

History of the OPC 2023

In 2023, we celebrate our 25-year anniversary. Here is a short summary of our history.

In **1997**, the government introduced Bill 160, removing principals and vice-principals from membership in the teacher federations, prohibiting their right to unionize or be included in a bargaining unit. School leaders throughout Ontario were unnerved. What would this mean for us? How would we function without a federation? What protections would we now have? A group of those leaders began to meet, planning how to create an organization that would protect, advocate and include principals and vice principals from both panels.

The decision was made to establish a professional association. The planning group met with principals and vice-principals from all 31 public district school boards, discussing the implications of their removal from the federation, debating the best way to move forward and offering their vision for an all-inclusive professional organization.

On December 13, 1997, in a meeting room of the former Toronto Colony Hotel, the planning group passed a motion to create the Ontario Principals' Council. Four hundred school leaders signed up as Members on the spot.

One of the key organizers of the group was Rob Whetter, who became the OPC's first president in **1998**. The vision of the new organization was to put Ontario principals in the forefront of educational change. The organizing group wanted the OPC to speak with a strong voice on educational matters with students, parents, government, stakeholder groups, the media and the public. The group decided on a Provincial Council format that would include an elementary and secondary principal or vice-principal from every public board in the province to serve as our Board of Directors.

On April 1, 1998, the OPC officially came into existence. Several key people played an integral part in its establishment – Jack Martin, Ken Sheppard, Rob Whetter, Leslie Hossack, John Judson, Doug Beffort, Sheryl Hoshizaki, Joan Mantle, Henry Mick, Brian McKinnon and Rick Victor.

We started out modestly, working out of the back of Thistle Printing in East York, with just 3 staff members. In September 1998, Mike Benson was hired as the first Executive Director. He expanded the staff to include an Office Manager, two Protective Services Consultants, legal support and a Communications Officer. In 1999, that team moved to 45 York Mills Rd in Toronto, renting a floor in a school offered by the Toronto District School Board.

Establishing a [professional development program](#) was one of the initial priorities, presenting both an opportunity and an overwhelming task. Joanne Robinson planned our first Odyssey conference, *Charting New Waters*, in 1998. Since that time, we have developed and delivered

workshops and online learning programs, co-authored books, organized annual conferences, developed resources, designed additional qualification programs and trained school and system leaders in Ontario and around the world. Professional learning for leaders focused on improved student learning has always been one of our strengths and core priorities.

From the beginning, we knew that another key resource Members would need was [legal and protective services](#). In 1998, the OPC started with 2 Protective Services Consultants, answering calls from Members about issues related to their role. Since then, the department has grown to 3 Intake Consultants, 4 PST Consultants, 2 Senior Legal Counsels and a Legal Counsel. On an annual basis, the PST talks to 1600 Members, conducts 15 legal issues workshops and attends over 300 meetings with school boards, the College of Teachers and Children's Aid Societies. Providing legal advice, support, counsel and representation to OPC Members is a crucial role for our organization.

In **2000**, we enhanced our advocacy work with our first [Principal's Day at Queen's Park](#). Meeting with MPPs from all three parties, we wanted to make sure our elected officials were hearing from the people who run and manage schools on a daily basis. Our unique insights allowed us to share our concerns, raise issues, answer questions and be a resource for the MPPs who were making important decisions about education. That advocacy event continues to this day, and has become a very successful way to connect with our elected officials.

In **2002**, the TDSB sold the school on York Mills. Realizing that a lot of the work we do was centred in downtown Toronto, near Queen's Park, the ministry and other stakeholder groups, we moved to 180 Dundas St.

In **2006**, after the latest 2 rounds of teacher negotiations had reduced supervision time in and around schools, principals started reporting on the resulting negative impact. We were hearing a lot about how a school should safely be supervised. Research of school districts across Canada revealed that no formal standards existed for school supervision around appropriate ratios and other safety factors.

Under then OPC president Blair Hilts, we developed a set of standards that could be used by all schools, providing an objective way to ensure supervision was safe and appropriate. [Our Supervision Standards](#) were released publicly in **2007** and generated a significant amount of media coverage throughout the province.

In **2011**, we hosted the 10th International Confederation of Principals Conference in Toronto, the first time the event had ever been held in Canada. 2000 educators from 40 countries gathered to hear keynote and featured speakers, attend workshops on a variety of topical issues, network with school leaders from around the world and enjoy the beautiful city.

Following the ICP Convention, Mike Benson retired to his sailboat and Ian McFarlane, a former principal from the Limestone District School Board, became our second Executive Director.

Following years of intense advocacy and lobbying, in **2013**, the OPC, CPCO and ADFO reached the first provincial terms and conditions agreement specifically for principals and vice-principals. After many months of talks, planning, strategy sessions and feedback from our Members, a historic agreement was reached that recognized the exclusive right of the three associations to represent all of our Members and to take part in good faith discussions with the Crown and Trustee Associations on their behalf. The resulting provincial agreement was the first of its kind to recognize the unique needs and working conditions of every principal and vice-principal in Ontario.

What do principals do? It was a question we discovered few people – including the parents in our schools – knew the answer to. John Hamilton took on this issue during his year as President in **2014-15**. We conducted research and learned that the role of the principal was not very well understood. In response, we developed an Advocacy Campaign to educate our school communities about our backgrounds, roles and responsibilities. John and the OPC's Director of Communications Peggy Sweeney travelled the province meeting with Members, providing supports and assisting principals and vice-principals with ways to advocate for their role in the school, all in an effort to develop better working relationships with our school communities.

For the past 25 years, we have developed dozens of [materials for our Members](#) – a website, *The Register* magazine, Lead Learners blog, Principal's Voice podcast and targeted professional learning resources on topical issues. Many of these communication pieces have won national and international recognition for their excellence, including awards from the Canadian Association for Communicators in Education, the National School Public Relations Association, The Tabbies and the KRW awards.

In addition to recognizing our own Members, we also wanted to recognize non-educators who have made a significant contribution to our sector. [The OPC Outstanding Contribution to Education Award](#) has been bestowed on 20 individuals including Dr. Fraser Mustard, Steven Lewis, the Honorable Murray Sinclair, Samantha Nutt, Chris Hadfield and School Mental Health Ontario.

In **2017**, Allyson Otten became our third Executive Director. She had worked with the OPC since the beginning, initially as an external lawyer. She joined the staff in 2002 as in-house counsel, moving into the roles of General Counsel and Associate Director before taking over as the ED.

In December 2017, after more than a decade on Dundas St, it was time to load up the moving boxes once again. It was there that our organization had flourished and grown from humble beginnings into the world-renowned association that it is today. With this growth, it became clear that a new office was needed to accommodate staff, professional development events and international visitors. Our new office at 20 Queen Street West meets all those goals.

As our organization continued to grow and evolve, it was also the right time to update our company logo to reflect our current brand identity, goal and mission. We chose to emphasize

the “P” in the new logo, to highlight our dedication to serve the principals and vice-principals of Ontario.

Following our **2018** Member survey, we realized that a more strategic approach was needed to determine our priorities and directions for the future. Our first [Strategic Plan](#) was developed, with a focus on four priority areas – Member Support, Advocacy, Professional Learning and Member Engagement. Each year those priorities are updated to outline our objectives and supporting actions in each area.

To ensure we were meeting the needs of all Members, Council passed a motion in **2019** to create an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Advisory Committee. The goals for the Committee were to focus on our organizational policies, practices and advocacy; review recruitment, retention and advancement into and within the profession; and provide professional learning to support equity, inclusion and diversity in school communities.

As part of that equity work, we knew that we needed to collect demographic data to better understand the diversity among our membership. Our first Member Census was conducted in **2020**. The [Census Report](#) included 12 recommendations in the areas of member representation, focus and affinity groups, professional learning, policies and procedures and organizational outreach.

We brought on our first Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in **2021**. [Our EDI work to date](#) includes the review of all Professional Learning offerings to embed principles of equity and anti-oppression; sub-committees focussed on Professional Learning and Recruitment, Retention and Advancement; District EDI Rep positions for each OPC District; and Member Affinity Groups, to bring people together over a commonality and share the mutual benefits of shared identities, forming safe and brave spaces that offer support, healing and connection.

In May 2021, on National Principal’s Day, we developed a campaign to highlight principals and vice-principals, recognizing our Members publicly. We talked about our role and responsibilities, as a way to help the public understand who we are and what we do. That campaign took the form of a [full-page ad in the Toronto Star](#) and a social media campaign on our platforms.

The local campaign was then extended to include a local component. [The Principal Profile](#) features Members highlighted through their local newspaper and on our social media sites. Those participants were then compiled into another [Toronto Star ad](#) for National Principal's Day in May **2022**.

At the end of 2022, Allyson Otten retired as Executive Director. Nadine Trépanier-Bisson moved into the role. She was the former ED of the francophone principals’ association (ADFO) and a former principal in eastern Ontario.

In **2023**, we celebrate 25 years as an organization. Our membership, consisting of practising school leaders, Term Members and Associates, is over 6,000. While much has been accomplished, our work continues. Our priorities remain on developing and delivering topical, timely and job-ready professional learning; supporting Members with legal support, advice, resources and representation; advocating for school leaders, public education and the best conditions to support students; and doing all of this through an equity lens, in an environment of anti-colonialism and anti-oppression.

The role of the school leader has changed and evolved over the past 25 years. The OPC works to change and evolve with it, as we recognize the importance of advocating for, supporting and training the people who lead our schools.

Our goal is to help those leaders create the safe, positive, productive learning environment in which all our students can reach their potential.

This article was prepared with contributions from several past and present OPC Members. We thank them for their time, and for sharing their memories and insights with us.