

Summer 2022

# Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
Association of School System Administrators

Association canadienne des gestionnaires  
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# A

s we emerge from the pandemic, I find myself searching for clarity with how best to proceed in a way that maximizes well-being and learning for all our students in these unique times. I was much more certain before the pandemic about what was important in the communities and schools with which I work. Amongst other world issues such as global warming and social unrest, the pandemic disrupted and changed the world, and has also unsettled my education leadership thought process.

On the plus side, the virus provided us a jolt from the pre-pandemic system of education that was already struggling and worsening in regard to student wellness and engagement. We knew there were issues with the education system prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic provided the kick needed for the system to pivot, learn, and implement alternate learning environments and technologies, by necessity and in haste.

However, the pandemic also highlighted and exacerbated the inequities (food security, access to Internet communications and learning opportunities, etc.), increased staff absences (stay home if you have a symptom), and increased student absenteeism (it's now habit for many, and more acceptable, not to go to school).

We massaged our education system through the pandemic as best we could, but these societal and health related impacts on the education system still linger. So, where to from here? How do we reinvigorate the important and effective elements of the pre-pandemic education system, and embrace the current need and opportunities for change and improvement, to ensure equity and excellence for each student?

One thing I am certain about is the purpose of leadership: to be optimistic about the future, and to empower and bring

out the best in people individually and collectively. *Reimagining Education* is our leadership focus, and the topic to turn everyone's attention to, so that it can be explored positively and collaboratively. This won't be easy given the accumulation of stress and exhaustion. Re-engaging our students effectively will require first that we re-engage ourselves and our education partners collaboratively and innovatively.

Which is why I am excited about the innovative format of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) national gathering at The Algonquin Resort in St. Andrews By-the-Sea, New Brunswick, from July 6-8, 2022. This year's leadership conference theme is *Reimagining Education* and will focus on our need to re-connect and re-engage with colleagues. Rather than a series of keynotes and facilitated breakout sessions, the conference will focus on providing participants with short, facilitated sessions to set the context, followed by structured time and opportunities to explore research and background materials on a handful of key themes.

Michael Fullan recently identified six reasons to be optimistic about learning in 2022.<sup>1</sup> He posits that "more powerful forms of learning are on the rise," and that "diverse leadership will grow and present new benefits." I appreciate the optimism, and I see this CASSA conference, which is designed to maximize education leader engagement and collaboration, as an opportunity to grow our leadership and present new benefits.

Further, we have begun having National Roundtable meetings with representatives from the Canadian School Board Association (CSBA), Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF), Canadian Association of Principals (CAP), Assembly of First Nations (AFN), and others. Despite our separate mandates, we share in providing a quality education for students, and I am excited



**Curtis Brown**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

### How do we reinvigorate the important and effective elements of the pre-pandemic education system, and embrace the current need and opportunities for change and improvement, to ensure equity and excellence for each student?

about the possibility that our collective influence might help to bring about positive change in areas of common interest.

Upon reflection of the work we do in our association, it is reassuring to know that we are identifying and addressing issues that are common in education across the country. I look forward to seeing you in New Brunswick and sharing and learning with you.

**Curtis Brown**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

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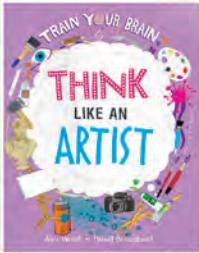
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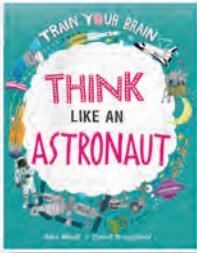
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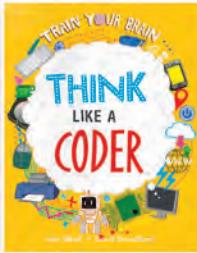
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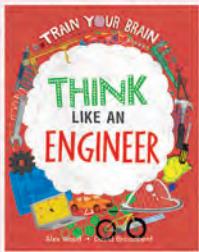
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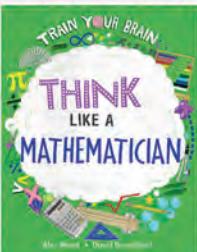
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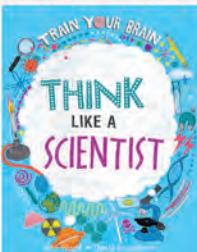
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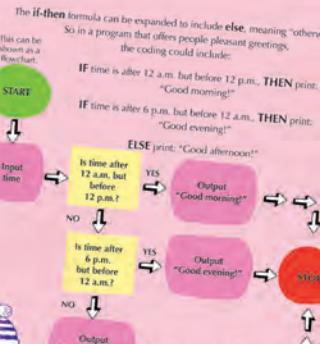
You can use the *if-then* formula in coding when you want to allow more than one pathway through a program. Say you want to write a program to encourage people to exercise more. The coding could include the instruction:

**IF** person remains still for more than one hour,  
**THEN** print: "Get moving!"

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22

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## Message from the CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director |

Welcome to the Summer 2022 issue of *Leaders & Learners* magazine!

The Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) has established its **purpose**: strengthening the capacity of senior school system leaders through national dialogue and professional learning; and its **vision**: equity and excellence in education for each learner.

The CASSA e-newsletters and this magazine are very intentionally called *Leaders and Learners*. Each of you, as a CASSA member, is a **leader** and a **learner** in your respective school district/division/board/education council.

CASSA, through its webinar opportunities, newsletters, magazines, and annual leadership conference helps to ensure that you as school system leaders can continue to learn, share, and grow together as members of our national association.

One of the ways in which I continue to learn is by being a member of the AASA, the School Superintendents Association. My membership includes a subscription to *AASA School Administrator*, a magazine that offers insights and commentary from American school system leaders. A recent issue included articles on "Student Integration." AASA President, Paul Imhoff contributed his thoughts and reflections

on Equity in Education. One excerpt from his piece resonated with me as I reflect on how CASSA and its members support equity and excellence for each learner: "As educators, we understand that equity is what truly reflects our moral imperative to care for each student and ensure that all students have the resources they need to graduate prepared for success after high school, regardless of the path they take" (School Administrator, April 2022).

This Summer 2022 issue highlights how CASSA members continue to **learn** and **lead** as education was re-imagined throughout and (hopefully) coming out of the pandemic. From St. Clair Catholic District in Ontario where outdoor learning was used to engage students to Newfoundland and Labrador English School District where leaders championed the conditions to create a learning culture, CASSA members learned the pandemic's implications for students. Also, a principal in Northern Lights School Division in Saskatchewan shared his learnings about areas of leadership in his role that have been impacted by the pandemic.

As we reflect on the mental health challenges brought on by the pandemic and its implications on teaching and learning, we read how the province of Ontario provides timely, culturally responsive resources and learning networks. We also learn of a Pan-Canadian network of school system leaders



Ken Bain

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

(in governance and administration) who lead and learn with thought leaders from throughout Canada. Full disclosure: I am on the network steering committee and see my work here as a wonderful learning experience. Finally, we learn about transformative leadership supporting district-wide anti-racism toward deep and equitable change in an article from School District No. 8 in British Columbia.

I am proud to help lead an association whose members are **leaders** and **learners**.

**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

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# Welcome to the CASSA/ACGCS Annual Leadership Conference!



**July 6-8, 2022**

St. Andrew's By-The-Sea, New Brunswick

*This year's conference will take place on the traditional unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, and Peskotomuhkati peoples. This territory is covered by the "treaties of Peace and Friendship" which these nations first signed with the British Crown in 1726. The treaties did not deal with the surrender of lands and resources, but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq, Peskotomuhkati, and Wolastoqiyik title and established the rules for what was going to be an ongoing relationship between nations.*

*We pay respect to the elders, past and present, and descendants of this land. We honour the knowledge keepers and seek their guidance as we strive to develop closer relationships with the Indigenous people and the land in New Brunswick.*

**Join us and select experts as we explore what it means to be leaders in schools during a time where we must *reimagine* what education can do for our students, staff, and families!**

The CASSA conference, covering the theme of *Reimagining Education*, is a unique event that brings together school system leaders from publicly funded school districts across Canada. The conference keynote addresses, panel discussions, and breakout sessions provide many opportunities for personalized learning and peer-to-peer sharing on related topics.

Thursday begins with breakfast, a morning welcome, and a brief Setting the Stage session. Thursday's facilitated sessions include Contextualized Literacy and Adaptive Leadership. CASSA Honourary Life Memberships and the Xerox EXL Awards will be presented during a sit-down lunch ceremony. Thursday afternoon includes a Celebrity Interview session featuring reflections, thoughts, and insights from leaders from across Canada and a choice of sessions on themes including: Truth and Reconciliation, Student Voice, Building the Capacity of System Leaders, Outdoor Education and Sustainability, A Focus on Equity for All Learners, and Racial Equity and Educational Justice.

Friday also opens with breakfast and a morning welcome, followed by facilitated sessions on Compassionate Leadership and Equity. After lunch, conference participants are invited to sit in on an Indigenous Interview session; an opportunity to hear the perspectives, wisdom, and learnings from Indigenous leaders and then consider the steps we all should be making as we move to Truth and Reconciliation.

## CASSA's Speakers

CASSA is pleased to introduce Jordan Tinney, Superintendent/CEO of Surrey Schools, as its 2022 Conference Lead Facilitator. Tinney leads one of Canada's largest school districts, and for the past 15 years, he has had the great fortune to lead in both the rural and the urban context and has an appreciation for places big and places small.

CASSA is also pleased to have both Dr. Imelda Perley and Elwin LeRoux as Indigenous Leaders on the panel conducted Friday afternoon. In this interview, members will hear the perspectives, wisdom, and learnings and consider the steps that we all should be making as we move to Truth and Reconciliation.



*The benefits of outdoor learning go beyond the effects of the pandemic as it has a positive impact on staff and students. Photos courtesy of Laura Callaghan.*

By Laura Callaghan, St. Clair Catholic District School Board

# T

he pandemic forced schools to rethink the benefits of taking children outdoors for learning due to lower transmission rates. We know the benefits of outdoor learning go beyond pandemic concerns and we are now working towards permanent changes as learning outdoors can have a positive impact on staff and students. Outdoor learning spaces on school grounds can be an extension of the classroom and provide students the opportunity to explore the natural world, collaborate in new ways in an open-concept space and engage in diverse hands-on learning experiences.

Research supports the many benefits of taking learning outside. There is evidence of improved confidence, social skills, communication, and concentration;<sup>1</sup> reduced stress, increased patience, and self-discipline;<sup>2</sup> and improved higher-level cognitive skills as students become caring stewards of God's creation.<sup>3</sup> At St. Clair Catholic District School Board in Southwestern Ontario, there is an integrated, collaborative approach to outdoor learning, with schools exploring a variety of ways to take learning outside, with the support from various system and school staff.

At St. Anne Catholic School in Blenheim, Ontario, there is no bad weather, just bad clothing! Building on the ideas learned from Richard Louv's research around "Vitamin N"<sup>4</sup> and "Nature Deficit Disorder,"<sup>5</sup> the school is working collaboratively to enhance student well-being by bringing our students of all grades outside with increasing intentionality, under the leadership of Principal Julie Knight. Julie shares "I have witnessed personally the joy, deep learning, and self-regulation that is occurring from merely a change in classroom environment from indoors to out. Our experiences have taught us that learning outside is as beneficial from a student behaviour perspective as it is from an academic lens."

From the words of a student, "learning outside clears my brain somehow and I just remember the work better." Principal Julie Knight supports her staff and students to integrate outdoor learning opportunities daily across the curriculum. Outdoor Learning Wagons hold a variety of essential learning

# Student Engagement and Outdoor Learning

*Learning outside is as beneficial from a student behaviour perspective as it is from an academic lens.*



tools to support outdoor learning, such as clipboards, pencils, rulers, and whiteboards. Classrooms take the wagon outdoors to the various learning spaces on school grounds or go for a short walk across the street to municipal parkland. Teachers support outdoor learning experiences in many subject areas. For example, students in Kindergarten to Grade 1 use natural materials such as twigs and stones to explore “fair share” in math.

At St. Michael’s School in Ridgetown, supported by Principal Kelly VanBoxtel, the Kindergarten educator teams engage students in meaningful learning opportunities outside every day. Both teachers and early childhood educators see many benefits when they learn outside. Michelene Blackshaw, classroom teacher, sees that “outdoor learning sparks curiosity as children help each other navigate in the outdoor environment.” Michelene further explains, “outdoor learning provides endless open-ended opportunities for learning.”

Registered Early Childhood Educator Partner Jen Chickowski identifies the goal of outdoor learning to “encourage the children to develop a love for all God’s creations.” Jen also identifies the importance of physical movement outdoors; “When our bodies are actively enjoying the fresh air, our minds tend to be able to think critically and collaboratively solve problems with ease.”

The System Leader of Experiential Learning helps schools find an entry point into outdoor learning. Chris St. Amand works in classrooms across the Board, helping teachers rethink instruction in outdoor spaces. Through co-planning and co-teaching, teachers try new strategies to incorporate outdoor learning experiences across the curriculum, mainly moving outdoor learning from being seen as an event to being an integrated part of learning. The pandemic has created opportunities to connect with community partners differently, as we shifted to offering school-based Outdoor Education. Many educators appreciated how these opportunities integrated into the school day and were less an “event.”

The System Indigenous Lead, Cortnee Goure, also plays a role in supporting outdoor learning opportunities at St. Clair Catholic in collaboration with community partners at schools and off site. Throughout the pandemic, connecting with the land and all of Creation has remained a focus in Indigenous Education opportunities. As students were learning virtually from home, students connected with hands-on learning experiences when learning

from Knowledge Keepers and Elders. For example, through story and song with Deb and Barry Milliken, Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, students learned important lessons and stories about creation and connections to the outdoors. Upon listening to the re-creation story of how Turtle Island came to be, students went outside, gather items in nature such as pinecones, branches, and different leaves, nature of all types, and created the image they could see in their mind while listening.

Working with the Facilities Department, St. Clair Catholic is adding spaces to support outdoor learning. Facilities Manager, Tony Montanino, identifies several keys to success when considering outdoor spaces as a standard design element in the Board’s next generation learning environments: stakeholder collaboration during the design process; including design considerations for shade, wind, visibility, and security; accessibility and flexibility so the space can adapt and change to the learning needs of small and larger groups; and the integration of play, considering natural materials and educational features that allow students to explore, discover, and be physically active.

St. Clair is placing these outdoor learning spaces prominently in the front of the school, framed with colourful shade sails to promote outdoor learning visibly in school communities. Outdoor education supports students overall physical, mental, spiritual, and academic well-being and fosters stewardship in our future global citizens.

A collaborative, intentional approach continues to enhance these outdoor opportunities across St. Clair Catholic District and provides visible signs of innovative learning opportunities in school communities. ○

*Laura Callaghan is the Superintendent of Education for St. Clair Catholic District School Board.*

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# A Post-Pandemic Learning Journey

By Georgina Lake, Katrina Moores, Nancy Mandeville, and Niki O'Brien MacDonald,  
Newfoundland and Labrador English School District

**A**t the outset of the pandemic large numbers of our educators across the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLES) chose to view the COVID induced educational landscape as an opportunity. This does not dismiss the fact that we, like educators across the globe, encountered some of the most arduous times in education. For our school district, this was an opportune time to transform the Kindergarten to Grade 12 learning landscape across a district of 250

schools, 65000 students, 11000 employees, and a vast geography.

On the last day of classes before schools shut down, 250 NLES principals and learning partners were engaged in learning together. We set out with the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) team to stimulate, support, and sustain practices that would enhance engagement and create the conditions for all learners to thrive. At the end of two days there was energy to focus on the learning that was needed to lead this work. We didn't know this was the last day of "normal" school for a very long time and ironically, this conference

provided an anchor and prepared our leaders to navigate a global pandemic and support learners, educators, and students, to become good at learning and good at life.

## Opportunities, obstacles, and learning

The importance of wellness and positive relationships for all stakeholders hit us hard at the onset of the pandemic. There was evidence of challenges for families as they did their best to support students with online learning, work and life balance, and childcare issues. The closure of schools and pivoting to online learning with a long summer of physical distancing, and the challenge of returning to in person learning were extremely difficult for some educators and students.

For students and teachers who returned to school in the Fall 2021, classrooms and school buildings looked and felt very different. Physical distancing was required for students and teachers along with personal protective equipment. The speculation about the impact of the pandemic on academic achievement, mental health and well-being among students created concerns that intensified existing mental health concerns. The pandemic has highlighted that well-being and relationships are essential to educator and student success.

We are building a learning culture where there is a respect for everyone's pace, perspective, and learning journey. Vulnerability is now identified as a strength and our educators as learners are entering learning spaces with more curiosity than certainty. Our educators as learners re-imagined learning themselves. This cultural shift combined with a massive desire for self-directed teacher learning and leveraging digital tools to facilitate, accelerate, and amplify educator and student learning has created deep learning opportunities across this province.

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- We need to be taught differently, assessed differently, and we need our learning to be communicated differently.

**The future of the world is in our classrooms today.**

What our students are telling us about schooling. Graphics courtesy of Niki O'Brien-MacDonald.

Assessment practices have become a focus for professional learning that creates hope for students. The cancellation of provincial high stakes exit exams gave educators the feeling that they had time to learn as they strived to reimagine their assessment practices that foster relationships with students. Educators have shared that they are rejuvenated in their work and while the past two years were some of the most challenging times in their career, they were also some of their best years in education. Our educators love learning, and the learning landscape is transforming as teachers are growing their practice.

As a result of COVID-19, collective efficacy is becoming more visible at both the district and school levels. Educators leveraged digital tools to support collaboration and are learning together, discovering new ways of responding to learners by reflecting on their practice and identifying new areas for learning. By making our learning visible on social media platforms like Twitter, we see evidence of collective efficacy growing across the province as we develop knowledge and skills to respond to learners.

Equity has also been a significant area of focus during the pandemic. Although this was not a new barrier to learning, the pandemic highlighted the urgency to create greater accessibility in educational experiences that are responsive to the diversity of learners. Students who are immunocompromised and cannot attend face to face school gained access to ConnectEd, a remote learning environment. Families shared that, in the past, their children have missed many days, weeks and even months of traditional in person schooling as a result of ongoing illnesses, surgeries, and medical travel requirements. In some cases, this has led to challenges with students achieving learning outcomes and feeling disconnected from their peers. Now NLESĐ ConnectEd students access daily learning experiences and maintain connections with their peers. ConnectEd will continue to support students who are not able to attend school.

We also learned that equity in education will only happen by engaging, listening, and responding to student voices. Throughout the pandemic we have engaged student voices through learning panels and partnerships. We continue to listen, and we

are growing because of learning alongside our most valued educational partners.

### Learning our way forward

The challenges encountered over the course of the pandemic were cushioned due to our learning partnership with the NPDL team, coupled with the grit, resilience, and compassion of educators and school staff. NLESĐ educators kept a relentless focus on engaging learners and creating the conditions for all students to experience success despite the hardships of a global pandemic. Our accomplishments are the result of embracing every silver

lining and obstacle as opportunities to create momentum to reimagine the learning landscape. We will continue to develop relationships and focus on capacity building so that everyone can become good at learning and good at life. ○

*Goergina Lake is the Assistant Director of Student Services, Katrina Moores is the Director of Programs, Nancy Maneville is the Program Specialist of Distance Learning, and Niki O'Brien MacDonald is the Director of Learning and Innovation for the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District.*



*Assessment stories around the campfire.*



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# High-Impact Post-Pandemic Leadership: Reflections from a Northern Principal

By T.J. Hoogsteen, Northern Lights School Division

The summer of 2022 marks the third summer of the global pandemic, and its impact on daily life cannot be overstated. This statement certainly applies to the work of school administrators. So much so, that several scholars and practitioners have written about the impact on school leadership. For instance, Pollock (2020)<sup>1</sup> argued that across the world COVID-19 had fundamentally altered school principals' work, while Harris and Jones (2020)<sup>2</sup> added that school leaders can no longer mimic practices they witnessed or undertook prior to COVID-19.

Although the crisis has not completely receded, leadership that flourished during the pandemic has not been wholly novel or disruptive. For example, pandemic leadership still required clear communication, relationship building with the entire school community, concern for student and community wellbeing, and proactive problem solving.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup> Conversely, school leadership characterized by unclear communication and lack of direction failed to adapt to the demands placed on schools by COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> As the pandemic continues, major upheaval in practice may not take place, and is likely not appropriate. Rather, as Gurr contends,<sup>7</sup> the probable trajectory in educational leadership is evolutionary and will build upon trends which are already evident.

The remainder of this article presents a vision for leading during and after the pandemic based on a northern, rural principal's reflections with the aim of providing practical insights to school and system leaders. This narrative is guided, first, by a framework designed for rural/remote schools set out by Eacott and partners.<sup>8</sup> The four main pillars of which are employing an innovation imperative, promoting collective responsibility, focusing on teaching and learning, and being visible and committed to the community.

These high-impact practices are well-suited for post-pandemic leadership in northern, rural communities like those found in Saskatchewan because they recognize and embed roles schools serve which go beyond education. Second, this article is underpinned by the belief post-pandemic leadership does not require a complete overhaul. Instead, subtle changes or amplifications to practices already considered to be high impact are more fitting.

## Innovation imperative

A major component of an innovation imperative is not accepting the status quo. The status quo in many northern

communities, including Weyakwin, means only offering school through the elementary grades. Following Grade 9, students must choose between leaving their communities, or discontinuing schooling. In a time when graduation rates of Indigenous students in Saskatchewan is of major concern, this is an equity issue that needs addressing.

Initially a cause of stress and uncertainty, the development of online teaching and familiarization of learning platforms during the pandemic has created an opportunity to challenge the status quo. In this case, advocating for expansion of grade offerings through leveraging these advances has taken

*Students making bannock on a stick during a recent land-based learning week. Photo courtesy of T.J. Hoogsteen.*



priority at Kiskahikan School. In response, senior administration at Northern Lights School Division are considering to pilot programs which would allow students to complete Grade 10 in an online format at the school, thus staying in their community for an extra year.

### **Being visible and committed to the community**

Throughout the pandemic many restrictions were levied upon schools and communities which made community involvement in the school near impossible. This created tensions because in many rural communities, schools serve as catalysts for community participation and social cohesion.<sup>9</sup> Finding ways to safely maintain important aspects of the school and community culture prompted a different type of innovation. Lauded as context-sensitive teaching or a method to embed Indigenous ways of knowing in the curriculum, land-based learning has been a key strategy for enabling community engagement in the school. Inviting elders and knowledgeable community members to plan and deliver outdoor activities such as net-setting, trap-setting, tea-boiling, bannock-making, and fish filleting are ways the school has built and maintained relationships with the community.

### **Promoting collective responsibility**

Similar to showing commitment to the community, promoting collective responsibility as a leader entails ensuring school activities are locally grounded. Working with community members to enact cultural or land-based learning activities supports participation and cohesion, it also maintains and establishes trust.<sup>8</sup> Trust is especially important during a crisis when (unpopular) decisions, local or government, are made and community support is required. Trust can also be developed through another collective responsibility promoting principle, collaboration, not competition. For example, the former long-serving principal at Kiskahikan still resides in the community. This could present challenges, were they not considered an ally and resource. But seeking and valuing their input regarding school/ community life has provided insight into implementing activities which meet school and community needs while remaining sensitive to health restrictions.

## **Finding ways to safely maintain important aspects of the school and community culture prompted a different type of innovation.**

### **Focusing on teaching and learning**

Thus far, the high-impact practices discussed have been heavily relationship oriented. Arguably though, improving teaching and learning remains the most important post-pandemic task for school leaders largely because of what is believed about impacts of school lockdowns. More important than the verbiage attached to this time (i.e., learning loss) are current efforts to enhance student learning.

Leaders can offset missed instruction through measures such as articulating focus for curriculum and assessment and participating in professional learning. Northern Lights School Division has endeavoured to do both. Each month, administrators and teachers work together in practical curriculum collaboration sessions based on the school division's literacy and numeracy priorities. Sessions center around effective planning/assessment/instructional strategies such as analyzing outcomes, constructing learning

intentions and success criteria, and sequencing learning plans.

### **Final thoughts on post-pandemic leadership**

Much has changed since 2020, and school leaders have and will continue to encounter many challenges. Even in the face of novel demands, leaders have the opportunity to have a major impact on their staff, students, and communities. With no end in sight to the pandemic, rural school leaders, in fact, all school leaders, can continue to direct their schools through the innovation, relationship, and improvement-focused practices discussed in this article. Although these actions may not be paradigm shifting, they are high-impact, nonetheless. ○

*T.J. Hoogsteen is currently Principal of Kiskahikan School with Northern Lights School Division and is an Associate Faculty Member with Royal Roads University.*

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# Student Mental Health: What You Do Matters!

By Theresa Kennedy, Louise Moreau, and Denise Andre, School Mental Health Ontario

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) works alongside the Ontario Ministry of Education as the provincial implementation and support team for student mental health. Working with the 72 school districts in Ontario, SMH-ON places every student's mental health at the centre of its vision and strategy. With a focus on promotion, prevention, and early intervention, school and system leaders establish the conditions for quality, consistency, and sustainability for school mental health.

During the pandemic, global and local circumstances have shone a spotlight on the importance and foundational interconnectedness between mental health, well-being, and learning. To separate these now is not an option. In addition, circumstances have highlighted the need to promote authentic,

identity-affirming approaches with explicit and caring attention to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices. Educational leadership throughout this challenging moment in history has been strong and steady, including a focus on supporting staff, students, and families/caregivers. Leaders have been on high alert for two years, and that's hard. Nonetheless, they recognize that schools must be protective, and the focus on wellness, alongside learning, has been important and exemplary.

Leadership commitment at the system level is a key factor that builds coherence within the core work of schools so that the foundations and practices for mental health support every student, every day, in every school.

SMH-ON conducted a survey to understand the mental health learning needs and supports identified by system leaders. The top three areas of need included organizational conditions/leadership commitment, equity,

and mental health, and learning resources. These areas of need helped identify the system leader focus for professional learning. SMH-ON recognizes that to achieve coherence for system leaders throughout the province, there is a need to inspire a shared commitment for student mental health.

## What leaders do matters

An advisory team of Directors of Education provides guidance on significant decisions related to the provincial mental health strategy, feedback throughout the school year to ensure that activities and supports are meeting the needs identified by system leaders, and discussion of emerging issues about student mental health.

Through the ongoing support of this advisory team, and the response to the provincial needs assessment of system leaders, two new resources were developed. The Desk Reference for Ontario Directors of Education and The Desk Reference for Ontario Supervisory Officers focus on four key areas:

1. General information on what system leaders should know about the provincial context and how to bring alignment from the provincial mental health and addictions strategy to the Board's strategic plan;
2. How system leaders inspire and action intentional and explicit conversations at the senior table and scaffold engagement throughout the district;
3. Ways that system leaders model to encourage belonging and connection to mental health and well-being as foundational to learning; and
4. How system leaders model, support, and encourage school leaders through effective communication and decision making about mental health resources, such as the SMH-ON Decision Support Tool.

Additionally, to bring coherence to the provincial work, a reference guide for school board trustees/elected officials was developed to highlight how governance matters in developing a shared commitment that prioritizes mental health and well-being for every student.



## Leaders inspire a shared commitment

It was important for building communities of practice that SMH-ON bring Directors of Education and Superintendent colleagues together to share experience from the field about how to build coherence for student mental health. SMH-ON created virtual networking spaces to focus on:

- Providing foundational learning, relevant resources, and networking opportunities for system leaders new to the role around mental health and well-being to support them as they began in their new positions;
- How communities of practice are focused on leadership commitment, unpacking the *Desk References*, and equity and mental health. These communities of practice featured knowledge building, implementation sharing from the field, and peer-to-peer networking; and
- The creation of a video library of “insight moments” featuring voices from the field sharing implementation approaches and strategies.

## Leaders are key to sharing information effectively

SMH-ON is the primary source of evidence-informed mental health resources and professional learning for Ontario school boards. With the understanding that mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention is a shared responsibility, tools, and resources available on the SMH-ON website equip staff at all levels of the organization with ready-to-use materials. To support system leaders in their leadership role, the networking sessions featured an overview of key resources, such as:

- For Students: No Problem Too Big or Too Small, a student help-seeking resource designed to promote strategies for self-care, or the Self-Love Practices for Black Youth, which are social media shareables developed using thoughts and ideas shared by Black students; and
- For Parents and Caregivers: By Your Side video series that inspires parents/caregivers to support students, focuses on positive mental health, signs of mental health concerns, and encourages help-seeking.

For full access to these resources and more, visit the SMH-ON website at <https://smho-smso.ca>. Amplifying the promotive and protective influence of schools with an

intentional focus on mental health and well-being supports conditions for every student to learn and flourish. As system leaders this work is iterative, and requires ongoing communication, monitoring, and celebration of success. System leadership matters! ○

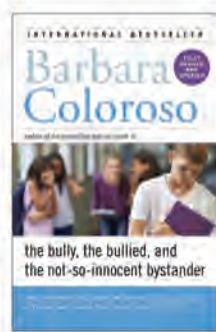
*Theresa Kennedy is the Co-Director and Superintendent, Louise Moreau is the Mental Health Leadership Team Lead: Superintendents, and Denise Andre is the Senior Administrator Mental Health Literacy and Programming Coordinator for School Mental Health Ontario.*



What you do matters... the Desk Reference for Ontario Supervisory Officers.

**Thank You** to all Canadian educators who are tirelessly helping one another and your students navigate the loss, grief, and immense change in this time of COVID-19. It has been both a joy and an honour to work with so many of you over the past 49 years. As we all reassess how we work with one another and how best to teach and support our youth, *Kids Are Worth It! Inc.*, ([www.kidsareworthit.com](http://www.kidsareworthit.com)) is offering two free downloadable handbooks for educators.

1. **An Essential Guide for Educators on Bullying**, based on the international best seller, *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Not-So Innocent Bystander*.
2. **Parenting Wit and Wisdom**—highlights from the internationally bestselling books, *Kids Are Worth It!* and *Parenting through Crisis*.



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303-478-8253



# Reimagining Student Mental Health:



## The Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network

By Cindy Finn, Kathy Short, Ken Bain, Nancy Pynch-Worthylake, Nathan Ip, & Vania Sakelaris,  
Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network

In recent years, the issue of student mental health has been a growing concern. The COVID-19 pandemic has only amplified the call for systems of education to be more responsive to the mental health needs of students and staff. This article highlights the creation of an initiative known as the Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network (CSMHLN) which brings together education system leaders for national conversations around school mental health. The authors of this article represent the steering committee of the CSMHLN.

The developmental needs of children and youth along with a recognition that schools are a logical setting for mental health literacy and intervention make systems of education an obvious area for consideration. Although each province and territory in Canada operates a separate system of education, there is consensus that a common space for dialogue about school mental health issues in this country is needed.

Recent progress in school-based mental



*The Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network logo, courtesy of Cindy Finn.*

health research and practice is shining a light on how schools can promote and support mental wellness. There is a considerable body of research to support the efficacy and effectiveness of school-based mental health prevention and intervention strategies. However, more efforts are needed to scale up this work and embed mental health and wellness into the core mandate of public education. Leaders in education play a critical role in these efforts. For these reasons, the need for a forum to bring together system administrators and trustees/commissioners committed to accomplishing this important work became increasingly apparent.

Through the leadership of School Mental Health Ontario, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA), and the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA), the idea of a national school mental health network of leaders began to take shape. The foundational work to outline the values, mission, vision, and goals for this network was initiated in the spring/summer of 2020. With continued support from the McConnell Family Foundation, a steering committee was formed in the fall/winter of 2020 to further refine and guide the work. They then set to work to further delineate the intent of the network and organize its activities.

The CSMHLN facilitates dialogue between experts in the field of child and youth mental health and school system leaders. The vision was to create a space for an open exchange of research-based information and knowledge of practice with a view to influencing and enhancing evidence-based decision making in Canadian school systems. The network is anchored in the awareness of the importance of an openness to learning and

sharing, the reliance upon research and implementation science, and the need to consider issues of equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

The network was formed by extending an invitation to leaders who serve as system administrators (CASSA) or as trustees/commissioners (CSBA). By accepting this invitation, participants would agree to act as network collaborators and participate in discussions around school mental health. Close attention was paid to recruit collaborators that reflected dimensions of the regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity found within Canada. Response to this invitation was swift and favourable, thereby reinforcing the need for such a pan-Canadian network.

An equally critical element in the formation of the CSMHLN was the inclusion of mental health experts to help further the exchange of knowledge and practice. Six prominent Canadian researchers and practitioners were approached to serve as thought leaders for the network: Dr. Jean Clinton, McMaster University, Ontario; Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens, University of Calgary, Alberta; Dr. Kathy Giorgiades, Offord Centre for Child Studies, Ontario; Dr. John Leblanc, IWK Health Centre, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia; Dr. Michael Ungar, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia; and Dr. Brenda Restoule, First Peoples Wellness Circle, Ontario.

Facilitated by members of the steering committee, each virtual network meeting focuses on a specific topic that is selected based on discussions with thought leaders as well as survey responses provided by collaborators. A summary of the proceedings and resources are then gathered and shared with the entire network. All network participants are encouraged to share this information within their respective organizations, all with a view to building capacity and informing decision making across jurisdictions.

The CSMHLN launched in March 2021 with a discussion on resilience led by Dr. Michael Ungar. Subsequent meetings were led by Drs. Giorgiades and Restoule who presented on the impact of COVID-19 on child and youth mental health (May 2021) and ways to address colonial trauma and racism among Indigenous youth and families (October 2021), respectively. In January 2022, Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens led a session on trauma-informed schools and in April 2022, Dr. Jean Clinton addressed the impact of toxic stress on young learners.

As system leaders ponder the future of education in Canada, school mental health needs

to be front and centre. By increasing awareness, sharing research, and discussing problems of practice, our systems of education and those who lead them can better respond to mental health needs and other emerging issues.

Feedback from participants has been extremely positive and speaks to the need for on-going sharing, networking, and capacity building. The CSMHLN will carry on its work in the 2022/2023 school year, bringing together system leaders and mental health experts to continue these important discussions. For further information about the Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network or to inquire about

joining the network, please contact admin@VAS-Associates.com.

*Cindy Finn is the Director General of the Lester B. Pearson School Board, Dorval Quebec. Kathy Short is the Executive Director of School Mental Health Ontario. Ken Bain is the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators.*

*Nancy Pynch-Worthylake is the Executive Director of the Canadian School Boards Association. Nathan Ip is a trustee with the Edmonton Public School Board, Edmonton Alberta. Vania Sakelaris is the Founder of VAS and Associates.*



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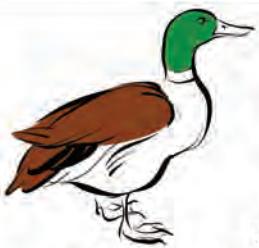
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# Students Tending the Fire



During a retreat-based experience, students helped create a toolbox to aid as an anti-racism learning activity. Photos courtesy of Jann Schmidt.

## Transformative

## Leadership

By Gail Higginbottom and Jann Schmidt,  
School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake)

**P**aradoxically, we celebrate and hold our breaths as we engage in a unique district leadership strategy that has transformed anti-racism work in the School District No.8 (Kootenay Lake). Engaging in a transformative leadership lens, we focus on the careful crafting of relationships, aligning with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, anti-oppressive paradigms, Truth and Reconciliation, British Columbia's *Bill 41* (DRIPA) and UNDRIP. Following the wisdom of Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." As district principals in International and Indigenous Education, this work is deeply meaningful to us both.

Transformative leadership combines both excellence and social transformation as pillars of a leader.<sup>1</sup> It is a leadership style that is based in ethics and long-term social shifts.<sup>2</sup> As injustices and truths rise here in our country, leadership that engages in truth and change is necessary. As our shared political, social, and economic landscape changes, our awareness grows and so must our systems.

School District No.8 (Kootenay Lake) welcomed Superintendent Trish Smillie in August of 2021. The district had already begun the imperative work of Equity and Reconciliation. Superintendent Smillie tasked us to lead the process of the development of a student-led anti-racism framework to support policy development. Our key role was facilitating a district wide process for consultation and awareness

building. In addition, an anti-racism committee that would work collaboratively to develop the policy to present to the board was skillfully facilitated by Dr. Catherine McGregor.

We were incredibly aware of the importance, intentionality and care this work needed; after all, "Systems change is the outcome of the emergence of a new pattern of organizing or system structure, and is often becoming the impact that we seek."<sup>3</sup> In a preliminary planning meeting, we collaboratively brainstormed a timeline, key partners, a framework, and a roll out for the school year with an end goal of having a policy presented by spring. This policy needed to include input and collaboration with many district and community voices to ensure equitable connections of ideas and thoughts on this complex topic. Not only was this a



*Students were guided through activities which highlighted personal identity, power, privilege, and common vocabulary in anti-racism work.*

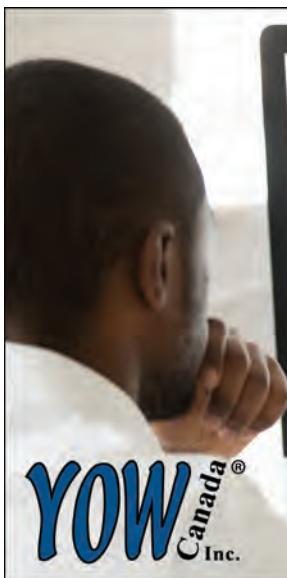
focus on anti-racism policy development, but an opportunity to create entry points into learning and self-reflection for all, leading to deep systems change.

In doing this work, it was important to model our beliefs and values, as “the Elders say if it comes from the heart and is done in a good way, our work will count.”<sup>4</sup> Intentionally, we wanted youth voices to lead this work, as we know how wise our students are and how the adults in the system value their voice and knowledge. The focus for this project was student voice and agency, thus we came up with the name “Students Tending the Fire.”

We facilitated a retreat-based experience for Black, Indigenous, and other students of colour to help in the creation of a toolbox. This toolbox could then be used as an anti-racism learning activity, supporting input from a public engagement survey. At the retreat, we guided student learning through activities which highlighted personal identity, power, privilege, and common vocabulary in anti-racism work. In a powerful student video, a group of students shared their stories and hopes and crafted follow-up extension activities that were shared in the *Students Tending the Fire Anti-racism Toolbox*.

The toolbox rolled out district wide to senior administrators, all school staff, school parent advisory groups, district parent advisory groups, the Aboriginal Advisory Council and Board of Education. In addition, student trustees then presented the toolbox to students district wide. The policy survey was also shared on the School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake) website and through school newsletters.

Superintendent Smillie coordinated the Anti-Racism Advisory Council, including representatives from community agencies, parents, district representation, territory, and Indigenous partners. The purpose of



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the council was to provide advice on the development of a policy related to racism. The scope of the council was multidimensional, including defining anti-racism, reviewing reporting tools and identifying gaps, recommending areas of focus, reviewing best practices, and finally providing advice for the policy and administrative procedures. Information shared from the public engagement survey was thematically organized and brought back to the council for consideration. Through enriching dialogue, complimenting lived histories, and critically engaging in anti-racism work, the council listened, synthesized, and created the pro-forma policy, shared with the Board of Education of School District No.8 (Kootenay Lake).

At the time we write this, the Council has completed the draft policy and administrative procedures. Since the process has developed slowly and with great care taken to balance the educational foundations of policy development, anti-racism terminology and the movement towards a draft policy, the Council is confident with the draft result.

In considering our next steps, we realize we have much work to do. We will continue

with resource development, updating the district anti-racism website, professional development, and awareness building. We will look to the policy and administrative procedures, developed through community voice and student voice to assist us. We will continue to engage students for their feedback as we collectively move forward anti-racism here in School District No.8 (Kootenay Lake). As shared by the American poet, Langston Hughes, “hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.” We will continue to hold onto our dream of a district and world that is culturally safe and responsive to all.

Our hearts are full with gratitude for the students who participated in the creation of the *Students Tending the Fire Toolbox*: Rhiannon, Jade, Tebo, Binyam, Taeley, Danielle, AJ, Chevon, Miku, Winter, Seth and Sara. Additional thanks go out to District Aboriginal Academic Success Teacher, Ki Louie, who assisted and supported students and the process. ○

Gail Higginbottom is the District Principal, Aboriginal Education, and

Jann Schmidt is the District Principal, International Education, for School District No. 8 (Kootenay Lake).

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