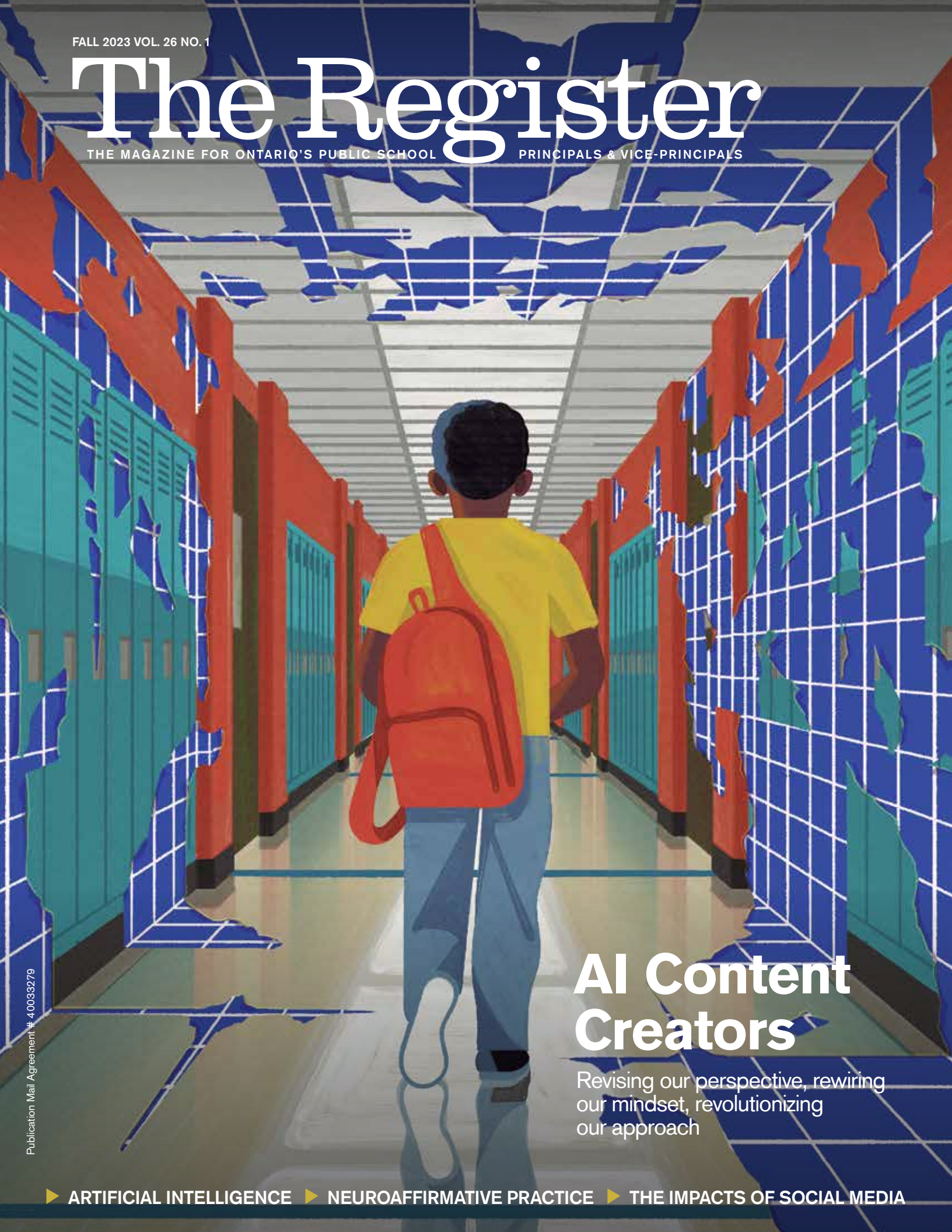


FALL 2023 VOL. 26 NO. 1

# The Register

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



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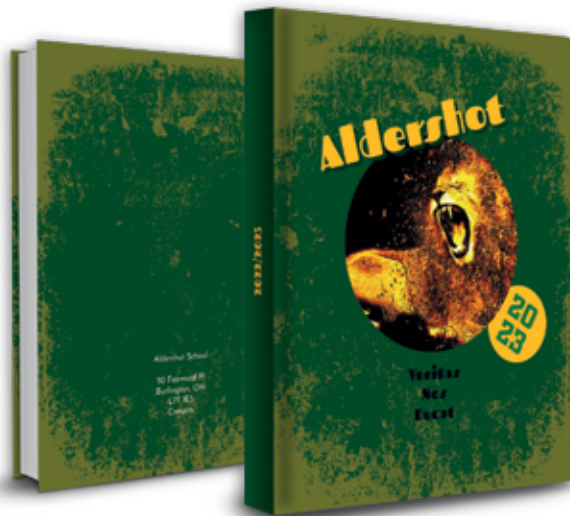
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# Next Round of Negotiations

Planning and work is underway



On August 31st, 2023, the provincial Terms and Conditions (T&C) Agreement of all principals and vice-principals in Ontario expired, both provincially and locally.

As the exclusive bargaining agents for principals and vice-principals in Ontario, the three principals' associations l'Association des directions et des directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes [ADFO] and the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario [CPCO]) began to turn their minds last spring to the next round of negotiations.

We expected that the negotiations between the Crown, Trustee Associations and teacher federations would be ongoing through the summer and into the fall, and we know from experience that the Crown and Trustees would only want to sit down at the negotiations table with us after having reached agreements with the teachers. Still, we wanted to be on record as indicating

our intention to negotiate, so we sent a letter to those parties to that effect on June 2nd, 2023.

While our negotiations process is not currently governed by the *Labour Relations Act* or the *School Boards Collective Bargaining Act*, we have sought consideration for agreeing to delay the start of our negotiations until after the teachers' federations have reached agreements. Specifically, consistent with legislation, we have asked for a freeze on current T&C Agreements, including the continuation of the committee work started as part of the now expired provincial T&C Agreement. We are still waiting for a response from the Crown and Trustee Associations. We have been able to secure dates to begin the process this fall, continuing

through the winter. Secured dates will be released if teacher negotiations have not been completed.

Since October 2022, we have also been engaging in discussions with OPC Councillors on the approval process for a new provincial T&C Agreement. Councillors have been asked to consider options that would allow tentative agreements to be shared more broadly prior to their approval by the voting body, a group that may also be expanded to include more than our Councillors. Conversations have continued as we work toward a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with each option. It is our expectation that a final decision will be made at the October 2023 Council meeting and subsequently shared with all OPC Members as we enter into the next round of negotiations.

The OPC, together with ADFO and CPCO, retained the services of an experienced research company, Abacus Data, to conduct a survey of all principals and vice-principals. We encourage Members to take time to complete the survey. The information gathered helps us to understand your priorities as we get ready for the next round of negotiations. As appropriate, we will be able to advocate by sector for elements that are specific to each organization, while also prioritizing common elements.

When we get to the negotiations table, our process will be similar to past years with a Table Team and a Caucus Team. The OPC interim General Co-Counsel, Michele Hamilton, is the official spokes-

person for the three associations. The Table Team will be the primary group that will be present during all negotiations meetings, which are expected to be held in person. This team is made up of representatives of all three principals' associations. For the OPC, we have sought representation from the Executive and Senior Staff, including our legal team.

The Caucus Team will be made up of Members from each association and will meet virtually. Some meetings will be scheduled based on negotiation dates, and at other times, the Caucus Team may be on standby for consultations. The Caucus Team members represent the OPC, ADFO and CPCO, with a view to bringing together a variety of voices based on our diverse membership with consideration for identity, role, panel, years of experience and region. The Caucus Team helps us to keep the focus on the priorities of the membership in ways that are responsive to the needs of school leaders.

We continue to welcome comments, questions and suggestions on the process. Please send inquiries, comments to [negotations2023@principals.ca](mailto:negotations2023@principals.ca). ▲



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# Happenings at the OPC ...



At the two-day OPC Vice-Principal Symposium in May, keynote speaker Curtis Carmichael spoke about how leaders can make a difference in the lives of their school community members.



Our Provincial Council wore red on Red Dress Day to acknowledge the many missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada.



A variety of summer events, workshops and training sessions were held at the OPC office in Toronto in July and August. Re-culturing Your School Workshop (left).



Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools (bottom left) and School Level Implementation of the Right to Read (bottom right).





# New Beginnings

An update on PL opportunities available to Members and Associates

**F**all is a beautiful season that has many different meanings and sentiments for various cultures and communities. Among others, it may be a time of harvest, a representation of change or a celebration of new life. The OPC's Professional Learning (PL) team warmly welcomes new Members to our organization, wishing you the very best on your continued leadership journey. We look forward to another year of engagement with Members and Associates within our learning spaces.

With the excitement of a new school year in the air, it is an opportunity to start anew after you've hopefully had some time to reflect and rejuvenate over the summer months. For the PL team, summer has been a busy time, with ongoing programming and planning for new opportunities for collaboration to support excellence in school leadership, recognizing the myriad roles and responsibilities that principals and vice-principals hold.

Based on Member and Associate feedback, this year's PL Plan focuses on leadership development in the areas of human rights and equity, as well as building collaborative professional relationships that positively impact school improvement. We will continue to provide a range of Additional Qualification (AQ) Programs, along with professional learning networks, monthly webinars and other collaborative opportunities on a regular basis. Some of the upcoming learning and resources that can be found on our [PL webpages](#) include:

- Webinar: Bias-aware Investigations and Progressive Discipline, on November 15
- Webinar: The Basics of Artificial Intelligence, on December 7
- A variety of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) on various topics
- Podcast for school leaders on implementing the revised Language and Français curriculum to be released on November 6

Our [PL webpages](#) have been updated and the weekly Professional Learning Opportunities email has a fresh new look to help you navigate and find various offerings and resources that are available. To receive PL updates, please [sign up for our Professional Learning Opportunities email](#).

## OPC Podcast – We Want to Hear from You!

Are you interested in sharing your area of passion or expertise through professional conversations about school leadership? We are looking to highlight and draw upon the knowledge and experiences of our Members and Associates through one of our podcasts. These will highlight excellence in leadership across the province, and provide opportunities for Members and Associates to learn from each other. We invite you to [complete the proposal form](#) today! ▲

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# Meet Ralph

The OPC's new president shares his plans  
and goals for the coming year

By Peggy Sweeney

Photography by Stef + Ethan

Ralph Nigro started his term as the OPC Provincial President on July 1st. He has been seconded from the Toronto District School Board for one year to take on this role on a full-time basis. Through this article, we hope you are able to “meet” the person who will represent you over the coming year.

Ralph Nigro was born and raised in Toronto. He grew up in “Little Italy,” attending elementary and secondary school in the area. He then went to the University of Toronto, earning an undergraduate degree in Political Science and French, and his Faculty of Education degree. He then attended York University, where he received his Master of Education degree.

But education was not his first pick of professions. “Throughout high school, I never once thought about teaching. Initially I was intrigued by law. And then, in the first year of my undergrad degree, I met my future wife, Elizabeth, who wanted to be a teacher. She sort of opened that door of possibility for me.”

In his third year of undergrad, Ralph had the opportunity to work as what today we would call an emergency replacement with the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Ironically, the board at that time was in the

same position that many of our schools are in today: very short of supply teachers. “For my last two years of undergrad, I was working one or two days a week as a supply teacher. That was my first direct exposure to teaching and working with young people, and I really enjoyed it. After that, I started thinking that this might be a career path for me.”

In the end, Ralph decided to be a teacher. He spent nine years in the classroom, teaching French immersion and history, becoming a secondary school History Department head and the coordinator of the gifted program.

He was promoted to vice-principal, a role he worked in for almost four years, then returned to a previous school as principal, holding that position for 13 years. He then made the move to join the Toronto School Administrators’ Association (TSAA – the local OPC association). For the past eight years, he has served as the





**“I really believe in advocating for strong school leadership and bringing forward the concerns and issues on behalf of our Members.”**

vice-chair and then chair of the 1,000-member group. In those positions, Ralph worked to ensure the school board understood the challenges of the role, advocating to help principals and vice-principals feel valued and successful in their work. During this time, the local organization also worked to promote diversity so that school communities could see their identities reflected in their school leaders.

Ralph’s involvement with the OPC started in 2010, when a vacancy came up on the local Toronto executive. “I really enjoyed the work that they were doing. I thought the advocacy, the support that they offered Members locally, was extremely important. That’s when I decided that I wanted to get more involved. The next year, I was encouraged to put my name forward as an OPC Provincial Councillor. And I’ve been on Council ever since. That position has been a great opportunity to learn more about what our colleagues are experiencing across the province. We see the differences, but we also see the similarities of administrators working to lead their respective school communities.”

After 12 years on Council, Ralph is now the OPC provincial president for the 2023–2024 school year. “The idea of wanting to be president was one that evolved over my time as a Councillor. I saw the bigger picture, the work that was happening, more of the political work that was being undertaken at the OPC with the ministry and with all of the other school districts.

For a long time I thought that it was perhaps a natural progression for me, but it took me a while to convince myself to pursue it because I saw that it was certainly a much larger role.

“And it took a lot of time for me to consider the potential impact not just on myself, but also on my family. But ultimately I thought that it was something I wanted to do. I really believe in advocating for strong school leadership and bringing forward the concerns and issues on behalf of our Members. I did so for many years in Toronto, and I will certainly do the same this year as president of the OPC.”

As the new school year gets underway, Ralph has several goals he'd like to pursue. “One is to continue the advocacy program. I think we need to keep getting the word out, not just about what the OPC does, but also what principals and vice-principals do in their schools. We need to make sure that people understand our role. Most parents do, but when it comes to the rest of the general public, maybe not so much. I think we need to continue to improve on that.” (*Editor's note: watch for the Principal Profile campaign to continue this year on our OPC X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn accounts!*)

“We also need to keep our membership more informed about what the OPC offers in terms of supports and in terms of professional learning. One of the things that I've noticed, not just in Toronto but from talking to colleagues across the province, is that people are entering these leadership roles much younger and less experienced than perhaps two decades ago. So we need to ensure that we have appropriate mentoring and appropriate supports in place for them.

“Our Members also know that it's been a goal we've had for many years now to achieve panel pay equity. We need to continue to pursue that, because it's long overdue. It's about fundamental fairness for our Members. Right now, it's something that is just hanging out there as an injustice. We need to find some way to convince the government that it's time this decades-old injustice be addressed.”

On August 31st, the provincial Terms and Conditions Agreement for all principals and

**“What I think school boards and the government need to do is to continue to listen to principals and vice-principals, who are the ones working most closely with the students and staff. We are the ones who see on a daily basis the needs of young people.”**

vice-principals across the province expired. However, due to the ongoing negotiations with teachers and support staff, the P/VP groups have yet to formally meet with the Crown (government) and Trustee Associations. This will be a significant agenda item for Ralph over the coming year, as he joins a negotiations committee from the OPC, l'Association des directions et des directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) and the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO) to meet, plan and bargain on behalf of the three groups. “It's my hope that by the end of my term as president, we will have a new provincial Terms and Conditions Agreement that fairly represents and respects the work that our people do each and every day in the service of their school communities.”

Last June, schools finished a full in-school year post-pandemic, but many people are still concerned about the after-effects of the lengthy time that students spent online and out of school. Ralph shares that concern. “I don't think that we have seen what the totality of the impact of the pandemic is on young people in particular. It may be many more years before we see the long-term impact of going through what was an existential level experience: the isolation with it and not being able to interact with peers has had a long-term impact on students.

“Have we 'caught up'? I don't think so. This will be an ongoing issue over the next decade. What I think school boards and the govern-

ment need to do is to continue to listen to principals and vice-principals, who are the ones working most closely with the students and staff. We are the ones who see on a daily basis the needs of young people. While a number of supports have been put in place, there needs to be greater collaboration and a lot more listening on the part of school boards to ensure that the limited resources we have are being used appropriately to get the maximum benefit for our students.”

One of the challenges of getting things done in schools is securing the attention and response of the ministry, and the Minister in particular. The OPC has released [statements and public letters](#) over the past few years, yet securing concrete solutions has not always been successful. “We need to keep trying, to keep building those relationships with the Minister, with ministry officials and with the government. I don't think that there's any disagreement about the relationship between strong school leadership and the role that it has on student well-being and student achievement. We and the government, any government, can agree on that.

“So the next step is, how do we move forward? How do we try to collaborate? As an organization, we always put student well-being and student achievement at the centre of any discussion. It frames any discussion that we bring forward. So we need to keep ensuring that we maintain that focus when we engage with the government. Our goal is to secure a



greater trust that will lead to the necessary resources and programs so school leaders can support all students and staff in being successful.”

At the provincial level, Ralph’s goal is to “listen and fully understand what the concerns are of our membership across the province. For individual principals and vice-principals, I fully expect that the greatest challenge for the current school year will continue to be staff shortages. It will also be critical to ensure that our new Members have been appropriately and

adequately trained to assume the role, and ensure there is ongoing mentorship for them.

“We also know that an issue we’ve dealt with for many years is our expanding workload. It’s the one thing that really has not let up. While workload challenges increased exponentially during COVID, the gaps in student learning and wellness that the pandemic created have led to a further increase in the workload and the expectations and accountability that have been placed on our school leaders. As someone

who has been the leader of the largest local in the OPC for eight years, I worry about the stress, about the impact that it has on personal and family life for our Members, and the spike in illness-related leaves that it has led to over the last several years.”

Ralph and his wife, Elizabeth, have been married for 31 years. She recently retired after 33 years as a secondary school math teacher. Both of their children have decided to follow in their mom and dad’s footsteps, recently graduating from faculties of education: their son Francis from UOIT (Ontario Tech University) in Oshawa, and their daughter Laura from York University. Ralph and Elizabeth know the challenges their kids will face upon entering the teaching world, but they are also very proud that their kids have chosen this important career.

Outside of school, Ralph likes to travel and read. “There hasn’t been much time for pleasure reading lately. My preference is political biographies. I’m also a big wine fan; I collect wines. At TSAA, I included monthly wine picks in our local newsletter, which has been well received. I also like to exercise and weight train.”


After his roles as vice-chair and chair of the TSAA, and working with Members on a daily basis, Ralph has a good sense of what the year ahead will look like in terms of being the spokesperson and primary representative for the OPC to the government, media, stakeholders and the public. “My hope is to work to ensure that school leaders feel that they are strongly represented. I want our Members to have a greater understanding of the services provided and to feel comfortable reaching out to the OPC. And I hope we can help ease some of the tensions of the job so that our people can focus on the work they love doing.”

“My job over the next year will be to ensure that I will be listening to what the issues are. I will be bringing them forward and working with the OPC Executive, Provincial Council and staff to make sure that we address the issues and the concerns.”▲

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# The Elephant and the Journey




Trauma-informed school leadership



By Deni Melim and Beata Batorowicz

Illustration by Cornelia Li



“If I grow up...” This was the matter-of-fact statement a seven-year-old made in my classroom when asked what he might like to be when he grows up. The fact that he didn’t think he would live long enough to determine the answer to this question was astonishing. We wondered how often this type of comment goes unnoticed in the busyness of school hallways, classrooms, offices and yards. How often are educators missing similar stories and experiences? Unfortunately, there are likely many kids just like my student sprinkled throughout Ontario schools, and we often consider how a complex school system can be changed to better support their unique needs.



**Developmental trauma:** chronic and repeated interpersonal trauma that impacts seven developmental domains (biology, self-concept, cognition, dissociation, affect regulation, attachment and behavioural control) (van der Kolk 2005).

**Developmental trauma** caused by adverse childhood experiences is often the elephant in the room for many educators. The scope and scale of the problem seems too big, too overwhelming, with factors outside a school's control. Developmental trauma has not been systemically addressed within our education system, but rather discussed by individual administrators who find an urgent need within their schools and respond to challenging behaviours the best they can, while balancing several priorities.

Sometimes, student behaviours are very loud and visible, while other times they are quietly self-destructive. Either way, the impacts of adverse childhood experiences and developmental trauma can be devastating to a student's mental, social, emotional and physical health throughout a lifespan.

The impacts are also felt by school staff, often leaving them feeling burned out, discouraged and perhaps even incompetent as they try to understand why typical behavioural strategies are not working. Given that children and youth spend a significant amount of time at school during critical developmental periods, it makes sense that schools become places for the prevention and mitigation of impacts. It is time that we engaged in an open and honest conversation about developmental trauma, its prevalence in our schools and its impacts on students, staff and communities.

While global research on the need for trauma-informed practices within schools continues to grow, the research exploring a school-wide **trauma-informed approach** remains scarce. The importance of leadership is typically noted for any school change effort or reform, including a school-wide trauma-informed approach. The recent voluntary survey conducted by the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) (October 2022) indicated that post-COVID, administrators are perceiving a higher prevalence of trauma in their schools and a higher rate of burnout among staff. The OPC called for future research to investigate the experiences, challenges and opportunities for trauma-sensitive school leadership.

This article is part of a doctoral dissertation titled *Narrative Inquiry: Leading the implementation of a self-organized school-wide trauma-informed approach*. The dissertation presents the first Canadian research that focuses explicitly on administrator leadership of a self-organized and locally initiated school-wide trauma-informed approach. The study identified, explored and



**Trauma-informed approach:**

a program, organization or system that **realizes** the impact of trauma; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms; **responds** by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices; and **resists re-traumatization**. The approach includes trauma-specific interventions and incorporates trauma principles into the organizational culture (SAMHSA 2014).

**Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Abuse



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

Neglect



Physical



Emotional

Household Dysfunction



Mental illness



Incarcerated relative



Mother treated violently



Substance abuse



Divorce

Graphic by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.





## Each administrator described their leadership experiences in implementing a self-organized school-wide trauma-informed approach as a **complex journey**.

described the leadership experiences of administrators during the complex implementation process that involved change to organizational and individual practices. The second part of this article, *The Journey Together*, communicates a key recommendation based on the experiences of administrators in the research as they implemented a school-wide trauma-informed approach in three schools within one community. Through interviews and conversations, we had a privileged peek into the stories of these remarkable administrators, which would otherwise have remained unheard. When taken together, their individual experiences represent a collective story that may serve as a learning tool for other administrators considering the same journey within their school contexts. This is one small but critical piece of their journey together.

### **The Journey Together**

**“It’s not as easy as saying...today we’re going to try implementing trauma-informed practices. It’s complex.”**

– An anonymous administrator and study participant

Each administrator described their leadership experiences in implementing a self-organized school-wide trauma-informed approach as a complex journey. They did not realize it would be such a long process and that it would differ significantly from other change efforts they had previously led. There was no end date, no one-size-fits-all, no magical educational program or quick fix. To begin, they came together and discussed the urgency they were all experiencing within their schools. They had been working together to explore the impacts of generational

poverty but wanted to understand what else might be driving the frequent and increasingly intense behaviours they were seeing.

**“In our school, the urgency was very, very loud and it became so apparent to us that there was no consequence that was going to change this behaviour. We needed to do things differently.”**

The administrators connected with a local expert in developmental trauma and began to understand that their schools were heavily populated with students with multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The sense of urgency was palpable, but administrators recognized that data was needed to communicate their daily experiences to school staff and senior school board staff. To make the problem visible, teachers identified the known ACEs for each student in their class. This activity had a profound impact on staff when they discovered that almost 80 per cent of their school population from kindergarten to Grade 8 had experienced three or more ACEs. The stories of their students became the data they needed and the urgency they felt now had a name: **developmental trauma**.

**“When we talk about putting a face to the data, that’s really what happened. Although this data may be harder to gather, this explains as much a story about a student’s inability to learn as would a reading assessment.”**

As the reality of their students’ lived experiences sank in, the administrators recognized that a different approach was needed to mitigate and prevent further impacts of

... there is a path forward for others to respond to the needs of students who have experienced developmental trauma.



developmental trauma. Together, they chose an intervention that prioritized relationships and was embedded with evidence-based trauma-informed principles, and fit the unique context of each of their schools. As they articulated their experiences, several themes and subthemes were identified as significant to practice. The first piece of advice administrators wanted to share with provincial colleagues is the significance of establishing a network of trusted colleagues engaged in the same work on a daily basis. They all stated it was not a journey that any administrator should consider taking alone within one school, but that a network should be established **prior to implementation** of a school-wide trauma-informed approach.

The administrators felt that having more than one school involved in the work at the same time had two significant advantages. First, it helped to sustain their perseverance and resiliency throughout the process while building collective knowledge. They needed others in the same position who understood the unique pressures of leadership and all the complex and moving pieces within a school. Leadership can be a lonely experience with decisions, actions and practices on public display to be viewed, judged and commented upon by others; however, the administrators agreed that leading a school-wide trauma-informed approach was the least lonely leadership experience they had undergone. From the beginning, they positioned themselves as leading learners, learning alongside staff as front-line practitioners, modelling and interacting frequently with staff and students, but their connection with their network remained paramount. It gave them a safe venue to share and discuss some of the challenges they were having and to celebrate moments of joy. They established trusting relationships among a like-minded group and learned with and from one another, regardless of where they were on their own school journey. They engaged in honest reflection about the process, planned next steps and celebrated the tremendous work they were doing separately and together.

**“To call somebody and to talk about an experience, to do some problem solving and to hear their experiences was really important and quite reassuring. It is reassuring to know that this is part of the process and this is actually quite normal.”**

The second advantage to establishing a collegial network was that they had greater power in collectively advocating for student needs. The schools share community connections with health, child welfare, youth justice, school-rehabilitation services and mental health organizations. Having administrators in three schools within one community request the same type of supports led to discussions about how community partners understand and deliver trauma-informed services within schools. This encouraged administrators to have further conversations about collaboration with partners so that the trauma-informed approach could extend beyond the walls of the school and into the community.

With the gift of hindsight, all of the administrators articulated the barriers and facilitators they experienced, and hoped that their stories would help guide their provincial colleagues as they consider engaging in similar work. Because of the candour of the administrators, there is a path forward for others to respond to the needs of students who have experienced developmental trauma. While it is tempting to dive in, the process of implementing and sustaining a school-wide trauma-informed approach is complex. It takes proactive and strategic implementation planning. But for these administrators, it began with building a collegial network of adaptive administrators engaged in the same work. For them, leading a school-wide trauma-informed approach is not meant to be done alone, but rather with others who can walk alongside each other during the journey. In taking this journey, administrators everywhere can begin shifting student narratives from “If I grow up” to “When I grow up.”

This article is part of a dissertation titled *Narrative Inquiry: Leading the implementation of a self-organized school-wide trauma-informed approach*. ▲

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By Karen A. Timm

Illustration by Raymond Biesinger

# Reframing Normal

Embracing autistic truths fosters trajectory shifts for neuro-inclusive schools

## Glossary

**Ableism:** Discrimination that favours people based on real/perceived ability (physical, cognitive or otherwise).

**Monotropism:** An Autistic theory framed around the use of attention and sensory processing, describing the difficulties Autistic people have transitioning between deep states of attention.

**Neuroaffirmative:** practice that aligns with and affirms Neurodiversity.

**Neurodivergent:** pertaining to a person, community or trait in the context of Neurodivergence.

**Stimming:** A form of Autistic expression and self-regulation that may be observed as repetitive actions and/or sounds.

**W**hile unpacking the layers of my own identity over the last several years, I have often found myself catapulted back in time, experiencing one of many retroiphanies (retroactive epiphanies). Recently, I recalled sitting with a preteen student who was trying to decompress many years ago.

She raked her fingers up and down her pants repeatedly, as if scratching away the scarring caused by years of being misunderstood, presumed incompetent and feeling alone in a hopeless battle with no end in sight. I could feel the anger, frustration and pain emanating from her, and instinctively knew that what she needed in that moment was to just be. No words needed to be said.

Later, this student told me what she had been feeling in those moments, and why she had to leave class. It became clear that this was one of so many similar situations I had come across over the years: a teacher's expectations for a particular student were not realized when the strategies (which they had previously deemed successful with many others) were simply not working. This student could read sophisticated texts, was witty, wrote poetry and created detailed illustrations. She had consistently demonstrated her ability to exceed the curriculum expectations. She also found the classroom chatter overwhelming; despite her

discomfort, she would try to stay as long as she could so as not to be mocked by peers and sometimes educators who told her that she was "overreacting" and "being dramatic," and that "it wasn't that loud in here."

As I think back on that day, I can feel the intensity of her emotions, along with my hope that I could make things better for her and anyone like her. Most importantly, though, I remember with crystal clarity the relief and joy she expressed when our exchange revealed to her how much of her experiences I could fully understand and empathize with. Until then, she had never felt truly understood.

Why did this keep happening? How was I seeing patterns that others did not? Why could I completely resonate with some of our "hard-to-reach students" and why could we understand each other so well?

It was around that same time that both she and I found out we were Autistic.

As an educator, the thing about recognizing your own biases that often hits hard is realiz-

ing the harm you have done throughout your career, despite your best intentions. When it comes to supporting Autistics, we have often just been doing what we were trained to do. Thankfully, when we recognize that formerly deemed "best practices" may be doing more harm than good, we have taken the biggest step, even when we don't know what to do next.

### Rethinking Behaviourism



For years, I had been dedicated to learning how to interpret and correct "behaviour." Despite my lifelong natural inclination to be equity-minded and my willingness to challenge my own biases, ironically, for many years I had engaged in behaviourist practices that I now recognize as incredibly problematic. Like many, I had encouraged the use of reward systems and programs that taught students to interact "appropriately," show "good listening skills" and comply with adult requests. We were the adults in charge and we knew best, right?

Despite our best intentions, we have all been complicit in causing harm to Autistics because we are part of a system that is based on an understanding of Autism from the outside looking in. Our system still pathologizes and stigmatizes different ways of communicating, interacting and experiencing the world, not just

**Until then, she had never felt truly understood.**

when it comes to Autistic Ways of Being, but more generally when it comes to anyone who is perceived as outside of the norm. Reframing notions of normal by embedding Neurodiversity Education into our daily practice has the potential to shift thinking that benefits all.

### Broadening the Narrative

With complex neurologies and intersecting identities to consider, Autistics are much more diverse than most in education realize. Yet almost all roads lead to misinformation.

- The Medical Model of Disability persists as a dominant driver in many policies and practices, reinforcing the idea that an individual is disabled due to their deficits, even though many barriers Autistics face come from societal norms that have arisen out of colonialism, industrialism and capitalism.
- Educators are still trained to see Autistics through the lens of a communication ‘disorder,’ which many misinterpret as a continuum. With little training on Dyspraxia (a condition affecting physical coordination), most educators do not yet realize how capable many Non-Speakers are. They don’t realize the necessity of presuming competence.
- Teacher education and professional development still include too much emphasis on behaviourism. As such, ‘undesirable behaviours’ are targeted to be extinguished by those seeking to help Autistics to ‘fit in.’
- Media portrayals have suggested that Autism is synonymous with Rain Man or Sheldon Cooper tropes, omitting the perspectives and experiences of women and especially those who identify as Black, Indigenous or People of Colour.

In many cases, ableism and the accompanying invalidation, stigma and shame cast upon Autistics is overtly baked into the system that is supposed to know better, yet has actually never known how to meet the needs of Autistic people

like me. Could this gap in knowledge be based on the dangerous and deeply entrenched assumption that we would not be capable of providing valuable insights into our own neurologies?

### Amplifying Autistic Perspectives is Key



To implement human-rights based Neuroaffirmative (or Neurodiversity-Affirming) Practice, our work must be informed by the insights of Neurodivergent humans. Why not start with those who work in our systems? Many of us are also parents of Neurodivergent humans, and we have such scope to share.

As founder of the [Neurodivergent Infinity Network of Educators](#), I see more educators recognizing and embracing their own Neurodivergent identities. For some, though, the benefits of being openly Neurodivergent still do not outweigh the risks. For Autistic educators in particular, the burden can be overwhelming. On top of constantly dealing with sensory triggers, we may feel complicit for things we intuitively have known were wrong, without understanding why. Outdated resources perpetuate stereotypes, lead to rampant staff misconceptions about Autistics being “broken,” and inform ill-suited approaches for Autistic students. These factors all contribute to many Autistic educators existing on the margins, expending inordinate amounts of energy “trying to fit in” by communicating, acting and interacting like those who are not Autistic.

### Understanding Autistic Masking

In their comprehensive new book, *Autistic Masking: Understanding identity management and the role of stigma*, Dr. Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose describe masking as “a form of stigma-driven impression management” (Pearson and Rose 2023). Autistics “quickly learn that in order to not be excluded, marginalized, invalidated and ill-treated further than we already





are, we have to be ‘acceptable’ and project a personality that lives up to others’ expectations of us and which gives them comfort.” (Rose)

Though research is showing that Autistic masking takes an alarming toll on the mental health and well-being of Autistics (Pearson and Rose 2023), most educators and school leaders may not even be familiar with this concept. As a trauma response, manifesting consciously and unconsciously,

**“The Mask becomes a near permanent projection and uses up an enormous amount of energy to sustain itself. It causes schisms in an Autistic person’s identity and research is now showing that Autistic Masking has direct links to the poor mental health outcomes in the Autistic community: the high rates of self-harm, the high suicide rate, the early average range of death.” (Rose)**

Autistics like me learn that the values and comfort of the predominant neurotype are more important than our own. We learn that making eye contact is “essential” even though it is often uncomfortable and overwhelming. We refrain from stimming publicly since “quiet hands and quiet feet” are also expected in meetings and job interviews. We learn that communicating by anything other than mouthwords is not valued to the same extent, even though many of us communicate more naturally via writing or other forms of alternative and augmentative communication. We are socialized to put our natural ways of being aside to avoid stigmatization and the presumption of deficits.

### **Double Empathy Problem Epitomized**

I have done a lot of reflecting on how and why my unique ways of experiencing the world have afforded me powerful insights into students and staff members who many consid-

ered too challenging. It’s a great example of the Double Empathy Problem.

Damian Milton’s theory of the Double Empathy Problem essentially suggests that Non-Autistics process the world differently from Autistics. As different neurotypes, we experience emotions differently, communicate and interact differently, and define and form relationships differently from each other. The Double Empathy Problem illustrates that non-Autistics struggle to empathize with Autistics’ realities, just as we do theirs (Milton 2012). Imagine the benefit to our systems if educators and leaders recognized this AND realized the pivotal role that Autistic educators, researchers and advocates could play in reshaping our systems to be more responsive.

### **Some Essential Leaderships**

Neuroaffirmative Practice is essential for any anti-oppressive work, yet anti-ableism and accessibility are often afterthoughts, or are restricted to conversations that involve team members discussing students with ‘special needs.’ Instead, all stakeholders need to work together to take authentically informed responsive actions that align with human rights. For those seeking to be allies to the Autistic community, here are some suggested next steps:

- Start from a place of **human rights**. Canada ratified the *United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) in 2010. Policies and practice haven’t caught up yet, but we can, especially when it comes to ensuring autonomy, agency and communication.
- **Embed Neurodiversity Education.** By seeking to understand different ways of being, as a co-learner with your community, you will quickly see the impact on many who finally feel they have a voice.
- Prioritize **access to reliable forms of preferred communication** for ALL students, in ALL learning environments. Commu-



# We are socialized to put our natural ways of being aside to avoid stigmatization and the presumption of deficits.

nication boards provide ready access for Non-Speakers, and the presence of these accessibility tools also helps to open dialogue and normalize autonomy of choice and voice for all.

- **Normalize stimming.** Take down “Whole Body Listening” posters. These are overtly ableist and invalidate the experiences of those who don’t listen best by sitting with “hands and feet still.” Model authentic appreciation of differences by seeking to understand how and why all humans stim, and why it is particularly critical for Autistics.
- Take into account that **notions of normal** have been significantly influenced by systems that have historically marginalized people who do not “fit in” with the status quo.
- **Listen to Non-Speakers.** For too long, Non-Speakers have been presumed incapable, yet mouthwords do not equate to intelligence.
- **Critically reflect on Social Skills Training** programs that often value neurotypical social skills, invalidate Autistic realities and force masking. Autistics are often very comfortable in Autistic spaces where we can be ourselves, so why must we be the ones to change?
- Instead of using reward systems that feel dehumanizing and can actually have the opposite effect on motivation (Kohn 2018), **learning about Monotropism is pivotal.** Incorporating Autistic specializations into our learning

is essential for Autistic motivation, and that doesn’t mean dangling them like a carrot.

- Critically **reflect on resource selection.** Consider whose stories are being told, and everyone in education has a role to play in reversing the harm caused by outdated practices that have not centred the voices of those most impacted. We just have to LISTEN to Autistics.

As educators challenge their own biases, actively commit to anti-ableist thinking and seek to operationalize truly responsive pedagogy, Autistic perspectives are becoming increasingly and necessarily embedded into anti-oppressive practice; this benefits everyone. Ensuring that authentic Autistic realities become integral considerations within our schools may be the next best move toward a sustainable Human Rights–based model of education.

By fostering Neuroaffirmative Practices, we can shift our systems away from models that pathologize and stigmatize, and instead develop school cultures that value authentic ways of being by redefining notions of normality. After all, in a world where authenticity is honoured, there is no cure for being yourself. ▲

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# AI CONTENT CREATORS

Revising our perspective,  
rewiring our mindset,  
revolutionizing our approach

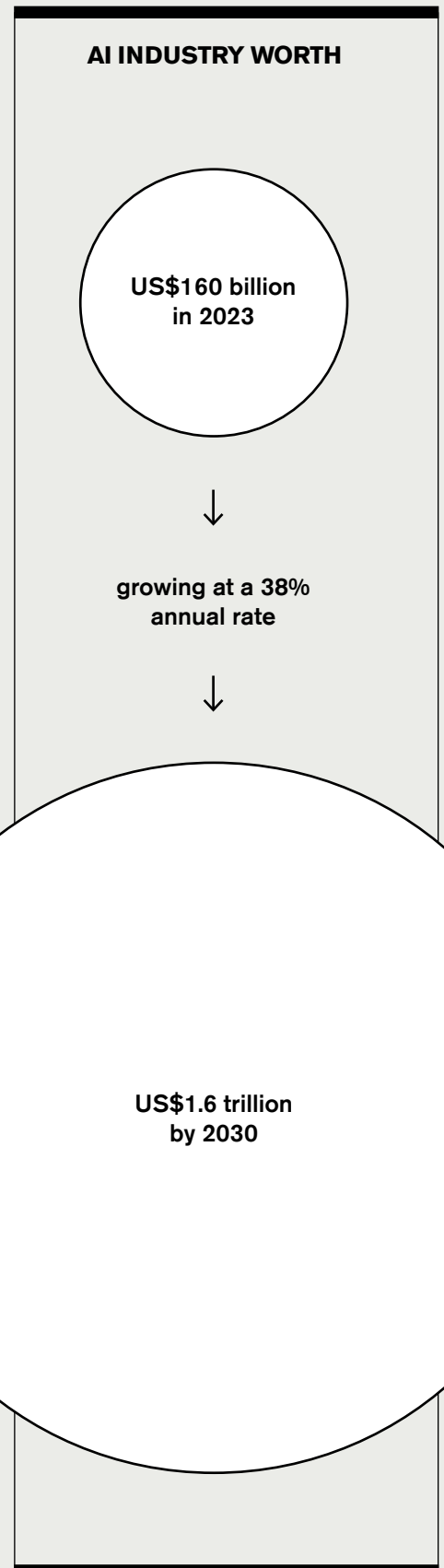
**C**ount the number of times over the past 24 hours that you used the Internet, an app or your phone for anything other than making a telephone call. Take that number and multiply it by seven days, and then again by 10, to account for all the hidden ones like security cameras, banking, chatbots, product recommendations and music lists. The result is a highly conservative number of the times you most likely encountered artificial intelligence (AI) in the past week.

AI technology is far from new. In fact, it has been stealthily creeping into our world for years. The industry is worth an estimated US\$160 billion and is growing at a 38 per cent annual rate, placing it at almost US\$1.6 trillion by 2030. North America currently holds the greatest share of the market, with 42 per cent of the world's revenue in AI, according to Precedence Research. For the work world, AI is revolutionizing and awakening a new dawn of an era that is being called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It already has a big role in today's labour market, and there is no doubt that it will be part of every career pathway before our current student body enters the workforce.

So why the sudden flurry of conversation about AI if it's been here for years? The technology just went into hyperspeed. Unlike content creators of the past, which were programmed only to give responses to set questions, today's AI content creators have the ability to evolve based on what the user inputs. To be clear, input goes beyond what was originally programmed or what the content creator finds on the Internet. Input includes voice recognition, self-created work and uploaded materials such as assignment requirements and teachers' notes. The more content that is inputted, the more it learns, making it easier to tailor responses to match the user's needs and traits.

AI programs also allow users to make follow-up corrections, ensuring content is even more individualized and specific to the user. The greatest power, though, is the ability to mimic human speech based on the input. Gone are the stiff, staccato, robot-like re-

sponses. With more and more user input, the AI program literally learns the thought and language patterns of the user, making the content sound like something the user would have written. But the true catch is the affordability. Many AI content creators are free, and paid ones are priced at as little as \$10 per month. The topic of discussion is not the introduction of AI but the universal accessibility of powerful AI tools to the average everyday person. In terms of equitable access to education, the possibility of levelling the playing field has just become a lot more attainable. That is a whole conversation within itself.



Do not be mistaken, though; AI technology definitely has some glaring flaws. Like any technology, AI is only as good as its creator or its creator's intent. It cannot be accurate all the time and the output will reflect any missing, incorrect or dated information that was originally inputted by the creator or user. Many of the free content creator tools use datasets up to 2021, but this is a moving line. These tools also cannot detect bias and do not understand the concept of harm. This can be confusing or misleading, feeding into negative societal constructs such as disinformation. AI also lacks a moral compass. Differentiating right from wrong can be hard enough for humans to pin down – add a layer of technology learning from humans that does not prioritize right over wrong, and you have a very powerful digital weapon. In fact, due to the incredible speed of technological advancement and lack of universal industry standards, AI leaders themselves have already [called for a pause](#) to determine ethical standards on creation and usage.

The topic of AI content creators has been buzzworthy for both educators and students since programs like ChatGPT became widely available. At the International Conference for Artificial Intelligence and Education in Beijing in 2019, UNESCO identified two main perspectives that educators fall under when it comes to AI: replacement or transformation. Those who worry about replacement feel greater fear over the technology and a loss of control. Those who embrace the technology see it as transformational and are more optimistic about the power of the technology for future indus-

tries. Both sides agree, though, that our priority as educators must be the redesign of programming to meet rapidly upcoming labour needs.

So how do we prepare for jobs that don't even exist yet but will before every single one of our students graduates? How do we keep up with a technology that is advancing in weeks and months rather than years? How do we stop students from using AI to bypass the learning journey without slamming it as a negative, rather than the positive it has the potential to be?

As educators, we need to acknowledge some fundamental truths to move forward. Time spent fearing AI, ignoring it, talking in circles about it or trying to stop it is time wasted. Some may even call for the return to paper-and-pencil tasks, adding more tests and more heavily weighted exams – which neither increases student success nor addresses the needs of marginalized groupings. We are not prepar-

ing our students for this very real reality if we do not face it. Regardless of whether or not we like it, we have no choice but to accept it and revise our educational practices. Rather than spending time on how to stop it, a better starting point would be to reflect on how to optimize human–AI interaction.

According to UNESCO's report *AI and Education: Guidance for policy-makers*, AI is good at things that are challenging for humans, such as pattern discovery and statistical reasoning. It is not great at what comes easily to humans, such as self-directed learning, common sense and value judgments. UNESCO emphasizes, though, that it is the combination of human and machine collaborative intelligence that leads to the greatest success. As such, there is a movement to re-brand the relationship between humans and AI as augmented intelligence. For example, computers can beat humans at chess when the humans are not reliant on technology, but humans working

**How do we stop students from using AI to bypass the learning journey without slamming it as a negative, rather than the positive it has the potential to be?**

with AI appear to be more successful than either working alone. Chess players who use AI have been able to beat not only Grandmaster chess players, but also computer chess games.

As educators, we need to consider how AI technology can enhance our students' knowledge and skills rather than seeing it as a means to usurp student capabilities and learning. The key is to determine how tasks in the learning journey should be divided between student and technology in order to capitalize on the collective intelligence (UNESCO 2021). Examining existing practices and focusing on process over end product will open opportunities for authentic learning that include AI as a tool to help foster innovative creative thought. Although current dialogue appears to be revolving around concerns regarding academic honesty and plagiarism, true impactful change that includes ethical usage will come from changing the instructional narrative.

The rise of AI, in particular ChatGPT, has also led to a rise in online publications that call for a renewed dialogue on authentic assessment strategies in the K-12 continuum. These articles argue that educators must re-examine current assessment strategies that rely on recall, memorization and summarization, as these knowledge-based tasks are easily replicated by AI platforms. However, even higher-order thinking tasks can sometimes be generated. For example, educators must be mindful of AI's efficacy in producing – within minutes – traditional academic essays with a specific thesis. The key is for educators to use meaningful and authentic assessment tasks where students can apply their skills to demonstrate a deep understanding of a topic while implementing feedback loops, whereby formative assessment/descriptive feedback guides student learning via scaffolded steps throughout the task.

The rich learning and reflection takes place during the journey with less emphasis on the final product. The more the educator and stu-

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**As educators, we need to consider how AI technology can enhance our students' knowledge and skills rather than seeing it as a means to usurp student capabilities and learning.**

dent work closely together on the learning journey with effective descriptive feedback loops for students, the less the possibility that the use of AI will generate the final product. By implementing effective feedback loops that engage students, enhance their overall learning and promote self-efficacy, educators can empower students to become active and confident participants in their own educational journey. Meaningful and relevant assessment tasks, coupled with effective feedback loops, will challenge and engage students and facilitate opportunities to demonstrate their learning and newfound skills in authentic ways that align with the curriculum. For suggestions, consider the following examples of authentic assessment practices in the AI Era.



## MEANINGFUL AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES IN THE AI ERA

### KEY IDEAS

### EXAMPLES

**1.** Engage students in higher-order thinking and reflection during summative tasks.

**A.** Engage students in critical analysis of how AI can be used in a safe and ethical manner in a classroom setting.

**B.** Create concept maps to reveal deeper understanding of a topic after student-teacher conferences.

**2.** Place emphasis on the implementation of descriptive feedback as a learning outcome that is assessed rather than providing an overall grade on the final product alone.

Assess grades at several stages of a summative task that are based on the student's ability to

**A.** create actionable steps to achieve goals

**B.** track their progress and make meaningful improvements

**C.** evaluate their own performance against co-created success criteria and

**D.** engage in dialogue about the feedback, including asking and answering questions about specific, timely and actionable feedback to deepen their understanding.

**3.** Personalize assessment tasks.

**A.** Consider tasks that allow students to incorporate examples and representations from their personal lives to increase engagement as learning becomes more meaningful and relevant.

**4.** Cross-curricular Performance-based Tasks cannot be replicated using AI.

Consider assessment tasks that require students to apply knowledge and skills to solve a real-world problem such as

**A.** a task where students are asked to assess the viability of the construction of a recreational facility in a community

**B.** a task that examines financial, environmental and other local needs, and

**C.** rich portfolio assessments that are differentiated to include diverse tasks and evidence.

## The reality is that our students are already expertly using AI content creators in their educational and personal lives.

As a final suggestion, talk to the true users, our students. As we wrote this article, Sandra asked her 15-year-old son if he had heard of ChatGPT. His three-minute response gave us more insight than the numerous articles we had read to write this piece. He not only knew of ChatGPT, but he also explained all the ways he had already used it, one of which was for math, as it sets out step-by-step instructions to help when he is stuck on how to do problems. He also mentioned other programs such as Midjourney (which creates artwork) and Tome AI (which creates presentations). A favourite

pastime, he said, is playing with Uberduck, which lets him upload his own original lyrics and hear famous singers sing it. He also was adamant that all students know apps to get around AI detectors using programs like Quillbot, which paraphrases and summarizes what ChatGPT outputs so that it is not detectable. And these are just the free AI platforms.

The reality is that our students are already expertly using AI content creators in their educational and personal lives. They have found the creative spark it can provide without us, and our focus needs to be capitalizing on this spark.

As educators, we always hope to influence student success, but in this case, it will be the other way around. It's indeed an exciting time in the world of education and the beginning of many conversations to come. ▲

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### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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# Potential Crisis Events and Negative Media

A plan for support

By the Protective Services Team

\* Note that this article will deal with matters that may be triggering to some readers who have experienced trauma through exposure to similar events in their schools and in their roles as school leaders. Our sincere thanks to all those who support those leaders. Please reach out for support when you need it – there are many who appreciate you and will listen, including your team at the OPC.

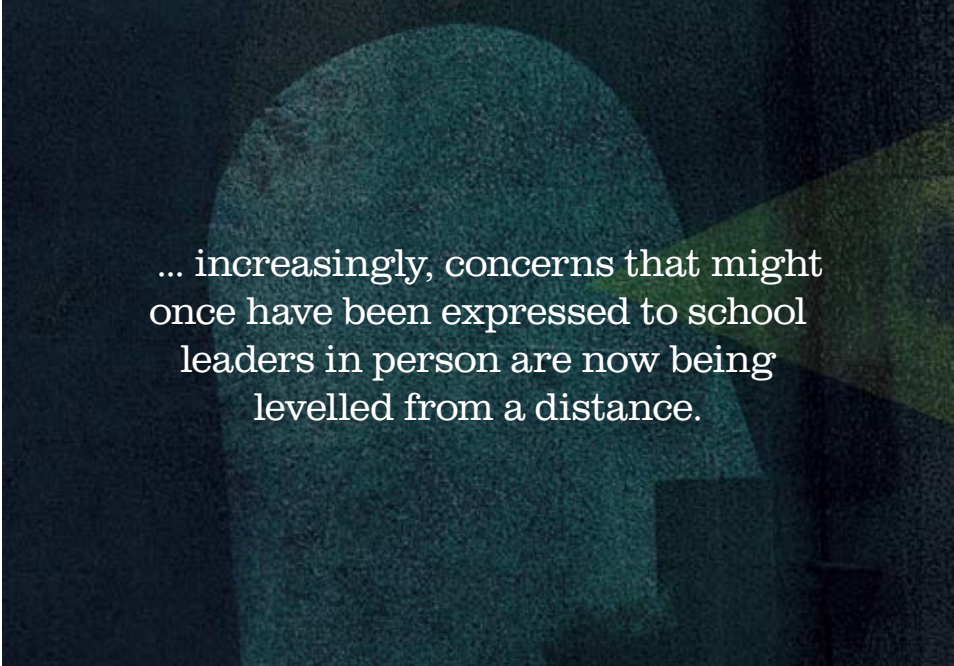
School leaders have always navigated challenging waters: implementing ever-changing ministry and board edicts, responding to regular and wide-ranging parents/caregivers concerns, supervising and supporting teachers and staff, ensuring that the complex and sometimes competing needs of every student are met, all while building a school culture that is safe and inclusive and that supports and challenges all to do their best.

Criticism comes with the job. However, increasingly, concerns that might once have been expressed to school leaders in person are now being levelled from a distance. What used to be difficult, but important, face-to-face conversations are now often one-sided accusations, declaring the school leader guilty until proven innocent. More principals and vice-principals are facing complaints, job restrictions and potential disciplinary action as they await the outcome of often lengthy investigations. The allegations can include offensive, even abusive, public statements, inviting others to add commentary. Meanwhile, owing to confidentiality requirements, school leaders can often do little to defend themselves.

Over the past year, many Members have reached out to the OPC Protective Services Team (PST). These Members are not only

dealing with complaints, but may also find themselves becoming potential targets of incendiary media events. Common issues include violence in schools, allegations of bias or racism, and concerns about specific curriculum content, staffing decisions, professional learning or even outdated dress codes. These stories can quickly gain traction in the media, blindsiding the Member and often leaving them feeling overwhelmed, alone, powerless, hopeless and traumatized.

If you are a school leader who finds yourself moving from navigating the normal challenging waters of education to surviving an unanticipated media storm, reach out to the OPC PST for support immediately. The following steps will also provide a solid guideline as you work with the PST and your board's senior team.



... increasingly, concerns that might once have been expressed to school leaders in person are now being levelled from a distance.



### 1. Maintain a paper trail by documenting thoroughly.

When an accusation is made, it can catch us completely off guard. The often aggressive and personal nature of the claim can set us back on our heels. We respond with, “Did I really hear/read what I think I just heard/read?” One-sided indictments are often designed to shame and silence, not to invite dialogue. We are left embarrassed and emotionally reeling. We often instinctively “retreat” and become defensive, even passive. However, it’s important not to be passive when it comes to documenting **everything**.

Keep an ongoing record of precisely what was said and done, by you and anyone else involved. Communicate via email whenever you can to maintain an ongoing paper trail. Whenever you have a verbal conversation with your supervisor or other board employees, follow up by sending them a summary email to confirm the details of any direction, to clarify unclear directions, or to ask for specific direction. When crafting emails, picture yourself potentially having to publicly defend everything you write. Document accurately and carefully.

If allegations are expressed in social media, copy them immediately. Inflammatory posts are often removed later by the accuser. As hard as it might be to see yourself being vilified by someone online, keep copies of any reference to you, your staff and/or the school. It may be important to show the wider impact on your reputation of what may have started as a single online statement.

### 2. Respond, don’t react.

Your emotional reaction might not be passive; it might be the very opposite. You may want to immediately match the complainant’s outrage and personal attacks with your own. Negative social media posts can often evoke strong emotions that can be difficult to manage. If you experience a physical response such as a clenched jaw, a racing heart or not breathing as you read, you may not be regulated or ready to reply. It is important to give yourself time to consider different perspectives and give yourself time to regroup before you respond. This is an important time to reach out to the OPC, your superintendent and/or your support network to talk things through.

It is a shocking and hurtful experience to be on the receiving end of criticism in social media that calls into question your integrity as an administrator, your administrative team, the staff, the students and/or the reputation of the school itself. Maintaining open communication with your staff and parent council as you deal with any media incidents is important, as they are usually significantly impacted as well. Working with your superintendent on a plan

to determine how to move forward will ensure communication at the senior team level as well.

There are other strategies you can employ for dealing with negative social media.

- a. Decide who is monitoring your school’s social media account so that you have a timely report on any negative comments before they spread.
- b. Let it be known that both positive comments and constructive criticism are welcome – as long as they are fair.
- c. Make a plan for responding to comments – positive and negative. Take your time and decide if the comments need an answer at all. Your response should always be positive, should a response be made.
- d. Deal with negative comments as necessary. If they are designed to make you angry and defensive, no response may be the best response. Ask your system administrator to have the comments removed.
- e. Racist, threatening or other egregious comments should be shared immediately with your superintendent, and a report made to the police.



### **3. Follow board protocol.**

Every board has established a protocol for crisis management that are available to all principals and vice-principals in the event of a tragic event, and this protocol will be very similar in the instance of a controversy or incident at a school that escalates quickly into a public event. Crisis management plans include the actions taken to anticipate, react to and recover from situations that are unexpected and disruptive.

Once there is a clear indication that the potential exists for an issue at your school or that members of your school community are actively and forcefully expressing their concerns on social media, it is imperative that your supervisory officer is alerted immediately, along with the board's Communications department. It is also strongly recommended to contact the PST through our Intake Consultants, to be linked to a PST Consultant and other support as needed.

Support in the following areas is very helpful in situations in which the school, staff or students may face media exposure, and these strategies have been found to be successful in dealing with crisis events:

#### **a. Ask for senior team representation at the school.**

It is very likely that the school's supervisory officer will attend the site to provide support and add a senior team voice for the staff, students and school leaders. At this time, a decision should be made regarding who will be the media contact should the media become involved. The superintendent or

communications officer will usually take on this role, similar to tragic event support.

#### **b. Request additional administration support (P/VP or both).**

Supply administration provides critical support in looking after the day-to-day running of the school while the principal and vice-principal manage the impact of the crisis with staff and students. The staff and administration may also have a significant emotional reaction in response to the negative media, and the option to have time and space to process those reactions is important. As well, having supply administrators on site provides time to thoroughly document events as expeditiously as possible. Contemporaneous notes should be written on a timeline, be dated once finished, and contain as much detail as possible.

#### **c. Connect with the board's communications officer.**

Consistent messaging is essential, and all communication should be approved by the board's Communications department and the school's superintendent before release. Staff should also be informed of the communications plan, in the event they are approached by a member of the media for a comment.

#### **d. Keep staff informed.**

Negative media impacts all within the school, and depending on the nature of the issue, some members of your school community may be affected more than others. Providing information as soon as possible prevents speculation that may lead to mis-

leading perceptions. It also helps determine who will need specific support. The need for confidentiality must be identified to staff as necessary.

**e. Refer to the OPC Communications tip sheet.**

This [tip sheet](#) contains information on social media, defamation, libel and slander, and privacy laws. An example is given of an issue, that of a hypothetical social media post that contains a negative opinion of you and to which others start adding their comments. Possible solutions are ignoring the post, addressing the issue with the School Council in conjunction with the board's Communications department, and scheduling a meeting with the individual to address the situation and request the removal of the post. However, if the post accuses you of professional misconduct that, if true, could cause you to be disciplined by your employer or the College of Teachers, then it is advised that you seek the support of your board to intervene. Options include reporting the post to the webhost under their rules of use, convening a meeting with the poster and senior administration and/or involving the board's legal counsel. A call to PST for guidance on the best options is also strongly recommended.

**4. Don't go it alone.**

The role of principal and vice-principal becomes very difficult when you are called to deal with crisis events or a strident media focus. It is very likely you will feel overwhelmed, concerned about an adverse outcome or personal liability, and alone in your situation as boards are careful to consider their response in the face of adverse media. You are strongly encouraged to reach out for support from those in your trusted support network, the OPC, your superintendent and/or colleagues.

The OPC has provided and continues to provide support to Members who are unsure about how to proceed when faced with issues of negative social and traditional media. We want to acknowledge and thank all the local OPC districts that help us provide that support and continue to advocate along with us for fair and due process for Members.

**Please reach out if you require any support to PST at 416-322-6600 or 1-800-701-2362.**



**It is important to give yourself time to consider different perspectives and give yourself time to regroup before you respond.**



### 5. Try to stay positive.

Despite all the difficulties and challenges of the role and the unrelenting nature of social or traditional media in dealing with criticism of schools and their leaders, there is still much joy to be had in leading a school. Significant satisfaction in the administrator's role comes from forming strong relationships with staff, students and school families. Trust is built when school leaders encourage open communication and invite input into school decisions.

To create a safe space for all to share ideas and concerns or to be able to deal with outside criticism through social media, it is critical to work closely with staff, students and your school community to regularly review what is working,

what is not and what might need to be changed, particularly where there is a real or perceived impact on mental health and well-being.

Your leadership provides significant support, direction and comfort to those in your school and school community. Be sure to plan for the same for yourself! ▲

✉ asayed@principals.ca

### RESOURCES

Protective Services Team. 2022. "Gearing Up For A Healthy School Year: Well-being, positive leadership and sustainability." *OPC Register*, Fall 2022. [https://www.principals.ca/en/resources/Register/OPC\\_Fall22-FINAL.pdf](https://www.principals.ca/en/resources/Register/OPC_Fall22-FINAL.pdf).

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\* In memory of our colleague Richard Bilkszto. Your leadership contributions and commitment to your students will not be forgotten. It is with heavy hearts that we acknowledge the difficulty and stress you endured.

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# CONGRATULATIONS

## Celebrating Retirements

We want to extend our congratulations to OPC Members who retired during the 2022-23 school year.

**Aarti Patel**  
Toronto

**Alan Johnson**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Andrew Kaiser**  
Halton

**Anja Belter**  
Toronto

**Ann Kennerly**  
Niagara

**Beth Armstrong**  
Upper Canada

**Brendon White**  
Thames Valley

**Bruno Kondric**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Carmen Mackay**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Chris Bourré**  
Rainbow

**Christine Holubowsky Smith**  
York Region

**Colleen Lowry**  
Peel

**Corey Trute**  
York Region

**Curt McQueen**  
Upper Grand

**Daniella Perrott**  
Peel

**Darlene Scarlett**  
Limestone

**Darlene White**  
Halton

**Demitra Zervas**  
Toronto

**Dianne Khawas**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Greg Brucker**  
Simcoe County

**Guido Ronci**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Jan Hansen**  
Waterloo Region

**Jana Tetreault**  
Algoma

**Jane Lek**  
Peel

**Jane McWilliams**  
Waterloo Region

**Janet Revell**  
Limestone

**Jeff Bell**  
Simcoe County

**Joanne Barry**  
Hastings & Prince Edward

**JoAnne Kim**  
York Region

**Josée Beaudry**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Larisa Grant**  
Thames Valley

**Laura Slater**  
Toronto

**Lisa Piquette**  
Rainbow

**Lisa Walters**  
Toronto

**Lisa Wargo**  
York Region

**Loui Silvestri**  
Halton

**Mark Duwyn**  
Toronto

**Maureen Coyle**  
Toronto

**Michael Malek**  
Ottawa-Carleton

**Michael Walkington**  
Toronto

**Michelle Morris**  
Simcoe County

**Mike Pastore**  
Niagara

**Monique Phillion-Smith**  
Upper Grand

**Nancy Murovec**  
Waterloo Region

**Paul Harvey**  
Toronto

**Paula Pink-Grant**  
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**Pauline McKenna**  
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**Peter Bischoff**  
Kawartha Pine Ridge

**Peter Bowman**  
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**Peter Deboran**  
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**Rick Ritter**  
Thames Valley

**Ruweida Hassan-Bismilla**  
Toronto

**Sam Iskandar**  
Toronto

**Sandra Himann**  
Waterloo Region

**Susan Durfy**  
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**Susan Mack-Osborn**  
Halton

**Tamara Turpin**  
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# Mark Your Calendar

## October

**30**

[ELDP Module 3 – Exploring your Equity Stance](#)

Application deadline: October 23

## November

**6**

[PQP Summer 2023](#)

Application deadline: June 13

**6**

[PDC Module 7 – Courageous Conversations](#)

Registration deadline: October 23

**6**

[PDC Module 12 – Supporting Leadership in Mathematics](#)

Registration deadline: October 23

**13**

[ELDP Module 4 – What is Instructional Leadership?](#)

Registration deadline: November 6

**27**

[ELDP Module 5 – Leading Safe Schools](#)

Drop-in session October 23

**29**

[Co-constructing Leadership for Equity](#)

(4 sessions)

Registration Deadline: November 15

## January

**15**

[ELDP Module 6 – Data Informed Decision Making](#)

Registration deadline: January 9

**22**

[SEAQP Module 1](#)

Registration deadline: January 9

**22**

[PDC Module 11 – Leading the Special Education Program](#)

Registration deadline: January 8

**22**

[PDC Module 3 – Leading an Equitable and Inclusive School](#)

Registration deadline: January 8

## February

**12**

[ELDP Module 7 – What are the Legal Duties of a Principal?](#)

Registration deadline: February 5

**23**

[SOQP Winter Session \(Online\)](#)

Registration deadline: January 26

**23**

[SEAQP Module 2](#)

Registration deadline: January 9

**26**

[ELDP Module 8 – Growing Your Personal Leadership Resources \(PLR's\)](#)

Registration deadline: February 19

**26**

[PDC Module 15 – I Stand in Treaty](#)

Registration deadline: February 12

**26**

[PDC Module 8 – Leading the Kindergarten Program](#)

Registration deadline: February 12

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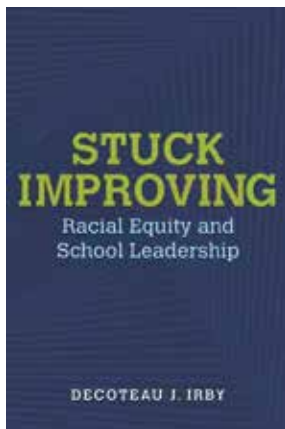
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# Stuck Improving: Racial equity and school leadership

By Dr. Decoteau J. Irby  
Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA  
ISBN: 978-1-68253-657-5  
Reviewed by Farah Slimati and Jacklyn Truscello

*Note: Stuck Improving contains the N-word. This is stated in the context of Black students sharing a lesson on the use of the N-word.*

***Stuck Improving: Racial equity and school leadership, by Decoteau J. Irby, is for school leaders who are committed to transforming K-12 schools into racially equitable and***

affirming spaces for Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx and other marginalized students. Throughout the book, Dr. Irby shares conditions that are essential to the work of racial equity reform in his account of a case study that resulted in a multi-year research partnership with one large suburban high school community.

Dr. Irby provides educators and system leaders with school-improvement practices and an understanding of how to utilize organizational racial resources, unpack collaborative racial learning and improvement processes, and intentionally ameliorate school experiences and outcomes for marginalized students.

As anti-racist school leaders, the two of us recognize Dr. Irby's affirmation that by increasing a school's capacity to engage in racial equity reform, it requires all members of the school community to become individually and collectively self-aware of their emotions and beliefs toward race and racism. If this is not achieved, attitudes and practices will continue to perpetuate white supremacy in schools. As Dr. Irby stresses, "[D]eep racial understanding

stems from radical questioning and inquiry into one's own racial beliefs and actions" (Irby 2021, 160). Cultivating a culture of racial self-talk and racial awareness among all members of the school community is foundational to actuate race-conscious inquiry cycles and to build capacity for achieving racial equity improvement in schools.

One of the most powerful conditions that the book presents is the race-conscious inquiry cycle that makes visible the racism within organizations. For school leaders to disrupt the systemic racism that is rooted in school structures, first and foremost, they have to racialize the problem. This means that a student achievement plan cannot sit in neutrality, especially when targeting students who have been historically marginalized. The racialized inquiry cycle is crucial "to generate racial data and learning opportunities" (Irby 2021, 171) that enable school leaders to identify racist behaviours and practices in order to develop an anti-racist action plan. An action plan for racial equity deepens the anti-oppressive policies and practices

that will ensure better outcomes for all marginalized students. Those outcomes are to be monitored and assessed continually, which requires a collective effort that positions the whole community as co-designers throughout the race-conscious inquiry cycles.

Dr. Irby recounts in detail, based on what he witnessed over a five-year period, the progress and setbacks school leaders faced in their attempt to create the conditions needed to increase their school's capacity for racial equity improvement and change. He accentuates that racial equity is dynamic; it shifts as racial consciousness evolves while the new learning among all stakeholders is taking place. School leaders who are committed to accepting the challenges of racial equity reform and find themselves "stuck improving" should not interpret that as a forewarning of failure or a reason to quit, but as a normal part of the improvement process, an indicator that a lot more progress needs to be made to achieve racial equity while whiteness continues to be at work. ▲

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# Who are you uninterrupted?

The intersectionality of the factors that shape us

“Who are you uninterrupted?” That was the question Dr. Andrew B. Campbell posed at the OPC Summit on Public

Education in April 2023. The question has made me think about my social identity and the ways many of us have had to navigate our identity in relation to our role as education leaders. It made me wonder what it means to be our truest self and to lead from that place.

Our individual **social location** (i.e., gender, race, class, age, ability, religion and sexual orientation) impacts our professional experiences. The impact is varied and layered, as the intersectionality of these factors shapes the ways in which we each experience the world and in which the world engages and interacts with us.

Many of us have adopted strategies and approaches that allow us to lead, but not as our authentic selves. Code-switching is one such strategy. It refers to the adjustment of one’s behaviour, speech, mannerisms, etc., to fit the norms and attributes of the dominant group at work – those deemed more acceptable and professional. Code-switching

is often used, consciously and unconsciously, by historically underserved groups to seek acceptance and to draw a distance between the stereotypes and any negative perceptions commonly associated with their social identity. Acutely aware that only certain parts of their identities are welcomed, people may use code-switching to create a false sense of belonging and acceptance.

Bringing only a portion of one’s self does not foster a true sense of belonging, and over time, this has negative impacts on overall mental health and well-being. I know the harmful impact of code-switching. When it became too heavy to bear, I was faced with the reality that I could no longer be everything for everyone else. With support and guidance, including self-care and self-love practices, I turned inward to understand the essence of who I am, uninterrupted. I knew I could not return to being a version of

myself that had me only surviving, not thriving. To lead as our authentic selves, we must first rediscover who we are. It requires a deep exploration and understanding of how our social location has shaped our experiences and responses to those experiences. It requires letting go of judgment and fear of what others might think, say or do, in response to our authenticity.

Today, I understand who I am as a leader, uninterrupted. It has enhanced my leadership skills. I lead more often with compassion, grace and understanding. I am able to speak my truth, have deeper connections with staff and working teams and a greater sense of trust. I feel more supported and better understood by my supervisors. It’s worth exploring the journey to understanding who we are uninterrupted, and what that means in the context of education leadership. ▲

Shelita Walker is a system principal of human rights, equity and inclusive education in the Halton District School Board.

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