

Instructional Leadership and Literacy Development: Part 1

Podcast Transcript

Martin

Welcome to another podcast presented by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.

My name is Martin Smit and I am an educational consultant for LDAO and the LD@school Project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Today it is my pleasure to be talking to Jodi Sepkowski.

Jodi is a Superintendent of Student Achievement with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board.

Today we're talking about instructional leadership and ideas for providing direction around literacy development and Tier 2 supports.

So why don't we get started, Jodi, could you just tell us a little bit about yourself and your role, please?

Jodi

Certainly.

So as you mentioned, my name is Jodi Sepkowski.

I'm a superintendent of student achievement in Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board.

This is my fifth year as a superintendent and each of the superintendents have a portfolio.

Mine is special education, mental health and well-being, but we also support a family of schools.

So currently I have 16 schools that I support through school improvement planning processes and we spend

a lot of time talking about instructional leadership and the instructional leadership moves that will make a difference for kids in schools.

Martin

Thanks, Jodi.

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Could you tell us a little bit about what you find is important as an educator?

What's important to you?

Jodi

Oh, what's important to me as an educator?

Wow.

I think we make things better for other people.

That kids walk out of our schools every day knowing

learning has happened and they're better off because of the educators in the classroom that have made it so that they're coming to school to a safe and caring place where they know they matter.

I'm thinking about some of our most important leaders in buildings, the principals that I work with, and how secure I would feel in sending my child to their schools because I would know that they would be looked after, they would be cared for, and they'd be learning.

So I guess those are the things that I think about as an educator, even when I was in the classroom.

Does every kid feel like they belong in this place today and somebody cares about them?

And are they ready to learn?

And if not, what do we need to do to find that space where we can move them to a place of learning?

Martin

I think those are really comforting words for any parent who is putting their child in the public school system because so often, people I think are worried their kids are going to get lost in the system, right?

Like we're so worried about paperwork and all those registration forms and all of those bits and pieces and to hear a senior leader really talk about the need for that, caring and personal touch for a child.

Has that philosophy changed at all over the years?

Jodi

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My philosophy has shifted to not just, it's not just about providing education.

It's about there's an entry place for every single student in our system.

There's a place and a space for them to learn no matter their identity, their abilities, where they come from, who they are.

But I also think

Teaching is really hard work.

I think it's become more and more difficult over time.

And are we able to build capacity with staff?

So public education is an amazing thing.

We open our doors and we welcome everyone, but does the entire system, are we able to provide the level of support

and an entry space for every kid to learn.

So I think about that a lot, that every child deserves, they have an inherent right to education and what are we going to do to make sure that happens?

Martin

Jodi, we're talking a lot about this personal philosophy of education, but of course you're a system leader and I think, you know, the big picture part has to come into play as well, right?

You're talking a lot about, you know, the individual needs of children.

But when we think about setting direction for a system, that's a different type of thinking.

Would you agree with that?

Jodi

Yes, absolutely.

So when I started out as a young teacher, I never had the foresight to think I'd be in this position at this time as a system leader.

But as I said before, education is such a privilege.

You need to have vision.

You need to consider what is

and what could be.

You need to be curious rather than judgmental.

And you need a strategic plan of action.

And it has to be based on data.

You know, there's an onion and you start to peel back the layers and you're like, we could do better.

We need to do better.

We see in our data that students are underperforming in these specific areas and what are we doing about it?

So strategically, you need to have a vision and you need to have a plan of action.

You need to have accountability.

You need to have monitoring and you need to build capacity because if you think about the end goal in mind, which is student achievement, we need to backwards plan.

How do we get there?

If we continue to do the same things we always do, we're going to have the same results.

So

Like I said, teaching is hard work.

Being a classroom teacher is incredibly difficult and complex.

So how are we building capacity within the system of our educators so that they can better serve our students?

Martin

And if we dive a little deeper into this setting direction,

You are talking about kind of your ideas about setting direction, but you're part of a larger team, right?

And it can't always be easy when you're working with a whole different group, people with different portfolios, different beliefs and different philosophies, but you still have to move that system forward.

Jodi

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Yeah, we all have to have a common end goal in mind.

And so we talk about it a lot as a senior team.

We meet every Monday.

as a senior team.

And the first hour of our meeting is called family of schools planning.

So the family of school superintendents, anyone that has a responsibility for supervision of schools are part of that planning.

Every single one of us, we take a look at the board action plan.

And one of our goals is every school must have the literacy and math goal.

It's about effective teaching.

effective instruction and assessment within the literacy and math.

And so we know that when we're doing school improvement planning and planning forward, we are all on the same page about what we are looking for when we enter into those spaces.

And we also know all our principals are at different levels of learning and what kind of support do they need to better inform their teachers.

And so when we do school improvement visits, we're very strategic in the questions we're asked

asking.

So everyone that is a family of schools superintendent, we develop the questions together as a family of schools team and talk about when we're in classrooms, we are looking for these things.

We let our principals know what we will be looking for and we work strategically with them for the high-yield instructional practices.

There's no surprises.

We're not there to do a gotcha.

We're there to provide support and learn with and from.

And let's be clear, some of our principals have far surpassed even our own knowledge about instruction and assessment because they're on the ground supporting the teachers.

So we're very strategic.

and aligned in our system thinking about if our end goal isn't to improve outcomes for students in literacy and math, how are we getting there?

And so we meet every Monday morning for an hour to talk about school improvement planning and what we're doing in schools when we're in schools, but also what do our P and VP meetings

What is happening every month when we're meeting with our P and VP meeting?

Where is their learning and growth?

And then what are we doing to support the teachers in the building with resources and their own learning?

And how do we strategize that so that there's competency and capacity across the system?

Martin

Jodi, you talked a little bit about

on specific needs of students and the importance of identifying those.

And we know that in Ontario, literacy has been a real focus, especially since the Right to Read report was released.

Could you tell us just a little bit about the literacy journey that KPR has been on over the last few years?

Jodi

For sure.

So the Right to Read report was really a catalyst for all of us, especially in ways that brought clarity and precision to literacy instruction.

KPR, and so when I say KPR, it's Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board.

So our KPR implementation plan is anchored in a multi-tiered system of support that offers students the intensity of support they require to become proficient readers and writers.

The multi-tiered system of support is collaborative in nature with schools and systems working together to support students.

But it is worth noting that the tiers of instruction and interventions are not assigned to any one educator or program.

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So being in special education, we work in tandem with teaching and learning and caring and safe schools and EDI and Indigenous education.

Everyone works together to offer students what they need as it relates to the foundational Tier 1 instruction and if needed, Tiers 2 or 3 interventions.

Martin

Jodi, are there specific screeners or assessments that your board is using for literacy presently?

Jodi

Yes, we're using Acadience.

Martin

Is it on a set schedule?

Jodi

Yes, it's on a set schedule.

So at the beginning of the year, term one, we do a benchmark.

There's another benchmark midway through the year, and then we use that data to inform next steps within the system or within the classroom specifically, but we also look at that data across the system to determine staffing allocations, let's say.

Martin

Could you speak a little bit to how schools are using the data from Acadience classrooms or school-wide?

Jodi

Absolutely, I can.

So I'm thinking of one school in particular that I most recently visited, and the early intervention teacher that's on site at the school, she is a 0.20 allocation.

She is

doing the Acadience screening with all K–2 students.

They then look at that data as a primary division and as a school to determine what are the students who are in risk.

So it's a pulse.

They're taking the pulse of kids at a particular time and then what are the specific strategies we're going to use to support their learning.

So that early intervention teacher is working alongside in partnership with classroom teachers to co-plan and co-develop lessons to support their learning.

And that early intervention teacher might also group students across grades or across classrooms to say, I'm going to take this small group and we're going to work on this foundational literacy skill because I see students are lagging in this area and bump them up with some additional support

That principal was also really creative in staffing with their SERT to pair with the early intervention teacher to provide small group instruction for kids who may be in risk or lagging behind in those foundational literacy skills.

So that data is driving every bit of instruction and next steps for learning for kids.

Martin

That's so great.

And it's so great to hear that people have some flexibility in how they're able to support the needs that come through the data.

Can you tell us a little bit about this early intervention teacher?

What is that role that you're talking about?

Jodi

Oh, this is very exciting.

And it's one of my favorite parts of visiting schools is meeting with the early intervention teacher because they are just so

Their capacity has been built at a system level through our teaching and learning department who provide really direct professional learning for them around assessment and instructional strategies to support students.

And so it's an allocation through the ministry for schools based on enrollment.

So each school is provided additional staffing for K–3 early intervention.

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But what I've noticed over time, they've expanded their role and they're supporting, of course, K–3.

But as we build capacity with our teachers in K–3 around high impact instructional strategies and precise interventions to support students based on whatever skill they may be lagging behind,

It is spreading through the school because then it's talked about at staff meetings and now our junior teachers and intermediate teachers are saying, hang on a second, can we be using some of this data to inform our next steps as we, especially this time of year, as students transition from one grade to another?

And the excitement is in the air and you can see when you meet with the early intervention teachers, they are so focused

on foundational reading skills for kids.

And we are noticing in our data significant improvements for kids in their reading.

And it's just, it's a beautiful thing when you see the passion that exists for our teachers and it's so intentional.

Before, I think prior to the Right to Read, we were teaching reading and we were doing our best and then we'd stumble upon something that a child might not know

what to do, but then the teacher didn't know what to do.

I know where they're struggling, but I'm not sure how to get there.

And I think with the precision and the practice and the foundational reading skills that we're talking about and in line with our speech and language pathologist, we've really come a long way in understanding how students learn to read and how skills build upon one another.

Martin

Years ago, that term efficacy came into play.

And I think so many of us struggled with that, like really trying to understand what that word meant.

And I think in these times, what you're talking about is having that data in front of you and being able to monitor the progress of students that this idea of efficacy or getting the result that we intended to get is a much more meaningful term in education.

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You talked a lot about the schools and what's happening in classrooms, but at the board level or at the system level, are you able to use some of the data as well?

Jodi

Absolutely.

So we look at system-level data for staffing allocations for those schools who may be in risk and determine which are priority schools who receives staffing in relation to the data we have through early intervention teachers, but also literacy coaches.

Also, our instructional leadership consultants across teaching and learning in special education are allocated effectively to support teachers to help them understand how to program effectively to meet the needs of students.

So that data, although we dig down to the student level, it impacts the classroom, but also system decisions about how we allocate resources to schools.

Martin

Jodi, we really sense your excitement when you're talking about education and the things that are going on

in the school board here.

The truth is though that it's always not exciting for everyone, right?

Change can be very difficult and I think educators sometimes are a bit nervous or worried when they see those changes coming.

Have you thought about that as a board or what are you doing as a board to help educators change practice and move to some of these new tools and practices?

Jodi

You're absolutely right.

So it's really

It's clear communication, high expectations, and support.

We need to be able to provide the resources to people that don't know where to go, where to turn.

They see that a child is struggling but not sure what to do next.

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So we really have been focusing in our principal and VP meetings, in our staff meetings, and on our PA days.

How are we building confidence

in staff who might not know where to go.

So I think we're all familiar with situations where students get to high school and they can't read.

And so what are we doing about that and how do we build responsibility across all curricular areas?

no matter if you're a history teacher or guidance teacher or a math teacher, where is literacy embedded within the program?

And what about kids that can't read?

We can't go back to those conversations, well, they didn't learn it in grade one.

Okay, so now we're going to learn it in grade 9.

And so it's really high expectations, but working with principals where we have literacy look-fors that we've built in our system?

What are we looking for when we're visiting classes and what are the conversations that must happen?

So when I visit schools and I'm with a principal and we visit a class and we're intentionally going into literacy classes,

Like I said before, it's all very transparent.

We communicate with everyone.

These are what we're looking for.

These are the questions we're going to ask.

We then debrief with the principals after and say, what did you see?

What was the gaps?

Where do we need to go next?

And what do you need as a leader to improve outcomes for that teacher so that they're confident and capable in their instruction?

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It's high expectations, it's pressure, but it's also support and resources to ensure that every teacher gets what they need so they can deliver the curriculum and understand through informed decision making where students are struggling and what their next best step is.

Martin

So are school administrators or principals actually getting specific professional development around evidence-based instruction?

Jodi

Absolutely.

So

I mentioned that our family of school superintendents meet every Monday morning and our whole conversation is planning about school improvement planning and visits and then we debrief after.

So every other month we have a principal meeting or VP meeting and then on the alternating months we have family of schools meetings.

Every single one has content around effective instructional practices.

So our system principals in teaching and learning are coming to those meetings to deliver content, resources, open to questions, information.

strategic delivery so that we are informing our principals who are also have different entry points for learning around what they need to be looking for in classrooms and what good effective instruction looks like and how are they using data to inform their next decision.

So it's very strategic from

our superintendents deciding what questions we're asking all the way down to the classroom.

But our principals and vice-principals have opportunities for learning every single month.

And then through our PA days, what's directed by the ministry, but we also, every single PA day that we have, we keep one portion of the day for school improvement work.

And then the expectation is that we're following up.

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We have online school improvement plans that we are checking as superintendents constantly and having those conversations with our principals to ensure we continue to move forward.

I believe I mentioned previously what every single school must have.

a goal around literacy and math, effective instruction and improvement.

So it's very clear what the expectation is and that we are providing the underlying learning and resources and professional development so we can get to that end goal of student achievement.

Martin

Thank you very much, Jodi.

You've been listening to Jodi Sepkowski and Martin Smit discussing educational leadership.

Be sure to tune in for Part 2, available at LD@school.

on the LD@school website.

To learn more about resources provided by LDAO, have a look at our websites, LD@school and LDAO.ca.

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