# Context-Responsive Leadership in Increasingly Unpredictable Times

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## Introduction

As I reflect upon my first one hundred days in office as Director of Education at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), I am reminded daily of the importance of context-responsive leadership… especially as our times have become increasingly unpredictable in nature.

The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL) defines leadership, for school and system administrators alike, as "the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization's vision and goals", as outlined in The Ontario Leadership Framework, published in the Fall of 2013 (p.18-19). The Rotman School of Management adds that leadership is one of the most significant career competencies that an individual in a position of added responsibility can develop over time. In brief, leadership involves a myriad of skills, including how to drive organizational change towards established objectives and targets, augment the performance of individuals or groups, resolve conflict between parties if/as required, negotiate with stakeholders internal and external to the system, and increase influence in key decisions. More specifically, McCutcheon (2018) claims, being able to adapt quickly to new conditions is a key predictor of success for leading change in organizations. She emphasizes the value of garnering insights from past failures and best practices of others, taking time to explore existing change management models and selecting the one that resonates most with you as a leader, as well as building confidence in the organization through the demonstration of authenticity and assurance in the path forward. Her sage advice speaks to me in striving to lead by example, with competence and conviction.

With the renewal of multi-year strategic planning processes as prescribed by the Ministry of Education Ontario (2017), typically every three-to-five years across the province, the OCDSB is in a continuous state of reflection and review, adaptation and change, as a large, complex institution of public education. I am very excited to have rejoined the organization at the start of the District's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan. As a learning-oriented enterprise, the plan of action provides students with equitable opportunities to reach their fullest potential and become creative and knowledgeable, kind and innovative members of society. The strategic pillars established... learning, well-being and social responsibility... provide explicit goals that balance achievement and wellness, with an essential underpinning of IDEA - inclusivity, diversity, equity and accessibility - throughout the system. In particular, the core value of 'leadership development' described in the reaffirmed strategic plan… promoting leadership and learning for students, staff, families, and the Board of Trustees, to encourage and support critical thinking, global awareness, and ethical decision-making… will allow me to lead with clarity of purpose, moving forward.

In their 'Emerging Themes Report', released in the Fall of 2023, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) also notes the ever-evolving nature of the educational landscape, provincially. The stimulating document - created for the purposes of discussion amongst colleagues - addresses "threats, opportunities, and areas for innovation" for Directors of Education as leaders of their district school boards (p.3). The report highlights a number of topics that serve as genuine priorities for educational leadership, including: navigating challenges such as global pandemics and local public health outbreaks; connecting students' passions to their chosen pathways in education - apprenticeship, college, community living, university and/or the workforce; coordinating services and supports for mental health; and, integrating technological advancements into teaching and learning environments. The report also states that human rights and equity, social justice and inclusivity for all should continue to serve as a focal point for the Council's advocacy work. The collective commentary shared through the emerging themes confirms, from my standpoint, the risks and rewards of leadership amidst the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of our times.

"The development of shared mindsets through coherence and the implementation of policies and procedures, practices and protocols in a complimentary manner via alignment of infrastructure facilitates the cultivation of systemness in schools and systems. During uncertain and unpredictable times, educational leaders can leverage systemness to ensure stability to manage the move forward." ~ *Pino Buffone (2021)*

The current context of a rejuvenated strategic plan for the OCDSB, alongside foundational resources for reference that provide sensible, sound perspectives on leadership such as those offered by the IEL, Rotman School of Management and CODE, for instance, create the ideal conditions for me to lead the District - in a context-responsive manner - through the next phase of its journey.

## Conceptualizations for Consideration in Context-Responsive Leadership

Bredeson et al (2011) explain that research in the field of education has acknowledged the influence of context on leadership behaviour. For instance, Louis et al (2010) in Bredeson et al (2011) note that "leadership success depends greatly on the skill with which leaders adapt their practices to the circumstances in which they find themselves, their understanding of the underlying causes of the problems they encounter, and how they respond to those problems" (p.94). Bredeson et al (2011) define context-responsive leadership theory as "practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables" (p.20). Further, they delineate, context-responsive leadership for superintendents (directors in our provincial context) has five key variations: school district size; organizational culture; community context and geographic location; fiscal context; and, political context. Fancera (2022) also asserts that context literacy is important for successful educational leadership as it enables leaders to move beyond knowing what to do, to applying the acquired knowledge and skills of specific leadership models and styles to improve educational outcomes. In essence, context-responsive leaders know when, where, why, and how to reconfigure elements of their environment in order to facilitate the likelihood of a more favourable result for the organization.

With the above perspectives in place, I offer the following notions for contemplation as key elements of context-responsive leadership for the District: a focus forward on edupreneurial excellence for programs and/or services offered; the dynamic evolution of skills to be utilized for decision-making purposes at the school and/or system levels; and, a continued emphasis on identity affirmation for individuals and/or groups throughout the organization.

### • *A Focus Forward on Edupreneurial Excellence*

In their thought-provoking article on the future of leadership in education, Hannon and Mackay (2021) provide five 'signposts' for the direction that should be taken. The signposts for leadership are as follows: lead the creation of a new education narrative that embeds the values of sustainability, solidarity, and responsibility into all decision making; lead within ecosystems that bring a diversity of providers of learning together - such as schools and colleges, businesses and tech companies; lead for equity of opportunities and outcomes, through policies and resources, in order to shape a thriving future for all; lead with innovation of systems that permit creative experimentation and knowledge exchange, as well as the utilization of current research; and, lead in regards to futures

literacy, moving beyond prediction by considering what is possible and preferred. Moreover, they explain that educational leadership has entered a new phase…one of ongoing disruption and constant change… at a pivotal moment in human history, where continuity cannot be assumed, nor expected.

> "We need to help students adapt to the strong winds of change more like a resilient palm tree, rather than a strong oak." ~ *Peter Gamwell (2022)*
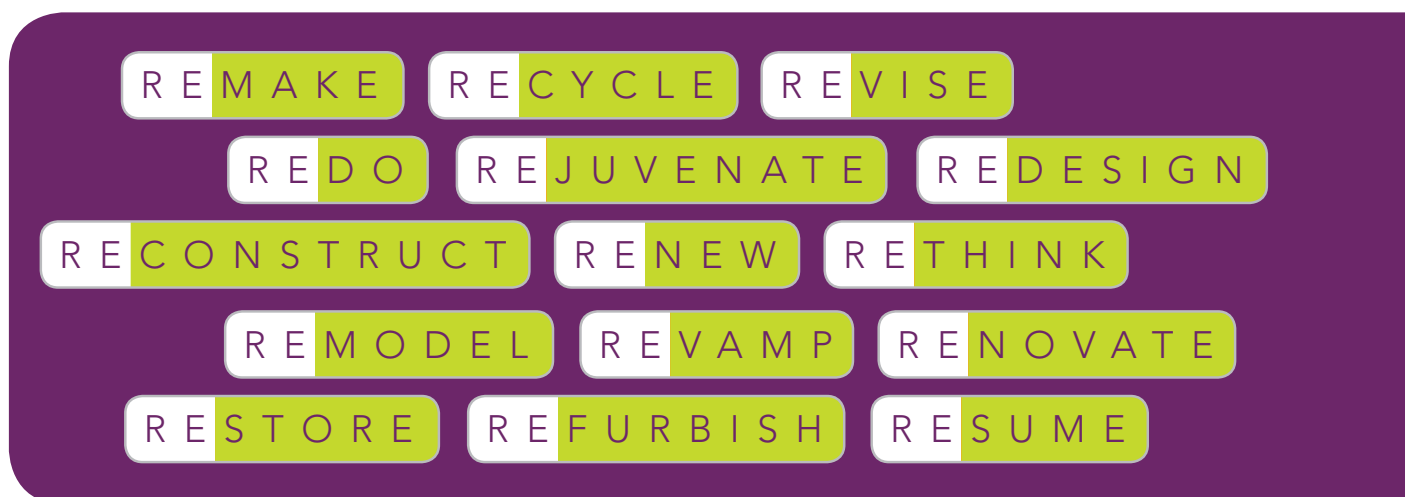
Further, Hannon and Peterson (2021) argue that the endeavours of educational leaders must thrive at four interrelated levels: planetary - living sustainably, protecting the earth's ecosystem, and acquiring global competence; societal - navigating the disrupted landscape of employment, and reinventing a participatory democracy; interpersonal - respecting relationships in diverse societies, and engaging with and learning from other generations; and, intrapersonal - having a secure sense of self, and demonstrating responsibility for personal health, fitness and well-being. This refreshed, integrated and animated purpose for living and learning will allow all of us, as citizens of the planet, to thrive in a continuously-transforming world.

To add, the discussion paper of the Education Partner Discussion Table formed by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), published in the Spring of 2023, shares an emerging vision and priorities for public education in the years ahead. Interestingly, the emerging vision is presented as an 'If/Then' statement that situates the predominant role of public education in preparing students for the future through caring and supportive teaching and learning environments that foster many of the very same characteristics and skills as the District's Exit Outcomes. The system priorities detailed - priorities that I have elaborated upon at our monthly meetings with system leaders - supervisory officers and general managers, principals and vice-principals - include: redefining student success and promoting multiple pathways to success through education, work and life; equipping students with adaptable, future-ready competencies to access multiple pathways through an uncertain future; centring the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous students, while dismantling colonial legacies and legacy thinking embedded in education; applying an intersectional lens to education policies and practices to better understand and address the disproportionate access and outcomes of students who experience multiple forms of marginalization; continuing to amplify student perspectives and engaging students, parents/guardians/caregivers and community partners in meaningful ways; and, collaborating with education and community partners to implement policies and procedures that promote and protect the mental health and well-being of all members of the school community (p.1-2).

Coupled with recent directives of the Ministry of Education Ontario - including the destreaming initiative and accelerated apprenticeship pathway at the secondary level, for

example, along with numerous revisions to curriculum policy documents - each of these resources affirm the invaluable nature of both entrepreneurial spirit and pedagogical expertise that Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz and Pashiardis (2022) coin as 'edupreneurialism'. In essence, the educational leaders of today (and tomorrow!) must operate harmoniously between these two styles, regardless of the size of their school districts, the cultures that exist already within their organizations or any other contexts of their systems, in order to meet the needs of the students, staff and school communities they serve as context-responsive leaders.

Through both form and function, edupreneurial leaders have the extraordinary opportunity to shape the future of their large, complex institutions of public education as a multitude of "re"... from reimagination to recreation… in order to establish inspirational teaching and learning environments that spark curiosity and innovation in their school sites and central departments.

REMAKE  RECYCLE  REVISE  REDO  REJUVENATE  REDESIGN  RECONSTRUCT  RENEW  RETHINK  REMODEL  REVAMP  RENOVATE  RESTORE  REFURBISH  RESUME

To my mind, a number of forthcoming initiatives at the OCDSB will exemplify a focus on edupreneurial excellence throughout the organization, including: a 'vision exercise' related to program review processes for early years and child care, elementary and secondary panels, as well as adult and continuing education; a reinvigorated commitment to the coordination of services for mental health and wellness to support the ongoing needs of school communities; as well as, the refinement of our approach to international education, post-pandemic, that continues to build experiential learning opportunities for students and staff, system-wide. Each initiative aims to ensure the effective and efficient operationalization of programs and/or services offered by the District, in the spirit of educational entrepreneurialism and pedagogical excellence, along with the responsible use of the organization's finite resources.

## • *The Dynamic Evolution of Leadership Skills*

During a recent presentation on-line at CMC Leadership's New Mindsets for Leading in Complexity, Economist Linda Nazareth explained the intriguing intersectionality of education, economics, technology and society for the future. Nazareth (2023) emphasizes that - in the wake of the pandemic period - we are at a watershed moment in the history

of the workplace, and ultimately, the fourth industrial revolution, with our work highly influenced by artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. This revolution of workspaces, she insists, will necessitate a redefinition of leadership where leaders will need to be equipped with an increasingly compelling set of skills… adaptability, flexibility and resiliency, to name a few… in order to take their organizations into a brave, new future in which very little will actually look like it did in the past.

Buffone (2021) adds that agility - the ability to think and move quickly and easily - will serve as an essential element in the move forward for leaders of schools and systems, post-pandemic. He claims that "the smartness of a leader's continuous interactions with the multi-faceted features of their environment, the very nature of the ever-evolving educational landscape of today, is of tremendous value for the leadership of tomorrow" (p.1610). He describes aspects of agility that include: the prioritization of strategic objectives in balanced measure - achievement, equity and well-being; connectivity through relationships and partnership building with agencies/entities in school communities; proactivity for effective change management through the mobilization of a sound model for organizational change; ingenuity in the optimization of resources over time (human/material/fiscal); and, the cultivation of systemness (as coherence of shared mindsets and alignment of policies and procedures) throughout the organization.

In practice, Lynch (2017) believes, schools and systems are constantly under pressure to keep up with the incessantly changing nature of our culture, and, educational leaders need to develop and implement a unique range of competencies to ensure students and staff are served properly. Amongst the essential expertise outlined, he places a priority on emotional intelligence through the maintenance of strong interactions between students, staff and parents/guardians/caregivers in school communities. As the IEL's Ontario Leadership Framework delineates, perceiving and managing emotions, as well as acting in emotionally appropriate ways, is a personal leadership resource that contributes to success when enacting leadership practices (p.22). Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to exercise control over which emotions guide their actions - when, where and how - in order to address the best interests of the organization, and help others act upon emotions in the same manner.

With respect to organizational culture change, an inevitability for vibrant, vigorous systems, the Rotman School of Management indicates that enterprises should: identify and assess environmental changes that may significantly affect them, whether as risks or rewards; evaluate how well-suited their current culture is in handling the changes

soon to be upon them; look for alternatives to facilitate a culture change; and, create or implement an alternative culture that responds to the environmental changes noted. More pertinently, they claim, leaders that are responsive to context must continually go through the above exercise in order to ensure the culture of their organizations is adjusting appropriately to current conditions.

> "Leadership must enable a culture that supports the freedom to think and plan in non-linear ways, and views uncertainty as a material to build with, not as a risk to be mitigated." ~ *Scott Smith (2020)*

The incredibly varied collection of capacities required to lead large, complex institutions of public education represent a dynamic evolution of sorts. As an impressive display or range of talents, grown and refined over time, an evolving array aptly describes the breadth and depth of skills needed for the constellation of situations and circumstances, events and occurrences that an educational leader will undoubtedly face in the oversight of their organization.

At the OCDSB, a number of initiatives demonstrate the dynamic evolution of leadership skills for decision-making purposes, both adaptive and technical in nature, including: the caring, concerted effort to guide system leaders (principals and vice-principals, supervisory officers and general managers, as mentioned above) in courageous conversations with students, staff and/or community members through collaboratively-restorative practices and conflict-resolution strategies; a refreshed leadership development plan that incorporates mentorship sessions with experienced colleagues for newly-appointed leaders, along with exploratory sessions for aspiring leaders; and, a dedicated, diligent approach to engage parents/guardians/caregivers in improvement planning processes via school councils on site, in addition to the valued voices of the Advisory Committee on Equity, Indigenous Education Committee, Parent Involvement Committee, and Special Education Advisory Committee, for example, at the system level. Each initiative seeks to build the capacity of system leaders across the District, including myself as Director of Education, in order to steer the organization, effectively and efficiently.

### • *A Continued Emphasis on Identity Affirmation*

Shirley and Hargreaves (2024) describe the intriguing nature of our times… one in which "identities are being oppressed and excluded everywhere simply because of where people were born, what they look like, and how people in power respond to that"… while at the very same time "groups who want to protect their privileges are twisting and turning aspects of these very real forms of social exclusion into full-scale culture wars" (p.xiv-xv). The identity politics that are created in schools, systems and society, they insist, are about the real differences that make many students susceptible to being marginalized

or oppressed. They explain that we are currently in an 'age of identity' which is less about finding or revealing our identities, and rather more about creating them anew… with those currently experiencing discrimination and struggling for inclusion - women, people of colour, disabled groups, and the 2SLGBTQ+ community among them - as the backbone of contemporary identity politics.

With respect to gender identity, for instance, Neuffer (2022) states that an organization's employers owe it to their employees to provide work settings that are supportive and accepting of all gender expressions and identities, including the respectful usage of pronouns, the assurance of inclusive healthcare policies, and the explicit recruitment of staff that are increasingly diverse. The incorporation of gender-affirming policies and practices into the workplace culture, he declares, will surely improve a system's corporate equality and inclusion.

Hernández and Darling-Hammond (2022) suggest a number of ways in which inclusive school environments can be built, including identity affirmation that supports all students in feeling safe, protected, and valued. Effective site-based practices and/or structures include: promoting trust and interpersonal connections between staff and students through the establishment of commonalities and interests; creating purposeful communities of care and consistency such as identity-affirming forums and clubs; developing trusting relationships using restorative practices; promoting understanding, voice, and responsibility through community-based projects; and, elevating diversity as a resource by designing learning opportunities that are responsive to the backgrounds and cultures of students. These practices and/or structures nurture student achievement, positive attachments to school, and a genuine sense of belonging for each and every student.

"Context is more easily defined than leadership. Context comprises such things as organizational values and cultures, social and professional relationships and interactions, the influences, drivers and local, national and international trends. Some are conscious influences, others are subliminal, but such things impact on how leadership is enacted within the organization."
~ *Michael Moran (2020)*

In its identity-affirming mental health framework, School Mental Health Ontario (2023) is responsive to individual student needs and affirms intersecting and developing identities. The frame contributes to, and benefits from, the wider efforts of district school boards to address oppression and marginalization, as well as work towards reconciliation, equity and social justice. Simply put, when an individual's identity is affirmed, reflected and celebrated, they feel a sense of hope, purpose, and meaning… more likely to lead to a strong sense of positive mental health, well-being and connection. Key elements of a school's mental health plan include: placing students at the centre of approaches and supports; recognizing and building upon individual, cultural and community strengths; adapting programs and services to meet identified needs; emphasizing the importance of members of staff in the formation of relationships with students; ensuring that service delivery across the tiers of intervention (mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention) is accessible, inclusive, culturally relevant and responsive; as well as, offering partnerships with community agencies/organizations that have unique expertise in equity, reconciliation, and wellness.
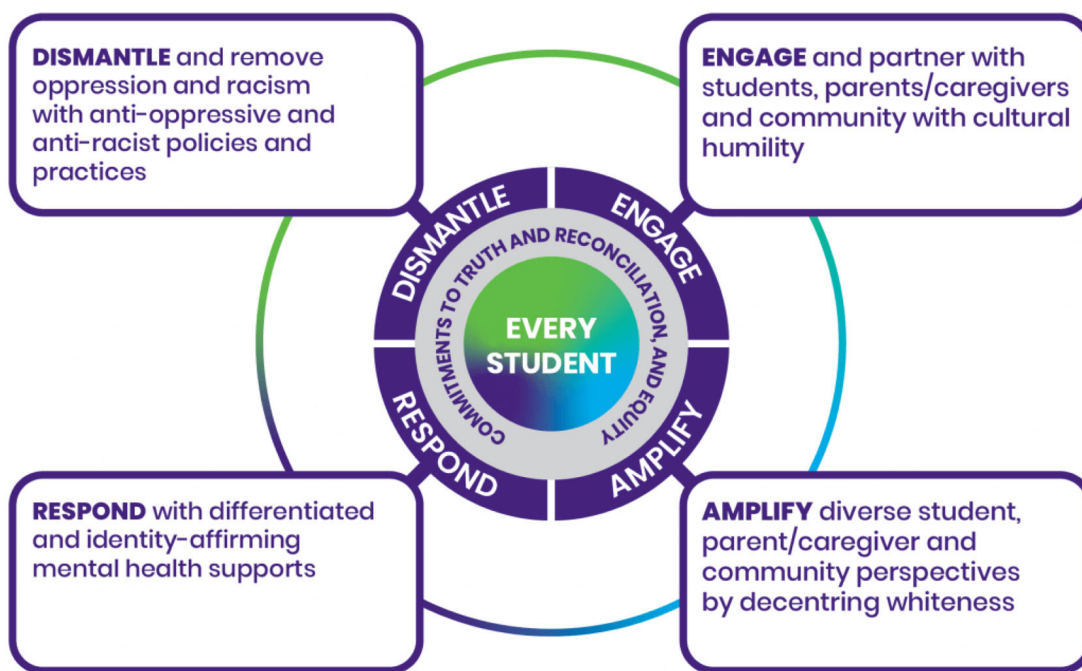


By creating safer, more welcoming workplaces with intentionality, leaders of large, complex institutions of public education have the wonderful ability to centre the identities of the staff and students they serve. In this manner, they will inspire engagement and enhance productivity through more inclusive, open-minded spaces, whether in school sites or central departments.

During my time away from the OCDSB - a six-and-a-half-year period - the organization has advanced a number of initiatives related to identity affirmation, including a noticeably more diverse workforce. The organization should be most proud of this and other equity-related accomplishments! Most specifically, the District's Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap provides a very thorough, insightful guide to eliminating barriers to

success, system-wide. Building upon the feedback/input of the 'Valuing Voices: Identity Matters!' survey of students conducted in the Fall of 2019, the document focuses on six key areas: securing accountability through governance and leadership; addressing the importance of identity through analyses of disproportionality in access, opportunities and outcomes; building staff awareness and capacity in human rights and equity, inclusion and social justice; increasing representation (as noted in the accomplishment mentioned above!) through formal and informal opportunities such as positions of added responsibility and committee structures; programming and supporting students via the diversification of curriculum and augmentation of access to mental health supports; and, building strong and respectful partnerships between students, staff, parents/guardians/caregivers and community through engagement and connectedness. From my perspective, the roadmap has been the single, most impactful resource that I have noted in the organization's journey over the past six plus years, since my return. In particular, it sets the foundation for a number of upcoming initiatives, including: a steadfast commitment to increased diversification of representation in positions of added responsibility, as well as on committees of the system; the ongoing coordination of professional development for staff with respect to bias awareness and critical consciousness; and, a renewal of the roadmap for the next three-to-five-year period. Each of these important initiatives aspires to ensure the continued integration of IDEA - inclusivity, diversity, equity and accessibility - throughout the organization.

## Consolidation

The conceptualizations for consideration in context-responsive leadership - a focus forward on edupreneurial excellence for programs and/or services offered, the dynamic evolution of skills to be deployed for decision-making purposes at the school and/or system levels, as well as, a continued emphasis on identity affirmation for individuals and/or groups throughout the organization - provide an optimal occasion to lead the District, moving forward.

With a renewed strategic plan that is centred upon the achievement, equity and well-being of its students, staff and school communities as a fundamental cornerstone, it is truly an honour for me to have been granted this opportunity. First and foremost, on the list of worthy initiatives to be accomplished, a preliminary consultation with our communities regarding parameters to guide the 'vision exercise' related to program review processes will take place in the Winter/Spring of 2024. The community-based consultation will shape 'guiding principles' to be considered for the program reviews ahead. It will be a pleasure and a privilege to work alongside the organization's members - students, parents/guardians/caregivers, staff, federation/union partners, trustees and school communities - in order to ensure that the diversity of voices that represent our District are heard during the consultative process.

As our times have indeed become increasingly unpredictable in nature, I trust that the key elements of context-responsive leadership, as described, will allow me to lead the District through the next phase of its journey with care and compassion, competence and confidence. I am looking forward to it.

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