



Ontario Institute for Education Leadership L'Institut de leadership en éducation de l'Ontario

*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

Leading in a Crisis: COVID-19 School Closure Christy Radbourne

An elementary principal in a K-8 rural school located in northern Ontario reflects on her first months leading her staff, students and community in the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic. The story illustrates how she enacted the practices of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) and drew on her Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) to ensure student learning, engagement, equity and well-being.

On March 13, 2020 the world shifted beneath our feet and we found ourselves facing an uncertain future in a new and significantly different world. This new world was defined by empty school buildings, a scattered community, and no face-to-face connections.

Our school

Our small rural school of about 220 students is located about 15 kilometres south of the northwestern Ontario city of Thunder Bay. Our community is vastly spread out and reaches all the way to the United States border which is approximately 35 kilometres south.

Our students and our staff

Because of our unique location, a number of students with special needs choose to remain with us rather than travel to special classes. Most of our students are bussed in which creates significant challenges to parent engagement and developing a sense of community in the school. Ours is a mature teaching staff with 11 years the average length of tenure and several who have been teaching for over 20 years.

Student achievement & increased enrolment

Over the past three years we have turned around our achievement scores, moving from 31st out of 33 in the city to first place in EQAO scores. This includes 100% in grade 3 Math, and 63% in grade 6 math, representing a 44% and 46% increase respectively over three years.

1.1 Building a shared vision

During these same three years, we also dreamed of and built an exemplary outdoor learning space and classroom. As word got out about our success in the community, we experienced our largest junior kindergarten enrolment ever for 2020-2021 as well as an increase in overall enrolment.

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

The COVID-19 crisis

Then the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent closures happened. I asked myself, “How would we sustain our achievement turnaround and build community without students in front of us and in a teaching platform virtually foreign to our staff?”

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – Problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge, and systems thinking

In the early days of the COVID-19 closure, principals, along with our board’s senior admin team, struggled to envision remote learning in virtual environments. Once the ministry provided the basic framework, we were left to design our own online learning programs.

Two things emerged as a priority for me:

1. Collaborating with staff on School Improvement Plan (SIP) goals, next steps, and improving teaching and learning practices, and
2. Reaching out to our community to continue to connect deeply and engage them in the transformation of the school.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared short-term goals

These were core tenets of the success we had experienced to date.

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and the community

Collaborating with Staff

I reached out to staff in an initial Microsoft Teams meeting. This was a brand-new platform to virtually our entire staff. The learning curve was steep, and timing was short. I knew connection and support were key and so I spent many hours supporting staff in uploading the application, walking them through the basics and identifying go-to staff members who could help others.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

We held our first staff meeting on Teams and it was emotional. I kept the agenda to connecting with each other, sharing stories, laughing and having lighthearted moments as we built familiarity with the platform and our new reality. We had a succession of short meetings via Teams about of the next few days working on the platforms we had familiarity with, assessing our student and parent strengths and those at risk, and discussing how we might best meet the criteria of the framework.

Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – Perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways

5.1 Building staff members’ sense of internal accountability

We outlined a basic framework to meet the ministry guidelines which included heavy reliance on synchronous opportunities and video. Like us, we knew our students would want to connect face to face and video offered us powerful opportunities to replicate our teaching in the classroom.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents

Working with the community

Next, I turned to the community. As our increasing enrolment numbers and widespread parent engagement attested, turning around the achievement story in our school had secured public confidence and raised the level of accountability to the community. Our community trusted us to consult and knew they were a valued voice in collaboration.

5.2 Meeting the demands for external accountability

Reaching out to key school council members and asking for feedback yielded some surprising results that pulled us back from the brink of disaster. Our board had sent out an initial parent survey to ascertain technology needs and internet access.

In my first contact with our Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) representative, I discovered that while 95% or more of our families indicated they had access to internet, the reality was that 80% of those had poor quality and very limited bandwidth. Because of our rural location, our families are forced to access the internet either through using canopies and rocket hubs or their cell phone data. As a result, live stream meetings such as Zoom and Teams were virtually impossible, as is uploading and downloading video. This effectively meant that for approximately 80% of our school community, synchronous learning was not possible, and neither were large amounts of video teaching and learning.

2.4 Building productive relationships with families and the community

Implementing our e-learning plan

Despite our board's and the ministry's directional focus on synchronous learning, we had to move in a different direction or at best, risk frustrating our students and parents, or at worse, alienating them entirely. On Thursday of the week before we were set to go live, our staff met again virtually, and we reworked our vision and plan for e-learning.

We had clear goals in mind based on our instructional success when physically in the school including:

- specific, organized, and structured weekly and daily learning plans,
- learning activities focused on SIP goals,
- feedback loop,
- teacher-modelled work,
- student work as exemplars,
- guided practice,
- focus on mental health and well-being, and

1.2 Identifying specific, shared short-term goals

- celebrating student effort.

Understanding the internet access constraints of our community, we limited our e-learning to two platforms: SeeSaw and Brightspace (D2L). Both were already being used extensively by our students and parents and would reduce the technology learning curve.

3.5 Allocating resources in support of the school's vision and goals

Together we developed a format where teachers would post weekly and daily plans that mirrored their classroom structures. Instructional material included models with teacher instruction either in written or in short video form. Staff worked collaboratively on meaningful learning activities that were connected to our SIP math and writing goals and exemplified our mental health and well-being plan. Anchor charts for problem-solving, writing checklists, and other supports were replicated and posted in our online classrooms. Feedback loops were created through the platforms using both video and written formats and students were able to post take 2s and 3s. Student work was captured and posted with teaching notes as exemplars of strategies in reading, writing, and mathematics.

4.2 Providing instructional support

Parents were encouraged to post feedback and engage with their children on their posts. We consistently encouraged parents to post unique learning opportunities including videos of children experiencing hikes, harvesting fiddleheads, cooking at home, managing their sugar bushes, and expressing their thoughts about COVID-19.

2.4 Building productive relationships with families and the community

Doing virtual classroom walk-throughs

in my role as principal when physically in our school, I spend every morning walking through classrooms noticing student work, documenting learning and posting examples of it through social media (Facebook/ Twitter/ Instagram) for our community. It also provides me with insights and observations on which to base any feedback to teachers on instructional practice and to students on their learning. I drew on this practice as my guideline for how I would operate in our virtual environment.

4.3 Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement

Now, every day, in our new teaching and learning environment, I walk virtually through each of our online classrooms. I notice and comment on student work, capture images of student learning and post them on our social media accounts. I post my own read-alouds for families on my YouTube channel, with author/publisher permission of course, and host virtual school council meetings to stay connected with the community.

I regularly e-mail updates to parents and keep our Facebook page updated with learning images, messages from staff, and updates for the community. We are now moving to more intentional instruction, focusing on learning that prepares our students for the next school year in September.

Psychological
Personal Leadership
Resources (PLRs) –
optimism, self-efficacy,
resilience, proactivity,
and character

We have found creative ways to manage synchronous learning including phone calls, scheduled online meetings, and live chats. Preserving our instructional integrity and our community connections throughout this period has been key to continuing our journey, maintaining public confidence and trust, and ensuring accountability.