



Transcript

Creating Thinking Systems Part 2:

A conversation with senior leaders from Bluewater DSB



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Usha James 00:02

This is *Re: thinking education*, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium, and I'm Usha James.

Usha James 00:18

Welcome to the second episode of *Creating Thinking Systems*, a joint effort between The Critical Thinking Consortium and OPSOA, the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers Association. I'm the Executive Director of The Critical Thinking Consortium, and I love my job. I was an educator as a secondary educator for many years, and then I spent some time at OISE. OISE is the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. It's the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto. I was seconded to OISE for five years as an instructor on faculty, and also a little bit of time as director of the secondary program. And all that time, I've been working with this amazing organization, The Critical Thinking Consortium, and we're a nonprofit, we've been around for a long time, and I work with this amazing team of people who are educators and writers and resource developers, and they just have this rich and deep and expansive, I would say, understanding of our framework and our approach to critical inquiry and how it can be applied in so many different ways. I love it.

Usha James 01:39

Today, we are going to be talking to senior leaders from the Blue Water District School Board about their experiences in creating a thinking system. What I really think that you're going to appreciate is that they came to our work together with an idea - with the conception of how to create cohesion and alignment, how to re-examine all of their systems and structures, and they were looking for a bit of a thinking partner. And we spent some time together arriving at a critical inquiry question that resonated with them that was specific to their board and their needs, and then they just ran with it. I am so excited to welcome our guests today with me. Are Lori Wilder, Director of Education for the Blue Water District School Board.

Lori Wilder 02:37

Hi, Usha, happy to be here today. Thank you so much.

Usha James 02:41

And Wendy Louwerse, Superintendent of Education with Bluewater with responsibility for K to 12 curriculum.

Wendy Louwerse 02:48

Hi Usha, looking forward to the conversation.

Usha James 02:50

Thanks, me too! We're going to start with some questions to get our conversation going. We're going to begin with the end in mind. So I would love to ask either of you, both of you, to start. When you think about the biggest impacts that you've seen, given the work you're about to describe. So starting at the end, what are some of the outcomes you are seeing now? I don't know if you'd like to start. Lori, what are you noticing in the system?

Lori Wilder 03:21

Yes, for sure. Usha, this has been an amazing project, and we are just so thrilled to be working with you. So thank you so much for your support. It's just, what I am seeing in my role as director is we're starting to build, and we've continued to build a community of learners framed around one inquiry question, and that alignment has been critical in our organization. I would say, from the work the superintendents are doing that I have responsibility for, and also Wendy will speak, probably to it more throughout this podcast, but the work that the principals are doing.

Lori Wilder 04:03

So we have one system critical question that everybody's doing. So I would just say that alignment, and just the learning that we're seeing with our superintendents' groups, with myself and with the principal group, and in turn, of course, the staffs at the school, because the question that we have framed is one that's known throughout our system now, and Wendy probably has her take on this as well.

Wendy Louwerse 04:32

Sure, I would totally agree, Lori, that alignment is one of the biggest things that we are seeing, and that consistency across the board. I think everybody is on board with this question. The beauty of this question is it has some flexibility, and we can talk about that a little bit later, but we're seeing uptake and engagement with the question among our administrators, among our school teams, and among our teachers. And it's everybody's on board, and it's really activated a lot of concern for learning, and everybody wants these students to do better.

Wendy Louwerse 05:09

It's also put a focus for us on the students who need our help the most, and most of our schools have implemented it into their staff professional learning at staff meetings and in all of the professional learning that they're doing within their school. So it's been very effective.

Lori Wilder 05:28

And if I could just add too, I would say that there's now a common language that is being shared just with the question and just for folks' information the question that the inquiry, question that came out is, "How can we continuously identify, plan for, and effectively respond to support the learners for whom our current practices are not working?"

Lori Wilder 05:52

So even when I now go in for school visits, principals talk about this. So when I talk about alignment, I'm seeing that at our administrative council table, which is our senior team, but I'm seeing it during school visits, when I talk to principals. And just that, it has brought a common language that I'm hearing

people use because part of that, and this is thanks to you, Usha, is principals are looking at what they can adopt, what they can affirm, what they can abandon, and what can be adjusted in their practices, and they are all saying the same language. So it's been a fantastic thing to observe and watch, and the outcome we're looking for is improved student achievement. So that's our end in mind for sure.

Usha James 06:39

Thanks so much for that, and I'm going to anticipate that listeners might be pausing and trying to rewind to the question. So I'm going to ask it one more time, give it to us one more time, to save them the trouble, tell us the question again. What's the inquiry question you're focused on?

Lori Wilder 06:56

Okay, I sure will. The question that we came up with is, "How can we continuously identify, plan for, and effectively respond to support the learners for whom our current practices are not working?"

Usha James 07:13

Thank you so much. And we're going to, in the show notes, we'll add some of those pieces, and I think it's important, and I'm going to ask you about this in a moment, to talk about where that came from and how it came about. But before you get there, I'd like to invite you to talk a little bit about why did you see the need to do something different? What prompted this journey in the first place?

Lori Wilder 07:39

When Wendy, do you want to go ahead and then I'll jump in?

Wendy Louwerse 07:42

Sure. I think I can speak to that. What we noticed was everyone seemed to be working really, really hard, but our EQAO scores [Education Quality and Accountability Office] and our grad rates, they still needed improvement. We worked with Elli Weisdorf at EQAO, and she helped us to uncover that many of our students with special education needs and IEPs were struggling, and they weren't meeting standards at the same rate as their peers, and so that was concerning for us. And we also have a rapidly shifting demographic of student populations, and that, you know, we recognize that there's a need for differentiated instruction in our schools and universal design for learning to support all learners in all grades, and particularly in our de-streamed subjects as well.

Wendy Louwerse 08:24

We felt we were missing focus, and our school improvement plans seemed to be kind of all over the map. Our administrators were seeing it as a task to be completed, but not necessarily making it meaningful or useful in their schools. It didn't seem to have meaning for our principals. And we as a senior administrators, we didn't feel like we were always planning our professional learning with intention or cohesion. We were doing lots of good things, but we seem to sometimes lack focus, and we were not seeing the buy in or the uptake or the impact that we were hoping to achieve. It felt like we had too many goals. We were going in too many directions.

Wendy Louwerse 09:01

We couldn't look at our data and not have a sense of urgency. And our data needed to drive our actions. And our administrators, they were drowning in data, but they needed a process to analyze it more effectively. We didn't, you know, we felt like there wasn't always alignment between our monthly structures that we had in place, like our monthly system administrator meetings or our school improvement plans, and we were we had to ask ourselves, if we're all working so hard, why are we not seeing greater impact in the work that we're doing?

Wendy Louwerse 09:34

We also noticed that many of our administrators were stuck in operations in their schools, and they weren't demonstrating instructional leadership. And after some reflection, we realized that many of our administrators had become principals during the COVID years, and they didn't maybe have the background in instructional leadership from the years prior that had happened with our principals. So we had to look hard at our own practices, and what were we going to do to develop our principals as instructional leaders, and what were we going to do as a senior team to model that instructional leadership for our principals.

Wendy Louwerse 10:10

So recognizing that our principals, you know, we think about the teachers stand in proxy for students with our principals, and we understand that our principals are like our students. And so, you know - what was our role in developing their instructional leadership? We decided we needed a cohesive approach to our school improvement planning, and we needed to lead this approach.

Wendy Louwerse 10:36

And so I sketched out a plan, and I brought it to our admin council meeting, and it was a rather grandiose plan now looking back on it, but our human resources superintendent, she suggested she was working on her SOQP [Supervisory Officer Qualification Program] at the time, and she suggested that we might want to connect with Jay MacJanet from Trillium Lakelands. And we did connect with Jay as a team, the superintendents, and Jay then connected us with you, Usha.

Usha James 11:07

I love these six degrees of separation. And I think that as you describe what you were noticing about administrators, about yourself as a senior team, about what were the needs in the school - I just know that so many districts and superintendents across Ontario and further afield across Canada are going to be able to relate to those exact same concerns that they've been dealing with as well. So I don't think you are alone, and I think lots of people are on some form of journey.

Usha James 11:41

Lori, any particular things that you would add about what prompted - you've been in this role for a while. You've seen lots of different things in your storied career, Lori. What did you notice that made you feel like you know what? We've got to do something different here.

Lori Wilder 12:02

Well, it's interesting you talk about timing, the length of time, because Usha, I was a superintendent for the same board 14 years before becoming director, and this is my fifth year as director. And so the team, the senior team, has really changed and shifted over those times. But as Wendy described, like we've struggled, you know, it's just we've struggled to figure out, what is it, and we've been fairly stagnant in our results. So everything that Wendy had said, I had also written down as a comment in that regard. But it's important, I think, and I'm so fortunate to work with the senior team I do, but it's important for us as senior members of a team to have a real learning focus as well - to develop a question, try to figure it out and work through it.

Lori Wilder 12:50

And I think just that focus was so helpful for us this year, because all of us were on the same page. And Usha, you had said something very early on when we had you join us - I think it was at our system leadership team meeting - you talked about we need to reframe data as guidance. I love that. I love that. And now it's so important, we're developing all of our competency around that, in terms of data literacy, and it's been so helpful. So it's focusing more at the senior table on this as well, and I still believe going forward, we need to do a better job of doing that, because we so often at the senior table get caught up in and prioritize other things. But why are we all here? It's for student achievement, and so that needs to be our focus everywhere, including our senior teams.

Usha James 13:47

I just admire it so much that as seasoned, you know, really experienced senior leaders, that you both are, that you have this level of vulnerability, that you're willing to say we didn't know what to do, and this was what was happening in our system, and we knew we needed to do something differently, and this is where we noticed that there were some gaps in our own learning. And so I just, I just want to appreciate that about both of you, and the way that you were bringing that forward, because I think that's where learning begins, is that ability to say we're not sure. And so thank you for sharing that.

Usha James 14:27

So let's go to the journey. So Wendy, you started connecting the dots to that starting point and how you began on this journey? Do you want to tell us a little bit more about those early steps that brought you along the way. And I'm going to foreground that there were probably some bumps along the way. So things didn't probably go smoothly right from the beginning. How did the journey evolve? And what were some of those bumps along the way?

Wendy Louwerse 15:03

Thanks, Usha. I think the first part of our journey was, I think I really like that you spoke to humility, because I think we had to go to a place where we could admit that, yeah, we've been doing all of these things and working really hard, but they aren't working. And we had to be honest with ourselves and admit that. And then you have to look at all of the things that you're doing and you don't want to - like, you can't just wipe it clean and throw everything out, you've got to, as Lori referred to, you've got to, you know, look at what you want to keep, what are the stretches you want to affirm, and what do you want to adapt, and what do you want to abandon?

Wendy Louwerse 15:38

And so in our process, after reaching out to you show what we did was we met with you, the academic superintendents met with you, and we shared our concerns, and we shared our grandiose idea and then you helped to guide us, and helped us to understand how we could simplify that plan to have a greater impact. I think what you did was you understood our grand idea, and then you helped us to simplify it, and that was really, really helpful. You guided us towards digging into our data, and you worked with us to develop our question. And I think we went around and around our question, and I like where we landed with our question, because it's an inquiry and it's not a goal statement, or it's not applicable. You know, so often when we do planning, we're so focused on mathematics, for example, that our question ends up focusing on mathematics or literacy. But it was much broader. And what I love about our question is, if you take it and put on the end of it, you can put anything on the end of it, so you can say, how can we continuously identify, plan for and effectively respond to support the learners for whom our current practices are not working in mathematics or in mental health or in wellness or in literacy. Like you can, you can tweak it and adapt it to the situation, and so it really does apply to all learners in our school.

Wendy Louwerse 17:03

What was exciting was so many of our principals, once we introduced the question, they ran down a road with it of having their staff, you know, choose five students in a class and focus on those students. One principal in particular had them put the names of those students on cards in front of them. And every time they meet at a staff meeting, or they're doing any kind of their instructional leadership, they have, you know, those students are sitting there right in front of them to remind them of who we're doing this work for. And staff really buy into that, because teachers want to do the best thing for those kids they have in front of them.

Wendy Louwerse 17:37

So what was great was, after you worked with the senior team. Usha, we had you work with our senior leadership team as well and getting them on board to understand what we were trying to do and how our - so our senior team, and our leadership team would include our learning services administrators, which are like system principals, as well as our equity and mental health leads. And so getting all of that senior team on board to help us in our planning, so that as we were looking at our planning for - this was last June, I guess - and as we were looking forward to our planning in the fall, it helped us to frame our thinking.

Wendy Louwerse 18:17

The, after we had developed our question and kind of had a direction that we were going in, then Usha, you worked with our administrators at our system administrator meeting in August, right before the school year started, and we introduced that question to the larger system, and we got into looking at the data with our principals, and it was just kind of - that day was sort of just starting to look at the data, and we got into that a little bit deeper on.

Wendy Louwerse 18:46

So having you come back for the next few system administrator meetings to guide our administrators on analyzing their data and starting to think about those goals was really helpful. And then what we

really appreciated was that gradual release of responsibility with us, the senior team, as we started to take over planning that instructional leadership and we based it on the needs that we were seeing through our school visits, the observational and conversational data that we were collecting, it really helped us to be very concise and intentional in the planning for our next instructional learning for our principals as we went through the year.

Wendy Louwerse 19:25

There were some, you know, some bumps along the way. You know, some people more than others, needed to be convinced that this was the way that we wanted to go. And we had to realize that, you know, sometimes, and I think this has maybe been our problem a little bit in the past, we wanted to run before we could walk, and I think recognizing that the slow start was setting us up to be successful down the road, and that we were able to move more quickly once everything got rolling. And so I think that was a really important piece of this process, and we had to trust in the process.

Wendy Louwerse 19:59

So as I said, some people were a little more apprehensive than others about it, because some people are very - I don't even really know if it's kind of more logical sequential. They want, like, give me a template, or give me a 1-2-3-4, to follow. And this was more about really deep thinking. And that's what the Thinking Consortium is about, is getting you to think deeply. And so for some people, that was really refreshing and exciting, and for other people that was a little bit scary, I guess.

Wendy Louwerse 20:27

We also had to do a little bit of, you know, "Bluewaterizing" the things that we were using. So when we worked on, for example, developing school improvement templates - we know our learners, which are our principals and our schools, and so we did some tweaking to make it fit Bluewater as well.

Usha James 20:45

Yeah, I think that really compassionate approach that you're talking about is recognizing that administrators - we're all educators. We're teachers. How many of us have had the training in data literacy, for goodness sakes, you know. How are we expected to, as you said at the beginning, you know, we're drowning in data. Do we have a process to analyze it, to make sense of it, to select it? And I think you had a little bit of that noticing, from what I'm remembering, when the principals were, you know, first being introduced to how they would access the data, or what type of data they might be looking at, right from the beginning.

Wendy Louwerse 21:35

Yeah, definitely. And I think too, you've got to, you know, look at the data and consider what does that mean regarding your student need? Right? Because everything is about what you know - action impact happens at the student desk. And so you need to know what the need is at the student desk in order for you to have any traction there.

Wendy Louwerse 21:55

And like I said, there was, it was good for some people, too, to stretch a little further and look at, you know, we have data from some of the different resources we use, like knowledge hook for example, or

math up, or we have EQAO lagging data. We also do check-in data with mathematics in our board, which is very useful for us.

Wendy Louwerse 22:12

But we also had to think about some of the things as administrators, that you're doing that are observational data when you're in classroom visits or conversations that you're having with teachers or having with your staff, whether it's natural conversations that just happen in the hallway, or whether it's conversations that are happening during a staff meeting or professional learning as well.

Usha James 22:31

Is there anywhere that you had to pivot, that you had to stop in your tracks and say, wait, we need to do something a little bit differently, or something arose that made you think about tweaking your approach?

Wendy Louwerse 22:48

I think there's some things that we did that pivoted from our old practices.

Usha James 22:54

Tell me about those important, pivotal actions, maybe - what are those leadership actions that were really pivotal, that were so important that made the biggest difference in the process, or in the journey?

Wendy Louwerse 23:13

So I think starting with our inquiry question really helped us to develop an inquiry stance in the work that we're doing. So I know one of the things that I've been modeling for my principals when we've had a classroom visit, for example, I'll come out and I will ask questions specific to - what's the feedback that you would give to that teacher now? What did you see while you were in there that you would like to highlight with me right now? Asking different questions about, you know, how did those students choose that book? Or, how did the teacher choose that book, what conversations went on?

Wendy Louwerse 23:49

It's helped us to develop an inquiry stance across the system. Why are these students not being successful? Why are those students being successful? And so I think that's been really impactful for us, because I think when we ask questions, we're no longer saying, you know, do this, do that, or being more ... It's not like we're giving direction, but it's more - we're curious. We're expressing curiosity, and we want to know, and then we can ask further questions that will help us to get to the answers.

Wendy Louwerse 24:25

Another really big piece that was important for us was revamping the format of our system administrator meetings. So we start with approximately our director, Lori, she gives an address, and then we start with about 90 minutes of instructional leadership. And from there, we move into what we call carousels, and they're usually based on one of four topics. So mathematics, literacy, equity and special education. And our administrators, we only do three carousels every meeting, and our administrators are divided into three areas, and they go move with their area of schools to the different carousels, and they attend all three, and they have about 45 minutes of learning in those what I call content areas, really. And then at the end of the day, afterwards, they have some time to work on their school improvement plan, with

the support of the superintendents being there, and sometimes some of the other system staff are available as well to support. And they also have opportunities to have conversations with one another, because there's they're really becoming much more aware of what's going on in one another's schools.

Wendy Louwerse 25:30

The big change with the 90 minutes at the beginning of the day that's been powerful is the academic superintendents - we have been leading that instructional leadership. So we plan it together, and we lead it together, and that has been a really impactful change that we've made this year.

Usha James 25:51

Thanks for summarizing those. I think adopting an inquiry stance, not just an inquiry question, and how that applies to everything you do, and especially your school visits - I think that's a powerful leadership move. I think that structure - thinking really critically about when we bring administrators together, it's such an investment of time and energy. How are we going to leverage that time as best as we absolutely can? And I think that rethinking that structure again, really powerful leadership move. So thank you for describing that.

Wendy Louwerse 26:31

And can I add some more to that?

Usha James 26:34

Yes, please.

Wendy Louwerse 26:35

Okay, let me add some more. Another thing that we did this year that's been very powerful, and it's the simplest thing - and thanks to you, Usha, it was a great recommendation on your part - is every week, we send our administrators a weekly message, and it includes some kind of instructional leadership recommendations. So for example, it might be a chapter in a book that we're recommending for them to read, or we might attach an article that we found somewhere. It might be a video link, or it might be just sharing some professional learning that we have had in the previous week with them. It's also some things about reminders, like, you know, getting ready for EQAO, or exams, that type of thing.

Wendy Louwerse 27:17

But most important in those weekly messages, they're just short, you know, two or three paragraphs, short paragraphs. And we've had a lot of very good feedback on the impact of those, because principals feel like they're still being encouraged to do their own instructional leadership, but they can do it at their own pace. And some people are finding, you know, I have lots of time to - I found time, pardon me - to read an article or watch the video. It's differentiated a little bit for them as well, and that there's three of us that are academic SOs, so we each take turns writing them each week and sending them out to our separate areas.

Wendy Louwerse 27:55

So we're finding that's been a very simple thing to do. It's an investment of, you know, 20 minutes, half an hour, whatever it takes to put it together. But it's very powerful for our administrators, and so it's something that we definitely want to continue with.

Wendy Louwerse 28:09

The other piece in all of this that's been really helpful has been that alignment with our school visits, and aligning it to our inquiry question, and aligning it to the instructional leadership that we're doing. So for example, we've been talking about having more impactful classroom visits in our instructional leadership during our system meetings with principals, and now when we go into schools, we can ask very specific questions around our classroom visits to see what the uptake is. And what's really exciting is to see their excitement actually, for the growth that they're seeing and the receptiveness of their staff to the work that we're doing. So it really is quite an exciting time here for us.

Lori Wilder 28:56

Wendy, I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was going to say, I think one of the key things has been an increased superintendent presence in schools during school visits. It's really demonstrating the importance of student achievement, and I see almost an increase in principal coaching when you go into the buildings. And at SAM, our System Admin Meeting as well. So I'm so glad you mentioned that. And the carousels have had a huge impact at our system admin meetings. So I think it's - Wendy and I often talk about - it's a line that's been around a lot, but keep the main thing, the main thing. And our principals know that main thing is student achievement. So that's very obvious at school visits and also at our system admin meetings.

Usha James 29:48

Lori, do you think about - is there anything that you've done this year differently that you think has been really pivotal from a director perspective? Something that you've either, I'm going to ask you - you mentioned at the beginning about affirming something that you've been doing in the past and really continued to work well, or you've adopted a new action as the most senior leader in the board that you think has been really pivotal. Or have you abandoned doing something that you used to do all the time? Any guidance there or reflection there on leadership actions you've taken?

Lori Wilder 30:27

I would just say, during every system admin meeting, Wendy alludes to the fact that I can do director's remarks, and what I am attempting to do is prioritizing the need for this journey that we're on with all of the principals. And every time I speak to them I might reference an article that has already been referenced, or bring something a little bit new to do with the inquiry question somehow supported a little bit that way.

Lori Wilder 30:57

I know, though that more could have been done at our senior table this year, so that is something that we need to adopt going forward, is that we also need to focus more at our at our senior table, because it's important to prioritize it. And how do we do that? We need to figure out, how do we prioritize that with our human resources and our business superintendents present. They are very engaged too. So

when we did talk about it, I asked the superintendents to bring a school or two of mystery of sorts, so that we could talk about it then, and it was good to have our HR and business folks there. I think what we need to do further on is bring actual data so that we as a team can look at that data. But it's just, I think for me, the big thing was just prioritizing the need for this journey throughout the system, and every time I spoke to principals,

Usha James 31:53

And obviously that makes a huge difference when the director is reiterating that at every monthly meeting that happens, so thank you for sharing that. And you anticipated the next question I was going to ask was, if you were to think about where to next, what's the next step in this journey? You mentioned prioritizing the time at the senior table. Anything else you see as a next step in the journey.

Lori Wilder 32:22

Well, we're really fortunate. We just have a brand new multi-year strategic plan that was developed with our trustees. And so you have to make sure your multi-year strategic plan aligns with that – which ours does. One of our priorities is directly linked to student learning, so having that backing, if you will, has been really important. But I just think the continuation of building a community of learners is important. We can't let that learning stance go and as well, continue to develop the data literacy, because that's an area where we've really focused on that year and building the competency in that will be really, really important to continue that.

Usha James 33:04

Thanks so much. I'd love to close off by asking you both about your learning, personally, professionally, individually. What do you find is your biggest learning through this journey?

Lori Wilder 33:22

Well, if I can say when I do go for school visits and/or when I talk to principals and superintendents, there is impact to this. So I guess my biggest learning is how successful this has been. This clearly works. I've had principals talk to me and say things like, they are seeing increased smiles in students, because generally - one principal had said that with our inquiry question, the focus has really been on students who would be deemed to be tier three students of sorts, and they've really struggled to figure things out. So they're seeing increased smiles, decreased behavior, increased academic success and, of course, increased self-esteem.

Lori Wilder 34:04

So it's just when you we have something coming forward like this Critical Thinking Consortium and support we have, we have to embrace it, give it all that we can, because it clearly does it clearly does work. And so again, Usha, thank you to you and how you've supported us. And Wendy has done a fabulous job in her portfolio of leading this work. And I just couldn't be more pleased and thankful.

Usha James 34:31

Thanks, Lori and I wasn't looking for a, you know, pat on the back. Our organization is just so thrilled to be able to - but what I think is key here is the implementation, because we could have all sorts of things

start and then it falls off in implementation. And that's, I think, where, you folks have been so committed and dedicated to making sure that it endures.

Usha James 35:00

Wendy, what's your biggest personal, professional, individual learning as you've been through this process?

Wendy Louwerse 35:09

So I'd like to thank Lori as well. That was very kind. Thank you. Some of my biggest learning has been the affirmation. I mean, I think I've always wondered about this, but it's been affirmed for me, that if there's a clear focus, you know, everybody rowing in the same direction, that it will have an impact. And I think that's what we've seen this year.

Wendy Louwerse 35:29

Another big learning - you know, sometimes we get these grandiose ideas and we know where we want to go, because it's always the best interest of kids at heart. And so we have to just remember sometimes it is beneficial to scale back a little bit so that you can, you know, with smaller goals, so that you can reach those bigger goals. Once you - it's kind of like that you got to learn to walk before you can run, kind of thing. But you have to balance that, because there's a sense of urgency as well. We want to do the best for the kids we have in front of us right now. And so it does create that sense of urgency,

Wendy Louwerse 36:06

I know, for all of the different components, especially as a superintendent, modeling that instructional leadership for my principals, what's been really important for me is to stay on top of my own professional learning, so that, you know, just like as a teacher, you've got to kind of stay those steps ahead. It's the same thing for me as the instructional leader with my principals, I've got to make sure I'm doing my reading, that I'm, you know, watching videos, that type of thing.

Wendy Louwerse 36:33

I found it very beneficial - I've been part of the OPSOA PLC with you, Usha, and three other superintendents, and that's been a wonderful opportunity to expand my thinking on the work that we've been doing here in Bluewater, and to learn with these other superintendents things that they're doing in their boards and sharing our ideas and our challenges with one another. And that I think has also really helped our professional - like for myself, my professional growth, so that I'm able to turn around and better support my principals as well.

Usha James 37:03

Thank you so much to both of you. It's such a pleasure. It's been a pleasure to work with you, and it's such a pleasure to chat with you and hear your thoughtful reflections about the journey that you've been on. I'll thank you on behalf of all the kids and all the educators, and especially all of the administrators. I know that senior leadership can sometimes feel like a bit of a thankless job, because you get all of the problems put on your desk, but on behalf of all of the people that you're supporting - supporting their learning and really carefully and compassionately thinking about how to support them in their work and

in their practice - thank you. And thank you for joining me here today. This has been wonderful. It's been great to have you.

Lori Wilder 37:54

Thanks so much, Usha. We greatly appreciate it.

Wendy Louwerse 37:57

Real pleasure. Usha,

Usha James 37:58

Wonderful! Thanks so much folks.

Usha James 38:02

When Wendy and Lori shared their experiences today, it really spoke to me about how necessary it is to develop a community of thinkers at the senior leader level and across the entire district. I think that they recognized the work they needed to do internally and how they needed to come together as a team of senior leaders to deeply understand both their own context and the possibilities going forward. They spent the time up front, grappling with what they needed to do, which practices that they needed to change, and then they took ownership. The academic superintendents came together and took ownership of the work that had to be done with administrators across the system. And they led it themselves, of course, checking in, and, you know, we worked together to support their thinking, but their leadership really has carried the work forward.

Usha James 39:10

Recently, I was asked what advice might I give to a district that is thinking of embarking on this journey - that's thinking of how to create a thinking system. I think we have to recognize that everybody who's in education is in it because they want to see kids flourish. We want to see people flourish. And so when you've been trying something, you've been working really hard, and then you're not seeing movement on whatever measure it is that you're looking at, but you're not seeing the movement that you would like to see - you're not seeing the growth - and it puts us in the state of "stuckness" where we're so deeply committed to trying to be better in some ways, for those kids who need us to change our practices and we don't know what to do.

Usha James 40:07

And so I think in that situation, and we all find ourselves in that situation, for me, it's really important to recognize that taking a compassionate approach, that if things are not happening in the system, it's not because people don't want them to happen. It's not that we don't want to support kids. It's that we have some learning to do. And if there is some learning that has to be done by the system, by all members of the system, then what we do is we center the importance of thinking in learning, and so it's really unlikely that we are going to learn anything about our practice or how to do something differently in ways that will be sustained and transferable to new contexts, unless we are really thinking about those things. We're grappling with them. We're thinking critically about our practice.

Usha James 41:03

In our next episode, we're going to be talking to senior leaders from Greater Essex County District School Board. Vicki Houston was brand new to her role when we started our work together.

Usha James 41:03

And in order to think critically about your practice, you need space, you need time, you need meaningful opportunities, you need a community of thinkers. You might need to grow your own competencies to think critically about your practice. You need guidance from places other than just yourself. So I think that's probably, I think that's a lot of pieces of advice, but I think that, I think that that's at the core of it, is really to understand from, I think, a compassionate stance that we all want students to flourish, and that if that's not happening, it's that we have to do some learning. It's that we need to hold up the mirror to ourselves, and that learning requires time and space and intentionality and systematic efforts to support it.

Vicki Houston 42:22

I started in the role as director two years ago. Usha, we've been on the journey for two years now...

Usha James 42:29

And Kari Bryant, who was a new superintendent,

Kari Bryant 42:32

It's been so exciting to be part of this. I had the benefit, obviously, of being a principal before...

Usha James 42:39

Both entering their roles after a significant moment of upheaval in education.

Usha James 42:48

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Usha James 43:16

Once again. Thank you so much for spending your time with us. Bye for now.