

## EP 13 - Equity and Mental Health: Strategies for Navigating Challenges

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:12]:

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

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:21]:

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:26]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:44]:

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:14]:

Hi, Susie. Good to be back with you again. As always, I am really looking forward to today's conversation. I know that we're going to be talking about virtual schools today, and I know this is a really important issue that sort of emerged, or at least became more urgent during the pandemic and beyond. And I know that school systems and school leaders are still thinking about how virtual schools and schooling fits into their program options in their districts. So, really looking forward to unpacking that a little with our guests today, who are from the Peel District School Board. We have Raquel Cariati-Cardoso and Sumeeta Merwar. So we're really happy to be welcoming them here today.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:02:00]:

Thanks, Lawrence, and welcome to both of you. Raquel and Sumeeta, it's great to have you. As a bit of a warm up, we thought we'd start with just a little bit about yourselves and how you came to be in this place right now in your leadership journey.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:02:15]:  
Okay, Sumeeta, you go first.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:02:18]:

Thanks for having us here. I'm really excited. I think the conversation about virtual is quite an exciting one. So this is really a huge opportunity, I think, to get a really awesome message across. Me, myself. My journey sort of started outside of education. I wanted to go into advertising. I did my undergrad and communications degree and really wanted to go into that journalism space. And I had the opportunity to volunteer, you know, continue with my education, and walked into an elementary school and decided that this is definitely where I wanted to be.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:02:53]:

Education sort of has provided me an opportunity to take that creative side that I have, where I wanted to be in advertising and grab the attention of individuals and communicate. It's given me that opportunity to do that, as well as the amazing space of teaching young learners always. And so then I did my graduate degree and my master's degree in ESL learning and communications as my undergrad. And I think, as I have continued to grow, I have nurtured the innovation space. I really truly embrace change. In fact, I think I seek it. And I enjoy seeing what happens when we sort of tweak things and change things and what are the outcomes and what could we have done better? I feel quite privileged to be in a space in education where I can do that. And so here we are, the pandemic hit.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:03:47]:

And I was very excited. I think I remember that very first day in March when we were told we weren't returning, and I had more plans than, I think everyone was ready to swallow and really excited about how we could turn education upside down and go virtual. And I won't forget that day because it's led me to today where I have the ability to be a principal of such an amazing virtual school.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:04:10]:  
Thanks, Sumita. Raquel?

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:04:13]:

Ironically, my career began in virtual learning, and this was, I want to say, 2010, I began my career actually at a private school, building elearning courses for them. And then I got hired with the Peel District School Board and began— very quickly. Knew that I wanted to get into educational leadership and always took on different leadership opportunities within my school. I had some breaks in between my courses and my journey because I am a mother, and that means I had some maternity leaves in between there. And it was really until I met Sumeeta that I decided to move forward and take that final push into my educational journey as the role as a vice principal. So that's how I got here.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:05:22]:

Thank you both. That's great. And I know both of you have a really strong passion for the benefits of virtual school, so I want to unpack some of that with you. But maybe first you could tell us a little bit about., you know, I know that everybody was required to be in virtual schools during the early stages and throughout some of the pandemic. But now that we've moved into a post-pandemic sort of world, who are the students who are showing up for virtual schools? And I also know that there are some misconceptions about the students that are showing up or the nature of the program. And so maybe you can help us understand that a little bit, too. So I don't know who wants to weigh in first? Raquel?

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:06:03]:

Yeah, sure. So when the Peel Elementary Virtual School was established, and this was after all schools had been opened, we were established as a response to the pandemic. So I believe at that time, every school board needed to have a virtual learning option. We still currently have satellite locations, and within those locations, we had picture days. We gave the option to families who wanted to come in for picture day. And very, very quickly, we realized that the majority of families who were a part of EVS were not, in fact, here as a response to the pandemic. People were coming at this time without masks, without social distancing.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:06:54]:

And I know now that's become, you know, we don't do those things anymore. However, at that time, people were still wearing masks. People were still social distancing. So we quickly realized that this is not why students are here. This is not why families have decided to be at EVS. So we did start collecting data to determine and to see why is it that families are choosing virtual learning for their K to 8 learners. Sumeeta, do you want to add on to that?

Sumeeta Merwar [00:07:35]:

Yeah. The amazement that we start seeing when we are building our community of learners is that the students that are here are definitely from diverse backgrounds, and it's including every type of learner from those who may need special medical conditions. But, like Raquel said, not all of them needed those medically safe spaces. Some of them needed just flexible schedules. We were starting to see many, many of our grades six, seven, eight, those who are going through a different period in their life with different social emotional needs. And the. The space became a safer space for them to learn because they weren't fitting in the environment of a building. And we saw growth.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:08:25]:

We saw success, in fact, so much to a point where our grade seven and eight platform, like the number of students in each class, were exceptionally high. And we had to start looking back and saying, okay, you know, do we stop this now? We're pushing the parameters of our classroom size. But it was just a place that everyone seems to be thriving in. And the students, really, the families, I should say more so than the students, started to recognize that the personalized academic and social benefits were very tailored to individual needs, where we were equitably providing what a student needs for their achievements in small groups. And it's in that platform

where we started to learn so much about our students and what they needed and how we can serve them better.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:09:18]:

And one thing in particular that all of our EVS students have in common is that they just didn't fit within the mold of a brick and mortar school. So, if you think about any principal or vice principal, if they think about who their students are, I'm sure that there are students in those spaces where the traditional brick and mortar school is not working for them. That is one thing that we've established is what every single one of our students have in common.

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

So I just want to delve a little bit deeper on this. You've touched on it a little bit, but I'm wondering if you could highlight for us maybe some of the common myths or maybe a few that tend to pop up a lot around virtual learning and what virtual schools are for and what they can provide.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:10:19]:

Sure. So, one of the biggest misconceptions. Well, this is what I believe is the biggest misconception—Sumeeta might have a different idea—is when they think of virtual learning, they're thinking about the way virtual learning was at the pandemic. They're thinking, Google classroom. They are thinking, okay, let's meet online for five minutes. Here's your work. I'll see you later. That is not what happens at the Peel Elementary Virtual School.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:10:56]:

Our teachers are live teaching synchronously all day long. The only difference is that there's a screen in front of them. They have their lunches, their planning times, of course, but other than that, everything is the exact same. We still have extracurriculars, which are a combination of in person and online. Teachers still facilitate duty. So, to me, those are the biggest misconceptions around elementary virtual ed.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:11:39]:

I think one of the other misconceptions that I often surface is the idea of equity. There's a huge misconception that our students, who learn virtually don't have those communities and social interactions. And one of the pieces that I often interrupt is to suggest that we cannot continue in our current environments in the world, to suggest that parents are unable to provide interactive and social time for their children, and that the only way that a child will be successful in their social world is at school. I think that's a very systematic way of thinking. It's a very veteran way of thinking. And we have morphed our world into so many different ways that we can connect with people. We've noticed that many of our community, while they come in person for activities after school or during their lunch hours, or they're going outside for different reasons, that the parents are very, very engaged. And I think it's a misconception that the parents are not equipped to make those very good parenting decisions that are going to impact their children's social lives.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:12:59]:

And that's a big message. I think that we, as a system, need to continue to carry and to honor those who require those flexible schedules or seeing the world in a different way, and also to meet that global competency of our workforce. You know, we have different shifts. We have different times of the day when people go to work. There are some people who work from home. We are providing that very same type of platform for our learners, and I think it's a big myth that I try to dispel, and we have seen that level of success, and it's disproving that the kids are not social or they're not being able to connect. They really are a vibrant community. They're buzzing.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:13:37]:

There's constant interaction and laughter and collaboration, and we're seeing it all day. We have a beautiful morning announcement. It's a 20 minutes show, and we showcase our students, and everybody wants to be on the show because they believe they're a celebrity when they get on. So it's a big deal to dispel that myth.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:13:57]:

So I know that you are both very directly involved in an ongoing way in a virtual school environment. So you see these benefits for students really directly every day. But how would you explain to other principals, or why should they pay attention or care about virtual schools? What's the benefit for other school principals, or how should they be viewing this that would support their work?

Sumeeta Merwar [00:14:27]:

I think that principals really need to see this as a magic wand. If there's another way to create analogy. We want our schools to be a place where literally every single child's learning needs are met, where lessons can come alive and go outside of the walls of the classroom. We know that we, and we say often that education has no walls, and this is exactly the way to do that. I think tapping into a virtual type of platform is like sprinkling a little bit of digital magic in the school's repertoire of how they serve students. I think it's really about opening up those possibilities, that treasure chest of possibilities, and personalizing education, really. We see success with students in person or virtually when we're able to personalize, and this is another way to do it. I think we're really breaking down all of the barriers and making learning a little bit more adventurous for the students when we have the ability to serve them on a platform in a learning mode that is not only just there, but also valued and uplifted. And I think that being the captain of your ship as a principal, you really need to be able to take that level of innovation and inclusivity and inspiration and, you know, hoist the sails up and have a virtual opportunity for some of your students.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:15:59]:

And one thing in particular, and just to extend a little bit on what Samita has already said, is that we know that not every student is built for virtual education. I have a five year old, and currently would this model of learning work for her? Not right now. This, it wouldn't be for her. But the same way that virtual may not work for my daughter, that does not mean that a brick and mortar

school would be the best suited way to deliver education for every single student in that space. And what virtual education offers is a different way of learning.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:51]:

Thank you both Raquel and Samita, you've given us a lot of key messages, I think. But if you could just briefly, like in a minute, just say, what would be the key message from everything you've kind of shared today that you'd want our listeners to take away?

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:17:04]:

One thing that I just want to say is that virtual education is not what it was in the pandemic. It has evolved. We are bringing AI into the classroom. Students are podcasting. Students are the creators of their space. It is completely different than what was happening in 2020.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:17:28]:

A message that I would love to get out there is we have large amounts of success for some students, and this environment is assisting those who need it and those who need it the most. The ability for our children to take the global learning tools virtually and enhance the way that they think through the tools and the AI's and the teachers as facilitators is a limitless and high levels of potential for our students. And so I really hope that virtual learning exists forever. I think it's part of our footprint in education, and I look forward to upcoming years and making it better and better each year.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:15]:

Well, I really want to thank you, Raquel and Sumeeta, for giving us all some deeper perspectives to consider around the value of virtual schools and what it has to offer for students. I think what you've given us here is really an opportunity to see that as a viable option for, for many students. So thank you so much for spending some time with us today and for sharing your expertise and perspectives with us.

Sumeeta Merwar [00:18:41]:

Thank you for having us, everyone.

Raquel Cariati-Cardoso [00:18:43]:

Thank you so much for having us.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:18:45]:

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

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:57]:

If you have a passion or story to share as an educational leader or would like to find out more about the other amazing professional learning opportunities offered by the OPC, please visit our website by clicking on the link in the show notes.

