



## **Transcript**

### **Creating Thinking Systems Part 6-1:**

**A conversation with senior leaders from Trillium Lakelands DSB,  
Waterloo Region DSB, and Hastings Prince Edward DSB**



## Creating Thinking Systems Part 6-1: A conversation with senior leaders from TLDSB, WRDSB, and HPEDSB

**Usha James** 00:01

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

**Usha James** 00:19

You're listening to the sixth podcast in our series, Creating Thinking Systems, a joint endeavor between The Critical Thinking Consortium, or TC<sup>2</sup>, and OPSOA, the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers Association. If you're joining us for the first time, welcome. We're so glad to have you, and if you've been on this journey with us, thanks for coming back. I'm really glad you're finding these conversations insightful and helpful in supporting your thinking about your leadership.

**Usha James** 00:53

Today, my conversation is with three superintendents who are at different points in their careers, and with three guests on this episode, all of whom have rich experiences and wonderful insights, we decided to split this episode into two parts. In this first part, you'll hear Jay and Vida and Tina introduce themselves and share some of their experiences as superintendents engaging in school visits. What has made them effective, and when have they been not so effective? And it's occurred to me that I really, in these episodes, have been asking my guests to be quite vulnerable. I'm asking them to share with all of you things that didn't go well for them, or where they haven't had an impact, and that's asking them to take a risk, and so I thought it might be only fair if I tell you a story about something that didn't go so well for me.

**Usha James** 01:57

Now, I haven't been a superintendent, but I have certainly been on the other side - a teacher in a classroom when superintendents and administrators come to visit. And so I thought I'd just tell you a story about how that went once. I'd been teaching for maybe five or seven years and had been really involved in many things in the school district where I was. I was teaching in York Region. I was a secondary school teacher, and we were working with Barrie Bennett around instructional intelligence. Many of you may have had the same experience. It was close to the end of the time that the district was working with him. As one of the culminating activities, they had decided that they were going to bring all the administrators from across the district together and watch a few teachers in their classrooms playing with these ideas, with these ideas, with these instructional intelligence strategies, and Barrie was going to have a commentary. It was sort of a way of bringing the whole project together as they watched.

**Usha James** 03:13

Well, there were many administrators, I'm not sure how many, but 100, 200 gathered together in the drama room of the school where I was teaching. We'd agreed ahead of time, three of us teachers had agreed ahead of time that they could live stream into our classrooms as we were teaching and watch

and Barrie would do a commentary, and then we would debrief afterwards. So being sort of the people pleaser that I might have been, I let the other two teachers choose the classrooms that they wanted to have live streamed, which left me with my fourth period grade 11, Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology class. It was a challenging class, and here I was agreeing to allow all these people to watch me.

**Usha James 04:08**

So I had created this great lesson, things that I had been doing with the students on other occasions. It wasn't new for them. I thought they would go along with me, but I knew that I had some characters in that class. Well, when a TV camera showed up in that classroom, I had a mic on, all of those students decided they thought they were in a movie. They became stars, and it was a disaster. It was a disaster. They decided that they were going to act up for the camera. There was all sorts of things happening in the back of the classroom. They were leaving the classroom and peeking through the window. It was a disaster, and here I am, mid-career teacher, knowing that every administrator in the district was watching me live, trying to grapple with this.

**Usha James 05:10**

The class finished, and now I had to go downstairs, do the walk of shame, into that drama room where I was going to be greeted by all of those administrators and Barrie Bennett to talk about what they had just witnessed. I thought I would never work a day again. My administrator, my principal, met me out in the hallway and she saw the look on my face, and she said, it's going to be okay, Usha. I walked into that drama room, and I think there must have been a standing ovation out of pity and empathy, and Barrie said to me, we are not going to talk about instructional intelligence today. We are going to talk about classroom management, because that is what we saw. And he was very gracious.

**Usha James 06:03**

It made me think about, how do teachers feel? How do administrators feel when their supervisors, their superintendents, are in classrooms and in schools with them? Sometimes it feels like it's a dog and pony show and you have to show off. Sometimes it can be quite nerve wracking. Sometimes afterwards, you're thinking to yourself, oh my gosh, what did they see? And how is that going to impact me? So having been there and having been with administrators as we've walked through classrooms, for me, it's really important to think about what makes this an opportunity where we are thinking together, where we come out feeling like we are in it together, that it doesn't feel like somebody is judging me. And a superintendent never wants that to be the feeling for an administrator or as an educator as they walk out of the building, and that's what I really want to talk about.

**Usha James 07:10**

So that's my story, but I'm really excited to hear our guests' stories and their experiences. So I'm so thrilled today to welcome three superintendents to our podcast, we have Jay MacJanet, Tina Jones and Vida Collis all joining us. So let's get started with some introductions. Tina, why don't we start with you? Tina Jones is a superintendent with the Hastings and Prince Edward County District School Board. Maybe you can tell us a little bit about where you are now and a little bit about your journey to this moment in your career. So tell our listeners a little bit about yourself.

**Tina Jones 07:50**

Thanks so much for having me. Usha. I'm Tina Jones and I'm with Hastings Prince Edward District School Board. I am very new in my career. I am two years and a little bit in as a superintendent, and I hold the portfolio of Innovation and Inclusion Services, along with overseeing two families of schools, which includes 13 schools, K to 12. And in terms of my journey to this moment, I've always been passionate about student achievement and had great opportunities over my career to really connect and be in different system roles. But I think what really led me here in this journey was the opportunity to have been an administrator in both elementary and secondary schools, and to be able to have lived that continuum, K to 12, and really see that whole trajectory of student growth, from our littlest, youngest learners to those as they cross the stage to graduation, really has been what has inspired me to move into a role like this and be able to be alongside and collaborate with schools across our district.

**Usha James 09:12**

Thanks. Tina. Jay MacJanet is a superintendent with the Trillium Lakelands District School Board. Jay, tell us where you're at right now and what brought you here.

**Jay MacJanet 09:25**

Thanks, Usha. It's a pleasure to be here right now. I'm sitting in my office in Bracebridge, Ontario, looking at three feet of snow and contemplating what will happen at our break in a few days. So my name is Jay, like Usha said, and I'm currently a superintendent with Trillium. I've been serving in the role for about five years now. I think five years at the end of this month. My main portfolio focus has always been curriculum, and I have Indigenous and outdoor education as well as 13 schools, much like Tina. I think what drives me - I love working closely with schools and system leaders to strengthen that instructional practice, build capacity, and hopefully impact that student achievement. I think a significant focus of my work has been supporting effective school visits. And I think we're going to talk about that, and building those strong trust based relationships with admin. But we always ground that in intentional use of data and evidence based practices. So the past five years, Trillium has seen some consistent improvement in results, and I think that reflects a collective commitment to using evidence to inform decision making and continuous improvement. And I'm looking forward to contributing to today's conversation and learning alongside these great colleagues as we explore the challenges and successes of this important work.

**Usha James 10:59**

Thanks so much, Jay. And Vida. Vida Collis is a superintendent with the Waterloo District School Board. Tell us where you're at and where you've come and where you are going.

**Vida Collis 11:13**

Well, this is my third year in the role, and I've been with the Waterloo Region District School Board for the past about 25 years. Right now I work with five secondary sites and 15 elementary sites, and my portfolio is primarily supporting school sites. I am attached to PIC (Parent Involvement Committees) right now and have led our boards work or supported the work in terms of positions, about a responsibility, in terms of placement into our various pools for hiring. And you know, I never set out to be a superintendent. It was not part of the game plan. I loved being a classroom teacher. Was not intending to become a vice principal. Loved the role of secondary VP. Was there for about nine years,

no intention on being a principal. Loved the role as principal for about seven years, and decided to enter into this role with a career of thinking I have, I think, a knowledge and an understanding and an opportunity to support principals in the incredible work that they do in the schools, right? You know, leading the schools, leading sometimes a small town or community. And the work to advance student achievement and well-being is complex, and as I look in the rear view mirror of my career that in education ends in about six weeks it has been an absolute, I believe, an incredible opportunity to be able to work with colleagues in supporting their schools and supporting kids and moving the work forward. So I might go off into a lot of retirement kind of spiel and but you know, that's what happens with age and when you're around for a while.

**Usha James** 12:53

Well, first of all, congratulations, Vita. And we're really excited for you, and maybe after this podcast is over, we're all going to get together and find out what exactly you have planned. But it's really lovely to have each of you at the various points that you are at in your career, and to share a little bit about what you've learned along the way and what you're thinking now, particularly around school visits.

**Usha James** 13:22

Jay mentioned just now that we are actually recording this just a couple of days before the winter holidays, and so I know that it's a time when schools are high in emotions. Kids have got a lot of emotions, families, educators, superintendents, lots of stuff going on, and so I will understand if you're all a little punchy right now.

**Usha James** 13:50

So when we were all in the OPSOA PLC (Professional Learning Communities) inquiry group together, it was a topic that came up for each of you, but also in many of the other groups as well. I think school visits, superintendents being in schools, it's something everybody's grappling with and trying to figure out how to do well, how to do better. But let's set the stage for all of our listeners first and why we're talking about this today, why it keeps coming up for people. And I thought I might ask you for a story. Do you have a story of a school visit that you've done that maybe it didn't go well, or maybe you thought it went well in the moment, and then you walked away, and sometime later, thought, "Gosh, that didn't really have any impact." Something that sort of helps situate people. Why is this even a topic that we're discussing? Tina, you're nodding. Do you want to start?

**Tina Jones** 14:56

Sure, thanks for that. Usha. I remember, like in my early days you land this job and you're all excited, and you have these 13 schools, and I'm really fortunate that I've been in this district for a long time. So I know lots of people. I have colleagues administrator roles. So I think, okay, I have relationships with people, and now I'm going out to do school visits. And you know, there's no training manual. So what does that mean? What was that going to entail for me? And you know, the initial ones were all those initial check-ins and connections, but there was one that really stood out for me in my second round a couple of visits, where I'm having conversations with the administrators, and they're they're going through all of these amazing things that are happening in the school, and I'm frantically writing these notes, and we're feeling good about all the things that are happening in the school, around instruction,

learning and culture, right? So, you know that sense of belonging and what they're doing to create that positive school climate.

**Tina Jones 16:13**

And I remember leaving the connection and leaving the school visit, and thinking, wow, like, really amazing, super excited to hear all those things. And then it reminds me when you say, like, did you walk away and you thought it went really well, and then you're like, hmm, I started to think to myself. I'm like, I wonder how they know any of this is having an impact. And that's what got me thinking about what was the impact of them sharing these things with me as the superintendent? Like, why was it important to them to share that? What was I giving back to them in terms of that feedback? Other than this sounds amazing, and it made me pause and realize that I hadn't set purpose and intention right, and really, but been thinking about why I was going. And, what was I really hoping to accomplish, right? And what were we going to accomplish together? And as Jay indicated earlier, those trust based relationships are really key. And I, again, I have the privilege that I know so many folks that are in in the admin role. So I have that good foundation. And then I thought, okay, what's next? And that's what made me really stop and pause and like, how do I know that we're collectively having an impact in changing student achievement and helping all of our learners continue to grow?

**Tina Jones 17:51**

So it was my moment of pause where I was like, are they just telling me all these amazing things, because you know, that's what I'm supposed to do. You know you're the superintendent? I'm supposed to tell you all these good things, but I'm like, where's our real dialogue around like I know that not everything is sunshine and roses. So where's our discourse and dialogue around student achievement and where we might be stuck and looking to continue to grow? And how do we know that we're having an impact as leaders? For me as the superintendent, how do I know I'm having an impact? But then for school leaders and principals and vice principals, how do they know that they're having an impact? Because ultimately, we know principals can change instruction and influence instruction and student achievement. So it made me really start to think about, what is my purpose here, and how do we move past the this - here's the list of amazing things we're doing - to really reflecting on what's the impact of our visits together and connections together around student achievement?

**Usha James 19:06**

Because those stories are wonderful, and it's important to share wonderful stories, absolutely, but then what? So yeah, thank you for that. I don't know. Vida, do you have a story? What comes to mind?

**Vida Collis 19:22**

And I think part it's less of a specific story and more of a reflection, right? So I think of the different types of school visits that we have. Sometimes we're present and it's very focused on an operational issue, sometimes it has to do in terms of the follow up of a critical event. And I think the one that we're really focusing on is when we're speaking about the instructional program and moving practice forward to impact student achievement. And when they don't go well, it's, I truly believe, it's what Tina was saying in terms of intentionality, but also distraction, right? So we're both entering this space where we're both able to focus on the work of school learning and improvement planning, and I'm not distracted. So I've walked into that space. Again we have foundational relationships, but I know what's

going on with the work, the demographic, the data. I've got three years of work with that individual, and I'm bringing each conversation forward, but I think most significantly, also for the principal and the team that I'm meeting with there, are they distracted, right, and being mindful that, if I'm entering their space, and we may have intended to speak of their SLIP (School Learning and Improvement Planning) work, depending on what's going on in the building, are they in the space for that, and how do we create that opportunity where we're both engaged in the work and on that same wavelength?

**Vida Collis** 20:44

So the ones that don't go well is when someone's head is not in the game, right, and focused on something else. So how do we arrange that time where it is not distracted by the other components of the role, which are very real and filled with stress and are very in the moment for the person that I'm with. And I recall after leaving, the administrator had a lot on their plate. And in that moment, school learning and improvement, planning could not be the focus. And I think it's upon us to make that call of when we discuss what. Right? And in that moment, we needed to focus on what was front and center for them and continue the conversation of SLIP when they're able to do so. And I think it requires the superintendent to be very present and very attuned and that's where building a rapport and a relationship and a constant back and forth is key. We might have scheduled SLIP visits four or six per year, but that's certainly only a fraction of the time that we spend together or in contact with each other.

**Usha James** 21:58

You're saying SLIP, the...

**Vida Collis** 22:01

School Learning and Improvement Planning.

**Usha James** 22:03

Thank you. Thank you.

**Vida Collis** 22:06

But you know, I think it's the intentionality of the visit is key. And when we try to put everything into a school visit, operations, SLIP work and addressing HR scenarios, that never works.

**Usha James** 22:21

I think that this is sort of the question is, how does it feel for you when you know it's working? And what are some of the situations where you really feel like, what's necessary to make it work better? It's not really resonating. It's not catching. I'm not feeling like I'm having the impact. So, Jay.

**Jay MacJanet** 22:43

I think this is a great question. You know, it's something that I think I've learned a lot over time. I know it's been five years. When I came from Niagara I think my mistake in starting to do school visits was coming forward with too much of a principal lens instead of a superintendent lens. So I can remember a time when I had a school visit, and just much like Tina in the moment, it felt great that I came with an agenda that was clear. We had a walk-through in classrooms. The data was reviewed, the conversation was professional. I left thinking that's a pretty productive visit. But when I reflected afterwards, and you

know, getting questioned from my director, I began to look at the lack of movement in the school over time, and I realized it hadn't actually had much impact at all, because he was critical with me in a good way. So what I think I eventually came to understand was that the visit wasn't effective, because there wasn't trust much like Vida said. I came in from a different board. I was brand new into the board. I think the admin were looking to support what they thought I wanted instead of what was in front of us, if that makes sense.

**Jay MacJanet 24:08**

And this particular administrator had experienced years after unpacking this, of system level interactions, I think that they felt were evaluative rather than supportive. So as a result, the data that was shared was very surface level, enough to get me to move on to my next school, but really having no impact with them. So the challenges were framed cautiously with me, because they didn't know me, and there was very little vulnerability. And I think that's the key, when you have your admin vulnerable and able to tell you truthfully what the challenges are. I think that's where real learning starts. So without that transparency, the school just wasn't moving forward in a meaningful way, and I couldn't provide that right support in my role, because I didn't truly understand the root issues.

**Jay MacJanet 25:00**

So I it took multiple visits, and actually way more than I expected, to break down that mistrust. And those visits weren't about fixing anything right away. They were about listening. And anyone that knows me knows that I like to talk, too, and sometimes listening, I really have to make a cognizant effort. I needed to be consistent in how I reacted and then demonstrate that my role was to support, not to judge. And that happens over time. And as that trust developed, the tone of our conversation shifted and the administrator became more open about what wasn't working. This administrator was more willing to share both challenges and successes, and definitely more comfortable engaging deeply with real data. And I think that's when the visits for me became truly effective, as they were grounded in school improvement planning, just like Vida said, it was rooted in evidence and driven by honest dialogue. Our talks were honest and sometimes too honest, but I appreciated it, because this particular administrator felt safe being transparent and vulnerable, and I was finally able to help, right, whether that meant putting targeted supports in place, connecting with some of the system resources that we had, or sometimes co-problem solving around instructional leadership.

**Jay MacJanet 26:19**

I don't have all the answers, but I'm a good sound partner to use some of the experiences I've had in the past and maybe formulate an action. And I think, for me, the that experience really underscored that effective school visits aren't just about being in the building or looking at data. That's part of it, but they're about vulnerability and relationships. And when trust is present, that data becomes a tool for improvement, rather than compliance. And I think that's truly important. And then that's where the real progress becomes possible. And now I have a really good relationship with this administrator, and when we come in, it's very succinct, it follows an agenda, but it's genuine.

**Usha James 26:59**

What I heard you say - there's four words that really jumped out to me that came out of what you said. You talked about purpose and you talked about intention. All of you, what is the purpose? What is the

intention, for a superintendent, to be in a school. You also talked about being present. How do we make sure that you know, whether as a superintendent or as the administrator, that we're really present in the moment, that we're not distracted, that we protect that time and then, the third thing I heard you talk about was vulnerability and trust, and are people willing to really be honest and frank about where they're stuck and so that you can co-problem solve or think collaboratively.

**Usha James** 27:58

So I thought we might start with that first group of words, purpose and intention. You know, here in Ontario, there's this growing expectation that superintendents are spending time in schools. And I know those expectations can differ significantly across districts. And before we talk about what it looks like in your district, in particular, if you have to frame for somebody who didn't realize this was part of the superintendent position, somebody outside of education, or maybe in a different jurisdiction where it's not such a growing expectation - why should superintendents be in schools? What is that purpose, that intention? From your perspective? Yeah, Vida.

**Vida Collis** 28:54

I would flip it to say, why wouldn't you? I mean, first of all, it's the bucket filler. You know, being in a school with kids and teachers that hum and flow is the energy that I sorely miss being in this role. So even though it is vignettes of that when I'm at different school sites, you always leave - this is on the selfish level - I always feel better having been in a school than not, or being at the mothership here is what I like to call it, and also having the opportunity to be in the school and talk to kids about their learning and as they're doing their thing in the classroom, asking, what's this about? Tell me more. Why are you doing this? When a student is able to articulate the rationale, the reason for whatever the thing they're doing is, to me, that is so informative as part of the learning walkthrough, right? Or the formative learning walk. And I tell you, and kids are great I mean, out of their mouths, speak truth and, sometimes, like, I don't know what we're doing, fair enough, right? But it's always a great exchange. And, and I think you know, and I'm really thinking of Jay, what you're saying in terms of trust, and building that trust, the trust that we build is over the course of all of our conversations and operations, and if they trust me on those situational things like operations, like the scenarios that they're dealing with, which are heavy often, they will trust me in the conversation about, what are their problems of practice in terms of moving the learning forward in their school sites, right? So I think with familiarity and with visibility and with proximity, that's another way of gaining, establishing that relationship and that trust. So there's my spiel on that.

**Usha James** 30:54

Why wouldn't you? I Well, first of all, why wouldn't you? I think that's a great answer. And also I absolutely feel what you're feeling about the energy of being in schools. I remember being in schools and walking with administrators into classrooms and being in kindergarten classrooms, and everything just falls away. So I know how rejuvenating that is for sure.

**Vida Collis** 31:18

And I want to be mindful. I'm very fortunate here in Waterloo region, I am sitting in the middle of the region, and I can be - it takes me about 20 minutes to get to my furthest site. I'm not in a region where it is hours, right? So I see Jay's face right now exploding with this, right? So it's very easy for me to be at

a school at nine o'clock in the morning, be there for a couple of hours, come back to the Board Office, have a snack and go out somewhere else, right? So that's unique, and that does not exist in many parts of our province.

**Jay MacJanet 31:49**

I can tell you, it's not in mine. I spend a lot of time traveling. I think my furthest school is an hour and 45 minutes. So you have to become efficient in other ways. So I'm on the phone when I have service, speaking with principals and others. So I like this framing issue, because I think we ask our teachers to know their learners, and then we ask our principals to know their teachers. It just makes sense that a functioning system, the SOs know their admin, right? And the only way you're going to know your admin is by being in the school. So to me, a visit on its own doesn't improve outcomes. Its value comes from how intentionally it connects to the system priorities, our use of data and the relationships that we build with them. They have to see alignment for them to trust you.

**Jay MacJanet 32:39**

So to me, the purpose of a school visit is to make the administrator stronger in the role. And I think that the administrator wants to make the teacher stronger. A teacher wants to make the students stronger. It's not about monitoring or checking boxes. That's at the beginning. That's the surface level stuff. It's about capacity building. So to me, when a visit's effective, it creates the conditions for that. We talked about trust and vulnerability, where administrators feel safe to be honest about what's working and what isn't, and then asking where they need support, and then having a conversation about it. But without that trust, the visit stays at the surface level - doesn't lead to meaningful change.

**Jay MacJanet 33:17**

So classroom walkthroughs, I think are a good example of this. I've been through a plethora of different classroom walkthroughs. When they're done with a clear shared purpose, and you talked about purpose, and they can see alignment to the school improvement plan and their own annual learning plan. And again, it has to be informed by data. They become a powerful learning tool. They really do, I think they help us focus on specific instructional practices. Help us look for patterns rather than the actual individuals. You can get engaged in that professional dialogue that strengthens that leadership. And the goal isn't to evaluate teachers, but to help administrators sharpen their ability, I guess, to see instruction clearly, ask better questions and then feel confident in leading that improvement more effectively in their buildings. Because sometimes we assume that they can just do that, but it takes teaching to do that.

**Jay MacJanet 34:17**

So that's why you need to have that research-based strategy and evidence, because that gives the visit its direction and credibility and sort of keeps it out here, instead of directly at the administrator. So the data helps us move beyond the anecdote and intuition, which we sometimes talk about, especially in those first visits, and the research helps us identify which practices are most likely to have an impact on that student learning. So I feel when those elements are combined with strong relationships that we talked about, the visit becomes a space for collaboration, problem solving rather than compliance. And we don't want compliance. We don't want boxes checked.

**Jay MacJanet 34:56**

So I think school visits when they're done properly, can achieve alignment, clarity and build momentum, because they become more confident, but only when it's grounded in that trust and guided by evidence. And I'm always going to go back to that, because that's the qualifiers for me. When we're focused on developing the people who lead the learning every day, good things happen. So that's when those visits truly contribute to sustained improvement.

**Vida Collis 35:25**

I think, just to build on that, Jay, I love that, in terms of our purpose is really to know our learners and to help leaders grow. And I think that being part of the PLC last year and our collaborative dialogue, it made me really think about the purpose is also to be curious, for all of us to really be curious and to grow a community of critical thinkers. So together, how are we thinking critically, together, and being curious about what we're seeing, hearing in schools around instructional leadership, and then able to engage in that dialogue together. Both myself, with the leadership, but also I see it just - this might be a bit outside of just the school visit, but I'm also thinking across my 13 schools and across our system, hmm, I wonder if I connect this leader with another one, because I'm seeing some similarities, or some of the dialogue that we're having and some of the questions they're asking, I think they could really connect with one another.

**Vida Collis 36:39**

So I see my role in that school visit is to also be thinking about who are they as learners and leaders, and who else might they benefit from connecting with and to continue to grow so it ties in really nicely with what you said, Jay, in terms of growing our leaders. But when I'm going, I'm also thinking about who else do they need to be connected with, outside of just me, right? Leaders across the system, who may have taken a different course or asked some other questions and looked at their data differently. And I think being in schools helps me see that and know those leaders more fulsomely and to really foster that sense of curiosity and critical thinkers.

**Usha James 37:30**

Well, of course, I love that. From the perspective of The Critical Thinking Consortium. You've talked about so many different purposes, right from absolutely knowing administrators, understanding what their needs are, being in those schools, to develop the trust that then allows you to push their thinking, to grow their capacity to really be able to, frankly point out what you're seeing to grow that community of thinkers.

**Usha James 38:07**

And you've also talked about how being in schools helps you understand your impact, from what the kids say to what the educators say to what the administrators say, understanding how that is a reflection. It's a mirror of the impact that that you've been able to have or have not yet had, as a district leader, and what your next steps might be in those situations. And so I think getting really clear on what is the purpose? What is the intention? Because it does make a difference if you pick the purpose as primarily as, of course, it's many things, but if we pick the purpose primarily as coaching, we will go in with a particular lens and a stance. If we pick a purpose primarily as learning and curiosity, like you're saying, Tina, then we'll go in with a different stance. And if we pick a purpose that's trust building,

because this is a new relationship, or there's a legacy of lack of trust or judgment, we will go in with a different stance.

**Usha James 39:21**

And so having the time, I think, as leaders, to really reflect on what is the purpose, broadly, of school visits, and then of this particular visit that I'm doing, of this particular school, of this particular connection with an administrator. Carving out some of that time, I think is so important. I would love to ask you all about this idea of trust and vulnerability. And obviously this is more than just within a school visit, but when you're in a school, and it's that administrator's it's their house, it's their home, and you're walking into their home. And what have you found are some ways that either open up that trust, that vulnerability, or really shut it down in your experience. What are some of the ways that you've been able to connect with administrators, and they've able to, been able to say to you, this is something I'm stuck on. I'd love to hear some of your thinking. Yeah, Vida.

**Vida Collis 40:40**

You know, and I think this is where an empathy lens always has to be part of our work, and the appreciation that the role of principal and school leader is so incredibly complex, and it's a job you can't describe to your friends outside of education. The scope is so vast. And leading with an appreciation of the challenges and the rewards at the same time of that work, and positioning myself as an empathetic listener and elbow partner and coming to be able to convey that I'm not coming from any type of place of judgment because, but of support.

**Vida Collis 41:24**

And again, how that happens during the school visit - I think that happens during every single conversation and every single interaction, and building that credibility and trust over time. And without that - the vulnerability, I think can't emerge, or it won't be, it won't be genuine. I always note when I'm having a conversation with an administrator and they come into their I would say their school learning and improvement planning process, but then there are their secret problems of practice that they finally start sharing. When they start to take a note. You know, when they reach for a pen and paper as part of our conversation, I always feel something has shifted, and the hope is that they're taking from that. And then I think it's imperative upon me, even though the visits are - they have a structure to them, and an ebb and flow. And you know, pre-communication, post-communication, and a flow of documentation that way, that it's part of my role to check in on them personally, right? Text, phone, call, reach out afterwards, and as I see them as a human being in a complex role, because being mindful of their personal leadership resources, I think is imperative, right?

**Vida Collis 42:42**

And I think sometimes people don't want to show us more than their game face, but when they do, we have a duty and obligation to be there and to follow up and so I would say I'm very fortunate that there's continuity year over a year with the people that I work with, because it is a very different conversation, year three with them, versus the first time meeting or getting to know and that's why stability in terms of who we work with, I think, is just a stability as an administrator at their place of where they are in their school, is so key and critical. It extends to us as well.

**Usha James** 43:22

You know if I can reflect back to you, but I think that in addition to coming to it with a stance that I'm here to support you in a very complex role, and when people feel that from you, there's sort of no formula that you can make that happen. It's not a set of it's not a script. But when people feel, when you feel that way, in the way that you interact with them. And then you just talked about that moment, that shift, when you suddenly see somebody lean in, yes, and say, oh, this is something that's important to me, how important it is to reflect that back to them, and to say, I hear you really opening up here, and you're sharing something with me, and I know that takes a level of trust and bravery or vulnerability, or whatever it might be, and I really appreciate that. And I want to hold it really carefully, and so, to be able to, in that moment, recognize that, I think, can also be so important.

**Vida Collis** 44:32

And I think that speaks to the emotional intelligence of the superintendent and their interaction with the people that they're working with, right? And they need to be able to see myself as a genuine leader. So I know that I need to carry myself in a way that's authentic as well, right, and also to deliver on what I say I'm going to deliver, right? I think that's also another mechanism in which we build trust.

**Tina Jones** 44:59

I would build on that Vida for sure. I think knowing that I'm going to follow through, if I've said I'm going to do something, that I will actually do it, I think is really important in building that trust and I've learned over time, that you can't underestimate even if it's the smallest thing that you've said, like, I'll get that email to HR, so we can, get that answer. And when you get back to people, or they're like, oh, thank you. That's super helpful. I think is really key, because, that's them opening that door to saying, I'm not sure how to navigate next. And so that commitment, I think, is really important.

**Tina Jones** 45:46

I also think when you - the texts, the phone calls - I think those check-ins between visits are really important. So I've also sort of self-instituted, like a beginning of the year. I'm doing them right now, and I'll do them again in January. I'm calling them for myself. You know, my just personal check ins. So in the very start of the year, I went to all my schools, but it wasn't a scheduled school visit, per se. It was hello, welcome. This is exciting. Brand new year. Great to see you. Right now I'm just doing thank you for everything from the fall. Have a restful holiday as it arrives. And I found that that is really important to people, and in the sense that I'm just connecting on that personal level with them, right? So they know, like when our scheduled visits are, but it's what you do in between the times of scheduled visits. I think that really helps build that trust with them.

**Tina Jones** 46:52

And I think you mentioned authenticity, right? So keeping it real. I'm not an expert in any stretch of the imagination, but I have some years of experience, and different experiences. Let's connect and have those conversations. And for me, the shift has been - admin don't always announce my or advertise my school visits anymore, right. Before it used to be like this big thing, oh the superintendent's coming. They want me to see their school in real time. And so I have several schools now that - oh well, we didn't tell people you're coming today. We just want you just to see math in action as it is. And that really speaks to me that they trust, right? That I'm coming in from that place of curiosity and connection

with them to really, truly understand and see the learning in action. So that for me, is a point where I notice some change and shift.

**Jay MacJanet** 47:59

So many great points. So many great points. I think just to add to this conversation, you have to model your expectations. And I think that's what Vida and Tina are saying. You got to be present. You need to show vulnerability, to expect vulnerability, and again, you need to listen and then affirm. I think one of the other things that I would like to add to that, perhaps, is when you're going for a specific purpose and there's a problem that arises, I always make sure that before I leave there's a specific action that the principal feels comfortable going forward with, and if not, I don't leave until that action is a solution for them that they can try and then report back on, and then we can talk about that. But that comes from the trust piece.

**Jay MacJanet** 48:50

Just a quick, funny note. Tina, I think it's funny that you said that you know they're authentic when you want to see a school in real time. My wife was supplying - she's a secretary, and she's supplying at a school, and part of my portfolio is math priority classrooms. So I was in the area, I decided to come and visit, and she said, you should have seen the office scramble, because it wasn't one of my schools, and they had a code word to say that a superintendent was in the building. And she thought it was hilarious, and I was devastated. I don't want them to feel that way about me coming into the school. So it was funny at home, but it made me think just when you think that you have that comfortable relationship with people, you don't. So don't assume that. It takes work and consistent work and being consistent.

**Usha James** 49:46

So I feel like I want to know what the code word is, but I don't want to rat out the school.

**Jay MacJanet** 49:52

It wasn't flattering. No, just joking. It was fine. Was fine. There was nothing. It was just funny that the head secretary was scrambling. Did you let the teacher know that the superintendent's coming? And she said, no. Oh my goodness. Anyway, it was funny.

**Tina Jones** 50:12

That's hilarious.

**Usha James** 50:15

Well, it might feel difficult to stop right now, just as we are getting into the meat of it. But we are going to take a break, and we will return to this conversation in part two, where we will get into some of the district-wide practices and routines that my guests are using in their school visits to really live up to those intentions that they've set for themselves, and where have they seen their own growth? So please join us again.

**Usha James** 50:48

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