing that growth is possible.

Seven Steps to Raise Your Roof

In my new book, *Raise Your Roof* (2025), I outline actionable steps for educators, leaders and parents who want to elevate others. Here are seven essentials from the book, and a road map to help leaders turn potential into performance.

1. Put People First

When I first became a principal, I thought leadership was about solving problems. I learned it's really about listening. If your goal is to advance the organization's agenda without hearing the people who live it every day, you'll create an echo chamber. Schools thrive when principals listen more than they speak. People don't follow titles; they follow authenticity. My daily question became, "Have I earned the right to lead today?" Putting people first means noticing the quiet teacher who stays late, checking in on the custodian who's grieving and remembering that school culture isn't what's written on the wall – it's what happens in the hall. A school's success doesn't come from control; it comes from care.

2. Support Growth

Growth doesn't happen by accident – it happens when leaders make room for it. Every teacher should feel that their professional dreams matter. I made it a routine to meet with new teachers within their first month and ask them: "What do you want to learn? What kind of educator do you want to become?" Support doesn't always mean funding big programs. It's about time, trust and belief. Curiosity is contagious, and when leaders show interest in people's growth, it signals that learning is a key component of leadership.

3. Recognize Commitment

We often celebrate outcomes but forget the courage it takes to try. Recognition should be about progress, not perfection. When a teacher experiments with a new method, even if it fails, thank them for their innovation. When a student keeps

trying despite difficulty, celebrate that resilience. At my schools, we introduced Roof-Raising Moments: short shout-outs during staff meetings or assemblies to highlight people who demonstrated growth, kindness or creativity. Recognition builds momentum. When people know their investment in themselves is seen, they invest even more.

4. Build a Culture of Belonging

A healthy school is one where every voice matters and every person feels safe to be seen. Belonging means safety in diversity. I used to tell my staff: "Diversity is being invited to the meeting. Belonging is knowing your voice will change the outcome." Leaders must ask, Who's not in the room? Whose story isn't being told? From hiring practices to hallway interactions, belonging starts with intentional inclusion. When belonging becomes a daily practice, schools transform from institutions of instruction into communities of connection.

5. Lead Through Service

True leadership is not about being in charge; it's about taking care of those in your charge. As a father, I told my sons, who all played hockey, "You can't score from the bench, but you can still lead from there." Leadership is an attitude of service, not status. In schools, we serve teachers so they can serve students. We serve parents so they can support learning at home. The best leaders see themselves as part of a larger ecosystem, where every act of service strengthens the whole.

6. Communicate Hope

Hope is a strategy with a heartbeat. When challenges arise, people look to their leaders for emotional direction. During a difficult school year, I began sending a Message of Hope to staff every Friday: sometimes a story, sometimes a quote, sometimes just a reminder that we were in it together. Those notes became a ritual of resilience. Hope doesn't deny difficulty; it declares that we can meet it. When hope becomes cultural currency, teams stop asking, "Can we?" and start saying, "We will."

**Diversity is being invited to the meeting.
Belonging is knowing your voice will
change the outcome.”**



7. Model Lifelong Learning

If we adults want students to love learning, we must love it first. The moment a leader stops learning, the roof begins to sag. I've made plenty of mistakes in my career, but each one taught me something. Whether attending workshops, reading leadership books or seeking feedback, I've tried to stay a learner. We need to adopt a mindset that will help us respond in a way that doesn't shut us down in a crisis, and we can do that by constantly challenging ourselves to learn instead of panic. Humility is a superpower. It shows that growth is a way of life. When leaders model learning, they give everyone else permission to grow too.

Raising Roofs Beyond the School Walls

Leadership doesn't end when the bell rings. The same principles that make schools thrive – namely, trust, growth, belonging and service – apply everywhere: in families, workplaces and communities. In organizations outside education, I see the same truth. Teams flourish when leaders listen. Innovation blooms when people feel safe. Performance soars when growth is recognized. Raise Your Roof is more than an education philosophy; it's a universal blueprint for human potential. When we see potential in others and help them see it too, we raise their roof. Hockey taught me that preparation meets opportunity; education taught me that belief meets

potential. In both arenas, growth is born from trust and teamwork.

A Framework for Lasting Impact

Roof-raising leadership is a practice.

Here's a simple four-part framework I share in workshops:

1. **Reflect:** Ask daily, "Did I lead myself well today?"
2. **Reconnect:** Reach out to someone you haven't connected with recently. Relationships are the roof beams of leadership.
3. **Rebuild:** When something breaks – trust, communication, morale – repair it quickly.
4. **Rejoice:** Celebrate small wins. Joy fuels purpose.

The schools we lead reflect how we lead ourselves. A raised roof becomes a living monument to belief and shared effort. When I walk through

a school, I see potential under construction. Every student, teacher and parent/guardian carries the seeds of greatness. Raising roofs is both a philosophy and a daily practice. It's about creating physical, emotional and spiritual spaces where everyone can flourish. If you remember that everyone you meet has a roof that might be too low, you'll lead differently. You'll ask, "How can I help them rise?" When we lead from that place, schools become more than institutions. They become communities of possibility. And that, to me, is the ultimate measure of success. ▲

Karl Subban is an educator, coach and speaker who has spent more than 30 years helping students, teachers and parents realize their potential. A retired TDSB principal and the father of NHL players P.K., Malcolm and Jordan Subban, as well as Natassia and Natasha, who also lead in their fields, he is the author of *How We Did It*, *The Hockey Skates* and *Raise Your Roof*.

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FROM LAST PLACE TO

LEGENDS



What the Blue Jays' rise teaches us about the power of team culture in schools

By Julia Hayes
Illustration by Carl Wiens

On a quiet Friday evening, my husband and I were watching replays of the Blue Jays' World Series opener, a moment that felt bigger than baseball. As the final out replayed, my husband turned to me and said, "How does a team go from the bottom of the league to the World Series? Because they're a family."

That reflection stayed with me. The Jays' rise wasn't just about athleticism – it was about culture, connection and collective purpose. It reminded my husband of his hockey days with the Dofasco Steelhawks, a Hamilton team built on trust, shared goals and community support. Their coaches weren't just professionals; they were dads, uncles and neighbours who showed up with heart.

As a principal in a small rural elementary school in the Grand Erie District School Board, I see this same spirit in our schools. Leadership isn't confined to titles – it's distributed across our communities. Teachers, educational assistants, custodians, office staff and students all contribute to a culture of care. When we empower learners to lead, support one another and celebrate collective success, we build something long-lasting.

The Blue Jays' journey this past season offers a compelling blueprint for education leaders. Their success wasn't born from a single star player or a flawless strategy. It emerged from a culture where every member felt valued, supported and accountable. In schools, we strive for the same,

creating environments where every partner, from students to staff, feels seen and heard.

Education research supports this. Michael Fullan’s work on “leading in a culture of change” emphasizes the importance of relationships, moral purpose and shared leadership (Fullan 2001). When schools prioritize collaboration over competition and empathy over ego, they become places where transformation is not only possible, but inevitable.

Distributed Leadership: The Power of the Collective

One of the most powerful lessons from the Blue Jays’ season is the role of distributed leadership. While stars like Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Bo Bichette often grab headlines, it’s the quiet contributions – like Davis Schneider offering his hotel couch to teammate Addison Barger – that reveal the depth of their team culture.

In schools, distributed leadership means recognizing that leadership is not the sole domain of the principal. It’s about cultivating leadership in others: teachers who mentor new colleagues, students who lead initiatives and support staff who create safe, welcoming environments. When leadership is shared, ownership increases, and so does impact.

At Seneca Central Public School, we’ve embraced this model. Our student council leadership team organizes school-wide events, our educators collaborate on school culture initiatives and our support staff contribute to decision-making. This collective approach fosters trust and ensures that everyone feels responsible for our school’s success.

In October 2025, our school celebrated Blue Jays Day. Dressed in blue and white, students and staff filled the halls with energy and pride. During the morning announcements, we talked about what it means to be a team and how kindness, empathy and shared responsibility drive success. The Jays’ story became a powerful metaphor for our students.

Spirit Days like Blue Jays Day are more than fun; they’re foundational. They create shared experiences, build identity and reinforce values. In his work on school culture, Dr. Andy Hargreaves emphasizes the importance of “reculturing,” shaping the norms, beliefs and practices that define a school (Hargreaves 1994). Celebrations, stories and symbols are tools leaders can use to build a culture of belonging.

The Jays’ narrative this season – of resilience, humility and unity – offered a timely story for our school community. It reminded us that success isn’t just about outcomes; it’s about the journey, the relationships and the values we uphold along the way.

One of the most striking aspects of the Jays’ season was their emotional intelligence. From supporting each other through slumps to celebrating small victories, they modelled empathy in action. For education leaders, empathy is not a soft skill, it’s a strategic one.

Empathetic leadership fosters psychological safety, which research shows is critical for innovation, risk-taking and learning. When staff feel safe to share ideas, admit mistakes and ask for help, schools become more adaptive and resilient. In my own leadership practice, I’ve seen how a simple check-in, a handwritten note or a moment of listening can shift the tone of a day and, sometimes, a career.

The Jays’ story also resonates with how we cultivate student agency. Just as players stepped into leadership roles regardless of seniority, we must create spaces where students can lead, collaborate and contribute meaningfully to their school communities.

At Seneca Central, we’ve embedded student voice into our decision-making. From student surveys to student-led announcements to our student council, students are not just participants, they’re co-creators. This aligns with Ontario’s commitment to student well-being and inclusive education, recognizing that students thrive when they feel empowered and connected.

As principals, we are not just leaders. We are also culture architects. Our words, actions and decisions shape the climate of our schools. The Jays’ season reminds us that culture is not built overnight. It’s cultivated through consistency, vulnerability and shared experiences.

Whether it’s modelling collaboration, celebrating small wins or navigating challenges with transparency, our leadership



Success isn't just about outcomes; it's about the journey, the relationships and the values we uphold along the way.

sets the tone. We must ask ourselves: Are we creating conditions where every member of our school community feels like they belong? Are we leading with heart?

The Jays' journey offers several key takeaways for educational leaders.

- 1. Invest in relationships:** Just as the Jays built trust both on and off the field, schools must prioritize relational leadership. Connection precedes collaboration.
- 2. Celebrate the small moments:** Schneider's couch story reminds us that culture is built in the margins – in hallway conversations, consistent check-ins and acts of kindness.
- 3. Empower the collective:** Success is not a solo act. Distributed leadership strengthens schools by leveraging diverse voices and talents.





Are we creating conditions where

EVERY MEMBER

of our school community feels like they belong?

- 4. Lead with empathy:** Emotional intelligence is foundational to effective leadership. It fosters trust, resilience and innovation.
- 5. Use others' stories to inspire:** Stories like the Jays' can be powerful tools for teaching values, building culture and connecting with students.

The Blue Jays didn't just win games – they won hearts. Their season was a master class in team culture, and for education leaders, it offers a timely reminder: our greatest asset is our people. When we build cultures rooted in care, connection and shared purpose, we unlock the full potential of our schools.

In Ontario's diverse and dynamic education landscape, principals are uniquely positioned to lead this work. By embracing distributed leadership, fostering empathy and celebrating the stories that unite us, we can create schools where every learner thrives.

Just like the Jays, we can rise from challenges, rally together and achieve greatness – not because we're perfect, but because we're a family.

Team culture has been a common thread across my school board this year. In her

remarks to system leaders, our Director JoAnna Roberto highlighted the importance of building a strong team culture within our board. While drawing parallels to our beloved Toronto Blue Jays in bringing Canada together in pursuit of excellence, she has continually emphasized that success is built on development, improvement and cohesion. It is about believing in the “power of growth.” Most importantly, it is about the work we do and that steady, intentional effort truly makes the difference. This is the culture we nurture in Grand Erie – one grounded in collaboration, collective responsibility and an unwavering commitment to students.

As a new principal reflecting on what I was seeing in my own school community, I found

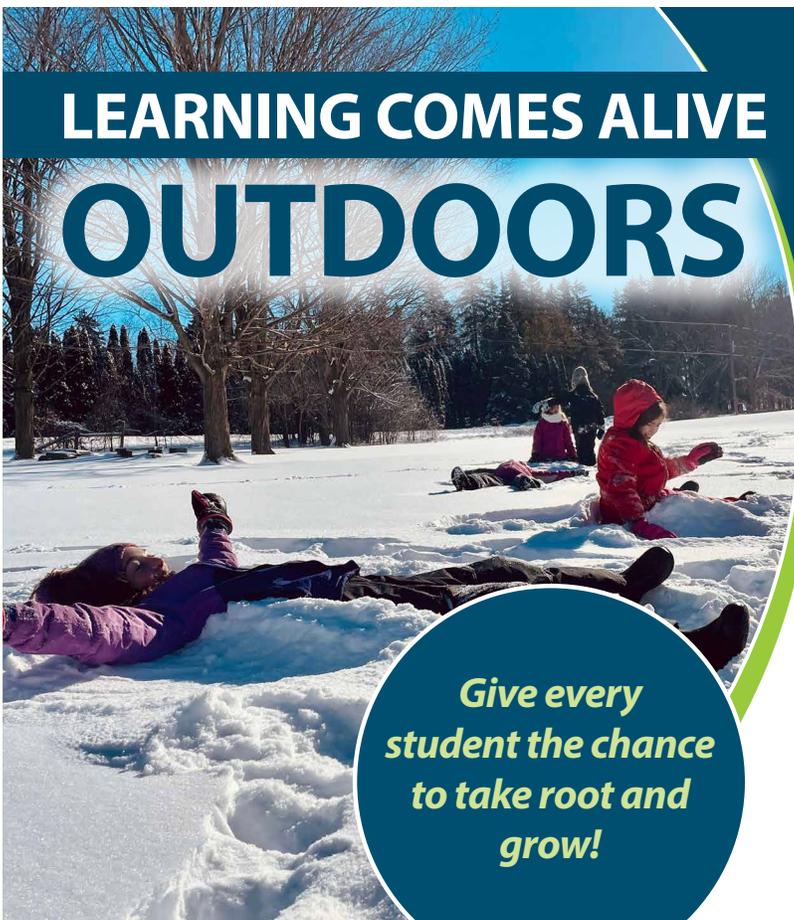
myself returning to the Jays’ season as a clear example of how culture can lift a team, and how those same principles show up in the everyday work of building a positive, supportive environment for students and staff. ▲

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Building Connections

Reflecting on the OPCLeadLearn Conference 2025

By the Professional Learning Team

After over a year of planning, on November 13–14, 2025, school leaders from across Ontario gathered at the Hilton Toronto Airport Hotel & Suites for the highly anticipated, first annual OPCLeadLearn Conference. After not having hosted a major conference for a number of years, the OPC brought back this flagship experience under the theme *Building Connections*. Responsive to the learning needs of principals and vice-principals, the conference offered two days of inspiration, collaboration and practical learning. Attendees engaged in thought-provoking keynotes, interactive breakout sessions, networking opportunities and contests and games, delivering a rich blend of professional growth and community building.

The conference venue buzzed with energy and anticipation as participants arrived Thursday morning. Colourful banners displayed the conference theme, while event sponsors showcased their resources for supporting effective school leadership and instruction. Opening remarks from OPC President Jeff

Maharaj set the tone for the event. He reminded attendees of the importance of continuous learning and collaboration, especially in times of change. His comments highlighted the importance of building relationships as a way to strengthen individual professional practice and the organization.

KEYNOTE HIGHLIGHTS

The conference opened with Dr. Ian Williams, an accomplished scholar and Massey lecturer. His address delivered a compelling message focused on the critical importance of conversations, even difficult ones, for developing meaningful connections across differences. Dr. Williams reminded us that a good conversation takes time, patience and, sometimes, courage. In our current context – where conversations are often marked by increased tension, incivility and polarization – these key messages provided school leaders with considerations for creating and holding space for conversations to deepen understanding.

On Day 2, Dr. Sharon Stein, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia and a globally recognized scholar in transformative education and global citizenship, took the stage. Her address, entitled “Everything is Nature: Humans and AI from an Earth-centred Perspective,” challenged leaders to think beyond their initial thoughts about artificial intelligence as either the ultimate tech solution or the ultimate existential threat. She encouraged attendees to consider how we might invite AI into an earth-centred inquiry to help us explore new educational and relational possibilities in an era of great political, ecological and social destabilization. The address concluded with a pre-recorded video from a colleague of Dr. Stein’s, Dr. Vanessa Andreotti, reading a poem called “The Spell of the Pedestal and Plan of the Mushrooms,” which powerfully captured the complexities and complicities that currently need to be engaged in educational spaces.

Both keynotes set the tone for the conference: leadership is not just about managing schools – it’s about building relationships, shaping communities and empowering people.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

The breakout sessions were a cornerstone of the conference, offering participants a chance to dive into topics tailored to their needs. Sessions covered a wide range of themes.

- **Equity and Student Success:** Practical strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, addressing

systemic barriers and lifting voices for equitable school improvement.

- **Community Engagement:** Exploring innovative, culturally responsive ways to build meaningful partnerships with parents, caregivers and guardians.
- **Mental Health Leadership:** Supporting staff and student well-being through proactive policies and practices.
- **Innovative Leadership Models:** Exploring new frameworks for decision-making and collaboration in schools, including instructional leadership grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.
- **Leadership Development and Coaching:** Balanced, evidence-based approaches to leadership competency development, well-being and flourishing.
- **Trauma-informed Practice for School Leaders:** Evidence-based responses and strategies for educators and school leaders to support students impacted by trauma.

These sessions were highly interactive, featuring case studies, collaborative problem-solving and opportunities for participants to share best practices. Attendees left with actionable insights they could implement immediately in their schools.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

One of the most valued aspects of OPCLeadLearn was the chance to connect with colleagues from across the province. Networking was woven into the fabric of the event, from contests and games, to informal conversations during breaks and meals. The conference app also facilitated connections before, during and after the event, allowing participants to share comments and photos, exchange resources and continue discussions beyond the two-day program.

Sponsor displays offered another point of engagement, creating spaces for leaders to explore new tools, services and partnerships that support school improvement.

CONTESTS, PRIZES AND GAMES

To keep the energy high and the atmosphere fun, OPCLead-

Looking ahead, the challenge – and opportunity – lies in sustaining these connections and applying the lessons learned to create meaningful change.

Learn featured a variety of prize draws and games. Participants were encouraged to engage in movement during the breaks, with activity stations that featured Jumbo Connect 4, Axe Throwing and Tetris Tumble. Prizes provided additional excitement and a sense of friendly competition. These activities weren't just about fun; they also reinforced the theme of connection by encouraging collaboration and interaction among participants.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Participants left the conference with more than just new knowledge; they carried a renewed sense of community and purpose. OPCLeadLearn 2025 reminded Ontario's school leaders that they are part of a vibrant network committed to excellence, equity and innovation. The insights gained from keynotes, breakout sessions and networking will provide a strong foundation for innovative leadership going forward. Looking ahead, the challenge – and opportunity – lies in sustaining these connections and applying the lessons learned to create meaningful change.

OPC is already planning for this year's conference, promising even more opportunities for growth and innovation. Missed last year's conference? Explore OPC resources, join upcoming webinars and mark your calendar for this year's [OPCLeadLearn Conference](#) on October 22–23, 2026. Together, we can continue to lead learning and transform education for all. ▲

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(Spring Session)

Registration deadline: March 9, 2026

30

[Principal's Development Course](#)

Module 9 – Leading the Innovative School
Module 10 – Supporting 2SLGBTQQA+ Students

Registration deadline: March 16, 2026

April

7

[Article Discussions](#)

FREE for Members – open registration

12

[Emerging Leader Development Program](#)

Module 11 – Leaders Supporting French as a Second Language

Registration deadline: April 12, 2026

14

Part 5 – [From Dreams to Actions – Leadership Conversation Series](#)

FREE for Members – open registration

26

[Emerging Leader Development Program](#)

Module 12 – Supporting Student Mental Health

Registration deadline: April 26, 2026

May

4

[Principal's Development Course](#)

Module 14 – Leading the French Immersion School

Module 15 – I Stand in Treaty

Registration deadline: April 20, 2026

7-9

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7-8

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12

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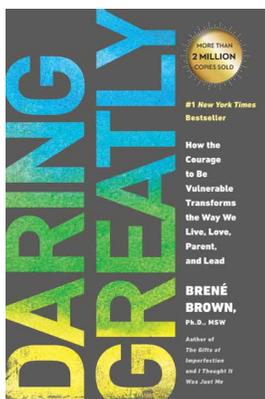
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Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead

By Brené Brown
Penguin Random House
ISBN: 9781592408412
Reviewed by Julie Laverdière-Chouinard

How are you doing? Crazy busy? In her powerful book, *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown invites us to slow down, look beneath the “busy,” and ask ourselves what truth in our lives we might be trying to avoid with this numbing strategy.

For school leaders, that question hits close to home. With demands such as navigating change; managing resources; supporting students, staff and families; and trying to maintain balance in our personal lives, it’s easy to mistake the “crazy busy” of constant activity for courageous leadership.

School leaders in one OPC book club explored Brown’s research on shame and fear, and her proposed antidote of “daring greatly.” This phrase, coined by Theodore Roosevelt in his 1910 speech “Citizenship in a Republic,” relates to the courage to dare, to accept – even embrace – failure, as the pathway to wholehearted leadership. This concept is central to the book, hence its title.

Our book club conversations centred on making connections between our personal and professional lives, and exploring the power of daring greatly to develop our personal leadership resources. We discussed the all too common gremlins of shame and fear, which permeate our lives and influence our roles as school leaders. Brown explains that those gremlins, protected by a trio of shields – perfectionism, numbing,

foreboding joy – keep us from feeling vulnerable. In our participants’ personal stories, we couldn’t help but notice the universality of our experiences.

In *Daring Greatly*, Brown invites the reader to reframe vulnerability from a weakness to a strength. With her disarming Texan wit and humour, she brings the concepts alive through many real-life examples, including her own, making this heavy topic easier to relate to, digest and engage with. Her book helped us understand that authenticity is the best antidote for taming the shame and fear within each of us.

As school leaders, there are a few things we can do, grounded in Brown’s research, to start leaning toward a greater authentic leadership stance.

Model imperfection: It’s okay to not have all the answers. Let’s just admit it to ourselves and others, and normalize the messy process of learning and leading.

Create space for reflection: Courageous conversations are hard. Let’s lean into initiating opportunities for conversations about shame, fear and authenticity. This alone can shape a school culture more than any other initiative.

Recognize and combat shame:

Schools are rife with shame. It appears on the playground, in behaviour management strategy, even in the staff lounge. It kills creativity, engagement and trust. How do we find ways to address the behaviours that breed shame without using this search as a strategy to manage the school culture? Brown suggests that we begin by modelling our own vulnerability and engaging in honest conversations about shame. By noticing and naming, we stop the weed from propagating. This may be the school administrator’s greatest and most complex challenge.

School leaders have stressful, demanding roles. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brown offers rich insights into authentic, human-centred leadership. She reminds us that courage is not about controlling the outcomes, but standing fully present amidst uncertainty, dropping our shields and creating a culture of emotional safety around us, where individuals feel empowered to express themselves authentically. Our students, staff and school communities need this more than ever, and this book is a great place to start thinking about how to lead wholeheartedly. ▲

Julie Laverdière-Chouinard is a principal in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.

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VP by Day, Auntie by Nature

Carrying my Indigenous identity with me all the time

When I became vice-principal of Indigenous education, most people assumed the hardest part would be the workload

or navigating the complex dynamics of a school system, but they were wrong. The hardest part is being one of the only Indigenous administrators in the entire system.

It's not about my age, or the way people look at me and think, 'She doesn't fit the mould.' It's that the mould was never made for us in the first place. This system wasn't designed with Indigenous students or Indigenous leaders in mind. I show up every day to create a new mould, one that makes a distinct space for us within this complex and often isolating structure.

There's no blueprint and no guidebook. Nobody shows you how to keep your composure when an Indigenous topic comes up and you are suddenly expected to be the expert, even when it's not your specific Nation or community. Nobody teaches you how to respond to overt racism against you, your students or your community members. Indigenous leaders are asked to be everything at once, occupying multiple spaces and roles si-

multaneously. It is exhausting, both personally and professionally. In our world, community is everything. I'm a vice-principal, yes, but I'm also a beadwork artist, a PhD candidate, a community volunteer and a relative who shows up for funerals, language nights and fish fries. We show up. Always.

Our identity doesn't get left at the door. When the final bell rings, my responsibilities as an Indigenous woman continue. I'm still navigating and translating between two very different worlds, carrying the stories of students and community in my chest, and I wouldn't trade it. The part that keeps me coming back is the kids. When Indigenous youth see Indigenous people in leadership, simply walking the halls, their eyes flicker with recognition. I've had students stop me in disbelief and say, "Wait, you're the vice-principal?" We laugh, but behind that laughter is something bigger: possibility. They see me and, maybe, they see themselves as leaders too.

Indigenous youth are told, directly and indirectly, that leadership and success aren't for them. That they're troublemakers, incapable or invisible. But when they see me sitting at the decision-making table, they also see that **we belong here too**. I am a doorway, a reminder to Indigenous youth that they deserve to dream. If they want to be leaders, they can be – not in theory, but right now. I often find myself thinking of those youth who need to hear, "You are capable, you are brilliant, you are already a leader." That's what this role is truly about: not the emails, not the discipline referrals, but continuous and fierce advocacy.

And when I have one of those sleepless nights, I hear my aunties' voices reminding me: **Leadership isn't about rest. It's about making sure the next generation doesn't have to carry as much as you did.** That's what keeps me ready to do it all over again. ▲

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Abacus Survey Data 2025

The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) collects data to advocate on behalf of our Members. In 2025, a survey* of 2,298 OPC Members indicated that

88%

have personally witnessed violence or threats against staff

98%

say the number of responsibilities they have are increasing

96%

report accessing their benefits this year, compared to 55% in 2023

77%

say the level of violence is interfering with learning in the classroom



82%

report that their increasing workload is negatively impacting their well-being



89%

feel overwhelmed by the volume and number of duties



75%

have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event in their school in the past three years

85%

say their work environment is constantly changing and it is hard to keep up

73%

say the level of violence is increasing

77%

say their current workload is unmanageable

43%

believe there are insufficient resources to support their mental health and well-being

*Abacus Data Survey October 2025

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