

WINTER 2025 VOL. 27 NO. 2

# The Register

THE MAGAZINE FOR ONTARIO'S PUBLIC SCHOOL

PRINCIPALS & VICE-PRINCIPALS



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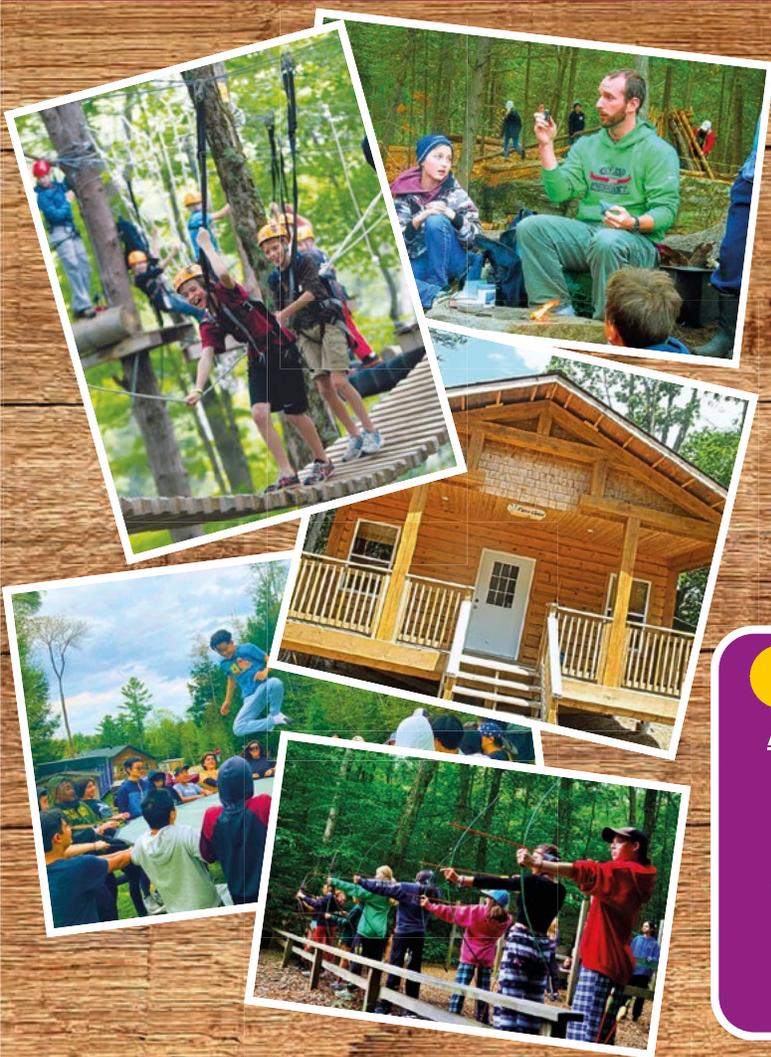
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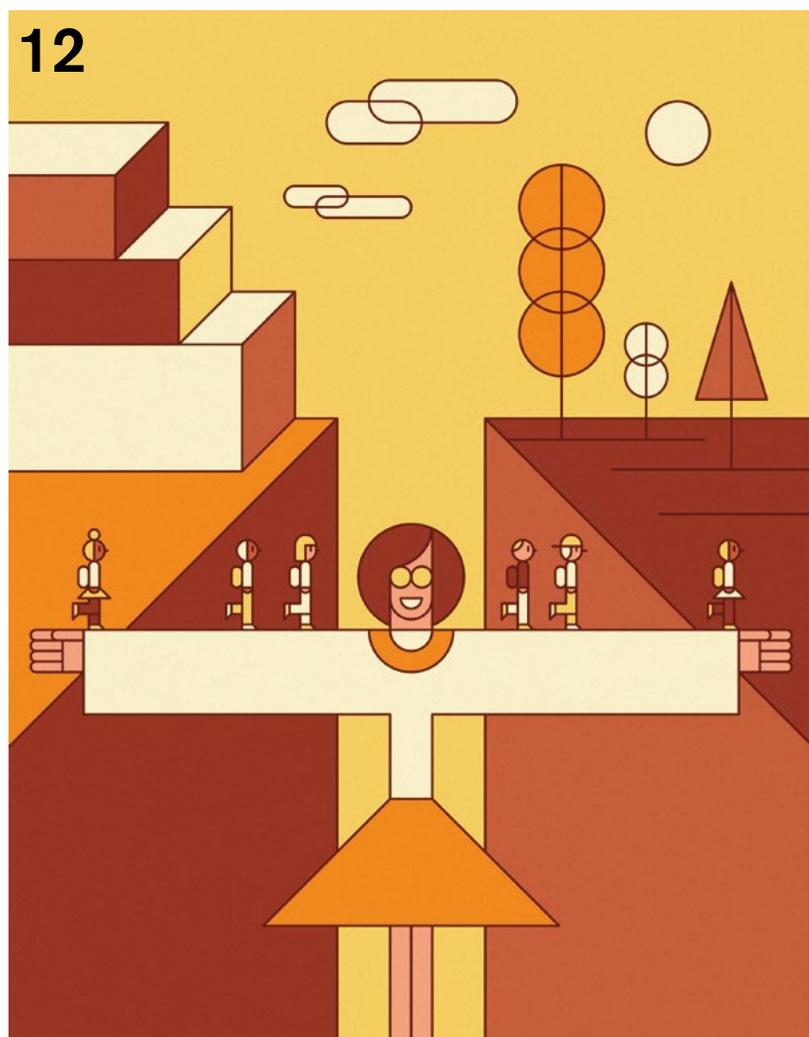
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# Shifting Advocacy

Responding to the weight of our work



In recent years, as principals and vice-principals, we have found ourselves navigating an increasingly complex and demanding landscape. With mounting pressures in schools, the OPC has enhanced our advocacy for the needs of our Members and our students. In addition to conversations

with the Ministry of Education and other partners, we are now using more public, assertive action. This change reflects the severity of the challenges we face – and the urgency of finding meaningful solutions.

Data collected from an Abacus survey in 2023 and an OPC survey in 2024 make it clear that because of increased workload, the well-being of principals and vice-principals is under significant strain. The surveys paint a stark picture:

- 97% of P/VPs report that their workload is *unmanageable*.
- 84% of P/VPs say that workload pressures are impacting their well-being.

- 82% of P/VPs say their daily workload this year has increased.
- 70% of P/VPs feel that their school boards do not value them.
- 66% of P/VPs have accessed mental health supports in the past year.
- 51% of P/VPs report that their mental health and well-being is worse now than in previous years.

These numbers are a sobering reflection of the daily realities faced by school leaders. Despite the unmanageable workload we were already facing, the provincial government introduced 13 additional initiatives over the 2023–24 school year. As demands continue to

rise, the pressure to balance administrative responsibilities and student needs takes a toll on both the professional and personal well-being of school leaders across the province.

Historically, our advocacy efforts have focused on behind-the-scenes discussions with the ministry and school boards. Our goal was to collaborate, fostering relationships that would lead to better policies and supports for students and staff. However, our data reveals that challenges have reached a breaking point, and it is clear that more public, visible advocacy is now required.

Last year, the OPC shared the data and the challenges we face with the media. In August 2024, a full-page ad in the *Toronto Star* highlighted the overwhelming workload and lack of support that P/VPs face. Our social media platforms are also a tool for advocacy, such as our [Did You Know Campaign](#), demonstrating the current reality in schools. These public efforts reflect how critical the situation in schools has become.

We also continue to engage in traditional strategies that have served us well in the past. On December 4, 2024, our Provincial Executive met with 22 MPPs (as we have done for over 25 years), and in those meetings we highlighted the numerous challenges that are [impacting our workload](#) and the consequences of that intensification.

Combining respectful dialogue with more assertive public action reflects our commitment to making a difference for our students, staff and communities.

We recognize that our advocacy must adapt to the times, weaving together the strengths of long-term relationship building with the power of public engagement.

Our message is clear: the demands placed on Ontario's P/VPs are unsustainable, and urgent action is needed. Adding to the urgency of these issues is the reality that 72 per cent of our P/VPs are eligible to retire within the next five years. This statistic underscores the need for immediate action – not only to address the unsustainable workload, but also to retain experienced leaders and attract the new ones our system needs.

While we remain committed to working with the ministry and school boards, we will also continue to use every platform available to ensure that our voices are heard. Our work is fundamental to the success of our education system. We must advocate not only for ourselves, but also for the students and staff who rely on us every day. Our advocacy reflects a deep understanding that we must evolve with the challenges we face, so that together we can build a stronger, more sustainable future for Ontario's schools. ▲



**Alison Osborne**

✉ [president@principals.ca](mailto:president@principals.ca)



Ontario Principals' Council  
20 Queen Street West, 27th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3R3  
Tel: 416-322-6600 or 1-800-701-2362  
Fax: 416-322-6618  
[www.principals.ca](http://www.principals.ca)  
Email: [admin@principals.ca](mailto:admin@principals.ca)

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

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**Ruth Hanley**, proofreader  
**Nadine Trépanier-Bisson**, business manager

**Art Direction and Design:**  
[Fresh Art & Design Inc.](http://Fresh Art & Design Inc.)

**Advertising:**  
Marlene Mignardi  
[advertising@principals.ca](mailto:advertising@principals.ca)

#### 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](mailto: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 2024, the OPC held our 25th annual Awards Dinner. Many of our Honorary Life Members were in attendance.



President Alison Osborne and President-elect Jeff Maharaj presented an Honorary Life Membership to Ralph Nigro, our 2023–2024 Provincial President.



The OPC Outstanding Contribution to Education Award was presented to Mackenzie Kolton (centre) on behalf of Egale Canada for their work to support the 2SLGBTQQA+ community through research, awareness and advocacy.



In December 2024, we held our annual Principal's Day at Queen's Park. Our Provincial Executive met with 22 MPPs from all four parties.



# Responsive Learning

The foundation of effective educational leadership

Ongoing professional learning is fundamental to leading in today's complex education landscape. Effective school leadership goes beyond administrative tasks; it thrives on creating inclusive and dynamic learning environments that are responsive to community needs and unique contexts. Building such an open and authentic learning culture requires intentional strategies that engage all partners – educators, students, families, staff and the wider community – in a shared purpose of growth centred on human rights and inclusivity.

How do we authentically engage and listen with humility to partners who bring diverse and varied perspectives? By involving families in decision-making processes and seeking input from our partners, school leaders can create programs and practices that reflect the community's values and address its unique challenges. When we model and encourage a learning stance and teamwork, we can further cultivate an atmosphere of trust and openness where unique ideas

are brought forward and accepted. Continuously building our capacity in areas including cultural competence and anti-oppressive practices will support leaders in being attuned to the real-time experiences and needs of their school communities. We also know that learning takes many shapes and forms, and some of the most impactful learning happens in short, unexpected moments of quiet reflection, impromptu conversations and team discussions engaging with cognitive dissonance. Our Professional Learning department is also learning and incorporating more universal design principles, varied formats and styles to engage Members in meaningful experiences that positively impact leadership practices.

## Leadership Coaching

Our high-quality virtual or in-person [leadership coaching](#) can further develop your leadership skills, capacity to respond to professional challenges or work-life integration. Each session is personalized to your goals and builds on individual strengths through a reflective process.

## Workshops

We welcome partnerships with school boards and local OPC associations to customize workshops to meet your needs on a variety of topics of interest. Our team of experienced school and system leaders will work with you to create learning that is relevant to your local context. Reach out to [learning@principals.ca](mailto:learning@principals.ca) or learn more on our [workshops web page](#).

## Save the Date – Summer Workshops are Coming Soon!

We are excited to offer two summer workshops to support leaders along their journey.

- [Leadership Horizons: Vice-principal Perspectives](#) on July 7th and 8th
- [The Equity Leadership Journey: Self-reflection and Facilitating Courageous Conversations](#) on August 11th and 12th ▲

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## Racially Motivated Double Binds

### The conflicting expectations for Black school leaders

By Dr. Katina Pollock, Dr. Donna Swapp, Dr. Annette Walker and Dr. Fei Wang

Most, if not all, school leaders in K–12 public education will wrestle with double-bind situations at work – when they face conflicting demands or expectations and fulfilling one requirement makes it impossible to meet the other, resulting in a no-win situation. Or, as the adage puts it, they are “damned if they do, damned if they don’t.” These situations are a part of school leaders’ professional work lives. For example, school leaders who struggle to balance leading and managing, or who wish to address equity, may feel pressured to prioritize immediate operational concerns over long-term school achievement goals (Cambron-McCabe 2010; Pollock & Winton 2016; Ryan & Armstrong 2016; Swapp 2012; Winton & Pollock 2015).

The degree to which leaders encounter these double binds is based on their own and others’ expectations around what happens in their schools; however, for some school leaders, these double binds are the result of how others react to their race. In this article, we share examples from 31 Black school leaders in Ontario who, in spring 2024, took the time to reflect on their work and wellness. These conversations included accounts of double binds for Black school leaders that were perpetuated by anti-Black racism. Unfortunately, these accounts from Black school leaders are not new (Lopez 2019; Nyereyemhuka 2024).

#### RACIALLY DRIVEN DOUBLE BINDS

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##### *Expectations Around Attire and Presentation*

Black school leaders spoke about navigating the expectations of others around attire and presentation as part of their work. For example, more than one male Black school leader described being approached by a parent asking to speak to the principal. In each case, the parent assumed the man was not the principal; in one case, the parent assumed he was the school custodian.

Further, Black school leaders talked about devoting high levels of attention to how they dress. They intentionally choose business attire to signal that they are the leader of the school, only to have others comment about how they are “dressed to impress.” In some cases, these leaders described being referred to as “uppity,” a racist, disparaging term used in the Jim Crow South for Black individuals who attempted to rise in socioeconomic status. Expectations around attire and presentation put Black school leaders in a double bind: on the one hand, if they dress for work like everyone else does (i.e., professional casual), they face assumptions by parents and visitors to their schools that they are not in a leadership role; on the other hand, if they dress in business professional attire, they are considered arrogant by teachers in their buildings. In these situations, no matter what they wear, Black school leaders are confronted with the racist assumption that they are “undeserving” of a school leadership role.

### ***Expectations Around Policy Implementation***

The Ontario Black school leaders we spoke with had a keen knowledge of school board policies, union contracts and government regulations. They described feeling compelled to carry out their work strictly “by the book” in ways their white principal colleagues do not, because of the increased scrutiny and surveillance they experience from their teachers and supervisors. For many of them, this meant that they had to engage in a level of rigid procedure compliance that some teachers in their school complained was restrictive and that they themselves believed contributed to increased management work and at times impeded innovation. However, when they practised less policy rigidity and concentrated on more creativity and instructional leadership (similar to the activity of their non-Black school leader peers), they were seen as not knowing “the rules” and were considered by others as “incompetent at their job.” In this double bind, there is no way to appease teaching staff: they were considered either too rigid or incompetent.

### ***Expectations Around Comportment***

Some of the Black school leaders who spoke to us, especially women, described how they had to intentionally modify their behaviour at work in response to how others interact with and respond to them. They described being perceived as either “angry” or a “pushover.” The Black school leaders who shared this double bind spoke about having to think, rethink and overthink what they were going to say in certain situations, and consider how they were going to be perceived by teachers in their school because of these choices.

Black school leaders are middle-level leaders; they have to work with the educators and staff in the building and the superintendents and staff at the board level. School leaders, by the very nature of their work, are expected to mediate between the board directives and supporting the educators in

the building. In all leadership cases, there will be times when school leaders have to deliver a firm “no” to a request and implement policies and practices that educators will not find favourable. For Black school leaders, especially women, their ability to stand firm is not viewed as a demonstration of strong leadership. Instead, many participants described fears around being perceived as the trope of “the angry Black woman,” especially if they continue to stand firm when facing pushback or questions from their teachers, or if they push back against teachers when they feel these educators are being unfair or biased. However, Black school leaders in the study described the inverse as also true: when Black female leaders focus on developing relationships and school culture over firm policy implementation within the school, they are seen as lenient or pushovers.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF RACIALLY DRIVEN DOUBLE BINDS**

School leaders who face double-bind situations will experience negative consequences regardless of the choices they make or the actions in which they engage. Consequently, they may also experience feeling trapped between two conflicting demands or expectations. For example, standardized testing and performance metrics can conflict with holistic approaches to education, forcing school leaders to choose between competing priorities. School leaders may also feel frustrated and powerless because no matter what they choose, they seem to encounter criticism or adverse outcomes. These situations are exacerbated for Black school leaders because they experience additional racially driven double binds that are due to discriminatory beliefs, racist assumptions and implicit and/or unconscious biases from other educators, parents and students. The consequences are far reaching. Black school leaders are frustrated and at times feel helpless and unsupported. At the time of these conversations, only a handful of Black school leaders felt supported by their school board(s) and superintendent(s).

The constant attacks on who they are as individuals, in the form of micro- and macroaggressions, is wearing on them and their occupational wellness is diminishing: they are burning out. This is a critical situation, not just for Black leaders but also for public education and future school leadership as a whole. Public education needs healthy Black school leaders because Black school leaders are a signal to Black students that the students not only belong in public education but can thrive in public education. Black school leaders are important disruptors of whiteness in public education. The entire school system benefits when non-white, including Black, school leaders are elevated. Canadian classrooms desperately need diverse representation in and of school leadership. Social justice demands it. None of these outcomes are possible if Black school leaders are burnt out, on leave or discouraged from aspiring to leadership.

## MOVING FORWARD

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Moving forward, it is important to consider how these racially driven double binds might be mitigated for Black school leaders in public education. Addressing this issue is not going to be as simple as a one-off professional learning event. It will necessitate thoughtful, difficult, ongoing conversations and work to disrupt the systemic anti-Black racism entrenched in Canadian public education and Canadian school leadership culture.

### *Rethinking Professional Learning*

Expecting Black school leaders to participate in professional learning to combat how others racially profile them is misguided, racist and not the answer. The focus should not be on Black school leaders' reaction to racism and microaggressions based on their race, but on the perpetrators of racism and microaggressions against Black school leaders. Further, individual action is an important element toward change, but the system that supports and reifies these racist microaggressions must be exposed and disrupted. Without institutional action and change, the issues facing Black school leaders, as reported by participants in the study, will continue. Those responsible for supporting Black school leaders will need to consciously not perpetuate this deficit model or "blame the victim" approach in planning professional development and professional learning initiatives. There must be extensive education around anti-racism and combating racial microaggressions, including examples presented to white and other non-Black educators and school leaders, and a strong measure of accountability for those who perpetrate anti-Black racism against school leaders.

### *Holding Public Educators to a Higher Standard*

The Black school leaders we talked with have had, and continue to experience, these racially motivated double binds with professional educators in their buildings. From both a system-level and individual perspective, this is intolerable behaviour coming from education professionals, and yet it continues to exist (CAP 2024). Members of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) who engage in discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice and racial practices are violating the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession in Ontario, not to mention the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. If professional educators feel comfortable enough to be racist toward someone who is in a position of authority, we have to consider what is happening in their classrooms.

### *Superintendents and School Boards Listening with Intention*

In our conversations, we asked Ontario Black school leaders about their relationship with their board and if they had received support when they encountered these double binds or felt burnt out. Many

described informing their superintendents or boards about specific incidents and patterns of behaviour, and having those complaints go unaddressed. Many were told that everyone experiences these situations and to "suck it up" or "ignore it." But they can't ignore these situations – living daily with racially driven double binds at their place of work leaves them feeling exhausted and unsafe, and that they cannot trust their board to protect them or hold those responsible accountable for their actions.

Black school leaders know their situations best and can offer insights that will help schools, school boards, professional associations and the provincial governments address this racism. If boards bring together Black school leaders to share their knowledge and experiences – many of which are personal and painful – they have to be willing to act on the information that is shared. One of the main shortcomings of consultation is that the people who take the time to share – and in many cases, relive their trauma – are not included in solution building, or even informed about whether their information will be used in decision making. To circumvent this pitfall, superintendents and boards can work with Black school leaders to co-construct solutions and strategies in an environment where Black school leaders are valued, respected as equal partners, heard and have their voices and perspectives incorporated into action for disruption.

### *Fostering Environments of Safety for Black Leaders*

Many participants talked about the need to create a sense of safety for Black education leaders, because they experience a systemic lack of safety in education. It is crucial that Black leaders are involved in conceptualizing what these spaces look like, because anyone who is not a Black school leader cannot fully understand what safety looks like to Black school leaders and how to create those spaces. Without this important element of co-creation, non-Black education professionals will continue to create spaces that are safe for them and expect Black leaders to fit into those spaces; for example, Dr. Ann Lopez talks about the importance of creating non-hierarchical mentorships focused on co-labouring (Lopez 2019). Participants in the study also found affinity groups – "group[s] composed of individuals who have a shared aspect of their identity, usually an aspect that is underrepresented or even undervalued in society" (OPC 2022) – for Black school leaders are helpful, but explained that the demanding schedule of the principalship could be a barrier to attending meetings. Along those lines, several suggested that annual holistic retreats for Black leaders would be a meaningful way for Black colleagues from all over the province to come together. These are but a few meaningful ways to address the lack of safety that Black school leaders experience in their work.

## CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the racially motivated double binds and other acts of racism in their work, the Black school leaders in our study expressed love for their work and a strong commitment to continue doing this work. Nevertheless, healthy school leaders are an important facet of and for healthy schools, so it is important to work to eradicate the issues that perpetuate harm for Black school leaders in their work. When we engage in this important and urgent work, everyone benefits. ▲

Dr. Katina Pollock is a professor of educational leadership and policy in the Faculty of Education at Western University.

✉ [katina.pollock@uwo.ca](mailto:katina.pollock@uwo.ca)

Dr. Donna Swapp is an assistant professor and chair of the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Regina.

✉ [donna.swapp@uregina.ca](mailto:donna.swapp@uregina.ca)

Dr. Annette Walker is an educator, researcher, and school leadership and occupational well-being consultant.

✉ [awalk33@uwo.ca](mailto:awalk33@uwo.ca)

Dr. Fei Wang is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia.

✉ [fei.wang@ubc.ca](mailto:fei.wang@ubc.ca)

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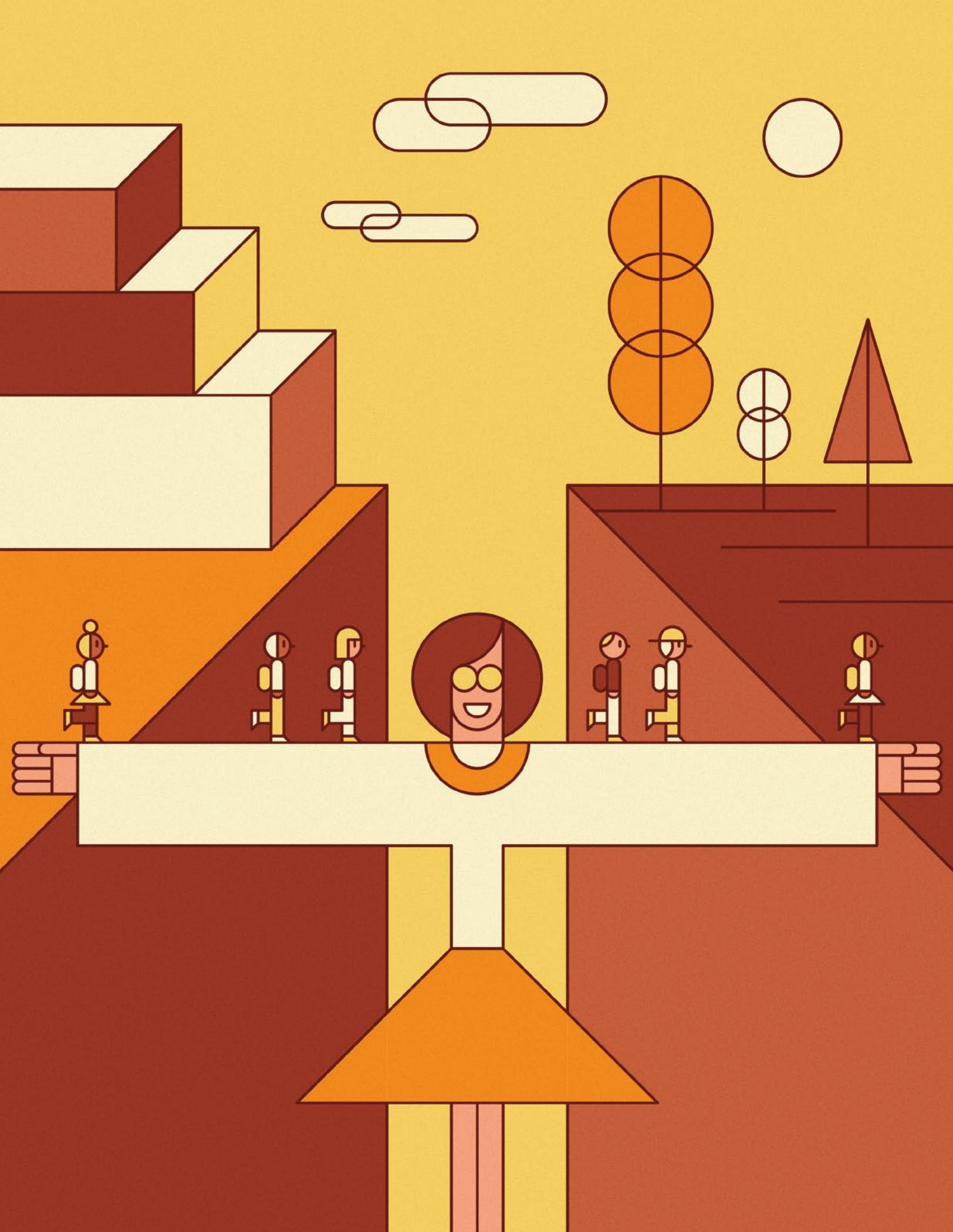
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By Dr. Jennifer Leclerc and Dr. Kathy Witherow

Illustration by Greg Mably

# Bridging the Gap

## from Big Box to Bespoke

Professional learning in support of school improvement

**P**rin cipals continue to face many challenges in their daily operations of a school, on top of their responsibility to ensure that conditions for student learning and well-being are responsive and addressing the barriers many students face within our schools.

Our inquiry question was, “How do principals learn the complexities of school improvement while continuing to lead their diverse school communities; and what supports from the superintendent are needed to maximize their leadership impact?”

Tethered to the focus of school improvement is how principals are embedding equity into their improvement efforts. Our theory of change includes the need to disrupt the status quo that holds on to the inequities and oppressive structures and practices within a school. The most effective school leaders lead with an equity stance and are focused on addressing what equity looks like in their school context as they tackle improving outcomes for students.

We asked 16 principals from school districts across Ontario to tell us about their experiences with school improvement planning and how their superintendent provided support for this essential task. What we heard was honest feedback about the challenges they face, as well as examples of collaborative working relationships and effective leadership practices. The varied responses shed light on the need to move away from generic, “Big Box,” professional learning, toward a more customized approach, which we call “Bespoke” professional learning – a tailored, individualized approach to professional development that addresses the specific needs of each principal and school.

So many of us have experienced “Big Box” professional learning. You know, the kind that resembles the big box stores that are filled to the rafters with generic brands of a little of everything. You walk the aisles of these stores picking up things you might not need, but are overwhelmed with the sheer

volume of merchandise. What you really want can’t be found, but you leave the store with a cart full of things you really didn’t need. Now let’s transfer this analogy to how we have experienced professional learning over the years. Just as with big box stores, traditional professional development often overwhelms educators with generic content that doesn’t address their specific needs. We leave the session feeling overwhelmed, but without receiving anything that pertains to our own school. The time has come to move away from Big Box professional learning to Bespoke professional learning; that is, professional learning that is customized, personalized and contextualized to the needs of each individual school and the professional learning needs of each principal.

The principals who participated in our inquiry shared many challenges with us. They talked about the challenge of high expectations for improvement, but with limited time and resources dedicated to achieving these results. Principals struggle to find dedicated time for school improvement planning due to daily operational demands and staff shortages. Moreover, this is accompanied by a lack of consistency in superintendent support. The support received from system-level leaders varies widely. Some principals talked about the valuable guidance and resources their superintendents shared with them, while other superintendents appeared disengaged from the “real work.”

We also heard that principals are frustrated by the disconnect that exists between prescribed templates and processes imposed by the district, and the need for school-based, context-specific planning. This is magnified



**Bespoke**  
*adjective*

products or services that have been specially made or designed for a particular person or type of customer. Custom-made.  
*[British, formal] ...a bespoke suit.*

Superintendents who create opportunities for principals to connect, share best practices and learn from each other's experiences lead to change in practice and a sense of confidence in delivering on expectations.

by the lack of opportunities for collaborative learning provided so principals can learn from colleagues and share best practices.

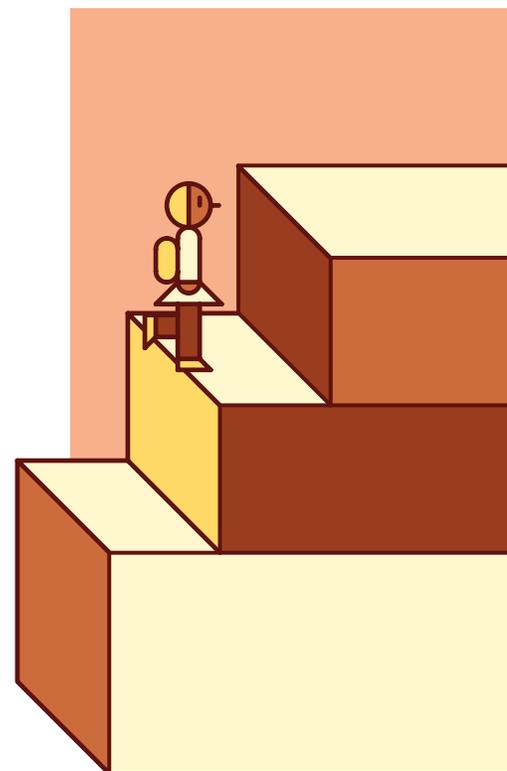
We've identified five key elements that are essential to any professional learning plan designed to build capacity for school improvement. If we can ensure that superintendents use these five elements as building blocks in the support provided to their principals, we will take professional learning from Big Box to Bespoke, and meet the individualized learning needs of principals and contextual needs of schools.

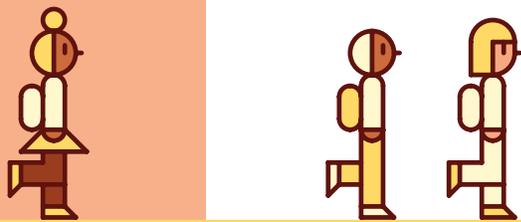
### **(1) Collaborative Learning**

Effective collaboration is crucial for principal development. We heard continually about the wasted opportunity of Family of Schools meetings. Instead of being a monthly opportunity to create a collaborative network of learners with other administrators, these meetings fall into the trap of being information sharing at best, and a waste of time at worst. Superintendents who understand the importance of having principals share their experiences and strategies with other principals find the time to structure peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Judith Warren Little (1982) provided a foundation for our current understanding of collaboration by crafting a taxonomy of collaboration with a move from "storytelling" to "joint work." This underscores the potential and pitfalls of collaboration and has fuelled numerous studies

over the years, including Sunstein and Hastie (2015), who point to the important role the leader plays in moving from "happy talk" to real learning.

Principals comment on this kind of impactful support, which includes tailored coaching, mentoring and relevant professional learning that fosters genuine dialogue and shared responsibility for each other's learning. For example, hands-on training in data literacy and how to create collaborative





structures at school are practical applications of improvement strategies. Superintendents who create opportunities for principals to connect, share best practices and learn from each other's experiences lead to change in practice and a sense of confidence in delivering on expectations.

## (2) Contextualized Learning

We have learned that principals need to feel supported by their superintendents and by the system so they can effectively lead the type of school improvement that puts students at the centre and ensures oppressive barriers are removed so that all students can achieve their potential. The reality, however, is that there is a lack of intentional learning for superintendents to ensure they are equipped to support principal learning.

Essential to any professional learning plan is the recognition that each school has unique needs and contexts. Understanding a school's context will help our superintendents move away from generic Big Box learning sessions and develop a more personalized approach where each school's starting point will be jointly understood.

This desire for flexibility also extends to the use of templates and processes for school improvement planning. Many principals feel like they are caught in an exercise of checking boxes rather than being engaged in a meaningful improvement process. Contextualizing professional learning does not mean learning in isolation. We heard from principals about the benefit of learning from their colleagues

and sharing best practices. Having superintendents facilitate the networking of principals who share similar contexts would be beneficial to this process. Helping principals learn how to develop collaborative processes will emphasize the importance of voice in the improvement planning process.

## (3) Data-informed Planning

Principals know the importance of having current and relevant data in a school improvement process. Yet, principals often haven't spent enough time developing their data literacy skills. We heard from many principals that they learn informally about data from their colleagues. Professional learning should build on data literacy so superintendents and principals are able to access, analyze and interpret various data sources to help principals make informed decisions. Thinking outside the Big Box for techniques in data collection and the integration of data sets in the planning process will bring evidence gathering down to the classroom and school level.

## (4) Mentorship and Experiential Learning

According to Hill (2022), an effective mentor is most commonly described as available, approachable, experienced, supportive, trustworthy, enthusiastic, encouraging and active. A mentor's past experience, knowledge and being a good role model for a mentee is essential.

Principals shared that mentorship from superintendents was highly valued. Learning about a mentor's experiences was recognized

as crucial to principal learning and work. Opportunities where principals were provided with hands-on experiences (working with others in meetings on their school improvement plan, visiting experienced principals' schools with a focus on school improvement, etc.) were cited as particularly valuable. It is the professional learning that connects leaders across schools that is most impactful.

## (5) Superintendent Support and Engagement

Regular and open communication between superintendents and principals is a key enabler for successful school improvement efforts. Studies show that consistent and transparent communication helps align goals and ensures that principals are well-informed about district priorities and initiatives (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012). Effective superintendents emphasize the importance of instructional leadership and work closely with principals to enhance teaching and learning. Intentional relationships that are cultivated between school and system leaders make a difference for principals, both newly appointed individuals and seasoned veterans.

Principals referenced the value of superintendent involvement in school-specific planning and in the implementation of effective strategies for superintendent-principal collaboration. Many principals cited the importance of genuine interest and support from their superintendents related to school improvement planning. Feedback and follow-up from superintendents were cited as critical. Giving and receiving feedback are highly effective skills and may be the secret ingredient missing to support principals.

## Concluding Thoughts

As we listen to the voice of principals, we learn that superintendents can have a positive impact in building principal capacity around school improvement efforts. This set of guidelines should be considered in designing professional learning that supports school improvement planning:



- (A) **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Ensure the learning structure can accommodate diverse learning needs and contexts of principals, from those who are new to those who are experienced.
- (B) **Practical Application:** Emphasize hands-on activities and real-world simulations to reinforce the learning of principals.
- (C) **Resource Allocation:** Provide principals with access to tools, templates and resources that facilitate effective planning and implementation.
- (D) **Feedback Mechanisms:** Ensure the superintendent incorporates regular feedback loops to adjust and improve the professional learning program over time. ▲

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS AT A GLANCE

### Building Bridges Between Big Box Learning and Bespoke Learning

| Principal Input<br>Big Box Approach  | From Big Box to Bespoke Learning  | Principal Input<br>Bespoke Approach  |
|--|---|--|
| "Frustrating when being told that I may understand instructional leadership and school improvement planning, but that my superintendent understood operations. This made me wonder what we value." | Moving from isolated learning to structured mentor relationships and experiential learning opportunities.           | "Having mentors has been extremely valuable. Had I not had the opportunity to work with some exceptional superintendents, I might have found my first couple of years as a principal challenging." |
| "A great deal of the centralized learning we are doing is sit and get. The purpose is to check the box, not to build capacity."  | Shifting from individual professional development sessions to collaborative learning.                               | "Engaging in meaningful discourse with colleagues and superintendents about improvement planning."   |
| "Challenges include inconsistent engagement, overly prescribed templates and limited follow-up on learning initiatives."   | Transitioning from minimal involvement to active, ongoing support and engagement from superintendents.              | "Useful support includes meaningful site visits, data analysis tools and personalized feedback."   |
| "One off' data learning presentations to support school improvement planning."   | Evolving from sporadic data collection to systematic use of data for informed decision-making.                      | "I think it's important that when a school is struggling, the superintendent is following up on conversations and looking at specific data and evidence of focused work."                          |
| "Principals are not consulted in the support they need to engage in effective school improvement planning."  | Changing from generic improvement plans to tailored strategies that address each school's unique needs and context. | "Flexibility in school improvement planning template reflective of each school's diverse needs."   |

Jennifer Leclerc, Ed.D, M.Ed., OCT member, is the retired director of education of the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, and is currently an instructor and educational consultant.

✉ Jennifer.Leclerc@ontariotechu.ca

Kathy Witherow, Ed.D, M.Ed., OCT member, is a retired associate director from the Toronto District School Board, and is currently an instructor and educational consultant.

✉ kwith64@gmail.com

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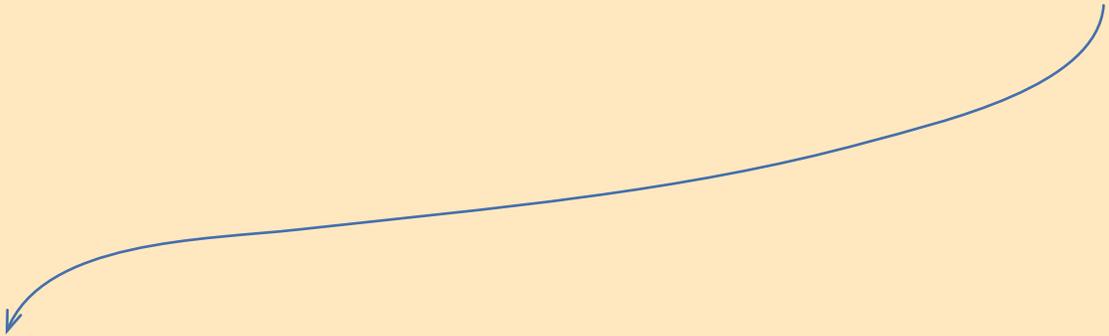
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# Human Rights



Navigating the complaints process



By the Protective Services Team

Illustration by Sarah Alinia Ziazi



All employees in Ontario are entitled to a workplace free from harassment and discrimination. Everyone has the right to work in an environment that is welcoming, inclusive and respectful. School boards have developed and implemented policies and procedures to ensure that school sites, board offices and buildings are safe spaces to work and to learn. However, issues can arise in which people may experience or be accused of human rights violations.

### **The Ontario Human Rights Code – What Is It?**

People in Ontario workplaces are protected by the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (OHRC), which was enacted in 1962. The OHRC prohibits actions that discriminate against people based on protected grounds. These protected grounds include

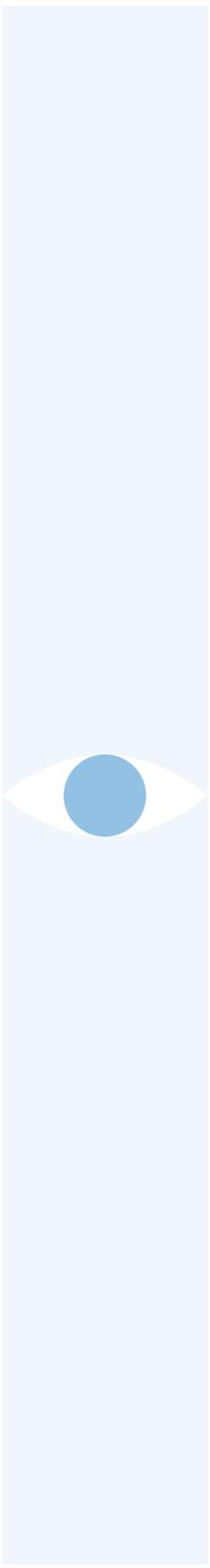
- age
- ancestry, colour, race
- citizenship
- ethnic origin
- place of origin
- creed
- disability
- family status
- marital status (including single status)
- gender identity, gender expression
- receipt of public assistance (in housing only)
- record of offences (in employment only)
- sex (including pregnancy and breastfeeding) and
- sexual orientation.

Most school boards in Ontario have human rights policies and procedures in place, and many have internal human rights offices that are responsible for receiving, acknowledging and investigating complaints.

More recently, many school boards have turned to third-party investigators to conduct investigations on their behalf in certain situations, especially when the complainants and respondents are both employees of the school board. Third-party investigators are neutral and conduct their investigations independently, reporting findings to the school board once their investigation is completed.

### **What You Should Know About Human Rights Complaints**

Over the past few years, principals and vice-principals have been faced with an increasing number of human rights complaints from various individuals, including staff, parents, students and community members. Navigating these complaints, particularly when you are named as a respondent, can be challenging and stressful.



Human rights complaints can be brought either internally or externally. In the internal process, complaints are managed directly by the board, which will conduct its own investigation, sometimes using a neutral third party. The internal human rights complaint process will vary from board to board. External complaints are usually filed with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, where the respondent can be an individual principal or vice-principal, the board as the employer, or both. The external process is different from internal complaints, and school boards will usually provide legal support to principals and vice-principals as employees of the board.

### **What Happens if I am Named as a Respondent to a Human Rights Complaint?**

As an OPC Member, if you receive a notification, either from your board or from the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, that you have been named as a respondent in a human rights complaint, you are advised to contact the OPC immediately and seek consultation before responding to a complaint.

A respondent has the right to

- seek assistance, support and representation from the OPC
- respond to the allegations in a procedurally fair manner
- know the identity of the complainant and
- understand the nature and the particulars of the complaint(s).

### **Attending a Response Meeting in a Human Rights Complaint**

Prior to attending a response meeting, Members should receive a summary of allegations so they can prepare a full answer and defence. These allegations may be vague or specific. Once you have received the summary, you may require some time to prepare, and you should be in contact with an OPC Protective Services consultant, who will guide you through the process. As part of the preparation for a response meeting, Members should

- review their notes and any incident reports related to the allegations
- review report cards, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), safety plans, etc. (if applicable) and
- gather any other documentation that might be relevant to the case (email, texts, call logs, etc.).

Proper documentation will contribute to ensuring the best defence possible to a human rights complaint.

### Maintain Proper Documentation Throughout the School Year

It is critical that P/VPs maintain thorough documentation, particularly when incidents occur at your school or during a school-sanctioned event, regardless of whether the incident occurs between staff and students, between staff and parents or between staff members. Consider taking notes about

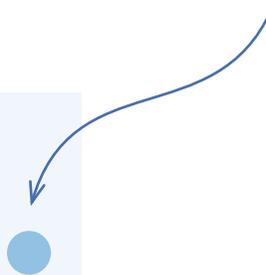
- the time and place of the incident, conversation or event
- a description of what happened
- names of people present (potential witnesses and participants) and
- policies and procedures followed at the time of the incident.

All this information will be useful in responding to a complaint. Record keeping is an important part of your role that should be followed as part of your regular day-to-day operations. Furthermore, accessing notes if you are named as a respondent will be beneficial as part of your defence against any allegations.

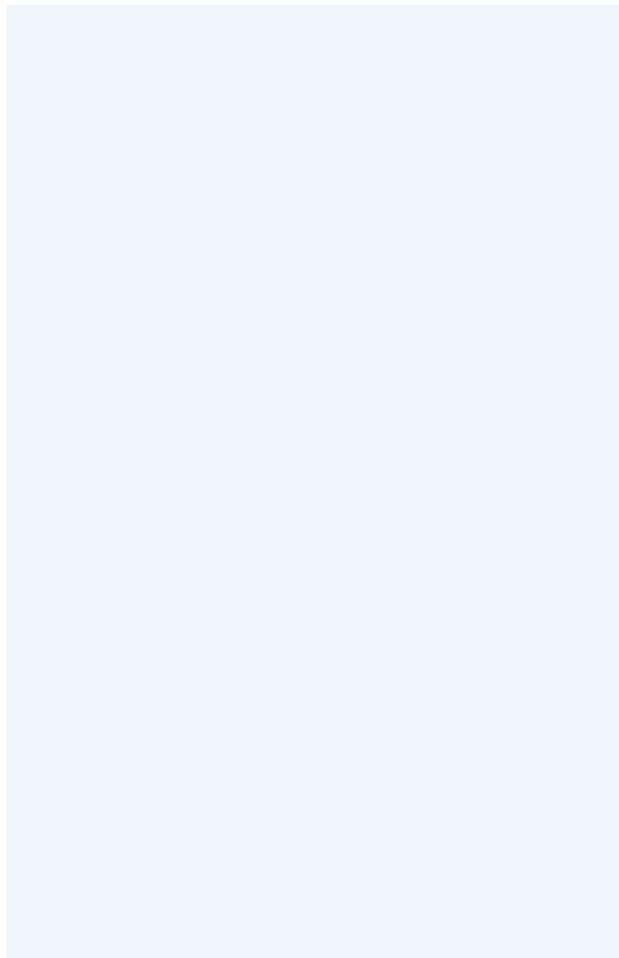
### What Should I Do if I am Called as a Witness in a Human Rights Complaint?

It is also possible that you may be called as a witness in a human rights investigation that is taking place at your board. Again, Members are encouraged to reach out to the OPC Protective Services Team for advice and support. There is an expectation of confidentiality when you are called as a witness, and it is imperative that you follow your board's directions and do not discuss the investigation with anyone other than Protective Services or individuals authorized by the board.

During your witness testimony, you must be open and honest. It is always important to make sure you understand the question that is being asked; if you need clarification, do not be afraid to ask for it. While you may be unable to recall details or information from the past, it is important to distinguish between not recalling something and indicating that something did or did not occur. For more information about testifying as a witness, please refer to the [Testifying as a Witness](#) tip sheet on our website.



Record keeping is an important part of your role that should be followed as part of your regular day-to-day operations.



### What Should I Do if a Staff Member Makes a Human Rights Complaint to Me About Another Staff Member?

There may be cases where staff members come forward with a human rights complaint about another staff member in your building. You should immediately contact your superintendent and the board human resources department to report the complaint and ask for guidance about next steps, support with the process and any other assistance you may require. School boards have an obligation to investigate human rights complaints and should provide direction on how the complaint will be handled. Ensure that you document the date that you received the complaint and the name of the person to whom you reported the complaint.

### Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (HRTO)

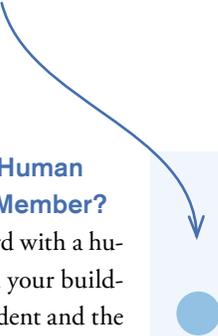
Human rights complaints are complex and can also be made through the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario if the claims fall under the *Human Rights Code*. The HRTO is the administrative tribunal responsible for resolving claims of discrimination and harassment brought under the *Human Rights Code*. As a first step, the HRTO offers parties the opportunity to settle the dispute through mediation. If the parties do not agree to mediation, or mediation does not resolve the application, the HRTO holds a hearing to adjudicate the matter.

The hearings are a legal proceeding similar to a trial – evidence will be called by the applicant and the respondent(s), there is examination and cross-examination of witnesses, the vice-chair will make procedural determinations throughout the process and ultimately will issue a decision that is binding on the parties, subject only to an appeal.

If you believe you have experienced discrimination or harassment on a prohibited ground (as listed above), you may choose to file an application with the HRTO.

### What Happens if I am Named as a Respondent in an HRTO Complaint?

If you are named as a respondent in a Human Rights Tribunal Application that has been initiated by a parent or a staff member from your school board, there are several steps you will need to take. These include notifying your superintendent and contacting the OPC. In most cases, the school board will engage legal counsel to respond to the complaint in accordance with its indemnification policy – provided you have followed board policies and procedures as an agent of the board. If the board takes the view that you may have violated its policies and procedures, it is possible you will need to defend yourself against the allegations. Contacting the OPC is essential to seek further advice and support. It will also be important to review the Terms and Conditions in your local



School boards have an obligation to investigate human rights complaints and should provide direction on how the complaint will be handled.

agreement to understand what indemnification protections may be available to you.

After you have had the opportunity to read through the complaint and gain a deeper understanding of the allegations, you will want to review your notes and gather any information that may be relevant to the complaint. You will also want to review your board's policies and procedures on human rights and any related policies. Ensuring that you have a thorough understanding of your local district's applicable policies and procedures will inform and guide you in your practice.

### What Types of Processes will I be Expected to Participate In at the HRTO?

Once a written response to the allegations has been submitted, the HRTO will share it with the applicant for their reply. All documents will be shared between the parties. Additionally, both parties will need to consider participating in a mediation process. The mediation process must be consensual – one party cannot compel the other to join. The purpose of mediation is to reach a timely and mutually agreeable resolution to the complaint. If mediation is not pursued, a hearing date will be scheduled. The hearing is a more formal procedure where an adjudicator will assess whether a Code violation has occurred.

Both parties will have the opportunity to present evidence through the examination and cross-examination of witnesses. Applicants may appear without legal representation and are granted flexibility in their examinations due to their lack of legal training. As a respondent, you will likely have legal counsel representing you.

**\* It is important to note that the OPC does not provide legal representation at HRTO hearings.** In some cases, school boards will provide legal representation, but this varies from board to board.

After the hearing, the adjudicator will review the evidence and issue findings of fact and law. This process can be lengthy, often taking months, and ultimately culminates in a written decision that includes the order and the rationale behind it.

### Filing Your Own Complaint

Principals and vice-principals may also choose to file a human rights complaint against an individual or individuals in their board. For an internal complaint, Members should follow the processes outlined in their respective boards' human rights and workplace harassment policies and procedures. The complaint forms will usually ask for specific details, including

- the name(s) and job title(s) of the individual(s) against whom you are filing a complaint
- the date(s) and time(s) incident(s) occurred
- the location of the incident(s)
- a detailed description of what happened
- which protected ground is engaged and
- the name(s) and job title(s) of any witnesses to the human rights violations.

In most cases, complaints should be made directly to your immediate supervisor. If your immediate supervisor is the person against whom you are filing the complaint, your board's policies and procedures should provide directions on how to proceed. It is likely your complaint would be directed to their supervisor or to the central department that is responsible for human rights in your school board.

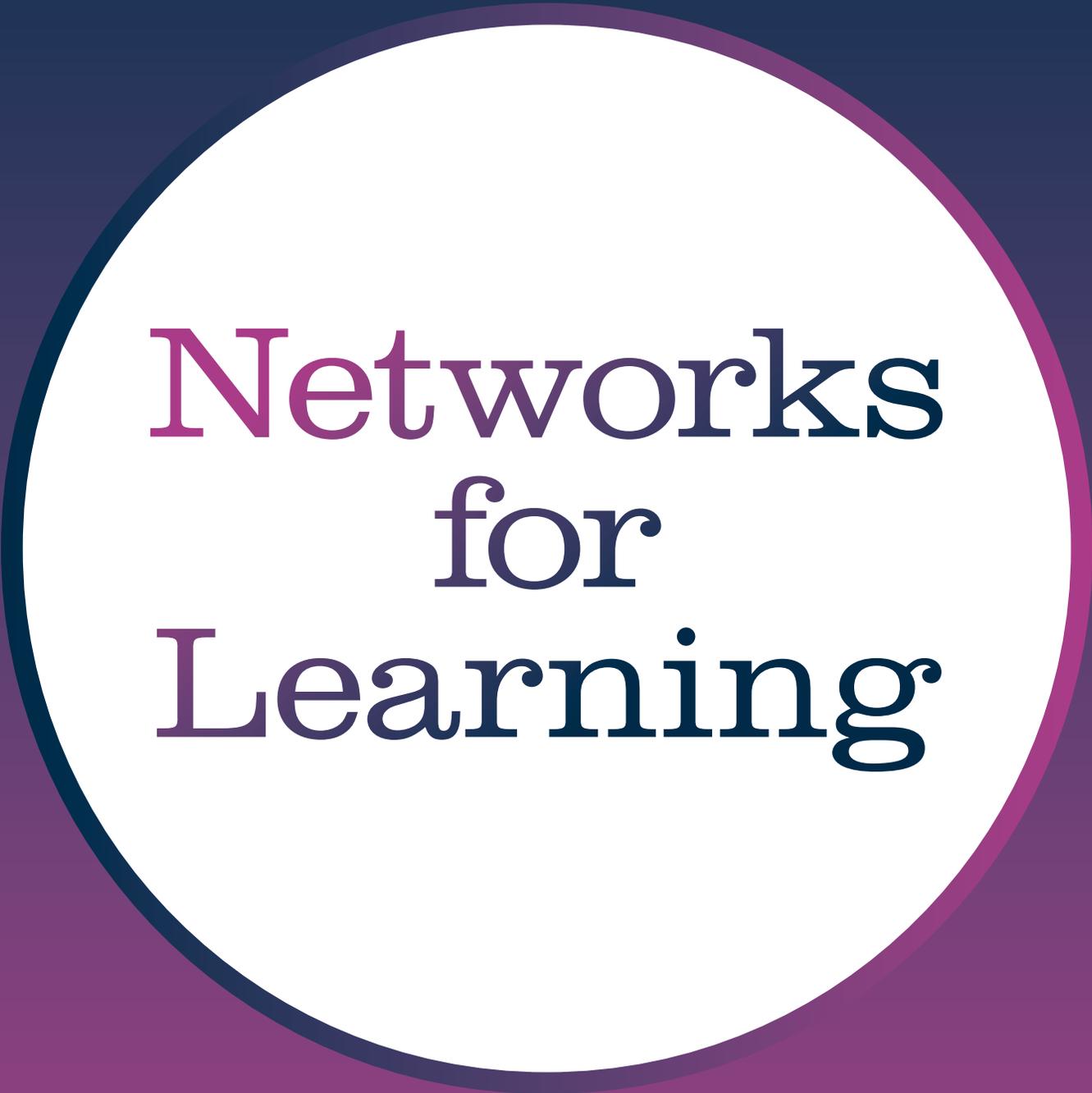
The avenue for filing an external complaint is through the HRTO. The [Human Rights Legal Support Centre \(HRLSC\)](#) is an organization in Ontario that provides free legal assistance to individuals who have experienced discrimination and want to file a complaint with the HRTO. The HRLSC's services include legal advice, guidance on the complaints process, assistance with filing an application and, in some cases, representation at HRTO hearings. Members can also consult with the OPC if you are considering filing an application with the HRTO for incidents that occurred during your employment. It is important to know and understand your rights as a Member and to be aware of your school board's human rights policies and procedures.

For more information, see

- [Human Rights Code](#)
- [About Human Rights](#)
- [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#)
- [OPC Session – Human Rights 101](#)
- [OPC Session – Human Rights Issues in Schools](#)
- [OPC Protective Services](#) ▲

✉ [asayed@principals.ca](mailto:asayed@principals.ca)





# Networks for Learning

Professional learning in support of school improvement

The OPC's International Exchanges Program provides a bridge to an inspiring journey to connect school leaders around the globe. By facilitating international exchanges, the OPC nurtures authentic conversations focused on best practices in education, fostering a culture of vulnerability and growth among principals. This initiative not only breaks down communication barriers, but also builds a vibrant community of professional learners dedicated to student success.

We applied to the 2024 exchange roster to Finland and New Zealand, and were over the moon to be matched and start our adventures in education, culture and self-reflection.

### Perspectives from Finland...

During March break 2024, I had the privilege of participating in the OPC's International Exchanges Program: Ontario–Finland. This professional opportunity allowed me to experience being “Principal for a Week” in a Finnish, and specifically the Helsinki, school board.

The principal, Irinia Pellikka, allowed me the opportunity to gain an appreciation of her school's various buildings and learning structures. I also visited a smaller local school to appreciate various models of schools in such a diverse, urban area. This school, Siltamaen Vuosi, was a K–6 school with approximately 400 students, a principal and a half-time vice-principal. They had a very arts-based focus. The principal, Anna-Mari Jantinden, made this focus a priority, and it was evident in the work displayed around the building, in the fact that the whole school collaborated to write and perform a play, and in the resources afforded to all the arts programming.

All of the teachers, staff and students spoke about their experiences and day-to-day programming. There are a lot of similarities to the Ontario system, and some very obvious differences. From the administrative perspective, principals are responsible for the budget, not only for the school items and professional development, and they are also responsible for paying the teachers. This is a huge responsibility that includes hiring

I was so inspired by the care that the Finnish system pays to staff mental health and well-being.



Principal Lise Medd (left) and Principal Irinia Pellikka

the staff and budgeting for salaries as well as for the needs and direction of the school. It is a lot of work for Irinia on top of being responsible for three and a half buildings. Thankfully, she has two full-time vice-principals.

Another stark difference is the support staff allocations. The school has a full-time youth worker, social worker and psychologist. This is amazing and is so important for the social, emotional and mental health support for the students. In addition, I visited an autism program where the main difference from my autism program was the amount of resources the program had, including human resources: twice the number of support workers, plus the teacher and an occupational therapist on site.

There is a real emphasis on making staff rooms communal and welcoming spaces in all schools. All are well furnished, including not only modern furniture, but massage chairs as well. Food and coffee were always available. The staff all sat together and interacted cohesively. In all schools, the principal's office was near the staff room, so the administrators integrated with the staff. This was inspiring and a goal to work toward in my building.

When I got home, and prepared to welcome the principal from Finland at the beginning of October, I was happy to be able to share some of the changes we have applied to our school that had been inspired by my visit to Finland.

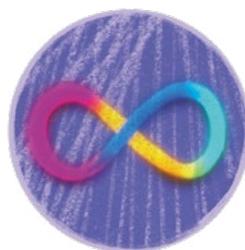
First, I was so inspired by the care that the Finnish system pays to staff mental health and well-being. With the support of a number of our teachers, we updated the staff room with some paint, plants, pictures, tablecloths and more. It has made it a more enjoyable place to be in and has resulted in many staff eating and sharing ideas together at lunch. We also moved forward as a school to decolonize curriculum night to be a more welcoming and supportive “Open House” evening with a barbecue and a more relaxing movement around the school to classrooms. It was a great success where teachers and families alike were more of the focus, making it a less stressful evening. Irinia, my Finnish partner, was very impressed by the kind and caring language she heard around the school from staff to students and vice versa. This, she mentioned, impacted the positive mindset in the building as a whole. It was nice to hear and it was a direct example I took from the Finnish system.

— Lise Medd

### Perspectives from New Zealand...

My travels took me to Auckland, New Zealand, where I found numerous parallels with Ontario. As Commonwealth countries, both nations share histories of colonization and celebrate vibrant Indigenous cultures. This shared backdrop enriches discussions around culturally responsive teaching.

As principal of Irma Coulson Public School in Milton, I oversee Canada’s only [climate ready playground](#), developed in partnership with the national charity Evergreen. Mission Heights School in Auckland is similarly committed to sustainable practices, creating equitable outdoor experiences for students. They boast a farm-to-table program that includes beekeeping. Students grow the food that is then given to members of the community who need it.



Principal Caroline Bush, principal of Mission Heights School in Auckland (left), and Principal Cheryl Hayles

Both educational systems emphasize culturally responsive teaching, focusing on the diverse needs of students, while prioritizing teacher efficacy and parent engagement. A highlight of my exchange was attending an “Improvement Network” meeting – a collaborative initiative aimed at driving educational equity. This is a group of principals who meet regularly to discuss and support each other in the learning goals they have set for their schools.

— Cheryl Hayles

### What We Learned...

Principals around the world are working through the same challenges of student success, staff development and creating supportive learning environments. We cannot emphasize enough what this opportunity has lent to our overall professional development and appreciation of other education systems. Through our observations, we have brought back ideas and models that will enhance the programming in our schools, including

- a greater appreciation for arts programming, which has a massive impact on all learning
- whole school programming, with its positive effects throughout the school
- the impact on learning of the country-wide nutrition program (in Finland, a fully catered hot lunch is provided to all students and staff every day, part of the national school meal program that has provided up

## These exchanges have influenced our leadership. This year our school leadership team is expanding the awareness of our relationship and responsibilities with Indigenous people.

to 850,000 students across the country with lunches and snacks since the 1940s)

- how to organize administration staff, focusing on staff strengths in curriculum and special education to ensure all students' needs are being addressed and
- insight into how Indigenous culture can be authentically integrated into programming.

A particular area of leadership that Cheryl is focusing on since her return from New Zealand is the introduction of authentic Indigenous language expression for our students. As a board, we currently deliver the land acknowledgement and share a reflection before meetings. However, this is articulated in English. Our school equity and inclusion team is now looking at experiences that will build our knowledge of Indigenous languages, particularly the languages that would have been spoken in our area before colonization. At Mission Heights School, the principal has budgeted for a member of the Maori tribe to teach the language and thus build cultural capacity in the school. In New Zealand, the Maori language is prevalent and is spoken widely within the country by non-Maori people, and that inspired Cheryl to develop more authentic Indigenous language opportunities in her school.

There were other observations that are similar to our experiences here in Ontario.

- The FSL programming is just beginning in Finland, and they appreciate the expertise of our ESL programs, which is where they are heading.
- Equity and inclusion is something that the Finnish system is working on, and they are focused on the same model as the Toronto District School Board.
- We all appear to value the opportunities that music, sports and the arts provide to enhance our students' academic experiences.

### Homestay Connection

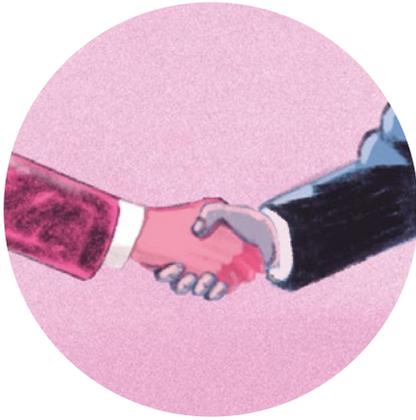
In addition to all the professional gains, we stayed in the homes of our gracious hosts, who provided the opportunity to live like a typical "Finn" or "Kiwi" to fulfill the whole cultural experience. In Finland, Lise enjoyed typical Finnish food including reindeer heart, Karelian pie and lots of yummy black licorice. She took part in a polar dip in the Baltic Sea and the sauna culture, explored Helsinki and took a day trip to historic Porvoo.

In New Zealand, Cheryl was able to tour the remarkable education and leisure spaces surrounding Auckland and the inner city. The Sky Tower provides a panoramic view of the Auckland cityscape. In Rotorua, she visited the Living Maori Village of Whakarewarewa and saw a live cultural show presented by members of the tribe that lives in that area. The village is punctuated by hot springs that support daily life and can be a danger at times. The traditional Maori weaving patterns are simply works of art. Hobbiton is a must-see for any *Lord of the Rings* fans.

Our hosts were so welcoming and hospitable. They opened their homes to a stranger and we are now not only networked colleagues, but friends.

Gaining professional friends and colleagues from halfway around the world has given us the opportunity to reach out and access their support and expertise as we move forward from this experience, and vice versa.

These exchanges have influenced our leadership. This year, our respective school leadership teams are expanding the awareness of our relationship and responsibilities with Indigenous people, in



particular with respect to the 94 Calls to Action called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. We are more intentional in our efforts to nurture relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people beyond the time frame of Treaty Recognition Week. This means being more intentional about familiarizing ourselves with the treaties which we are obliged to uphold as we occupy this land. This is a direct outcome from our experiences in Finland and in New Zealand.

**Conclusion: Building Lasting Connections**

The relationships and professional networks formed through this exchange are invaluable. We extend our gratitude to the OPC for facilitating this opportunity and to our respective school boards for their support. A

special thank you to Irinia Pellikka in Finland and Caroline Bush in New Zealand for their warm hospitality.

As we continue to foster these connections, we are not only enriching our professional lives, but also enhancing the educational experiences of our students. We encourage all principals to consider participating in this incredible program – it’s a chance to expand your horizons and bring fresh perspectives to your school community. ▲

Lise Medd, B.Ed, is the principal of William Burgess Elementary School with the Toronto District School Board. Lise was an international exchange participant during the 2024 school year. She will be applying for future exchange opportunities.

✉ [lise.medd@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:lise.medd@tdsb.on.ca)

Cheryl Hayles, B. Ed, Masters in FLE, is the principal at Irma Coulson Public School with the Halton District School Board. Cheryl travelled to New Zealand during the summer of 2024 as an international exchange participant.

✉ [haylesc@hdsb.ca](mailto:haylesc@hdsb.ca)

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# Mark Your Calendar

## March

**14**

[Teaching and Learning Through e-Learning Qualification Program](#)

Registration deadline: February 28

**17**

[Education Law Qualification Program](#)

Registration deadline: March 3

**19**

[Affinity Group Meeting – Black Administrators](#)

**24**

[Understanding Muslim Students Course](#)

Registration deadline: March 7

**27**

[New Book Club Group](#)

*Coaching for Equity: Conversations that Change Practice*

FREE for Members!

**30**

Regional Session – Durham and Simcoe County

## April

**1**

[New Book Club Group](#)

*What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing*

FREE for Members!

**1**

Regional Session – York Region

**7**

[Principal's Development Course](#)

Module 18 – Anti-oppressive School Improvement

Registration deadline: March 24

[Principal's Development Course](#)

Module 1 – Principal Legal Duties and Responsibilities

Registration deadline: March 24

**15**

[Affinity Group Meeting – South Asian Administrators Group](#)

Regional Session – Grand Erie, Halton and Waterloo Region

**22**

[Affinity Group Meeting – NeuroRealMe for Neurodivergent Leaders](#)

Regional Session – Algoma, Ontario North East, Near North and Rainbow

## May

**1–3**

Provincial Council Meeting

**8**

Regional Session – Avon Maitland and Bluewater

**12**

[Principal's Development Course](#)

Module 2 – Instructional Leadership for School Improvement

Registration deadline: April 28

**20**

Regional Session – Toronto

**22–23**

EDI Conference – Supporting Educators and Administrators Engaged in Equity Work

## July

**2**

[Principal's Qualification Program, Part 1 and 2](#)

Registration deadline: June 1

### OPC Staff Contacts

**President**

Alison Osborne  
president@principals.ca

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Nadine Trépanier-Bisson  
ntrepanier@principals.ca

**Communications**

Peggy Sweeney  
psweeney@principals.ca

**Protective Services**

Aditi Sayed  
asayed@principals.ca

**Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**

Irfan Toor  
itoor@principals.ca

**Professional Learning**

learning@principals.ca

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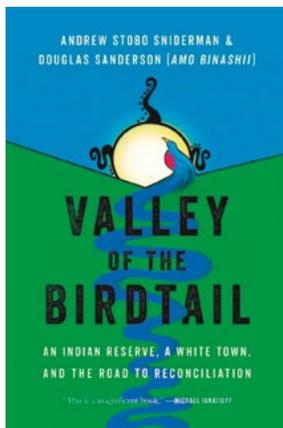
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## Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian reserve, a white town and the road to reconciliation

By Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sanderson (Amo Binashi)  
Corwin Mathematics  
ISBN: 9781443466301  
Reviewed by Irfan Toor

*Valley of the Birdtail* is a historical narrative of two communities separated physically by a river and a valley, but also separated by the impacts of colonization and colonialism.

The book is very engaging as it blends modern-day reflections with historical accounts of how the policies and practices of local, provincial and federal institutions have resulted in disparities in two communities a few kilometres apart. Waywayseecappo is an Indigenous community whose people have lived near the Birdtail River in Manitoba for generations. In the late 1870s, white settlers started a community named Rossburn a few kilometres across the river and the valley. The authors, Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sanderson (Amo Binashi), provide historical, legal and political analysis mixed with the stories of the people who live, and lived, there to explain how it is not the physical distance that accounts for disparities in income, education and opportunity, but rather the cumulative impacts of decades of discriminatory legislation, policy and societal attitudes.

Many Canadians have recently learned and become aware of the tragic history of the residential school

system that existed in Canada for over a century. But other practices, such as the 'pass system' related to movement on and off designated reserves or the restrictions on the use of agricultural technology and the limited access to permits to sell agricultural goods, are not as well known. Sniderman and Sanderson explain how policies that reinforced colonial notions of Indigenous people as inferior acted as barriers and were counterproductive. Meanwhile, the same policies that restricted opportunity for the Indigenous community benefited the white community across the valley. As indicated in the book, "*the government orchestrated failure on the reserves, the Indians who suffered the consequences got blamed.*"

Much of the story involves a comparison of access to education in the two communities. The disparate access to resources and the resulting disproportionate outcomes and opportunities impacting Indigenous students and families are not only historical facts,

but also an ongoing and modern reality. It is important for school leaders today to understand how the mindsets and racist thinking of the past still play a role in school practices and policies today.

The story also discloses the tensions that exist within and between members of the Waywayseecappo community as they have tried to navigate the oppression imposed on them, the loss of personal and cultural identity and a desire to create better lives and opportunities in a way that embraces that same personal and cultural identity.

*Valley of the Birdtail* brings the words 'colonialism' and 'colonization' to life. The cumulative aspects of the legislation and societal discrimination are well laid out and explained in the context of the lives of people in both communities. Recognizing and disrupting how these patterns impact the students and families in our school communities are some of the truths we need to learn and are part of the way we can and need to work toward reconciliation. ▲

Irfan Toor is the social justice and anti-oppression advisor at the Ontario Principals' Council.

✉ itoor@principals.ca



# Responsive Leadership

Building a thriving and inclusive school community

In his book, *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, Muhammad Khalifa states that “School leaders can play a pivotal role in shifting power between educators and

community (i.e., students, families, community members) in equitable ways. They can choose to not only hear community voice, but also to listen to it, to embrace, validate and promote it.”

Thriving school communities and equitable practices go hand in hand. Being an anti-oppressive person and leader is not about following a book or a program – it is a way of being and doing. It is about intentionally challenging the status quo, ensuring equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those who are marginalized.

I build authentic relationships within our school community by actively seeking input through surveys, meetings, phone calls and conversations. Community members were involved in the selection of our school’s name and the School Improvement Equity Planning (SIEP) goals, brainstorming fundraising ideas and organizing community events. This empowered our families, staff and

students to actively contribute to school success. Every learning resource, field trip and event is carefully considered. I always ask the “why” and “how” of a particular situation and what its impact will be on student learning and well-being.

Research has identified that students thrive when they feel safe, valued, respected and included. I support teachers in creating opportunities where students’ identities are acknowledged and affirmed, through diverse classroom library resources, creation of identity posters and growth mindset activities. Additionally, I run school-wide read-aloud sessions featuring books that reflect our diverse student body and global society. This initiative has expanded to include educators, students, local authors and families.

Leadership and extracurricular opportunities are designed to help students thrive based on their interests and talents. The Student Voice Committee

implemented initiatives including a successful fundraising campaign to support our school’s breakfast program and a local food bank.

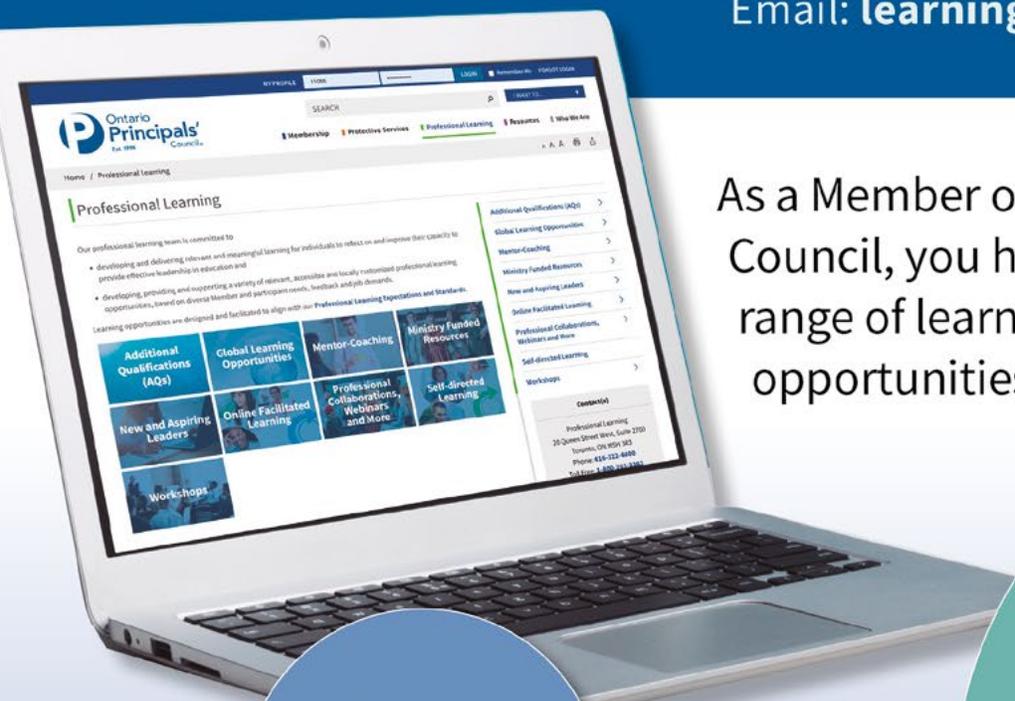
I approach staff, students and families from an asset lens, recognizing their unique talents, skills and knowledge. This perspective builds trust, fosters a sense of belonging and motivates everyone to contribute. As a result, our teachers open their classrooms for their colleagues to learn from each other, and parents actively support school initiatives. There are times I engage in difficult conversations by asking probing questions and grounding discussions in equity.

Equity is a journey, not a destination. I continually reflect on my experiences, and stay informed through current research and ministry and school board policies to ensure that human rights and equity are central to my work. This commitment to learning is grounded in humanity and equity, supporting me in leading with a purpose and authenticity. ▲

Gurmeet Gill is the principal of Red Cedar Public School in the Peel District School Board. ✉ gurmeet.gill@peelsb.com

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