



Transcript

Creating Thinking Systems Part 3:

A conversation with senior leaders from Greater Essex County DSB



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Usha James 00:00

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Rethinking Education*, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium. I'm Usha James, Executive Director.

Usha James 00:20

I'm imagining you might be walking after a long day at school, reconnecting to your surroundings, to the earth, getting some fresh air in your lungs. Or maybe you're in your car commuting to or from work. Or maybe you're a senior leader on your way to spend some time with administrators and teachers and students in schools. Perhaps you're a family member or a community member who's curious about how school districts are thinking about their work. Whatever has brought you to us today, I'm so glad you decided to join us.

Usha James 00:52

Well, I'm so excited to be having this third conversation in our series about senior teams, senior leaders, and how they're navigating system-wide change, particularly with a focus on trying to integrate this critical inquiry approach, trying to focus on developing their own data literacy and that of their administrators, and trying to support school improvement planning in new ways.

Usha James 01:26

So I'm so excited today to have as my guests, Vicki Houston, the Director of the Greater Essex County District School Board, and Kari Bryant, Superintendent, also at Greater Essex. Thank you so much for coming today.

Vicki Houston 01:44

Thanks for having us, Usha.

Kari Bryant 01:46

Yes, thank you.

Usha James 01:47

So we've been on this journey together a little bit for the last, I don't know, year, year and a half, couple of years, I'm sure, you will correct me, but I thought before we describe for all the listeners what that journey has been that I would ask you to begin with the end in mind. What are some of the biggest impacts or outcomes that you've seen, I guess, most recently or along the way, of the journey that you've been on, of the work that you've been doing around supporting school improvement and board improvement planning?

Vicki Houston 02:25

I'll start. So I would think that our system principal meetings are very intentional and the focus is always on student achievement, even just the setup of the agenda. Previously, we would just put items on the agenda, we would flow through the day from 8:30 to 3:30 with a break for lunch.

Vicki Houston 02:50

Now, we're very purposeful in terms of the timing of what we do and when we do it throughout the day, and admin are for a majority of the day engaged about examining the data around students. It's no longer looking at satellite data, which we tended to do in the past, but specifically around individual students, and then layering that data to create lists of students that they're monitoring, if you want to call them marker students, for those students where currently our practices are not working for them. During the system principal meeting, we're also giving them time on the agenda to actually do planning.

Vicki Houston 03:34

We know when administrators leave the meetings, they leave with a whole bunch of things to do for homework. So we're purposeful about giving them time during that meeting to actually do some planning time with their colleagues, to bring back to their own schools, to lead the same work with their staff, and not go away having so much to do. But they're ready when they get back to the school. And I know Kerry's going to speak a little bit about there's almost zero operational items on our system, principal, and vice principal meeting agendas. And I'll let Kari speak to that.

Usha James 04:10

That's a huge shift. I think people would agree, at this time of year, especially so you know, interested in hearing your perspective on that Kari, because I think at this time of year especially, when people are trying to get out their PD calendars for the next year, and there's just this mad sort of lobbying - I want this many days for my initiative, and this much time at the principal's meeting, and, that sort of competitive approach to having a whole bunch of different items on the time that you have principals together, and that seems to have really shifted.

Kari Bryant 04:49

Yeah, absolutely. I think just our awareness of what we were modeling, our system administrator meetings, used to be very operational in focus, and if we wanted to shift our administrators into more into more instructional leadership, we had to take a hard look at what we were modeling and really make that shift ourselves. And I think that's really been powerful. And as Vicki said, just the level of data literacy and the level of understanding of teacher practice, which in turn enhances student instruction and student achievement, really has been a huge, huge shift.

Usha James 05:27

Exciting, so exciting. Tell me why you started. Why did you decide to go down a different road? What were you seeing that made you think that you need a new or a modified approach?

Vicki Houston 05:43

So again, I'll start that one, because it started with me. So I started in the role as director two years ago. So Usha, we've been on the journey for two years now, and I had been a part of the senior team for,

you know, 10, 11 years prior to that, in a variety of different portfolios. I had several new superintendents join our team, almost half. Some were promoted from within the board. Some were external to the board, and coming in, and saw a definite need in terms of focusing on school improvement planning and student achievement, and really looking at data.

Vicki Houston 06:27

And so I intentionally did some changes in some portfolios, and put school improvement planning within my own portfolio. So not a disrespect to the work from, you know, everybody previous who were in a variety of different roles as SOs or as the director, but we needed to put a focus back on student achievement was one of the things that I was seeing. Previous to becoming the director, I was in HR so lived through all of the labor disruptions and lived through Covid and know that that became the focus of what we were doing. We were very directive with our administrators because of the climate of what was happening. There wasn't a lot of opportunity and room for them to be independent or time for school improvement planning. So all the stars aligned when I moved into the role, to be able to go back and put the focus on what our actual purpose is.

Vicki Houston 07:26

And then also saw a need, which I know Kari can speak to, around a number of new administrators. Many left during labor disruption, many left during Covid. There was that, you know, huge time in terms of retirement for us from a board amalgamation time, right? We're starting to see those retirements now from 1998 and so just you know, took that as an opportunity as well to differentiate the learning that we were doing with our administrators.

Usha James 07:58

I mean, oh, sorry, you go ahead.

Vicki Houston 08:00

That's okay. I was just going to say, so really, in our first year, the journey started with working with you, just with the senior team, because of you know, the makeup of the team was so different. And now this year, in our second year, that we've actually started to be more intentional and focused with our work on principals and vice principals. Yep.

Usha James 08:19

I mean, I know you're putting a positive spin on it and saying that it's an opportunity, which it absolutely is an opportunity, but that's a lot of newness. Like you're new, the superintendents are new, the administrators are new. It's a huge amount of turnover, and that, of course, presented that opportunity, as you're saying, but it had to be unsettling as well.

Vicki Houston 08:44

Yeah. But with new opportunities, you take advantage of those when you can, in addition to learning the new role,

Usha James 08:53

What a trooper is, what I'm going to say, Vicki. Kari, what are your thoughts, like, from your perspective as a superintendent, what was sort of, what were you seeing that required something to be different?

Kari Bryant 09:07

Well, I'm also one of the new superintendents. I'm a third year, so I had the benefit, obviously, of being a principal before Covid, and before the time of, of all the work action and the shift to more operational. So I saw it from that side of things.

Kari Bryant 09:25

And so to move into the role of superintendent, my first year, we weren't we weren't as aligned, and this wasn't the focus. We were still, you know, coming out of Covid. And so for me, it's been so exciting to be part of this, just because the alignment within the senior team and the focus of instructional leadership, putting that as the main thing has just really opened up a lot of opportunities and a lot of learning for me. And it's been amazing to see the growth in administrators and just amazing to have that in terms of really having a solid understanding of what I am looking at, going out in school visits and what we are focused on in terms of admin conversations.

Usha James 10:12

Thanks for that, Kari. I think it's interesting, because we've definitely heard that in the other two conversations that we've had with Limestone and with Bluewater that I'm not going to say it's an unexpected outcome. I actually think it was a big reason that all three boards that we've talked to have gone down this sort of path, is looking for a sense of alignment and cohesion.

Usha James 10:39

And I wonder if that's just a way to, I mean, of course, you want alignment and cohesion in order to move student achievement forward, but also sort of a sense of steadiness in the face of all sorts of chaos that can happen in a school board is that at least you know that your senior team colleagues, you're all on the same page. You're all looking for the same thing. You're all moving in the similar direction. It must provide a little bit of steadiness as well.

Vicki Houston 11:10

Absolutely. And again, it keeps the focus on student instruction and student achievement. And I think that's the most important thing, and we can't lose sight of that. And it is easy to when it isn't front and center, as we've made it this year.

Usha James 11:27

So you've both started to talk a little bit about the journey, how we started together, working with the senior team and data literacy of the senior team last year, and then the changes you made to assistant principals' meetings this year. Were there some other moments in the journey that you noticed some significant shifts in the way you did business, the way you practiced your leadership? And I'm sure there were bumps along the way. So what were some of those bumps that you encountered, and how did you move through them?

Vicki Houston 12:07

I'd love for Kari to share the bumps first that she saw.

Kari Bryant 12:15

Okay, you know, one of the pieces was just around data literacy and getting administrators comfortable with having data all at their fingertips and how to use it and to ensure they were using it and they really were focusing on the right things for students. We really saw a growth in preparedness of administrators coming to meetings. At the beginning, people came without computers, and they weren't totally ready to go all the time. And just to see that in terms of growth has been exciting.

Kari Bryant 12:50

But the bumpiness there was just adding expectations and adding some deadlines into the practice, and then continuing to keep that focus. So knowing that it wasn't going away, and we were going to continue to ask the same questions, and we would continue to focus on the same things, so I think that was how we got through some of those pieces.

Usha James 13:14

I think that what you're saying is that it took some of - I think an anticipated bump along the way is, whenever you change anything. You change routines. People are not going to know definitely whether this is here to stay. Well, this too shall pass. Should we just wait it out? But I think you're talking about that consistent focus that sent the message that this is how we're going to do things now, and this is what's expected of administrators, and we're here to support you all the way through it. It's not just an expectation, it's the support that goes with it.

Usha James 13:56

Other bumps, what happened that you didn't anticipate, or things that you had to navigate along the way through this journey, or continue to have to navigate through this journey?

Vicki Houston 14:07

So I'll add in a few things to what Kari also spoke about, I think what was a challenge initially for the senior team, was just the focus of every single meeting at the assistant principal meeting, because it was such a substantial change to what we were doing before. Continued to want to try to put those operational things in there. Continued to wanted to try to, you know, change timing on the agenda. So that was probably a first one.

Vicki Houston 14:35

A second one I would see was in terms of Superintendent school visits, and I've shared plenty times before, I don't like the word visits, but I haven't come up with a new word yet, because it's not just a visit. They're intentional and they're purposeful. So previously, and I said, you know, I was an SO before becoming the director, and prior to human resources, I did have areas of schools, and I would go do my school visits, and they just happened. The team never discussed those. The team never was purposeful about, you know, what questions were we asking? What were we doing? How long were the visits, and all those types of things.

Vicki Houston 15:16

So there was some learning and some pressure amongst the senior team to really align those - needed to bring everybody together to be intentional about the visits. Right to you know, with Usha, with your support around when should those visits occur, and what should they look like, and common questions being asked at those visits. So that could come back to the whole team, to be able to share, which then enabled us to be able to create our next steps as a leadership team, to be able to support the administrators in the school.

Vicki Houston 15:53

I think another bump maybe would be, I thought that we'd be further along, maybe. Kari was saying that some didn't even bring, you know, computers in the first meetings, those types of things. But, you know, step back and reflect and say, we really need to meet everybody where they are, and then just provide that structure and support. So no rush. We've told them we're going to be messy for a little while, and then we're going to continue to move along on the continuum where we're actually, you know, implementing, and then we're monitoring results and those types of things. So a few bumps, but nothing that we couldn't overcome.

Usha James 16:35

I have such admiration for you to have carved out the time at those senior team meetings. Because I think what we're noticing is there certainly is that interest in, as I was saying, alignment in various different districts, where people are thinking about, what do the school visits look like, and how do we ensure we're asking similar questions?

Usha James 17:00

But I think the second part of that which you devoted time to in this last year is aggregating up your data. What are we noticing across the system? What are some of the answers that we're getting to these questions that we're asking at school visits, and what does that make us think about administrators' strengths and what their next learning needs are, and how does that shape our senior leadership actions? I think that time carving out, that time to aggregate up the data at District Council has really been a significant, a pivotal leadership move.

Vicki Houston 17:41

I would agree. I just want to add, I think, in the past, we ourselves were very operational and didn't always, you know, have the focus on student achievement and our strategic priorities. So that time, like you said, has really been intentional and really been helpful with our planning days.

Usha James 18:04

So you talked about a number of different pivotal and impactful leadership move - carving out the time at senior team meetings, changing the format and the agenda and the structure and the content of system principal meetings, thinking through alignment and cohesion in terms of superintendent actions, when they do go out to schools, when they coach administrators - all of those things I think, have absolutely been impactful. Are there any other particular leadership actions you think you took that in retrospect, or maybe you knew it at the time that this was a game changer to do, to do this thing.

Vicki Houston 18:49

So I'd say one leadership move which was challenge. I came into the role, and you know, as a superintendent with colleagues who are still superintendents. So was brave in terms of a leadership move in making some portfolio changes. And those changes are hard. It's hard on a system, it's hard on individuals and it's hard on a team, but it was the perfect opportunity with so many openings for superintendents. So made the bold move of doing some portfolio changes to really look at alignment in terms of the work that all of the superintendents were doing, to try to break down some silos that had been there previously, not necessarily intentional, but just the busyness of the work.

Vicki Houston 19:42

And we also, unfortunately have a deficit budget, which is not good, but in a way, it was helpful, because it really, really made the senior team focus on, what are our priorities, so that we could allocate our budget and our resources very specifically and intentionally to the schools that needed the most. Before we had a formula that we used, and every school got the same, and we know that every school isn't the same, so we, you know, made the move. It initially didn't go over well with some schools, but now it's not even a topic of conversation.

Usha James 20:25

Yeah, that's amazing. And I think that that really has been interesting for me to see is - having finance and financial concerns and criteria that should be used in order to allocate finances, which, of course, is sort of, you know, part of the way we approach all thinking is criterial thinking. And so what is the criteria? And for that criteria to be so tightly aligned to which schools, which students need us to change our practices the most, that tells us which schools needs us, need us to change our practices the most. And then how do we differentiate our approach, which is something I think lots of people struggle with - that idea of differentiation at the district level. I think that, you know, it just really helps to guide us in everything that we do, to remember those pieces right. Like when we're making decisions, keeping that at the forefront, which students need us but the most, which schools need us the most. And it really makes decisions not always easier, but a lot more clarity in terms of the why. And I think, you know, for me and for many of the principals, I'm sure the impact of having the director leading the work has been amazing. And I think it's been so important to have Vicki at the forefront of school improvement planning, and it just really sends a powerful message to the system on the importance of it, and her commitment to student achievement, and I think that's been a huge impact for the system to see.

Usha James 22:06

Agreed Absolutely. So where to next? What do you think is on the horizon, as you're planning for next year? What do you think are the next most important learning needs for the system, for administrators, and for your team?

Vicki Houston 22:25

Well, I'll start with the team. So I'm very fortunate that I have an overzealous team who always wants to do new, great things. So I need to be extremely cognizant of the amount of change that we've gone through as a whole system, right? And so, you know, always keeping that at the forefront, so that we're not just changing for the sake of change.

Vicki Houston 22:55

And so most recently, our senior leadership meetings have been about, you know, really streamlining and no more add-ons. So you talk to Usha about professional learning, and what does that look like, and everybody wants time on the agenda, and everybody wants the PD day. So it's being very, very explicit about, here are our priorities. That's it. We need to plan appropriately so that the principals can plan appropriately. I'm also going to have two superintendent openings, so more change in the senior leadership team. So we've done some activities together as a group about, again, looking at portfolios and is there more - is there room for more alignment? Is there room for what does the area's schools look like? Because we had a traditional model before, so we've spent the last couple of weeks just really looking at that to be able to determine what is next year going to look like for us.

Usha James 23:57

I feel like you just did a little job posting there. I don't know if that's true or not...

Vicki Houston 24:04

We would love to have anybody join us. We have a tremendously incredible senior team.

Usha James 24:09

Oh, what about you, Kari? Where do you think the next steps are?

Kari Bryant 24:17

Well, I've been really excited about the classroom visits I've been able to do in my last school visits, and I think at the end of our year, we really had the focus on what that classroom visit looks like for our principals, and then myself as superintendent going in, the intentional and focused conversations that we're able to have about teaching practice and about student achievement within those visits has been really exciting. And so I really look forward to moving into the next year and really being able to keep focus on what that classroom visit looks like, with intention, focused on the school goals and then stemming from that, how to support administrators in planning forward for their year in terms of supporting teacher practice and fulfilling the goals of their school improvement plan.

Usha James 25:10

Yeah, super exciting. I love the energy that's still in your voices at this point in the year. That's very encouraging. So let's close our time together - this conversation, with just maybe an invitation to hold up the mirror to yourself for a moment. What's your biggest learning been? What's your takeaway about your own leadership?

Vicki Houston 25:38

I'll let Kari start with that one.

Kari Bryant 25:42

Well, in terms of my own leadership, again, I think it's just the growth that I've seen in myself in terms of how I'm supporting my administrators. I again, I'm in my third year, so my first year of school visits, I

really, I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't know the questions to ask. You know, the classroom visits really were tours of the school.

Kari Bryant 26:03

And now, to be able to get to the point now where we walk into two classrooms and I'm able to have the conversations with administrators that really I know are making them think and making them think forward in terms of their planning and leadership actions, it's been really exciting. And I know that for me, that's been a huge learning piece, and probably the most exciting part of this year.

Usha James 26:26

Thanks for that.

Vicki Houston 26:27

I'd say that a few important learnings and some impact on me as an individual. So I knew entering into the role that I had wonderful colleagues to work with, and that, you know, they were very supportive. And I think to see the impact now, I really, truly know how committed the team is to doing the work together. They don't push back - and how they support each other as we're supporting the schools.

Vicki Houston 27:04

I think another learning for me was the ability, which I was surprised at how quickly it happened, in terms of creating a safe place at our administrator meetings. You know, when you have a whole bunch of people in a room, sometimes people will be quiet and not share, but the risks that people have taken, the openness, the honesty, the transparency about what they need to learn. You know, Usha, you pose some difficult questions sometime. There's a quiet in the room, but then they're more than willing to open up and share where their struggles are as well as the successes. So you know, the impact for me on that is knowing that they're really, truly committed to making a difference.

Vicki Houston 27:51

And then I think the most personal one for me, it's no secret that directors have a director performance appraisal, now legislated by the Ministry. And so I purposely put that as one of my goals, to make sure that we were consistent and that the Superintendents and Administrators would analyze and interpret data using an equity lens. That was one of my goals. And part of our director performance appraisal, we needed to put that out. Mine went out to about 272 different individuals for input.

Vicki Houston 28:27

And there were so many times, and Usha, I've shared this with you, were there so many other distractors and so many other attention grabbers that sometimes I felt like, you know, I didn't have the focus on student achievement and school improvement planning and really examining the data. Yet, thankfully, the feedback in my DPA was very clear that I am committed to the work and supportive of the work, and do have a very clear vision for consistency with this. So that for me, personally, doing the work has been very rewarding, and to know that the system and our community partners are seeing it too.

Usha James 29:07

Yeah, well, congratulations, is what I'm going to say. I think at this time of year, it's so important for people to feel seen and heard and valued for the work that they're doing. And I always - I've been challenging people recently to be able to name what their own strength has been this year, or what ability they've developed, what they're proud of, that they have been able to do this year, that they weren't able to do before. And so I am so happy to hear that each of you is able to identify that, you know, and it absolutely resonates with me, as I've been on this journey with you, which I'm so grateful for - is that growth that you've seen in your own leadership abilities. And the perseverance and the consistency, the stick-to-it-ive-ness, I think, is absolutely, of course, the system is going to see that. So congratulations, is what I really want to say,

Vicki Houston 30:14

Thank you.

Usha James 30:16

And that doesn't mean you're done, obviously. There's lots that we're going to do together, that you're going to continue to do, but I think there's lots of opportunities along the way to say congratulations and it's really impressive.

Vicki Houston 30:32

And congratulations to you. Usha.

Usha James 30:34

Thanks, Vicki. I think I'm lucky. I'm lucky to be in it with you.

Vicki Houston 30:41

We never, ever would have been able to do the work without you.

Kari Bryant 30:46

No, that's true.

Usha James 30:47

Well, I appreciate the pat on the back. Don't think I entirely agree with you. I agree with you that you have a very strong team. But thank you. It's been a real pleasure to be part of it and to continue to be a part of it.

Usha James 31:02

Thanks so much for being in conversation with me today. I really have a feeling that these conversations are going to resonate with so many people across the province and further afield across the country, as senior teams everywhere are navigating similar challenges. And so hearing your journey and why you got into it and what has resonated with you, I have no doubt that it's going to support other people's thinking as well. So thank you so much for being with me today.

Vicki Houston 31:39

Thanks, Usha. It was been an absolute pleasure and so rewarding being on the journey with you. You're so supportive all the time.

Kari Bryant 31:46

I feel the same. Usha, thank you so much for having us.

Usha James 31:49

Thanks. That was good.

Usha James 31:53

I hope you found that meaningful and interesting, as I did, and that, I hope part of what you're taking away is a sense that this is really challenging work, and educators and leaders are really all working as hard as possible, really working diligently to try to deeply understand how to move student achievement forward. But not just student achievement - how to think about it more holistically, considering their well-being, and understand students as whole human beings. And then to understand the impact of their practices on students and on families and community members. It's very challenging.

Usha James 32:44

I think what I'd like people to take away from this is that we are in it together, and by collectively thinking, by collaboratively thinking, we will end up thinking more creatively about how to take the next steps forward. And that's what this podcast is about. And I really hope we sparked your thinking and maybe even brought a smile to your face.

Usha James 33:10

I'm really happy about how the beginning of this series, *Creating Thinking Systems* has started. One of the things I think I noticed about school districts like Essex and Bluewater and Limestone is that they really started the year recognizing that they needed greater cohesion and alignment if they were going to make headway in their goals. That they couldn't rely on hope as a strategy. Hope is important, but I often say hope is not a strategy. And so, what I think they did was they really started the year seeing that they needed greater cohesion and alignment, and then they found ways to really practically create that cohesion in the system through their messaging, I think was a big piece of the puzzle, through narrowing their focus and their goals. I think that was really important for all three of those systems.

Usha James 34:23

Through making sure there was a through line through all of the structures that they put together, for administrator learning, for senior team planning, for educator learning, that there was some through line that everybody could see that they were working towards the same thing. And they could clearly articulate what that same thing was. And so I think that was a bit of the journey that was similar, if I had to summarize.

Usha James 34:51

And what came out in the end, I think all three systems were talking about them feeling that they were further ahead, that they were on track, that they weren't flailing, that they felt more settled in their

approach, that it didn't seem like they were putting out fires all the time, that they were cramming operational items into every spare moment that they had. I think it was a feeling of greater intentionality and being more steady and more focused.

Usha James 35:37

I think these three conversations have been an absolutely fabulous start to our series, *Creating Thinking Systems*, and given the feedback that we've had, there's no question that we are going to continue. We are lining up some wonderful senior leaders to start off the next school year with, and we're going to be talking to them about some similar things, how they are thinking critically about their own leadership practice, and we'll be diving into some different themes and different subjects, which we can't wait to tell you about. But stay tuned. It's coming soon, and we really hope that you'll stick around and listen to our upcoming episodes when they're released.

Usha James 36:30

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