

Winter 2024-2025

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Association of School System Administrators

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## Message from the CASSA/ACGCS President



**Michael Helm**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

**H**ello Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA)! I hope the Fall months have moved along well for all of you, and that you are ready to begin the transition into Winter and into 2025.

At the end of October, I was fortunate to attend the Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network that gathered for a pivotal two-day event. The aim of this gathering was to address the topics surrounding mental health issues in Canadian schools. It brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including members from the CASSA, the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA), school district representatives, health officials, and mental health practitioners.

The meeting aimed to foster discussions on key priorities essential to advancing mental health support in schools across Canada. It brought together experts in school mental health and leaders from school systems nationwide. Engaging presentations sparked thought-provoking discussions that explored the roles of trustees and commissioners in supporting their school districts or boards, the responsibilities of administrators at both the central office and school levels, and strategies for nurturing existing partnerships or establishing new ones.

By the end of the session, it was evident that the network's continued efforts are critical to ensuring system leaders are aware of available resources, best practices, and supports. The discussions emphasized the importance of effective collaboration, strengthening relationships with partners, and prioritizing support within schools. This includes equipping school staff to assist students with mental health challenges, addressing the mental health needs of staff members, and focusing on early intervention and preventative measures, all while ensuring equity and accessibility.

We are at a critical juncture where the complexities of diverse needs demand attention. By continuing this dialogue, we can move closer to ensuring every student receives the support they need to thrive – both academically and emotionally – in school environments that prioritize and promote mental well-being.

The Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network work is so important in helping us and I look forward to seeing what unfolds in the coming months and year.

I wish you all the best in the New Year!

Take care,  
Mike

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**Ken Bain**  
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**Reg Klassen**  
CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

# A Farewell... and a Hello!

**A**fter more than a decade in the role, I have decided to retire and turn the Executive Director role over to a new leader. I am proud of the growth in membership the association has experienced over the years. The Canadian Association for School System Administrators (CASSA) now includes members from every province, the Northwest Territories and the Francophone system leaders outside Quebec.

I am proud of the professional learning opportunities we have provided to our members. Our timely focus on Truth and Reconciliation through our conference speakers and workshops is a highlight for me. The professional learning needs of school system leader centres our work.

I have worked alongside CASSA presidents whose commitment to the importance of a national association of school system leaders has been quite extraordinary as they all had very demanding roles as school system leaders while continuing to support the association. My thanks to **Roger Nippard** (Alberta), **Cindy Finn** (Quebec), **Anne O'Brien** (Ontario), **Reg Klassen** (Manitoba), **Curtis Brown** (Northwest Territories), **Kevin Kaardal** (British Columbia), and **Mike Helm** (Quebec).

My sincere thanks to the dozens of CASSA board members who have given of their time to support the association and its goals.

I know CASSA will be in good hands with Reg Klassen as its new Executive Director.

**H**ello all! I look forward to officially joining CASSA as the new Executive Director in January 2025. This is an exciting new chapter in my life, and I find myself filled with eager anticipation. Even though Ken's work over the years leaves large shoes to fill I look forward to the role and working alongside all of you as we further our national mission in education.

CASSA has already made a significant impact in the lives of system leaders, and I am honored to be joining this incredible team of dedicated individuals to serve as your Executive Director.

Together, I believe we can continue to build on the amazing work already underway, and I look forward to collaborating with all of you to create even greater impact. My goal is to support and amplify the efforts of all CASSA members, to explore new ideas, and to ensure we remain focused on our national mission as we move forward.

I welcome any opportunity to connect with you, listen to your ideas, and learn from your experiences. I'm excited about the work we'll do together and the positive change we can create in the lives of those students we serve.

Here's to a continued bright future of CASSA and being inspired by our work ahead!

# Indigenous Representation in Schools in Northern Communities

By Souhail Soujah, Cora America, and Justin Heron, South Slave Divisional Education Council

*A small step to reclaiming student identity.*



*Students participating in a violin lesson.  
Photos courtesy of Souhail Soujah.*

Indigenizing education means changing our lived experience. It's not just tokenism and land acknowledgements, but braver actions that uphold the calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many districts have taken the bold step of indigenizing their systemic operations to reflect the values of their community more accurately. Yet, their teaching faculties remain predominantly Western and ethnically distant.

Primary education is critical to individual self-actualization in a knowledge-based economy and technocratic society. Although education is a significant step in the path to adulthood and self-sufficiency, its core values and, by association, its purpose are a source of digression among Canadians. This is particularly acute in Indigenous communities where Western values clash with Northern cultural perspectives.

The dominant cultural dogma in Canada, a Western Anglo-Saxon and French-centric perspective, greatly disadvantages Indigeneity in northern communities by creating a system that is at odds with their cultural values. The Indigeneity of our First Nations communities is at risk within the education system because of the absence of systemic changes that accurately reflect the nature of our Northern peoples. This is most salient in the representation of our students in the teaching staff.

A quick survey of teachers within our region, one that prides itself in inclusivity and strong representation of First Nations staff, reveals an alarming trend that repeats itself across the Northwest Territories (NWT). Only 17 per cent of our teaching staff is indigenous. By contrast, over 90 per cent of our non-teaching staff is indigenous. In short, we import our teachers from southern communities, perpetuating colonialist practices not dissimilar to the work done by missionary Europeans at the turn of the century.

Research is abundantly clear on the importance and value of ethnic parity in learning. Schools are a mosaic of children with distinct descriptors. Race, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and many other identifiers, visible and otherwise, necessitate a faculty that parallels this diversity.





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◀ Listening to an expert.

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Work by several academics in the field has drawn a connection between student engagement and their identification with teachers as role models.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Olson observed that students of Latino ancestry performed better, were more engaged in their learning, and missed school less often when their teachers were Latinos themselves.<sup>4</sup> These studies hypothesized that the similarity of cultural values fostered a perception of advocacy and empathy lacking in non-Latino teachers.

Similarly, Gerry and Weixler, and Egalite, Kisida, and Winters noted that African American students felt kinship and responded more actively to African American teachers, citing understanding when struggling academically and appearing to support difficulties outside school, a reality of most African-American students in large cities.<sup>5, 6</sup>

These experiences are similar to those of Indigenous students in Canada. Landertinger, Tessaro and Restoule, in

looking at the impact of Indigeneity in school faculties and teacher retention, report that Indigenous students reported greater confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem and academic success when taught by Indigenous teachers.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, schools with more prominent Indigenous faculties were perceived to be more welcoming, inclusive and open to community input. Justin Heron, a Cree educator in the NWT, recalled his experiences

*Continued on page 10*

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growing up as a child in the 1980s and the impact his teachers had on his learning:

*“I had low self-efficacy in school as I saw many southern teachers cycle through our schools. Though often dedicated, these teachers struggled to fully understand the unique context of our lives, culture, and community needs. This lack of continuity and cultural resonance impacted my ability to connect deeply with my education, often leading to disengagement in school.”*

The same ideology was echoed by Cora America, a long-time northern educator who spent more than half her life living and teaching in the North, when asked how we improve Indigenous student achievement:

*“... by providing and purposefully planning learning opportunities where Indigenous students see themselves reflected in what they learn, how they learn with whom they learn and where they learn...learning situations must be created where Indigenous students see themselves reflected in the faces of their teachers and education staff, highlighted in the curriculum, nestled in the traditional ways presented by community cultural resource people and Elders who are invited into their classrooms. Indigenous students must see themselves mirrored in the school environment- pictured as successes and accomplishers- and*

*reflected in celebrations during cultural events and activities.”*

America goes on to emphasize the importance of learning in their native tongue:

*“Lastly, and most importantly, Indigenous students must place themselves in the Indigenous language spoken – the words that connect them to their self-identity.”*

Lastly, representation in their teachers, America reiterates, much like Heron, leads to self-efficacy and empowerment:

*“These learning opportunities where Indigenous students see people like themselves succeed by sustained effort and with confidence will raise their beliefs that they possess the capabilities to master comparable activities.”*

In addition to academic success, learning milestones, and positive community relationships, Indigenous students taught by Indigenous teachers are more likely to become teachers themselves, further alleviating the need for representation. This unintended consequence is of greatest benefit, as “Education is the profession that teaches all other professions.” It is the first cultural milestone that must be met for all others to follow. Self-governance is centred on controlling one’s fate, a task impossible to achieve if the social systems

that support a community’s infrastructure are outsourced to culturally tone-deaf entities.

Reconciliation and self-governance can only occur in First Nations if the systems that define a nation’s paradigm reflect the composition of their people. Education is no exception. The absence of Indigenous teachers in Northern classrooms is a stumbling block to the reintegration of Indigenous students. The legacy of trauma from Residential Schools is an inheritance that our students reluctantly receive upon birth. It breeds hopelessness, disengagement, and alienation from a system predominantly populated by foreign values espoused by foreign faces. We must do better. Heron echoes this sentiment succinctly:

*“As we strive for equity in education, prioritizing Indigenous representation across disciplines is essential for creating a strong, lasting impact on self-efficacy and achievement within northern communities.”* ○

*Souhail Soujah is the Superintendent of the South Slave Divisional Education Council in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. Cora America is the Assistant Superintendent of the South Slave Divisional Education Council. Justin Heron is the RILE Coordinator (Regional Indigenous Language Education) for the South Slave Divisional Education Council.*

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At the core of the Sixties Scoop was the belief that Indigenous children were better off with white families. Conservatives, social workers, health professionals, the clergy and the RCMP were all part of a system designed to separate Indigenous children from their parents. The Adopt Indian and Miteo program, known as AIM, was a prime example of this. Indigenous children were sent out of province and out of country. But there was resistance. By the early 1970s, Miteo activists like Peggie Standish, Rose Thibodeau and Yvonne Racette were writing articles, organizing and raising awareness about the removal of children from their communities. They fought to establish their own recognized child welfare systems that would not be so quick to remove Indigenous children from their homes.

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AIM all the time was placed in emergency. The AIM children and children, Indigenous children have one their own recognizing that they are in the hands of the state. The state will support the state in the state of the state.

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# A New Educational Mindset: Embracing Innovative Community Learning Centres



*Students engaging in technological learning.  
Photos courtesy of Mario Chiasson.*

By Monique Boudreau and Mario Chiasson, Ph.D., District scolaire francophone Sud

A quiet but impactful shift is underway in a school district in Southeast New Brunswick, Canada, which aims to address long-standing gaps in education by embracing a new organizational culture that aligns with the demands of today's society. After years of unsuccessful attempts to innovate through technology alone, the District scolaire francophone Sud leadership team realized that true transformation required a new mindset, structure, and culture. This story demonstrates how a school district has made strides in innovation and performance through system transformation.

In the early 21st century, globalization and the information technology (IT)

revolution connects the world, and innovative workplaces are increasingly less structured, which promotes a culture of collaboration and networking rather than hierarchy. In this landscape, individuals are expected not only to work but also to learn and innovate, shifting organizational culture towards one that prioritizes dynamic collaboration and responsive leadership skills as core competencies. However, while industries have adapted rapidly to these changes, the education system has lagged, unable to evolve at the same pace since the 1980s.

This lack of adaptation has created a mismatch between what the education system delivers, and the skills needed in today's workforce. Traditional educational models no longer adequately prepare students for innovative and versatile careers. The system struggles to keep up, leading

many to question how education can overcome this pressure and whether it has the resources, leadership, and capacity to evolve in response.

Aligned with New Brunswick's 10-Year Education Plan, the French school board has taken up the challenge of bridging the gap between education and the labor market. Through the "Intr'Appreneur: Tomorrow's Education Today" project, they aim to transform the educational system to meet evolving societal needs. The project shifts from an ego-system to an eco-community approach by creating a "Connected Innovative Community Learning Network." In this model, schools collaborate with community members, healthcare providers, business partners, and research institutions, reimagining schools as "Innovative Learning Community Centers" that serve

as community hubs integrating real-world learning. This vision requires systemic leadership that fosters innovation, collaboration, and deep learning, establishing trust, promoting open dialogue, and building a “*Business Intelligence Network*.” Together, these elements support a dynamic, inclusive culture that enables agile, learner-centered environments, preparing students for a future shaped by artificial intelligence (AI).

The project, which began in September 2019, initially included six schools engaged in this system transformation, implemented in three phases: merge, converge, and transform.

1. **Merge Phase:** This phase brings students, teachers, and staff of the same grade levels together into one Learning Community (LC). In other words, the “*grade level in the classroom*.” Teachers and staff collaborate to create interdisciplinary learning experiences, helping each students achieve grade-level competencies.
2. **Converge Phase:** In this phase, the entire “*school is the classroom*” functioning as a LC, with teachers from all grade levels supporting students across different age groups. Community members and support staff are integrated as extended resources, providing personalized support for each student.
3. **Transform Phase:** In the final phase, the school is rebranded as an “*Innovative Learning Community Center*,” and the “*community itself becomes a classroom*.” This shift allows learning to be directly linked to community needs, making education more authentic and relevant while interacting with professionals.

The move to an eco-community mindset affects everyone involved, including corporate services and administrative staff, who are now required to incorporate community perspectives into planning and design processes. When planning a new school or updating an existing one, these staff members engage with stakeholders to create flexible, inclusive spaces that foster a sense of well-being and community. Their understanding of spatial design such as the use of multifunctional furniture and acoustics is crucial for creating environments that support personalized learning allowing students and teachers to work both individually and in groups within LCs.

The Intr’Appreneur project is supported by a leading research team evaluating its impact on aligning education with

*Reimagining schools as innovative learning communities that serve as community hubs.*



*Schools must adapt to community-responsive, innovative models to offer a new mindset, structure, and culture to 21st-century education.*

societal needs. Six key research areas that guide the project are leadership, engagement, well-being, environment, competencies, and inclusion. While still in its early stages, initial findings indicate that students and teachers are more engaged within the LCs. These environments foster a sense of belonging and support the development of effective management skills, contributing to both student autonomy and teacher efficiency. Inspired by these early successes, other schools in the district have embarked on this transformative journey.

In today’s rapidly changing world, traditional teaching methods no longer suffice. Schools must adapt to community-responsive, innovative models like the Intr’Appreneur project, which offers a new mindset, structure, and culture providing a pathway to 21st-century

education. This New Brunswick initiative bridges formal education with essential skills for an evolving society, showing how system-wide transformation can foster sustainable, meaningful learning experiences. Further information is available at [www.sentrapprendre-intrappreneur.com](http://www.sentrapprendre-intrappreneur.com). ○

*Monique Boudreau serves as the Superintendent at the District scolaire francophone Sud. Beyond district and provincial responsibilities, she has been a key figure in education, serving as Vice President of the National French Association of Superintendents (RNDG) and contributing to le “Comité tripartite.”*

*Dr. Mario Chiasson is the Director of Research, Innovation, and Change Management at the District scolaire francophone Sud.*



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# Enhancing Mental Health Initiatives Through Collaborative Leadership

By Dr. Stephen MacGregor and Dr. Sharon Friesen, Calgary's Werklund School of Education, and Dr. Jennifer Turner, Calgary Board of Education

Supporting student mental health is a top priority for school systems across the country. Frameworks like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) offer structured approaches to mental health interventions, but the path to successful implementation is often fraught with challenges. Success with MTSS hinges on effective facilitation by educational leaders who can navigate complexities in resources, policy, and community partnerships. Our research is conducted in partnership with schools and school authorities to examine how education and health system leaders can collaboratively learn from their experiences with implementing a continuum of mental health supports and services. Our study is a multi-year project involving 59 schools and school authorities. Here, we draw insights from a community engagement event and interviews that included education system leaders, school leaders, health system leaders, and school-based counsellors. Our findings highlight the potential of mobilizing insights using professional learning networks.

## Challenges in implementing mental health supports

Our research has surfaced the many challenges education leaders face when implementing school-based mental health supports. Participants frequently reported a critical shortage of human resources – including specialists, therapists, and staff – placing an unsustainable burden on school and system-based staff and parents. One school-based leader explained, “We simply don’t have the bodies on the ground to provide those services,” underscoring the strain on existing personnel. Participants also emphasized that lasting change would require provincial governments to address resource shortages as a priority equal to academic achievement, with policy adjustments to reflect this commitment.

Systemic issues, such as poor coordination and unclear role definitions, further complicate

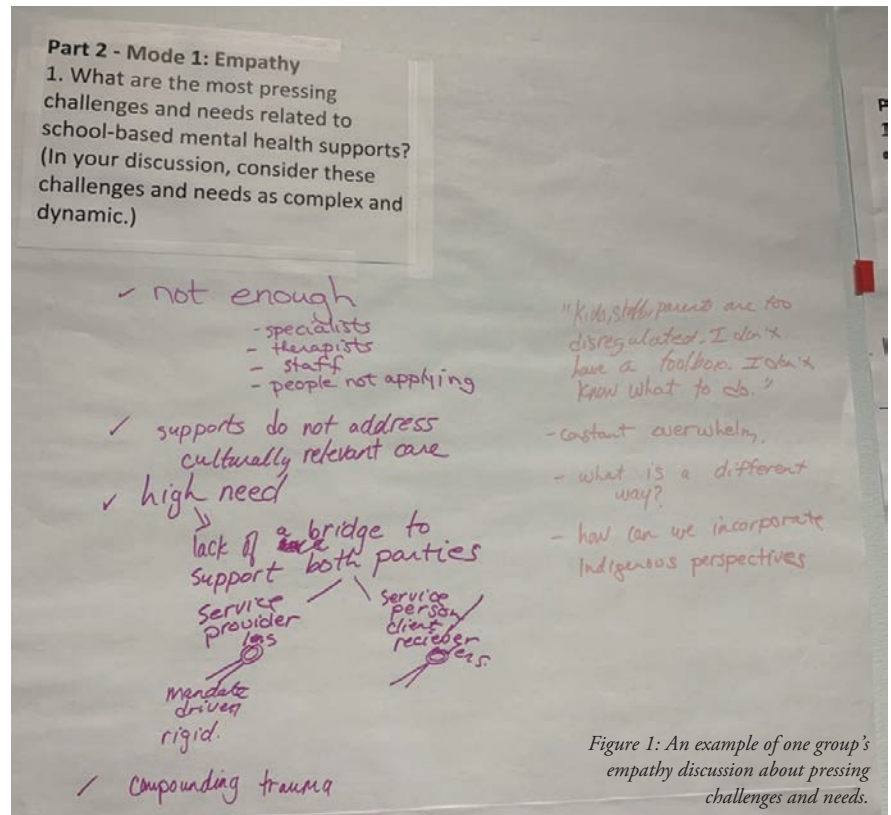


Figure 1: An example of one group's empathy discussion about pressing challenges and needs.

efforts to support student mental health. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues, increasing both the demand for mental health support and the obstacles to providing it. System-based leaders reported a tendency to adhere to established guidelines rather than embrace new strategies, often resulting in short-term solutions that could fail to address deeper systemic issues. This hesitation stemmed partly from the limited, short-term funding for mental health initiatives, which restricted leaders' ability to pursue longer-term strategies.

Educational leaders also identified a gap in designing and implementing culturally and locally relevant change. Limited evidence-based guidance for diverse student populations, such as newcomers, English language learners, and neurodivergent learners, hindered their efforts to ensure equitable access to mental health supports, echoing the well-known need for mental

health strategies that address the varied needs of student populations. How, then, can school system leaders think of their roles in addressing such complex challenges?

## The role of facilitative leadership

School and system leaders are facilitators who align efforts among education staff, mental health professionals, and community partners to ensure that mental health interventions are evidence-informed and contextually relevant. The participants in our study shared many experiences illustrating leaders who wish to address systemic challenges must actively facilitate collaboration not only within their teams but also among one another.

Engaging in professional learning networks, for example, provides educational leaders with opportunities to tackle implementation challenges collectively. Within these networks,



system and school-based leaders can exchange experiences, collaboratively problem-solve, and develop flexible strategies responsive to their varied school contexts. As one system-leader observed, “Everyone is trying to do something... depending on their access to different resources,” highlighting that collaborative networks could create opportunities to learn across various contexts. Moreover, collaborative learning can encourage leaders to refine context-specific approaches and eschew the focus on stopgap solutions, enabling the building of mental health supports that are flexible to the unique demands of their communities. What is clear from our research, however, is that such learning needs to be backed by an evidence-informed framework for implementing and evaluating mental health supports in schools.

Our participants expressed a strong desire for guidance that emphasizes both proactive and responsive approaches (see Figure 2). Their aspirations included:

- Government ministries working in concert to facilitate mental health supports,
- General guidance through a conceptual framework and tools that can be tailored to the unique contexts of different schools and communities, and
- Government policies and priorities aligned with the real needs of schools.

They also stressed the importance of training and engaging other senior leaders, integrating the various aspects of student mental health into teaching practices and paying increased attention to the mental health of school staff.

### Bottom line actionable message

System and School-based leaders can leverage professional learning networks to share insights and develop practical strategies that address resource gaps and systemic challenges. By prioritizing collaborative learning, they can strengthen school-based mental health supports and improve wellbeing throughout their schools. ○

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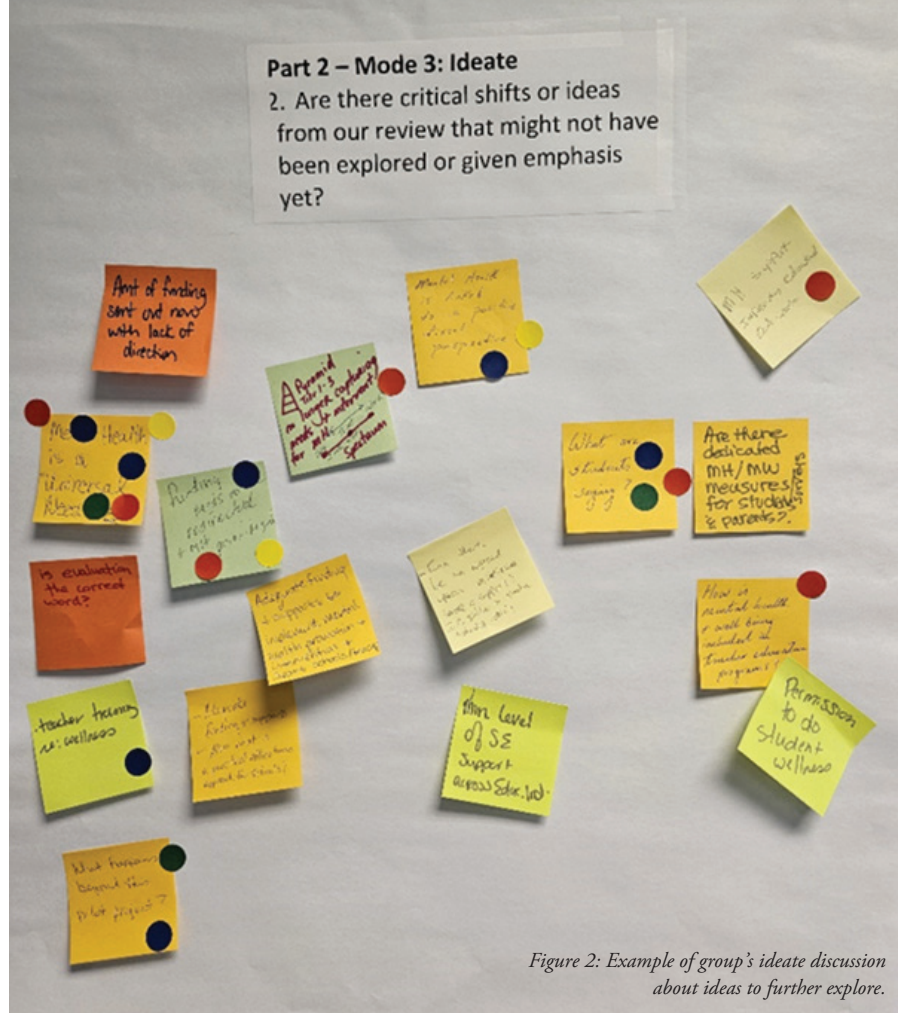


Figure 2: Example of group's ideate discussion about ideas to further explore.



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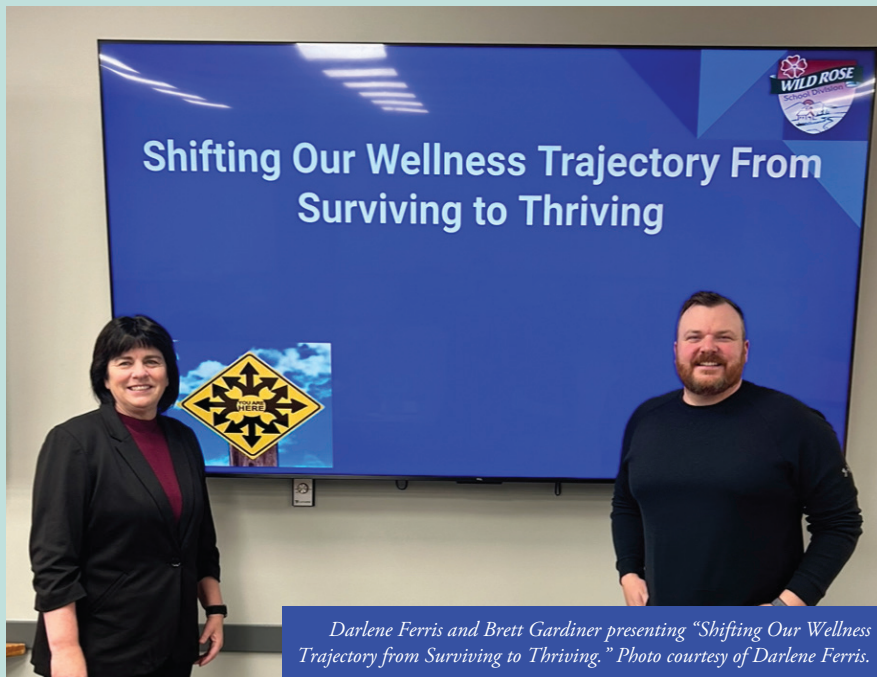




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# Shifting a Wellness System from Surviving to Thriving: The Journey in WRSD

By Darlene Ferris, Wild Rose School Division, and Brett Gardiner, Momentous Performance Educational Consultant



**T**he pandemic changed education, magnifying an already evolving mental health crisis among students. This prompted leaders to adapt to the new needs of students and systems. A more comprehensive and strategic approach to mental health was imperative. An updated collaborative effort involving mental performance consultants, psychologists, and senior leaders seemed a promising strategy to address this growing challenge. Wild Rose School Division (WRSD) implemented innovative strategies to foster a more supportive and responsive learning environment. Although we realize that we cannot address all mental health issues in schools, a radical shift was necessary.

The first step was to prioritize the system leaders' new responsibilities. Considering the

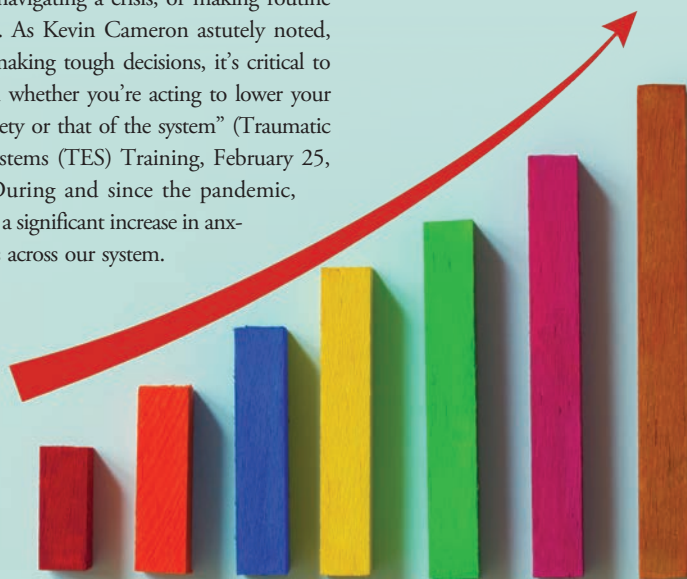
increased pressures, the most important goal of wellness leaders was to lower the anxiety of the system. This responsibility is paramount, whether navigating a crisis, or making routine decisions. As Kevin Cameron astutely noted, "When making tough decisions, it's critical to reflect on whether you're acting to lower your own anxiety or that of the system" (Traumatic Event Systems (TES) Training, February 25, 2024). During and since the pandemic, there was a significant increase in anxiety levels across our system.

We became deliberate in our efforts to reduce this by prioritizing the system's well-being. Primarily this involved more active listening, transparent communication and the focus on making decisions that promote a sense of calm and security for all.

Acting on the need to reduce system anxiety we adopted the following principles:

1. *Confidence is clarity.* It was clear leaders needed to articulate a clear vision and direction, aligning teams to foster confidence and empower individuals to leverage their strengths. This shared understanding enables personalized approaches, increases team investment and promotes differentiation at the school level while still aligning with broader board priorities.
2. *Collect before you direct.* Effective programming involves gathering comprehensive information before making decisions. By collecting both qualitative and quantitative data from the school community, leaders can ensure that their choices are informed and aligned with the needs of their stakeholders.

Implementing the above principles in WRSD, department goals were shaped by a multifaceted approach. Staff, student, and



parent surveys provided valuable data. To delve deeper into these results, focus groups were conducted. To encourage honest, transparent feedback, outside experts often lead these groups, including Alberta Health Services (AHS) and the folks at the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP).

Additionally, analyzing hospital data provided insights into the community's wellness concerns. This data not only formed the basis of our wellness program goals but also served as a benchmark for evaluating the program's effectiveness.

Following the pandemic, we observed that students had a difficult time re-engaging in regular classes, many reported that they had difficulty transitioning back and struggling "to do" school after the two-year disruption. Further, statistics showed a significant increase in reported anxiety and depression and a corresponding decrease in attendance at all levels in our system. Suicide ideation, attempts, and violent threat risk behaviors significantly increased following the transition back to in person learning. Also, all schools reported an increase in worrisome behaviors along with a significant decrease in general resilience and general learning abilities. Disconnection was

at an all-time high amongst students, staff, and the school community. Thus, the need to focus on reconnection.

With board support and a mental health grant, we added "Connection Coaches" to our division wellness team. These coaches were required to have a minimum of two years post-secondary education in mental health or related fields. Their role was to make connections with those students who seemed to be struggling. They identified and engaged those students who were hanging out in the hallways but not getting to class and checked in on chronic nonattenders. The coaches helped students build connections with peers, staff, and community resources.

Further we hired part time mental health therapists to work in our rural schools, which did not have provincial therapists in their immediate community. Now rural students could more easily access the support that they needed. Therapists could observe students individually, within the school system as well as within the family system. Having part-time therapists in these schools also built capacity amongst the staff and we now have a whole team of professionals supporting complex and diverse needs. Capacity building also created an increased feeling of connectedness and confidence.

Within year one of our updated wellness program, we noticed the following:

- Attendance at the elementary level increased 12 per cent,
- Suicide attempts decreased 95 per cent,
- Stage two threat assessments dropped 100 per cent, and
- AHS Addictions statistics for students decreased from 28 per cent to six per cent.

These statistics indicate a very positive shift in our wellness program. Although we recognize there is still much work to be done, we are indeed moving from "SURVIVING TO THRIVING!" ○

*Darlene Ferris (B.Ed., M.Ed, Registered Psychologist) is the Director of Wellness for Wild Rose School Division, she's been an educator and administrator for over 25 years. Darlene also has a private clinical practice in Red Deer, Alberta. Brett Gardiner, a former High School educator, is an award-winning western sports announcer and owner of Momentous Performance in Sylvan Lake and Red Deer, Alberta. Gardiner, a Provisional Registered Psychologist, is passionate about helping others and works as a mental health and performance coach and consultant in the education, athletic and corporate sector.*



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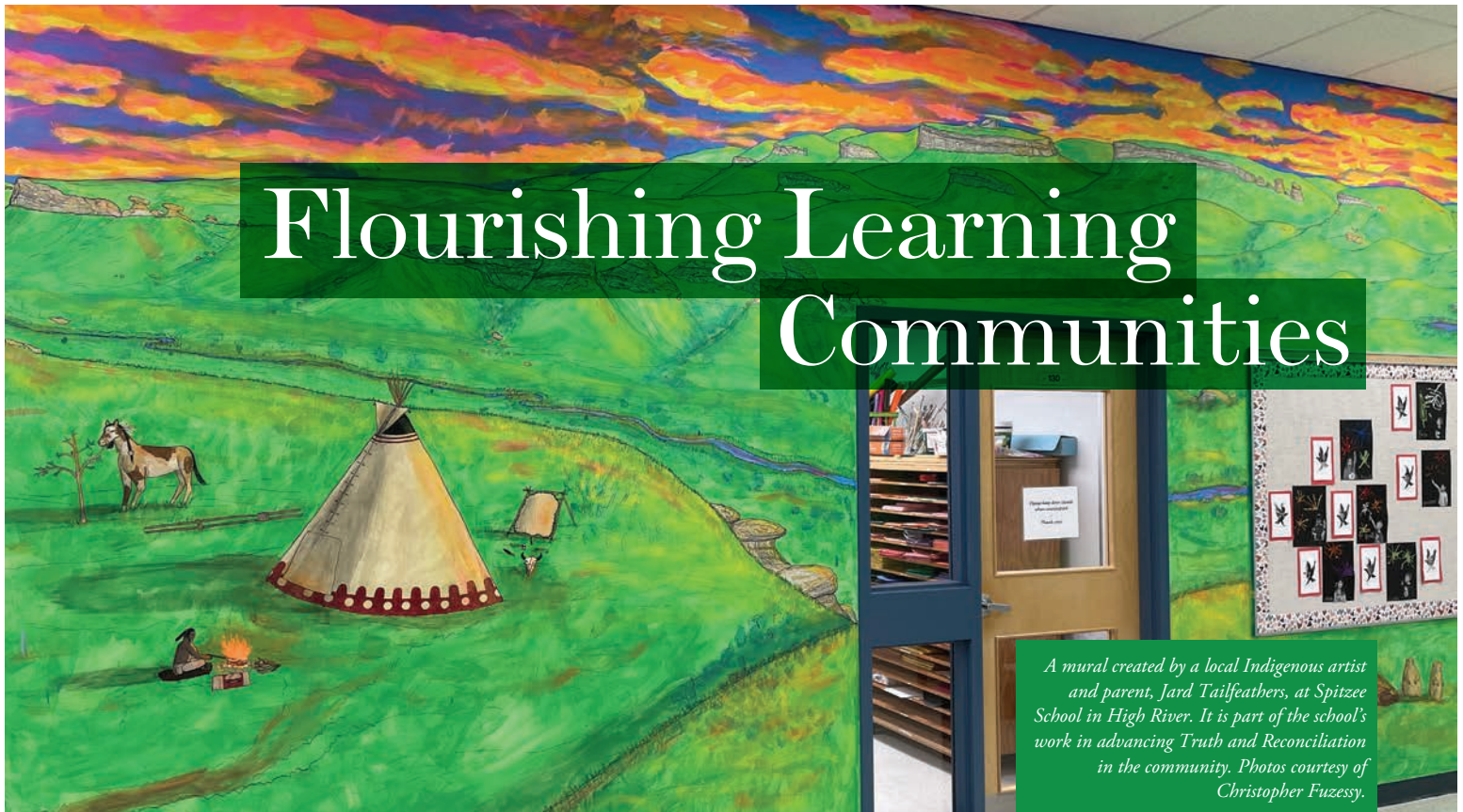


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# Flourishing Learning Communities



*A mural created by a local Indigenous artist and parent, Jard Tailfeathers, at Spitzee School in High River. It is part of the school's work in advancing Truth and Reconciliation in the community. Photos courtesy of Christopher Fuzessy.*

By Dr. Christopher Fuzessy and Charity Tegler, Foothills School Division

**B**uilding community is an essential part of our work in public education. Foothills School Division (FSD) is active in this work in our ongoing efforts to engage with our learning community to determine our individual and collective contributions to flourishing.

Two years ago, system and school-based leaders collaborated to develop a *Guide to Success for a Flourishing Leadership Culture*. You can read about this work in the Summer 2024 edition of *Leaders and Learners*. The literature guiding this effort is drawn largely from works by Amy Edmondson, Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge, and David Cooperrider.

We identified the following five core commitments to thrive together in our system and school leadership work:

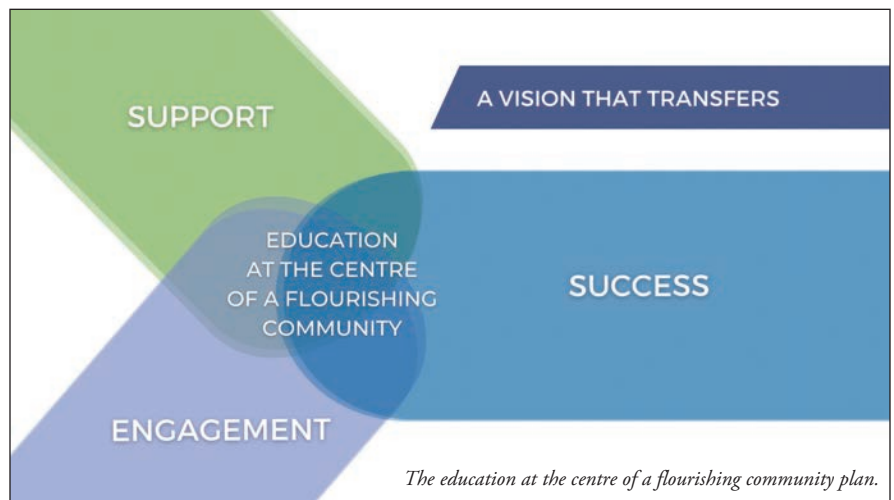
1. Systemness,
2. Healthy relationships,
3. Effective communication,
4. Effective collaboration, and
5. Authentic curiosity.

Our schools have been working to replicate this work locally resulting in positive ripple effects through this focus. In considering the next steps, a question posed in Shane Parrish's work expanded our horizons: In

solving problems, Parrish asks us to consider what would have to hold true for any problem not to have existed in the first place.

Our response to Parrish's prompt is that *community* would have to exist for this VUCA<sup>1</sup> world to have never existed; and this provides our roadmap to our system. We can strive for positive change in our classroom, school and division communities, engage in, and create the conversations necessary for affirmative effect. Building community is essential because it is our responsibility; it is also a primary area where we can have significant impact through our daily work.

Our first step is to develop a definition of community. This emerging definition draws upon a wide and eclectic range of authors and fields of study, including the philosophy, psychology, and trauma-informed literature including the work of Bessel Van der Kolk, Martin Seligman, and Viktor Frankl. Meaning, shared purpose, and social relationships are highlighted here as essential to individual well-being, and community. Inherent in this paradigm of community are trust, connectedness, social support, interdependence, and interrelationship: a place where each of us belongs and shares in the welfare of those around us.



*The education at the centre of a flourishing community plan.*

These concepts of interdependence and interrelatedness resonate deeply, are reminiscent, and speak to my beginning awareness of Indigenous wisdom and world views, or at least my non-Indigenous awareness thereof. Mi'kmaq Elder Alberta Marshall, Blackfoot Elder Dr. Leroy Little Bear, and author, decorated professor and Citizen Potawatomi Nation member Robin Wall-Kimmerer speak to the notion that we are responsible to and for each other, and to and for the world that sustains us.

Our understanding of these unique and complementary Indigenous teachings articulates a world where there is a collective responsibility and mutual respect to, and care for one another and all that mother earth provides to sustain us. This conscious living in respect and reciprocity is the essence of interconnectedness as we understand it. Living a good life calls us to recognize and respect such, and it is only in this collectivity that we can uphold ourselves. This resonates indeed and speaks to community with the wisdom of the ages.

We have thus resolved that our work is to develop connectedness and interrelationship both within and without our

organizational community – reciprocity defined, from micro to macro.

This work has started. We are currently engaging with both our parent community and our entire staff team around a definition of community. The conversation thus far supports our proposed definition with some voice and feedback for enhancement.

We are also asking our shareholders if a sense of belonging is necessary in the community; so far, the response has been an absolute consensus on this point. Finally, we are inquiring about the conditions necessary for our FSD learning community to flourish, and there is a synergy in these responses.

In short, considering this engagement opportunity has only just begun, the conditions we are gathering in community voice are quite similar to *The Guide to Success* we developed as a leadership team in 2023. Perhaps we should have anticipated this, but the five essential commitments cited above largely capture the feedback to date; with the important caveat that systemness can now be more fully understood through the Indigenous concepts of interrelationship, interconnectedness, and reciprocity.

Our next steps are to finalize a definition of community, reassert the importance of

belonging, and build a flourishing communities framework from the feedback we receive. We will share this back to our community and build this framework into our engagements moving forward. The framework will weave into our policy and administrative procedure framework, become embedded in our education plan, and set the bar for positive interactions and community building into our foreseeable future. We are building towards a flourishing Foothills community. ○

*Dr. Christopher Fuzessy is the Superintendent of Schools and Chief Education Officer at Foothills School Division (FSD) in Southern Alberta. Charity Tegler is the Director of Indigenous Learning and Equity for Foothills School Division and a citizen of the Otipemisiwak Métis Government.*

### VUCA definition

1. This term was introduced by the US military in the 1980s when the then Soviet Union collapsed, it stands for: volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous.



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# *A Renaissance of* Professional Development

By Teresa Di Ninno, Jeney Gordon, and Pamela Edey, CAPE Public Charter School



**T**he CAPE teaching staff has, over a 10-year period, engaged in action research to address areas of concern within the classroom. With support, each teacher or teaching team developed their individual research plan with the ultimate goal of increasing student learning. We then shifted to school-wide professional development in program areas that were seen as needing attention such as numeracy, literacy, and integration.

Identified learning losses stemming from COVID-19 restrictions demanded a different approach to professional development. The CAPE administration responded by redesigning professional development to address the learning losses and social-emotional deficits of students, while promoting the

acquisition of meaningful and effective strategies within the teaching staff.

The benefits of personalized professional development have been touted by numerous researchers, including Zheng Ke and Huang, 2019; Bakhtiyarov et al., 2020, Hall and Trespalacios, 2019; and Chaipidech et al., 2020.

Undoubtedly, the personalization of professional development allows teachers to identify and address areas within their practice that require enhancement, which in turn, builds teacher efficacy. One consistent aspect of CAPE's professional development experience was the autonomy to individualize priorities in learning and the associated modality. By 2021, prioritized professional development needed to be resurrected as decision fatigue, lingering apprehension and the daily demands of the classroom's complexities monopolized the energy of teachers and

support staff. We needed to rebuild anew, and a four-stage plan emerged.

The first stage of the plan was to re-evaluate the preferred delivery methods amidst an electronically saturated environment. With many staff tired of separation, professional development needed to bring people together while fostering professional learning. As an instructional staff, skill development involved large group delivery and small group workshops linked to topics that had immediate impacts in the classroom – student regulation and learning deficits, in that order.

The second step of our professional development plan involved pinpointing subtopics under these two larger umbrellas and providing a variety of group-oriented opportunities for staff to learn together. Physicians, clinicians, and therapists presented to and worked with instructional staff to increase capacity. While some collegial groups worked to differentiate skills deficits from clinical conditions, other teams honed their co-regulation skills. While literacy deficits were indeed noticeable, the delays and gaps in numeracy were glaring. This required focused learning on the development of numeracy skills through skilled teaching of mathematics. While much of the second step, focusing on subtopics, was successful, there was limited transference with staff who were struggling to engage with a high-level math course. Upon investigation, we were able to determine that a key point in our plan had yet to be identified – staff endurance for learning within such an immense time of change.

The third stage of our professional development started in 2023 and continued into 2024. Throughout these two years, staff were again grouped for professional development, but all experiences were focused on a book study format. A key ingredient for this strategy was sessions guided by site administrators. Information was presented to educational assistants, teachers and administrators through the lens of our specific context allowing for collective learning. Staff engagement

*Continued on page 24*

# Finding Wellness in the Work

By Dr. Wilco Tymensen and Karen Rancier, Horizon School Division, and Kathleen Lane, EdCan Network

In the last decade, reported rates of mental health problems including anxiety and depression have increased.<sup>1</sup> Within Alberta, teachers and school leaders are reporting increased rates of mental health problems.<sup>2, 3</sup> Extensive efforts to enhance public understanding about mental health have reduced stigma,<sup>4</sup> improved mental health literacy<sup>5</sup> and increased help-seeking intentions,<sup>6</sup> but have not necessarily improved people's mental health. At Horizon School Division (HSD), we have witnessed students and staff become less connected to others and less engaged in work that brings them joy and energy. Our belief is that meaningful work brings about positive connections, and enhances joy, energy, and wellbeing.

Given the complex nature of wellness, we can draw upon complexity theory to understand how systems can learn and co-create change more effectively given that "successful and sustainable improvement can never be done to or even for teachers. It can only ever be achieved by and with them."<sup>7</sup> Complexity theory is premised upon the view that our reality is socially constructed. It assumes that an individual's constructs are influenced by his or her context, prior knowledge, learning experiences, and interactions with others. Given this understanding and recognizing the important role principals have in shaping the school environment, HSD has been working with Prairie Rose Public Schools (PRPS) to create a collaborative learning opportunity for our principals.

Our experience over the first two years of the project showed that principal wellness was enhanced when they were engaged within collaborative social networks built around common objectives and trusting relationships. We found that these social networks allowed new knowledge to be shared, interpreted, reframed, and implemented which led to changes in practice and enhanced principal and teacher wellness.

We approached the work with the mindset that wellness is a shared



*The Horizon School Division administration team. Photo courtesy of Horizon School Division.*

responsibility. We wanted the experience to have a focus on listening, participating, and engaging. We found that the more opportunities for input and genuine involvement people have, the more engaged they were. Our findings showed that principal participation in this project was positively linked to improvements in teacher wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

To continue the momentum, HSD is extending the project for another year, collaborating with PRPS and the EdCan Network to create ongoing collaborative learning opportunities for our principals. In 2024-2025, HSD is focusing on The Six Types of Working Genius Assessment, by Patrick Lencioni. The assessment is a productivity tool that helps participants discover their gifts and talents to use in the workplace. The personalized report participants receive upon completion of the assessment highlights everyone's areas of Working Genius, Working Competency, and Working Frustration. Areas of Working Genius are activities that bring joy and energy, areas of Working Competency are activities that are neutral in terms of the energy provided to or used, and areas of Working Frustration are activities of struggle that drain energy.<sup>9</sup> Principals described their reports as "that is so me!"

While it is impossible to always avoid areas of frustration in the work, Lencioni

proposes that the areas of genius are where we should do most of our work.<sup>9</sup> Too often staff take on work that falls within their competency at the expense of undertaking work that brings joy and energy. Future implications of this work are yet to be determined but are likely to include consideration of these areas when assigning work and inviting leaders to serve on project planning and committees to ensure a balance of geniuses to facilitate *wellness in the work* for as many leaders as possible.

As we continue to focus on wellness, we know that wellness doesn't improve by accident, we must intentionally focus finding wellness in the work. In addition to building capacity, focusing on collaborative work that brings us joy and energy creates opportunities for involvement and influence, which are workplace factors known to foster wellbeing. ○

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*References are continued on page 24*

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*Continued from page 22*

increased substantially as the detail, level, pacing and application of the material could all be fine-tuned to the needs of the group.

Professional development themes for the 2024 year were identified using the data from the 2023 professional growth plans. Leaders currently include administration and team leads, thereby broadening the expertise within the school. Each professional development group is supplied with a budget so that they may purchase resources, register for events, or secure outside expertise. Each teacher is required to identify areas of growth based on the Teaching Quality Standard, implement strategies to improve learning for students, and report on how this will impact their practice. In the 2024 school year, over 55 per cent of our teaching staff are actively participating in additional individual professional development opportunities: masters courses, administrative training, formal collegial mentorship, literacy and numeracy support. In 2025, plans for professional development include a return to action research teams.

By the time the fourth stage is underway, all instructional staff will be involved in collegial learning that is research-based and data-driven to increase capacity and efficacy.

To reiterate the findings of Gümüs & Bellibas (2021), “teachers who participated in job-embedded professional development activities, such as coaching or mentoring, teacher networks, and action research, were likely to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy.” Additionally, this redesign integrates the seven elements of effective professional learning; focus on content, active learning, collaborative support, models of effective practice, coaching and supporting, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Bates & Morgan, 2018). By implementing a four-stage professional development redesign we have created a promising path to academic recovery from the pandemic and to teacher efficacy. ○

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*Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., has been the Principal of CAPE Public Charter School for 17 years.*

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*Continued from page 23*

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# Bridging the Gap from Big Box to Bespoke Professional Learning in Support of School Improvement

By Dr. Jennifer Leclerc and Dr. Kathy Witherow

**P**rincipals continue to face many challenges in the daily operation of a school on top of their responsibility to ensure equitable outcomes for student learning and well-being. We set out to look at how principals learn the complexities of school improvement while continuing to lead their diverse school communities; and what superintendent support is needed to maximize principal impact. The most effective school leaders lead with an equity stance and are attuned to the importance of their school's unique context.

We surveyed 18 principals from school districts across Ontario to tell us about their experiences with school improvement 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 leadership development that addresses the specific needs of each principal and school.

So many of us have experienced Big Box professional learning that resembles big box stores filled to the rafters with a little of everything. As you walk the aisles of these stores, you experience feelings of being overwhelmed. We can take this analogy to how we have experienced professional learning. Like big box stores, traditional professional development often overwhelms educators with generic content that doesn't address

their specific needs. Principals are asking for a move away from Big Box professional learning to bespoke professional learning that is customized and contextualized to individual school needs and the learning needs of principals.

The principals that participated in our inquiry shared their many challenges. 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 due to daily operational demands and staff shortages. The support received from system-level leaders varied widely. Some principals talked about the valuable guidance and resources shared by their superintendents, while other superintendents were described as disengaged from the “real work.”

Principals are frustrated with the



disconnect that exists between prescribed templates imposed by the district and the need for school-based, context-specific planning. This is magnified by the lack of opportunities for collaborative learning so principals can learn from colleagues and share best practices.

We've identified five key elements that are essential to bespoke professional learning that builds principals' leadership capacity.

### 1. Collaborative learning:

Effective collaboration is crucial for principal development. Continually we heard 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 laundry list 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 provided a foundation for our current understanding of collaboration by crafting a taxonomy of collaboration with a move from "storytelling" to "joint work."<sup>1</sup>

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:

Essential to any professional learning plan is the recognition that each school has unique needs and contexts. Understanding a school's context will help 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.

The desire for flexibility also extends to the use of templates and processes for school improvement planning so principals can get beyond feeling like it is an exercise of checking boxes instead of meaningful engagement in the improvement process. Contextualizing professional learning does not mean learning in isolation. Having superintendents facilitate the networking of principals that share similar contexts would be beneficial to this process.

### 3. Data informed planning:

Principals know the importance of having current and relevant data in the improvement process; however, 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 make informed decisions. Thinking outside the Big Box for data collection will bring evidence gathering to the classroom and school level.

### 4. Mentorship and experiential learning:

Principals commented that the most impactful support includes tailored coaching, mentoring, and relevant professional learning that fosters genuine dialogue and shared responsibility for each other's learning.

Principals shared that mentorship from superintendents was highly valued. Learning from mentors about their 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 principal's schools with a focus on improvement, etc.) were cited as particularly valuable. Clearly professional learning that connects leaders across schools is found to be highly 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.<sup>2</sup> Effective superintendents emphasize the importance of instructional leadership and work to build intentional relationships with their principals.

Many principals cited the importance of genuine interest and support from their superintendents as a key driver for their own efficacy. Feedback and

follow-up from superintendents were cited as essential. Giving and receiving feedback are highly effective skills and may be the secret ingredient in supporting principals.<sup>3</sup>

### Concluding thoughts

When we listen to principals, we learn how superintendents can positively impact principal capacity and efficacy when these professional learning design elements are followed:

- 1. Flexible and adaptable:** Ensure the learning structure accommodates diverse learning needs and contexts of principals.
- 2. Practical:** Emphasize hands-on activities, and real-world applications.
- 3. Accessible:** Provide principals with access to tools, templates, and resources that facilitate effective planning and implementation.
- 4. Feedback mechanisms:** Incorporate Superintendent-Principal feedback loops to adjust and improve professional learning over time. ○

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