



Transcript

**Creating Thinking Systems Part 5:
A conversation with senior leaders from Toronto DSB and
Hastings and Prince Edward DSB**



Creating Thinking Systems Part 5: A conversation with senior leaders from TDSB and HPEDSB

Usha James 00:00

Hi everybody. Welcome back to *Re:thinking education*. I'm Usha James.

Usha James 00:18

This is our fifth podcast in our series Creating Thinking Systems, sponsored by OPSOA, the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers' Association. And today we have a really special topic. We're going to be talking about thinking systems, of course, but in the context of special education.

Usha James 00:39

In our previous podcasts, we've heard from districts who are grappling with the question, "For whom are our current practices not working?" And we've been really thinking about, how do we better serve all students? I think at the senior leadership table, there are lots of ideas, and yet we are struggling to ensure that those ideas and those practices reach the students' desks, particularly those who need us to change our practices the most.

Usha James 01:10

I think that we've all been teachers in classrooms with students who have special education needs and have struggled to know how to support them and been frustrated with how systems support them. So today we're going to be talking about that at a system level with superintendents who have responsibility for specialized services for special education. What are they doing in their districts? What are some of the things that they are struggling with? Where are some of their successes, and how are they thinking critically about their leadership?

Usha James 01:46

Okay, this is great. I'm thrilled today to be welcoming to our podcast series Creating Thinking Systems two of my very favorite people. We have Nandy Palmer. She's the Executive Superintendent at the Toronto District School Board with a portfolio for special education programs and equitable outcomes. And we also have Ken Dostaler, who is with the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board with responsibility for student services. Hello Nandy. Hello Ken.

Nandy Palmer 02:17

Hi everyone. Nice to be here. Thank you for having me.

Ken Dostaler 02:21

Thank you. Usha, nice to see you. Good to hear your voice. Nandy.

Nandy Palmer 02:25

You too. Ken.

Usha James 02:29

So we've known each other for a couple of years. We met when I worked for the senior team at Hastings in Prince Edward, but you've both been participants in the leadership inquiry groups or PLCs that OPSOA has sponsored and I facilitated. So I know you, but tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what brought you to where you are today. Mandy, do you want to start?

Usha James 02:55

Thanks, Nandy. I'm so glad that you already brought up intersectionality as something that we really need to carefully consider, and I definitely want to talk about that later. But Ken, first tell us, tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what brought you here.

Nandy Palmer 02:55

Sure you know I am so passionate about education and about serving students and families, but I was a special education teacher for many years, moved into vice principalship, principalship, family of Schools Superintendent, and then in the role of superintendent with responsibilities for special education. But I also worked at the ministry, so I was able to see what practices look like across the province, and that was a great learning opportunity for me. With regards to serving students with special education needs and disabilities, I as a racialized leader and a racialized person, for me, it's really important looking at intersecting identities for students with special education needs and disabilities. So I found in this specific work or this specific portfolio, and while I serve all students you know, really working to meet the needs and change outcomes for this group of students, I'm able to do all of it - teaching, learning, instructional and assessment practices, looking at identity, and looking at disability and special education.

Ken Dostaler 04:30

Well, thanks, Usha, yeah, it's a neat story that really starts its way years ago east of Ottawa. I grew up in a very bilingual community, so I went to school in French right through to the end of high school. I always seemed to have a leaning towards any type of marginalized population. Just seemed to step in to want to support at a weak spot for anyone with special needs since I was very young. And as I got into education, I've been lucky enough to work - I was with Ottawa Catholic for many years as a teacher, and I did some special education and taught in both French and English, both panels, elementary and secondary. And as I moved to the Hastings Prince Edward board into Hastings County, I took on a special education lead role within a school, so kind of what we call a department head. Did that for many years, moved into a vice principal role, into principal role, and North Hastings, where I spent many years at the high school, and again, just always seemed to want to work more and more - find out what we could do to help neurodivergent students, students that struggled to kind of find their voice in classrooms and in programming.

Ken Dostaler 05:41

So I was lucky enough to work with some great leaders in this board and provincially. And then, sooner or later, lo and behold, I land at the board office where I've been for almost 10 years. And this role has me doing mental health and special education and some early years. But I've had other portfolios. I've had Safe Schools and Equity and Inclusion, and I had met Nandy many years ago and loved her work

and loved her narrative and her firm stance on supporting all students. And when we support the marginalized or those that need a little extra support, with that universal approach, you end up supporting all students at the same time.

Usha James 06:19

Thanks so much to both of you for getting us started. I think that you both have deep experience and real passion, which is something I've enjoyed so much in our chats together and learning from you and with you about how to best support these portfolios and students with special education needs. And so I think there are many people listening, not just across the province, but further afield, even, who recognize how challenging it is to really shift systems in terms of special education and specialized services.

Usha James 06:58

And so I wanted to ask you a question. I asked it in a recent PLC group that I'd like to invite you to share, what is, from your perspective, a really impactful leadership move that you've made recently, like, let's say, in the last 12 months or so? Maybe this year, maybe last year, that you really think moved the needle. Do you have something that you're thinking about, that you might share, and what do you think made it impactful?

Usha James 07:33

Sure. Ken, I can go unless you'd like to go.

Ken Dostaler 07:36

No, that's great. Then I'll follow up.

Nandy Palmer 07:39

Okay, great. So Usha, in our time together, in our groups, you know, we talk a lot about the ecosystem of the district, and we talk a lot about the culture, and we know that systems and structures drive practice. So if we're looking at changing practice to better serve students, we need to look at what systems and structures and supports are in place.

Nandy Palmer 08:00

So one of the more impactful leadership moves that I can think of, that I've been able to be a part of and to lead is really shifting our focus from just compliance when it comes to special education to capacity, really investing in the staff so that they have the knowledge, the competence, the confidence and the tools to meet the needs of our diverse students in TDSB. So I truly believe that most educators, as well as support staff, are so committed to students with disabilities and special education needs, but they might sometimes feel under-prepared or don't have enough knowledge to address the complexities that come with special education. So we have intentionally looked at building our internal professional learning model, identifying strong educators within our own district and, for example, going into creating demonstration classrooms that teachers can visit to see what a program looks like. That's a self-contained program as an example. In TDSB, we call them intensive support programs.

Nandy Palmer 09:16

So our focus has really been on building what Hargreaves and Fullan call the professional capital of our staff through building human, social, and decisional capital at every school so that we can have this shared responsibility and shared accountability when it comes to students with disabilities and special education needs. So we've also created our own special education additional qualification courses that are geared towards teachers specifically in the TDSB, but they're offered to anybody who would like to take them. Those are special education parts one and two, and also an autism-specific course as well.

Nandy Palmer 09:53

In addition to that, we've been able to have again around the theme or focus of building capacity, for the first time, this past August, we had every single principal, vice principal and superintendent, attend two half day mandatory training on special education, again, to build that competence and confidence, and the result has just been, you know, great. Of course, you're still going to have those that require more support and more learning, but it's resulted in stronger instructional practices, building a sense of collective efficacy, like I said, shared accountability and responsibility and really reminding us that we're a learning organization and what we do is going to contribute to improved outcomes for students with special education needs.

Usha James 10:55

I think that what you're really talking about is such a compassionate approach, because you talked about moving from compliance to capacity and competence. And I think that really recognizes that educators want to support every student. We all want to, and everybody's running as fast as they can. And so if we're not seeing that support for our students, it's not because we don't want to do it, but that there's some capacity that needs to be built. And so when you talk about those impactful leadership moves are not just about an accountability that points to compliance, but rather really building people's confidence, you said, and competence and I think what's wonderful is that not just of educators, but of administrators, and that's such a powerful leadership move.

Nandy Palmer 12:00

Thank you. Thank you for that.

Usha James 12:03

Ken, how about you? What do you think is an impactful leadership move that you might have taken recently?

Ken Dostaler 12:09

So many themes jumping out during, Nandy's conversation about where they're heading, and certainly I have to point out, we work so well when we come together as special education advocates like in our role, and we remind people quite often that what we do is advocate for their students and bring it to the large boards as well, because their teams are, you know, incredibly strong. And Nandy with 66,000 IEPs, as opposed to our 3400 or a little under 3400 but the themes are very similar.

Ken Dostaler 12:43

And so when I hear you talking about the competency of staff, that has been a real driver for us, and we asked ourselves some questions. It comes back to the professional learning committees or communities that we had formed, those PLCs where we asked the question about, what are we trying to achieve? You know, what's the data? You know, what data do we need to know whether we're successful or who's struggling? And so when we looked at that as a critical thinking question for our board, we knew that we had students that fall under the umbrella of learning disabilities that were achieving under where we know they're capable of achieving. So being that they have a higher than average intelligence, but they have some form of learning difference, we wanted to make sure we were putting in front of our educators appropriate training, capacity building, as you were talking about so one of our big rocks, we'll call it - so we each department in our board in Hastings Prince Edward has what we call a SASP. So these are the student Achievement Service Plans that we fill in every year to keep our director aware of where we're going, what the big the big goals are, and one of them will be building capacity for our students with learning disabilities.

Ken Dostaler 13:59

So we're really excited to have just found out that we've received some funding for removing barriers grant from the ministry. It's such a boost to the program. We had, you know, Plan A, Plan B. Plan A was always, if we could get the funding, we're going to be able to release our educators and certainly our administrators, and build the knowledge and confidence in those learning support teachers, which are in every school.

Ken Dostaler 14:30

And then the learning support coordinators are going to be a big part of that. We have coordinators for each school, group, learning support teachers in each school. The metrics have been defined. We know we're going to use EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) data. We've got some Power BI report card data and some credit accumulation that we're going to be asking schools to monitor. So we know we want to move, you know, 10% this year, but we're going to build on that capacity of our educators to provide - to put those students with learning differences and learning disabilities at the forefront when they're thinking of delivering their pedagogy. Then what you have is everybody benefiting from a universally designed classroom or approach program, and you are not looking at lagging data that shows you, oh, we've got students with LDs who are performing under where they should be. They're sitting at a level two and not able to move to that level three and four. So that's a big goal for us as a board in our multi-year strategic plan, but also for us as a department of special education.

Usha James 15:35

The data that you're both talking about, and we're all getting better at looking at and disaggregating and understanding better - I feel like that clear sense of examining the data - I mean, I don't think it's new, but we're definitely improving our ability to do it. And I'm interested in what your data is saying, and in particular, when we look at disaggregated data, what you're seeing around intersectionality.

Usha James 16:08

Nandy, you started to talk about this. I was just working with a district this week, and they said that when we were looking at the data together, and they said, you know, one in six of our students has IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), but when we drill down deeper, when one in four of our Indigenous students has IEPs, and that is a learning that just changes the game a little bit in thinking about, you know, how are we not perpetuating inequitable outcomes across a variety of different groups. I'm interested in hearing, what are you seeing in your data, and you know, are you able to disaggregate it further? What are you noticing about different populations of students?

Usha James 17:00

Yeah, thanks, Usha. So absolutely, you know, when we talk about looking at data and using data, it's about doing that critically. So I'll give you an example, not just for example, about tracking identification and placement, or how many students have had an IPRC (Identification, Placement, and Review Committee), or how many students are on an IEP, but also measuring student belonging, achievement, post-secondary transitions as an example, where do they go when they leave us? But a big part of that is about also when we're looking at data critically, is about engaging in, I guess, equity-focused reflection, so examining how race, language, socioeconomic status all intersect with disability in the identification and support processes. So what we see is that we do see an over-representation of boys, number one, in our special education programs, and particularly Black and Indigenous boys and racialized students. So the board that you're referencing, I would say, we see a similar trend or pattern.

Usha James 18:13

And how does that make you think about the work that has to happen at the district level in terms of, you know, not siloing maybe special education from other goals and strategies?

Usha James 18:32

Yeah, so I think this relates back to my first comment around our focus on building capacity of staff. And I would call it building system capacity, so that the entire district is rowing together, if you will, in the same swing, and so ensuring that professional learning equips all the educators, not just special education teachers, as Ken mentioned, use Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, differentiated instruction, CRRP (Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy). So we have as part of our referral process, and this is just an example - if a teacher or parent flags a student as having some challenges we create first before just jumping to an IEP - of course, if a student needs an IEP for specific reasons right away, they would get one. But we create what we call an Individual Learning Plan, and some boards may call it a Growth Plan. And so as part of our ILP, or Individual Learning Plan we've actually put in that the teacher needs to identify, not just strategies or principles of universal design for learning and differentiated instruction, but our third category on that is culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy. So how are you emotionally building into your processes, your structures, your practices, going beyond what people have historically viewed as the Spec. Ed. pieces like UDL and DI we've added in intentionally CRRP as part of that.

Usha James 20:16

You know, it makes me think, Ken, of the structures that you're playing with as well at the school level, when we think about processes. How do processes actually support our aims of building that capacity and competency? It's one thing to just say the commitment or the expectation that we all need to be paying greater attention to and better serving students with special education needs. But how do the processes and the structures support that, and some things that are happening in your board or that you've overseen that do that?

Ken Dostaler 20:59

Yeah, that's a great lead-in. We have for the past two years, and it's not done yet, we have done what we're calling a reculturing of IEPs. So the whole piece around strengthening accountability and consistency for those individualized education plans was really important. We needed to make sure that our documents were, you know, closing gaps, not just identifying what the students' learning differences were, but actually closing the gaps, right? We don't want to modify when we know a student just needs accommodations.

Ken Dostaler 21:31

So we realized, in doing a full review of the students having a special education plan, we realized we had so many that were called non-identified or an NX IEP. We had many, many, many of these. So we had to decommission what didn't need to be in existence anymore, because good teaching from our teachers, with, as you mentioned a little earlier, about, teachers want to do their best. They come to work every day wanting to make a difference. When you talk about, I use the Robin Sharma "purpose to your paycheck". We use that one quite often. You know, from his one of his wonderful books on how to motivate and how to keep connected to the work that we do, and our educators know what they want to do. They want to close those gaps and give those kids a chance.

Ken Dostaler 22:16

We're not done yet. It's funny, Nandy and I have talked many times about the work is never done, and we don't want to be reactive to what we're seeing. And that is, you know, students that are not succeeding at the level they can, and we're not opening enough doors, so we have to get upstream. And we felt that a proper process and reviewing those documents and having solid documents in front of teachers that parents understand, was a great move, but there's still so much work to be done. But we're proud that we're on the journey and we're moving the needle, and we're starting to see the shift. And yeah, it's been positive, very positive so far.

Ken Dostaler 22:16

So we felt it was incumbent - you just mentioned processes - we put a process in place to do a full review of all IEPs and all buildings and get at them to make sure that they were really tight. And, you know, it required heightened monitoring from us, from our learning support coordinators and from our system principal, and we ended up bringing down the total number of documents that were no longer needed because the students were doing great, and we were conferencing with families regularly. So we're big on the service model. We're big on relationship building. We've surveyed our families. Our SIAC (Special Education Advisory Committee) drove an important survey last year to ask, "What can we do? How can we better serve you as parents?" And we heard loud and clear from them the things they wanted to see around tightening communications and helping understand documents and

processes. So we did our work at the Education Center to help proliferate the strong work of our front lines and make the changes. We saw the changes.

Nandy Palmer 22:53

I was just going to add that that part of it is so important about student and family voice, because we heard as well, consistently through our SEAC, our Special Education Advisory Committee, and from parents directly, that IEPs was an area that they would like to see us focus on so we have also implemented an IEP audit system, where superintendents work with their principals to look at IEPs to ensure that to your point, Ken, are they really needed? If a student requires accommodations only do they need an IEP for that? Because we know that any student can get or receive accommodations. So that accountability piece, but also that intentionality around them truly being an individual education plan, I think, is so important. So I really love when we have these conversations, because you really get to hear and share promising practices across our districts.

Usha James 23:36

I think that you're sharing amazing successes, and as you said, promising practices that are showing that they are making a difference already. So if you're amenable, I would like to ask you the opposite side of the question, which is, you've shared some really impactful leadership moves. But in each of your experiences, whether they're individual or from a district level, what are some moves that you've tried to make that have had little impact or maybe even negative impact, they backfired on you? I think our listeners all recognize the challenges of the work that you're trying to do, and it's not easy, and you never come out of the gate perfect. And so what are some lessons learned along the way, where you ran into a bump, or you tried something and you know, nothing happened or, as I said, it backfired on you.

Ken Dostaler 26:10

I don't mind leading here, maybe. It's funny because we're working through the PPM (Policy and Program Memoranda) that came out a few years ago around student mental health. It's the whole cross-sectoral service coordination PPM. Where we found difficulty where - students had designations and we had complex needs in a community - and I'll just speak to our area where we have really, really eager partnerships, but they weren't always sure what the dance should look like. And I feel like we didn't have that fully figured out until we came to the table over the past few years, and we are proud of the work we're doing, but we realize that there's so much left to do. You know, the Planning Tables, the Child and Youth Planning Tables that are meeting regularly and hashing out the details. And of course, we being the hubs where the kids come to school, we want to be part of those discussions, because I think that's where we were coming up short. We were hearing from parents they were frustrated with - maybe it was funding through the OAP, because they have a student with autism at home.

Ken Dostaler 27:11

Our numbers for autism have really, really gone up. We've just presented a report to our Administration Council today, our admin council that meets, you know, throughout the month, and we brought the numbers so that they could see as we're as we're moving into revised estimates for budgets. And you know, our numbers are really, really mounting, and so we have to look at that as well. So LD is our focus right now, but I know that autism and the support for those kids in school, but for the families, it's

not just the school. The families need support as well. It's really a wraparound. And so that's where we know we were not - we needed to be better and learn more from what the other organizations can bring to the table. So when we meet with them in schools, we have a better understanding of what their lived experience is at home. And we have to come with an open mind, that they're not all in the same place. Some are really well versed at navigating. Others need lots of help, and we knew that we all had to come together in a concentrated effort to better improve that, that wraparound service model. So that's what we've been working on.

Usha James 28:23

I guess I can go next. But instead of looking at something distinct, I'll just continue with the two pieces that I spoke to earlier. So, the intent, for example, around the capacity building, is right. It's the right thing to do for students to strengthen our assessment and instruction practices and ensure that every student has access to high quality learning. However, what we found is that, you know, depending on how quickly you go and if you're making things mandatory, as opposed to self-directed, you need to have a balance and you also need to be fully engaging staff as well as our leaders, our principals and superintendents, in understanding the why behind the work. And so we had a lot of good content. We partnered with our legal team as well to present with us at these mandatory sessions. But I think if I had to, in hindsight, do it again, I would probably connect with some teacher leaders, perhaps through the union or our Administrator Association, to see you know, what is the shaping of the professional learning to get some input from them, so that the buy-in could be a little more powerful, and that they would feel that perhaps this was something that's being done in partnership with them, rather than, you know, we're making them attend these mandatory sessions.

Nandy Palmer 29:57

So I think it's more for me, Usha, you know, a lesson learned, or what I might do differently next time around. Because ultimately, what we want to see is everyone not just engaging and participating because we've made it mandatory, but rather seeing the learning that they take from this transferred back to the classroom, and so I know it's happening, but is there a way that we can do the work ahead so that that can happen more universally and uniformly, if you will? So to me, it's about learning that capacity building isn't just about giving them the knowledge and the skills that they need, but really also about how do we foster and cultivate ownership and trust back in terms of transferring the learning. And so when do I need to slow down, listen more deeply, and maybe co-design or co-plan the learning with staff leaders outside of my department, so that they can feel that the learning is not just collaborative, but relevant and so, yeah, that would be my, my lesson learned with regards to that.

Usha James 31:14

I think that the two things you brought together there about how do we make it more likely that learning, professional learning, is going to transfer into classroom practice? That's a question I hope we're always asking ourselves, is, how likely is it that however we're framing the professional learning, whether it's centrally provided professional learning, or whether it's job embedded? How likely is it that this professional learning is going to transfer into classroom practice and what you centered there in your response was, does everybody have a shared understanding of the why?

Usha James 31:55

And that takes me right back to your original comment about compliance. If people don't really, you know, internalize the why - why are we doing this? Why are we taking on this work? Then we are going to get compliance or not, rather than really deep transformation of experiences in classrooms as a result of shifting classroom practice. And something that strikes me, and I would love to get your take on it, both of you, is that, when we look at the data and we disaggregate it, we see patterns, and those patterns show us who our current practices are not working for. And it doesn't just give us a list of kids, it gives us populations of students. And when we really drill down, as you've been talking about, there's no question that we see over-representation of students with special education needs in the data of achievement, that's not where we hope it would be.

Usha James 32:59

And then we further see that intersectionality. We see students with special education needs who are also who also self-identify as Indigenous, who are also Black, or, you know, have a variety of identities and characteristics. Now, when you put that in front of me as a teacher and show me that, it's a mirror, and it's a really hard mirror to look at. I look in the mirror and I say, "Oh my goodness, I, as an educator, or we as a system, are consistently not serving certain populations, certain groups of students, and that goes right to the heart of you know why became an educator was to support all students." It's really challenging. And so, you know, I'm interested in how you're navigating the emotions that might arise, or if you think we need to spend more time with the emotions that must arise when people are faced with that reality.

Usha James 34:04

I think it goes back to what I said earlier about staff want to be there to support students so always presuming positive intentions and understanding that we all got into education, or most of us got into education because we wanted to serve students and families. But I think it's also looking honestly at our data, right? And so when we're looking at the data, yes, it can be overwhelming, but is there also discomfort or defensiveness, or another emotion that is linked to also feeling overwhelmed as an educator and if the data is showing us that some of our practices aren't working for all students, that's a hard pill for us to swallow as a district sometimes, and we need to really closely examine that and say, "Okay, we've identified this now. How, what are we going to do about it?" And we talk a lot about creating spaces, right? Brave spaces, safe spaces, whatever people might choose to call them, but to create those spaces where I think we can allow staff to process those emotions without judgment.

Nandy Palmer 35:17

So how are you creating norms at the beginning of your learning sessions as an example so that everyone feels that they can share openly. But I think we need to stay focused and anchored that our responsibility is to change those outcomes. So while we're creating space for those emotions to be shared, we can't get bogged down entirely in that. We need to always, you know, keep our eye on what our goal is, which is to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and special education work.

Nandy Palmer 35:50

I also think, in the TDSB specifically, for a very, very long time, we've been engaging in equity work. So a lot of staff are at a point where they know that this work is not about blame. It's about awareness, about reflection, and again, our collective and shared responsibility and accountability. I think one of the

reasons, or one of the other pieces too, is, as educators, we always want to fix, right, so if a teacher comes to us as a leader and shares something you know, really affirming what they're feeling and listening with empathy and not rushing to give a response, and so really listening to understand, rather than listening to respond. And again, identifying the that inequities are sometimes systemic and not individual failures. So it's not to be looking at a teacher individually to blame and shame, but how do we shift from any of those emotions to real purpose and to curiosity and this need to change to better serve students.

Ken Dostaler 37:01

So many great sound bites, so many great sound bites, I want to jump off. Oh Nandy, those are great. Yeah, you've got me thinking about, you know that whole trauma informed practice around, you know, seeking first to understand before trying to be understood. Huge shift in my own approach to all things behavior, all things, you know, just peeling layers away so we can get at the crux of the issue. And you know, nine times out of 10, it's not the behavior you're seeing. It's something else going on. You know, not so much, what's wrong with you, but what happened to you.

Ken Dostaler 37:33

And when we looked at our data years ago in safe schools, and we were asked by the ministry to no longer support the suspension of students, K-3, we saw data that was alarmingly leaning towards students with special education needs. They were over 50% of the suspensions. So it tells you that students that aren't succeeding start to act out and become behavioral, and then you can put a whole bunch of layers in there around you know, what potentially might be driving other factors in their life, whether it's social-economic, whether it's cultural issues within assimilating to an area that is more rural than urban. So we had all kinds of things that we wanted to unpack.

Ken Dostaler 38:20

I'm just going to put my Usha hat on and channel my inner Usha. When you came to us in 2024 around thinking critically about our leadership, and you said, you know, let's articulate which learners are currently - our practices are not working for - I love that. It's not a negative or a deficit approach. It's really just, let's be factual about the data. Why is it that these students are not performing well? And when you look at the data that we were putting in front of our leaders and certainly our educators, we were needing to use those four A's that you taught us around the you know, affirm, adjust, adopt, abandon, and once we started practicing that, we modeled it as a senior team, and we were asking our school leaders to do the same. And so we were seeing a lot of really, really important pauses in their thinking and in their approach, and then maybe recalibrating their approach to how they were dealing with young people that were struggling for a variety of reasons.

Ken Dostaler 39:23

And if it was the learning because no one wants to stand out, and it was something I heard from a student with special education needs many years ago, and even actually, my best friend, who has developmental disabilities, who teaches me a lot about acceptance and fitting in, he just doesn't want to stand out. He wants to feel like he fits in, which is why the whole inclusion piece is so important in special education. So the more we can help them to feel like their strengths are good enough, and there's lots we can build on, that's where we as school teams started to make a big difference and a

shift. And we're hoping to keep perpetuating that momentum and keep moving things, because we know that that work is never going anywhere. And as I said, our data is showing that we have an increased amount of needs landing in our schools. So we have to better the competency and better the outcomes for those kids as we build, you know, more understanding of what it is that you know, the hardwired that's why our whole training around the LD is going to be really important. Let's get to the assessment data. Let's, let's get our psycho-educational consultants doing some training for our teachers, because just hearing about one piece of an assessment is not enough. They've got so much to offer. We have an in-house psychologist who can also help build capacity. So we're using our internal staff to help drive a better understanding on the front lines of classrooms.

Nandy Palmer 40:49

I wanted to add...

Usha James 40:51

Oh yeah, please go ahead and add, yeah.

Nandy Palmer 40:53

Anytime you bring Ken and I together, you're going to have - we're going to talk a lot, because we just, we are so passionate about this. But Ken, thank you so much for bringing up trauma-informed practices. And my whole department of 600 plus staff members are actually engaging in trauma-informed form training this year, as well as focusing on cultural safety, because I go back to, you know what Usha asked us in the beginning. And so we know that through trauma-informed practices, we're looking at the student and the family and all of that, but with cultural safety, we're really pushing deeper and looking at just not responding to trauma, but also recognizing the power dynamics and systemic inequities that can create harm in the first place. And I think that's where we need to be looking as district leaders, you know, whose culture is centered, whose are marginalized, and what are we going to do to address those systemic inequities?

Nandy Palmer 42:03

We're also really fortunate in the TDSB that we have an urban Indigenous center that we - education center - that we collaborate with very closely, as well as our equity department to do this work. So it's when I talk about professional learning and that thread again, and capacity building, it's also about us as a department building our own capacity so that we can go out and support the system. So we've been really focusing this year on trauma-informed training for our entire department, and how do we promote cultural safety in all of the work we do. So we really want to build that empathy and connection, but also realize that we need to actively dismantle any conditions or systems or structures that we have in place that lead to trauma in the first place.

Usha James 42:56

You know what it's making me think about as both of you talk is you're really - the words that are coming to mind for me are holistic approach to thinking about supporting students. I'm thinking you're both talking about an integrated approach. You know, in our last podcast we talked to Wes Hahn, the director of the Trillium Lakelands District School Board about cohesion and alignment. These are all the words that I feel like the strategies that you're talking about are bringing up for me. That you're talking

about a thinking system and a system looks at all of the various influencers, facilitators, and barriers to students' achievement and well-being and what, you know, the equitable outcomes that we're seeking and integrating our approach to them, rather than separately thinking about, how are we going to support special education versus equity versus trauma-informed practice versus math versus literacy? And I don't know if that resonates with you, but those are the words that come to mind when I hear you talk,

Usha James 44:18

yeah, absolutely. When I think of my own role, you know, as a district leader, as a superintendent, what is it that I'm trying to have impact on, and not just on my own, but as part of that bigger system? And so I think it's about ensuring that every decision that we make is moving us closer to an inclusive system where we're all moving together and where we will get ultimately alignment and coherence. Because we can't expect a student or a family to be in one neighborhood or one area and experience something or process in one way, and then they move, you know, to another area within the same district, and they're experiencing something completely different.

Nandy Palmer 45:12

So I think it's a continuous process, system-wide of reflection, of dialogue and of improvement, so that we can ensure that there's a commitment to inclusion and equity and excellence and high expectations for all students, regardless of where in the district or which school in the district they go to. So I think Usha your point around, you know, doing all of this in order to get alignment and coherence across any district, but also sustained practices, right? So it doesn't, again, just like the parent and the student shouldn't be experiencing something different, a good teacher is a good teacher anywhere. So I don't ever want to hear that a family is saying, you know, that school had a great teacher, or this school doesn't. How do we ensure that all our schools are great schools with great teachers across the district.

Ken Dostaler 46:07

That is where we as a senior team, made sure to break down the silos and work cohesively, so that even if I'm talking about screeners and we're trying to figure out where students are at, we really want to have that consistency, so that the experience would be no different whether you're in the north, south, east, west of our county. It's a large area, of course, much larger in northern Ontario. So you have to bring an approach that is that coherence in our own narrative as a district, is about having things that are measurable, that are similar, so that when school leaders are having discussion, they're having discussion about similar, you know, tools that we're employing, and we're doing that as well as a system.

Ken Dostaler 46:51

For example, in bringing in a new special education platform. So it's called The Rise platform. I know many districts have jumped on this earlier. We want something that communicates better with homes. We know that'll create better outcomes for kids if we're having good continual back-and-forth with homes, so we're implementing that over the next calendar year. We've had it accepted, and we know that everything from IEPs to emergency plans of care, need to be - we have to have a mechanism that can bring things back and forth between the school and homes. And so we're, we're working on that as well, and it's been a cross-pollination of departments. To get that type of project underway, everyone

had to support at budget time last year, and we're excited to be moving that forward for families so they'll see better communications, and the back-and-forth won't be as tedious and, you know, an antiquated approach where we're doing everything paper-based.

Ken Dostaler 47:49

People are moving more and more online. We're using AI more and more as well to enhance our capability and, you know, look at things in different - we're using it quite regularly as a, you know, as leaders in the board, and we're seeing really, really nice outcomes for kids with special education needs. We see it as being - we want to be at the table, we said, you know, social media got away from us, and we were reacting to what it was doing in the lives of young people. And we want to be at the table with AI so that we're able to utilize it for students with learning differences, because it'll be another great tool and a great agent to get their work leveled, you know, so that they're we're leveling that playing field. The more we get our head around - because even the concept of using it in an inappropriate fashion, that's a human concept, not a technology concept. So a little bit of a tangent, but it all leads back, if you know what I mean, Usha, right? It does connect us back to coherence in the narrative.

Usha James 48:47

Well, that's what I think. We're exactly that is, no matter what we're looking at. It's not a separate initiative. How can we think collaboratively across all of these challenges and opportunities and really take a more integrated approach. And I just love the way both of you are really elevating and centering the voices of families and students and listening carefully to what they are asking for and what their experiences are and using that as a key driver in your decision making. And so I think I'm going to invite you as a bit of a wrap-up to - you're both thinking critically about your own practices, and you're prompting systems to think critically about their practices. And I wonder, if you consider the questions. You've both talked about the questions that you've learned to ask yourself, and that you hope districts are asking. Is there a question that rises to the surface for you that you're always asking yourself and it helps you? It's your compass. It's your North Star. And is there a question that you hope the district, or others, I think, in your role, are always asking themselves and how that might help us to really critically examine our practices? Is there? Is there a question that rises for you?

Nandy Palmer 50:17

I think for me, I really in every aspect of the work, it's about not just looking at what I do, as I mentioned earlier, the compliance piece of it, but why do I do it, and with what impact, or what's the impact of each move, of each leadership move? And so I think districts, we need to be asking about, what is that impact of every decision that we make, or the intended impact, and how are we going to monitor and measure that?

Nandy Palmer 50:53

I started off talking about intersectionality and, you know, from a personal and professional lens, but are the decisions that I'm making, or individually or as part of a team or as the district as a whole - are those decisions grounded in evidence and informed by all the diverse voices, especially students and families - students with disabilities and special education needs and their families. And if we want to get to a certain place again, what is my role in building capacity of our leaders, our superintendents and

principals, so that they can build the capacity with educators to lead learning in inclusive and welcoming environments? And then, you know, I wouldn't be an educator without saying, Usha, do our actions actually align with our strategic commitments to equity and student achievement and well-being?

Nandy Palmer 51:52

So I think those are some of the questions. I know you asked for one, but those are some of the questions that I try to reflect on so that we can make, you know, data informed decisions that are grounded in evidence, but also informed by voices.

Usha James 52:12

I mean, I asked for one question from the two of you because I know I'm going to get three. If I asked for three questions I'm going to get 17. So I'm quite cognizant, but I appreciate that.

Ken Dostaler 52:23

I'm just wondering if Nandy and I will end up with a morning show. I feel like the two of us are going to be on a morning show with coffee and Breakfast with Nandy and Ken.

Ken Dostaler 52:35

I'm going to bring it back for a second. Something Nandy just kind of wrapped up with is around that, you know, there is that overarching multi-year strategic plan that we asked all of our community members to pitch into. Those that work for us, those are outside the families - everyone. I reviewed that with our SEAC. We have a very active SEAC body. They challenge our thinking all of the time. So we did ask them, you know, why am I here, and what do I hope SEAC can achieve this year to make a tangible difference for students with special education needs and their families? And it was, you know, really interesting to hear from all the different members. We use that as a driver for ourselves as a department. We asked, "How can we better serve and build better relationships?" We did that several years ago. We're meeting more with families. We're doing more case conferences, where we're sitting down with them to say, "What's your reality? What's happening? What can we do to help?" And that's made a huge difference. People don't feel like it's us versus them. We're in it, on the journey with you. It made a big difference with the relationship that we have with families.

Ken Dostaler 53:44

But what SEAC told us very clearly was they wanted to see an enhanced parent engagement and empowerment. They wanted to see some improvement in communication. So we're working on that through subcommittee work, and there's obviously the advocating for better resources and training, and that's what we started our whole podcast with around you know, what are we doing to build the competency and the capacity of our educators? Because they really want to do a good job when they're not sure of something, I think that's where they feel like they're on, not on solid ground, and they may go down areas or maybe avoid areas that they could be just having a much greater impact if they just knew a little bit more about what it is that brain needs. What does that kid need to feel like they can be their best in front of their peers? When they don't, that's when we see behaviors. That's why I talked about the safe school component, and what our data was telling us. So yeah, lots, of work to do in those areas, but that big overarching question for SEAC is a driver for our department as well, and for our board as a whole.

Usha James 54:49

It's so amazing to be here with both of you and I hear three things in what you wrapped up there just now is really asking questions about intent. Why are we here? What is the data telling us about where we need to change our practices? What is the difference, as you were saying, Ken, what is the difference in the outcome we want to see as a result? What do families want to see? What do students want to see as a result? So intent - a whole bunch of critical questions around our intent that we need to be asking ourselves on an individual level and on a system level.

Usha James 55:27

And then there are questions around what informs us. You talked about that Nandy. What informs our thinking? Who informs our thinking? Whose voices are we hearing? And not just at the beginning, when we're setting our goals, but all along the way, who's helping us think about how our practices are rolling out, and you know, are they rolling out the way we intended?

Usha James 55:53

And then the third thing I'm hearing you both talk about is impact. We need to be asking questions about - what is the breadth of our impact? Who are we reaching? Who are we not reaching? What is the depth of our impact? Is this superficial, and is it compliance, or is it something deeper and transformative? And what is the duration of our impact? Is this something that you know we're going to see a change this year and then it'll be like starting in scratch in September, or are we seeing that this is going to have long-term, sustained impact?

Usha James 56:26

And so the questions you're raising are really, I think, core to a critical inquiry approach that we take as leaders and also that whole districts can take together. It's just such a pleasure to chat with you and to hear your perspectives. And I think this could go on for hours more, which it has on other occasions, but I think we should probably give our listeners a break, and you've given them lot to think about and lot to process.

Usha James 56:57

Thank you so much, Usha. Ken, always a pleasure.

Ken Dostaler 57:03

Sure, is partner. It's been great sharing time with everyone, and we're always open to suggestions. And if, you know, people do have good practices, we love the sharing. It makes a big difference. Sometimes you're imitating and not innovating, because something's working really well somewhere else, and we've benefited from the sharing across our different communities of special education. So thanks, Usha,

Usha James 57:28

Oh, thank you. Thank you Nandy. Thank you Ken. And thank you for all of the work that you're doing in your districts and for sharing those experiences. I know people are going to find them valuable. Thank you.

Usha James 57:44

One of the things that I've noticed when I'm working with district is over and over again, I'm hearing people talk about how unhelpful it is when the district is working in silos. And we talked about that on the last podcast with Wes around alignment and cohesion, is that, when special education is operating in a silo from the program department or the curriculum department, then people are not seeing how Math goals or literacy goals have to be supported by a deep understanding of special education and the needs of students within special education. And everything that Nandy and Ken were describing was about an integrated, holistic, coherent approach. And I think that really making a difference to inequitable outcomes is going to require that. We are not going to be able to do this work and make a difference for kids if we're operating in silos.

Usha James 58:56

And that integrated approach operated on so many different levels that I heard them talk about. They were talking about at the system senior leader level, that the departments were working together. We were talking about how, when you look across different subject areas or areas of responsibility, that it was important to integrate those pieces. And also, even at the school level, how are administrators making sense of impact on students with special education needs and other initiatives? Culturally relevant pedagogy, for example. How we bring these things together in a really practical process driven way that takes it out of the jargony space and into something that's actionable.

Usha James 59:52

I think when people talk about equity, it can feel very abstract, especially as an educator in a classroom. It can feel like, you know, oh, you want me to use this book, or I'm supposed to use this particular strategy, or I need to bring in more examples from diverse cultures and identities into my curriculum. So either equity can feel very abstract - what are we talking about - or it can feel in the minutia like in the weeds of it. But I think what Ken and Nandy really pointed us towards is that when we talk about equity, we're talking about equitable outcomes and experiences. And if we look carefully at the data in any district and across Canada, we will see disproportionate outcomes. We will see over-representation, or under-representation of certain groups in the achievement data, for example, or the well-being data, etc.

Usha James 1:01:00

So when we see that disproportionality that compels us to really take a hard look at our practices, our systems, right from the individual classroom teacher - what am I doing in my classroom - to what are our school wide practices to what are our system wide practices that perpetuate inequitable outcomes? And as long as we see inequitable outcomes across groups of students, there's space to work. We have to do some work there. And so that's what I think, brings equity into sharper focus for us. It's not a strategy, it's not a resource. It's an orientation to the way we work, to leadership, to teaching, to learning. So that's one thing that really struck me and stood out to me.

Usha James 1:01:52

Another thing that really struck me was they're both so passionate about their work and also compassionate, I would say. And so they really centered that compassionate approach that helps us

think that if this is not happening, it's because we don't know how to yet, not because we don't want to. And so how do we build the learning that's required and the understanding that's required to really move the work forward? So compassion, I think, is so central.

Usha James 1:02:31

I also think humility - they talked about the humility of being able to listen carefully to voices who have experienced school systems that have not served them or have even harmed them. How can you put yourself in a position to actually listen carefully and seek out those voices and then use them to make decisions?

Usha James 1:02:55

And then the last thing that I heard them talk about was vulnerability. And vulnerability that allows us to look in that mirror, that bitter pill to swallow, that Nandy was talking about, that difficult mirror that we look in and say it's okay for me to see that some of my practices, individual or systemic, have not been working for certain groups of students. And that now I know better, and now I can do better, and we can do better. But when we see it, we can't unsee it. And so giving yourself the grace and having the vulnerability to look in that mirror is what I think will help us move forward in a good way.

Usha James 1:03:46

Thanks so much for joining us today. The reason that we're here is because you are committed to thinking critically about your practice. And as a leader who's listening to these ideas and thinking about the moves that you are making and what's specific and contextual in your district, there's no doubt you'll have questions and you might want to follow up, and you want to learn more, and you want to connect with people. And I really think that, as Nandy and Ken both said, that when we can operate as a community of thinkers, when we can come together and learn from each other and push each other's thinking, that is really such a valuable space to be in.

Usha James 1:03:46

So we really encourage you to find those spaces, and I know that, especially in terms of leaders who have responsibility for special education, there are, you know, various places that you might come together and work with each other, but are these the questions you're asking of yourself and asking of each other and really getting at the heart of what's going to make a significant difference to those equitable outcomes?

Usha James 1:03:46

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