

*Leadership: A School  
District Initiative*

*Report Presented to the  
Ottawa-Carleton District  
School District*

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# I. Introduction

The Ottawa Carleton District School District (OCDSB) has begun an initiative to foster leadership at all levels within the school community. The OCDSB is interested not simply in leadership at the upper echelons of the school system but in leadership practiced daily throughout the school district community.

Successful program and policy design rests on understanding how the policy recipients approach the issue area. Only by understanding how leadership is understood by those we want to practice it, can we create leadership programs that encourage it. As a consequence, the OCDSB undertook to engage school district employees, parents, students and trustees in a discussion of leadership. There were two central research questions.

The first research question centred on defining the ideal leader for the school community:

- If you could create the ideal leader, what characteristics would the leader have?
- How would the leader behave?
- What are the consequences of being around a leader?

The second research question explored the current practice of leadership among the school community, current experiences of how the District supports leadership and preferences for future activities the District could undertake to support formal and informal leaders:

- What do you do that provides leadership?
- Tell us about your leadership experiences or training in the OCDSB. How did this help or hinder you?
- Some people are leaders within their sites but do not want to be *formal* leaders. How can we help you as an informal leader?

Finally, groups were allowed to offer any comments or suggestions to the District.

- What else would you like to share with us about leadership in the OCDSB?

We are pleased to present the results of this research. If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact Jennifer Espey at [espey@gandalfgroup.ca](mailto:espey@gandalfgroup.ca) or (613) 233-8080.

## II. Executive Summary

### Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed for this study. Qualitative methodologies are used to explore an issue area and maximize the likelihood of understanding an issue from the variety of perspectives of the target groups. Qualitative research does not test whether or not these understandings are representative of the population.

Surveys were conducted from November 2005 to May 2006. Almost 1300 surveys were completed. For the purposes of completing the survey and for analyses of responses, the school community was broken into categories based on role in the District. There are 16 sub categories and one “other” category. For each sub group, up to 50 cases were analyzed. Respondents included full and part-time academic staff, principals, vice principals, administrative support staff, senior staff, plant support workers, parents of special needs students, school councils, trustees and federation representatives.

The discussion of the results will proceed in three sections. The first research question focused on defining the ideal leader for the school community. The second research question explored the current practice of leadership, current experiences of District support for leadership and preferences for future activities the District could undertake to support formal and informal leaders. Finally, participants were allowed to offer top of mind suggestions. The third section discusses these responses.

### Part I: The Ideal Leader

There was striking similarity across the school community in preferences for the ideal leader – the characteristics, behaviours and consequences. And, participants directly link this leadership style to better results for staff and for students. Moreover, this leadership style is one that can be practiced through daily activities at all levels and in all roles within the District.

The consensus in how the school community defines an ideal leader and in the perceived benefits of that style of leadership provides fertile ground for the District to formalize, and then encourage the practice of, this style of leadership. Participation is significantly higher when policies and programs reflect existing understandings. This research indicates that the District will not have to mediate competing understandings of leadership. It is unusual to find such consensus. More often, we find polarized views.

## **If you could create the ideal leader, what characteristics would the leader have?**

Without exception, the school community defines leadership by the relationship of a person to those around them. The relationship is not defined by status, by authority nor by expertise but by the ability to enable, to empower and to work collaboratively with those around them. For instance, organized/time management had less than half the mentions of good listener/approachable.

Ideal leadership characteristics differed little across the groups. The similarity was remarkable. Top leadership characteristics are:

- Good listener, approachable, personable
- Understanding, empathy, respectful, caring
- Motivational, inspirational, visionary
- Honest, trustworthy, dependable, consistent
- Knowledgeable, informed, expertise
- Good communicator
- Positive, enthusiastic, energetic

Conversely, traditional management characteristics such as decisive/problem-solver and organized/time manager were mentioned with much less frequency. There were very few non responses to this question. Note also that while visionary and inspirational were very important they were clearly not as important as characteristics that centre on responding to others such as empathy, understanding, openness, and supportive. It is critical to note that leadership is not seen as centred on 'vision' or on 'management' but instead on enabling others.

## **How would the ideal leader behave?**

Once again there was striking similarity across the groups. The preferred behaviours are manifestations of the preferred characteristics where the leader has a supportive relationship with those around them. The leader would be accessible. They would be supportive of and motivate others. They would seek input in an inclusive decision-making process. For instance, 'take charge' and 'decisive' had less than half the mentions of 'lead by example' and 'provide guidance and support'. Most mentioned ideal leader behaviours were:

- Lead by example
- Provide support/encouragement/motivation
- Seeks input/inclusive/fair

- Approachable/friendly
- Professional/responsible
- Positive/energetic
- Respectful
- Empathetic/understanding
- Team player/builds relationships

### **What are the consequences of being around a leader?**

Once again, responses were similar across groups. The language used to describe the consequences of being around an ideal leader includes personal benefits of feeling inspired and valued, professional benefits of learning and becoming a leader, team benefits in uniting colleagues and providing shared vision and school district benefits for students as the school community becomes more productive and creative in their work.

Around an ideal leader, the work environment is supportive, collaborative and individuals and teams thrive. There were no significant differences among groups in their responses. The consequences of an ideal leader that received the most mentions were:

- Energized/inspired/bring out the best in people
- Good learning environment/become a leader/personal development/learn by example
- Positive work environment/good morale
- Unites team/collaboration
- Supported/valued/confident
- Productive

## **Part II: Practicing Leadership**

### **What do you do that provides leadership?**

When asked what activities they currently undertake that supports leadership, employees identified practices that are in keeping with their definition of ideal leadership. In fact, across groups, employees identified daily practices such as supporting and mentoring colleagues, encouraging and mentoring students and parents, communicating and sharing information and assisting with extra activities around the school community. This suggests that the ideal leadership style exists and is operating

throughout the school community. No response was still low and virtually all groups across the community provided examples of how they currently practice leadership.

Top mentions were:

- Lead by example
- Teach/provide direction/motivate and encourage students
- Communicate and share information
- Assist and support new and other teachers/colleagues
- Be available/approachable and listen
- Extracurricular activities/coaching
- Support and mentor students and parents

**Tell us about your leadership experiences or training in the OCDSB. How did this help or hinder you?**

Discussions of how the OCDSB supports leadership reveal to key findings: 1. current supports do not reflect the way respondents see leadership; and 2. opportunities to engage in leadership are unevenly distributed.

The research finds that, currently, at the macro level, mentions of leadership experience provided by the District were dominated by two responses:

1. Formal leadership training such as workshops and retreats
2. No response to this question at all

With significantly fewer mentions were:

- Mentoring/job shadowing
- Internships/leadership academies
- Acting head of department

For those who could mention activities undertaken by the District, those activities do not reflect the style of leadership preferred by the school community. Formal leadership training was mentioned most by principals, vice principals, and full time teachers. However, based on participant responses to how they support leadership, the current *practice* of leadership is diffuse, continuous and occurs daily – in interactions and activities with other. In contrast, the responses regarding leadership experiences *supported by the District* focused on discrete, time limited programs or events to *train* leaders.

There are two distinctions between the ideal style of leadership expressed by, and already engaged in by, respondents and the District supports mentioned First, is the difference between a focus on leadership *training* rather than leadership *practice*. Training can be undertaken in a workshop or retreat; practice, however, requires continuous mechanisms to enable it. Second, is the focus on discrete workshops rather than on processes or activities that are internal to school/district functioning that allows for the practice of leadership.

The preferred outcome is for responses to this question to reflect current understandings of the ideal leader – the practices that participants see and offered in the previous question as leadership are formally recognized and supported by the District. Discrete programs such as workshops, leadership retreats and seminars are geared at training individuals. In contrast, respondents see leadership as a supportive relationship among all involved in the District. In this model, leadership initiatives are NOT designed to ‘teach individuals how to be leaders’ but instead are practices and processes that allow for leadership to occur.

These should be processes that structure the space in daily practice and in the school culture for collaboration and support within the District such as a mentoring bank for teachers, for students, and for support staff – where those willing to mentor are listed in bank, mentoring is a supportive, not evaluative exercise, and those wishing for a mentor can choose from those available; a committee in need bank that lists committees in need of participants who are diverse employees/parent/student, communication programs or bi-weekly meetings that encourage information sharing within schools, district recognition of participation in extra curricular activities, processes set up to ensure that parents and councils receive feedback on suggestions that are sent forward to trustees or to the district, awards/events that recognize current leadership of teachers in their roles with students and newer colleagues, etc. To the extent that understandings of the school community are reflected back and endorsed by the District, the gap between the community and the District is diminished and, critically, leadership activities are further encouraged.

The second key finding is that District support for participation in leadership is very unevenly distributed. Despite the fact that virtually all groups, regardless of role in the school community, believe they do practice and support leadership, District support for leadership appears to be limited and unequally distributed.

Importantly, at the macro level, no response to this question was second only to mentions of workshops/retreats. Non response was not distributed equally across groups. In fact, it was very low for those school district participants who are in formal

leadership roles such as principals and vice principals or who are full time teaching staff. No response and no opportunities to participate in leadership activities was highest among those groups who are not in teaching positions or who are in teaching positions but not full time such as plant workers, educational assistants, occasional teachers, office administration support.

**Some people are leaders within their sites but do not want to be *formal* leaders. How can we help you as an informal leader?**

There was greater cohesion around suggestions for district initiatives to support leadership. The first priority is to allow for active participation throughout the school community in leadership on a daily basis through practices that encourage leadership sharing, mentoring and collaboration. The second priority is to offer more opportunities to all members for training *and* to provide the resources – both time and supports – in order to engage in leadership activities and training.

Not surprisingly, participants have not, by in large, translated their ideas about leadership into policies and programs. This is evidenced by the fact that the most mention to this query was no mention at all. It is not unusual that participants have not put time into translating their ideas about, and experiences in, leadership into potential programs or policies. In fact, this emphasizes the need for the District to capture this understanding of leadership – to provide a formal narrative for it. By formalizing this understanding, District employees will be able to see it coherently reflected back to them. The understanding of leadership exists, and in fact, practices that are commensurate with this understanding also exist. What does not appear to exist is the formal recognition of this leadership and programs incorporated throughout the school community to encourage it.

While specific program needs will differ across job functions, the theory guiding what the district could do to assist leadership is remarkably consistent across groups. This common notion of how leadership can best operate in the school community will assist uptake on programs. Responses to how the district could assist informal leaders are not surprising given answers to previous questions. The most common suggestions centred on creating the opportunity to practice leadership:

- Provide the opportunity/share leadership
- provide support and encouragement
- value/recognize the contribution.
- Workshops

- in-house leadership training such as mentoring and role modeling
- being consulted in decisionmaking.
- ensure that staff has the time and resources to either attend leadership workshops or devote to leadership activities.

## **Conclusion**

The results strongly suggest that there is consensus within the District on leadership. The ideal leader is defined relative to her/his relationship with those around them. The relationship is not defined by status nor authority nor even expertise, but by a person's ability to enable and empower others. An ideal leader is accessible, approachable, supportive and empowering. They motivate, are inclusive of others opinions, and they offer guidance. They build and unite teams in a common vision. They recognize the contributions of others and appreciate their efforts. The whole school community is seen to benefit from this type of leadership.

In keeping with this idea of leadership, participants offered many examples of how they already engage in and support leadership activities. Virtually all groups gave examples of how they practice this leadership including those groups who aren't normally identified as leaders such as plant support workers, office administrative assistants, parents, the school council and occasional teachers. These acts of leadership are part of daily practice yet may not be recognized as leadership by the School District.

The fully articulated consensus among the school community in what ideal leadership looks like and how it is practiced is an excellent base from which to build. There are not polarized or divisive understandings that have to be mediated. Engagement is significantly greater when policies and programs simply formalize and encourage current understandings. Moreover, the school community has already translated their ideals about leadership into current practice. The imperative for the District is to recognize this practice and to extend the circle of those who can engage in it.

*Current District supports for leadership appear to be out of sync* in two ways: 1. top mentions were of discrete programs focused on training individuals, not of processes that encourage leadership practice within the school community on a continuous, daily practice basis; and 2. supports to engage in leadership appear to be unequally distributed among the school community.

The District must demonstrate that it values leadership. It can only do this by communicating that and ensuring that supports exist to practice leadership. Participants, in their deliberative groups, offered suggestions for how the School District could encourage leadership, especially informal leadership, throughout the District. These suggestions indicate that a discrete program will not serve the District. Instead, participants suggested a way of operating – model policies and programs – that could be adopted to act diffusely through the system and to encourage leadership on a daily basis. It is a relationship not just among individuals within the District but between the District and its community.

Acting on the suggestions of participants would require policies that encourage leadership as a daily mode of operation. Processes such as team vision setting, collaborative work styles, mentoring programs of junior staff by senior staff regardless of job roles would help build supportive relationships and ensure inclusive decisionmaking. The difference can starkly be described as an out of school, one day workshop for those seeking advancement versus bi-monthly mentoring lunch groups that engage an experienced teacher, a new teacher, an occasional teacher, a student, an admin staff and a parent, or listing committee opportunities that specify participation of representatives of different roles in the District including occasional teachers, parents, students, etc, or weekly awards for teachers, students, janitors who demonstrated leadership as support for others.

At base, there must be space created within the daily functioning of the District to recognize the importance of leadership as enabling others. It is a practice, not a title. The District must also ensure that adequate time and back up resources are provided so that engaging in leadership is not a cost to individuals. If it is, this will diminish uptake. Accessing formal leaders will also be important including information and response sessions where input to the system by School Councils, by parents, by students is duly considered and receives a response.

As important as the processes that could facilitate leadership behaviours are the policies that define membership in the ‘team’. The research suggests that those outside of what is normally considered formal leadership are systematically excluded from leadership supports. Are plant workers involved in vision setting at the table with teachers? Are educational assistants? Are parents of special needs students? Regardless of the subject area under discussion in these meetings, enlisting a team that represents all aspects of the school community builds relationships and leads to shared responsibility. The research indicates that many groups feel marginalized from leadership activities. For these groups several things are critical: 1. recognition that they are informal leaders; 2. opportunities to participate in leadership activities including vision setting and decisionmaking; and 3. recognition of their contributions.

## Next Steps

The District is in an enviable position. Seldom is there such consensus around a policy goal, or the understanding of it. The hard work – getting target groups to understand and engage in leadership – is already done. What is required is for the District to catch up to that understanding and to adjust their leadership initiatives in order to encourage what is already happening. Having said that, it is critical to recognize and encourage this practice of leadership. To adjust the structure – the programs and activities – to encourage it. If not, the costs of engaging in it, without supports or recognition, will reduce it. What are the next steps then?

1. Develop a narrative that captures this understanding of leadership for the school community. This provides legitimacy to this understanding and it demonstrates that the District ‘gets it’. Leadership is not a title; it is a practice. Virtually all members in the District engage in leadership.
2. Develop processes that encourage the practice of leadership continuously, effectively and in daily practice. What are the best practices in this area? What are the obstacles to implementation? This may require a literature review.
3. Recognize the contribution of those who engage in leadership activities.
4. Ensure that membership in this leadership club is broadened. Many participant groups could provide examples of how they engage in leadership but could not provide a response to how the District supports their leadership.