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*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 – September School Reopening Christy Radbourne

An elementary principal in a K-8 rural school located in northern Ontario reflects on her first month leading her staff, students and community in September reopening following school closure the previous March due to 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.

The context: September re-opening

The only constant in the re-opening of schools in September 2020 has been uncertainty. Changes occur at every level of schooling quickly and often several times a week. Direction feels muddled. Health and safety guidelines shift regularly, and tension and stress are at an all time high.

Despite this, re-opening our school was still something we looked forward to. Students remain at the centre of our profession and vision and we missed them. Opening safely, continuing to maintain our community's trust, and ensuring that meaningful teaching and learning could happen in a much-altered environment would be one of the most significant challenges of my career.

1.1 Building a shared vision

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.

Contributing to the district's re-opening plan

During the COVID-19 school closure I was elected Elementary President of our local Ontario Principals' Council. In this role, I became a member of the School Working Group whose mandate was to develop a September school re-opening plan during the summer months.

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

This work provided valuable insights into what I could expect in my own school as September loomed and plans to re-open began to form. Provincial and board guidelines that were generic and needed to be modified to reflect individual school contexts. Just as every school and school community is unique, our re-opening plans and procedures had to be adapted as well.

Implementing the re-opening plan

The logistics of bringing students back into the building and space utilization were the first significant hurdles. Well-planned structures and predictable procedures were key to allaying fears and creating time and space for teaching and learning to resume. Clear procedures and structures were needed so that staff could focus on teaching and learning.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

Student movement on entry, exit and throughout the building were key issues. Additionally, creating classroom lay-outs with teachers was important to mitigating ambiguity and providing structure for teachers to begin class set-up. I began consultations in July with teachers and support staff in my building to work out the logistic puzzles.

I worked with my custodial staff and a few teaching staff with a strong spatial sense to begin addressing classroom lay-out. With custodial staff, we removed items that couldn't be easily sanitized so when teachers arrived, their classrooms were ready for set-up. Specific challenges included staggering lunches for cleaning, unloading and loading busses one at a time, and parent pick-up and drop off. For each of these I worked collaboratively with staff to create logistical plans that could be clearly communicated and followed by students, parents, and staff.

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

Communicating with parents

Managing the constant change would require consistent, transparent communication and implementation procedures, in addition to well-planned logistics and structures. Throughout the planning, managing communication to ensure clarity and deal with any misinformation became critical. Staff and community were receiving messaging from multiple sources, including the media, friends, and social media. This meant that I had to be at the forefront of communications to ensure accurate timely messaging.

1.4 Communicating the vision and goals

I scheduled two parent Zoom meetings in August to connect, address upcoming plans and changes, answer questions and offset any misinformation. Additionally, as major milestones were complete, I created an Update Newsletter for parents that went out weekly in August. We also used our social media, email, and weekly update to inform parents about important timelines, including re-registration and school opening.

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

Issuing clear, concise, and up to date information, while also answering questions and addressing concerns in an open and regular forum became critical to ensuring our school community had the right information and could make informed choices for their families. Throughout I maintained availability for parents and guardians and focussed on transparent, honest communication.

Building staff capacity

Staff had concerns as well. We resumed weekly staff meetings in August and planned an outdoor get-together in compliance with public health guidelines to close out the previous year and begin the new. Three days were designated for professional development and slide decks were provided by the Ministry focussing on Health and Safety, Mental Health and Well Being, Anti-Racist Education, and the new Math curriculum. It was overwhelming and personalizing it was critical to preventing overload.

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

A pressing issue for all was the loss of curricular time due to lengthier entry and exit times and washroom and hand washing breaks. In divisional groups, teachers and staff collaboratively planned their own logistics around washrooms, hand-washing, and curricular time.

Teaching and learning

Divisional groups shared the data we had collected in the months prior to the COVID closure to facilitate our September Literacy and Math planning blocks. We needed a place to start and were short on data since we had no EQAO or assessment data since the previous March. Collectively we selected a focus on Literacy and Math in order to begin the work of “catching up” and maximizing teaching time. We then planned the re-opening blocks of Literacy and Math, focussing on diagnostic data, mental health, and re-engaging with learning as School Improvement Plan (SIP) goals for September.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

4.2 Providing instructional support

We engaged in exploring the new Math curriculum through an expectation scavenger hunt. This provided the opportunity to engage with the new curriculum in a fun and engaging manner. We connected our previous practices in mathematics with the new curriculum strands to help staff visualize the new curriculum in their teaching. We also took the time to notice and name the changes by grade in a visual organizer.

2.2 Stimulating the growth in the professional capacities of staff

We renewed our focus on outdoor education opportunities. With a fully developed trail system and outdoor classroom, we had unique opportunities to learn outside and alleviate some of the COVID realities in classrooms.

2.1 Providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff members

Mental health and well-being

Paying attention to mental health and well-being was critical as a leader. COVID added unique stressors to an already difficult time of year, including fear, uncertainty, COVID fatigue, and health and safety concerns. Messaging had never been more important. Acknowledging that everyone's COVID experience was unique, validating concerns, addressing fears, and ensuring that the appropriate structures were planned and in place prior to opening were vital to maintaining staff mental health and strengthening trust.

4.1 Staffing the instructional program

Transparent and honest communication were never more important. Teachers and staff needed to understand what their responsibilities were, how we would help them meet them, and to know that we were providing the safest possible environment to facilitate teaching.

Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – Perceiving Emotions, Managing Emotions, and Acting in Emotionally Appropriate Ways

Critical to meeting public health and Ministry guidelines for re-opening, was ensuring staff had all necessary materials and equipment to meet health and safety guidelines in their teaching. Consequently, I had to do some conscientious budget re-alignment. Budgets are already tight and significant materials needed to be purchased to facilitate the effective implementation of new procedures and increased supervision. This meant ensuring dollars were aligned with new procedures and goals for re-opening. It also meant securing Senior administration permission to engage in deficit spending if necessary and to create a tracking system for Covid related re-opening costs.

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

Launching the re-opening

Once plans were in place, the school administrative assistant and I created a special re-opening newsletter for parents that outlined all of our changes and new procedures and I held a follow up Zoom meeting for parents to attend and ask questions. We utilized

email, Facebook, Twitter, and created videos of key procedural changes in action to communicate with families.

On the first days back, I visited each class and welcomed students back and outlined changes and procedures. During our first two weeks, our entire staff met daily to debrief how procedures were working and provide feedback and create adjustments where needed. This time provided us an opportunity to connect and to make changes where needed on a timely basis. It even provided the occasional laugh too!

Four weeks into the year and our new procedures are running smoothly and meaningful teaching and learning has returned. Despite significant changes to parental and student routines at school, we have maintained confidence and trust and are welcoming back eight of our virtual school students in October.

Our class, school, and playground set up looks different, but the same learning structures are evident and in use. These include learning goals, co-created success criteria, math and literacy strategy walls, student work exemplars and feedback loops. I am back in classrooms noticing and communicating via social media the great learning and engagement that is happening daily. And our outdoor space and learning was featured on the CBC!

It was important to acknowledge that our vision and goals for teaching in learning in our school had not changed. The only thing that had changed was the environment in which we were achieving them. Though change is still happening daily, we have an established process for communicating and operationalizing changes that provides stability and a steady foundation for teaching and learning.

May 2021 Post-Script: Re-engaging and Thinking about the Future

I wrote the first part of this story at a time of high stress and uncertainty that was tempered by a sense of gratitude and optimism. The anxiety I experienced was due to the uncertainty about safety, process, procedures, and students' well-being and learning. I felt gratitude simply for being able to interact with our students and families. My optimism came from re-engaging, learning, and hoping for an end to the chaos COVID caused us to endure. Each day that we moved forward with students in the building – in classrooms, hallways, and outdoor learning spaces – filled once again with laughter, chatter, teaching and learning, our optimism grew, and our uncertainty waned.

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distribution leadership

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

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The second and third waves

Then came the second wave and the Christmas shutdown. This was followed too soon after by the third wave when our local community faced a COVID crisis that resulted in shuttering our classrooms once more. On a more positive note, what had unfolded in the face-to-face months we had between the closures was an intense time of learning, both organizationally and individually. It had been a time for reflection and reconnecting with what really matters in schooling. It was a time for remembering why we became teachers, student support professionals, early childhood educators, administrative staff, and principals.

A time to reflect and rediscover

Our values, beliefs, and hopes about education were revealed and tested. As we struggled to maintain teaching and learning in a remote environment, I recently asked my staff to reflect on these gems about our students and education that had been rediscovered. I invited them to revisit their “why,” their core beliefs, and use them to remain hopeful, engaged, and committed to a bright future. For staff, educational equity and the hope that it promises for all students was identified as a core value.

1.4 Communicating the vision and goals

This deep-seated belief in the opportunities for education to ensure equity was also the root cause of staff stress and concern. The COVID roller coaster of shutdowns, openings, restrictive safety policies, and missed learning opportunities shone a devastating light on inequities among our students – inequities that existed pre-COVID. These are inequities in homes, parental support, technology and internet access, and financial and food security. These were issues that, previous to COVID, our staff had not considered deeply. Now, staff could see that these inequities posed a threat to students’ learning opportunities and exposed students to widening learning gaps.

The first return to face-to-face schooling

In the first return, there was a great deal of concern with identifying and closing these perceived gaps. However, I continued to ask staff to remain focussed on re-building relationships and re-connecting with students. Through re-connecting and learning about their time away from school and their perceptions of the pandemic, we began to rebuild our community.

2.2 Stimulating the growth in the professional capacities of staff

As a leader, a key priority was to assume a stance focused on rebuilding and reconnecting. This was a stance that gave staff “permission” to explore new ways to engage with their students and assess their student performance. It was one in which I emphasized that above all, mental health and well-being had to be placed first.

2.3 Modeling the school’s values and practices

To model this for my staff, I took my own detour from the mandated pathway to re-engaging with teaching and learning by rethinking what our focus would be on our scheduled October Professional Development (PD) day. This day in the past would have been ours to plan and use as a staff to focus on our specific learning needs to support our students.

However, in part due to macro-emphasis on closing COVID gaps and in particular, the introduction of the new Math curriculum, our Board sent us a mandated script and agenda for the day. Although I knew we needed to complete our School Improvement Plan (SIP) and engage in more learning about the new Math curriculum, I felt that our staff needed a mental health and well-being boost first.

Going off script

This meant going off script. For the first half of the morning, I booked a forest therapy walk with registered guides in our community. Forest therapy is a guided meditation in a local forest that emphasizes time, breath, and connection, both with the natural environment and with positive memories and feelings. It concludes with a natural tea ceremony and gratitude recognition. I purchased individual boxed lunches and we returned to the school in the afternoon to engage with the new Math curriculum and the planning of specific SIP goals. The work we accomplished in the afternoon was some of the richest, most engaging PD we had experienced as a staff. We came away with practical and meaningful goals in Math for our students and an excellent picture of where they were at in Math.

This is a sampling of staff feedback on the day:

- “The best PD I’ve ever experienced”
- “I so desperately needed that”
- “Thank you for giving us time and space to breathe”
- “The best experience I’ve had in years”
- “That’s the most connected I’ve felt to my work and myself in years”

Reflecting on what matters most

We thought about what really mattered: students and their well-being, the development of the whole child, our relationships and connections, and our community.

What was the result? Staff looked for ways to allow students to connect with themselves, each other, and nature. They gave themselves permission to stray off script based on their students’ needs and voice. They began to see our outdoor learning space as a place for re-engaging children’s wonder and relationships with school, their peers, teachers, and learning.

We saw that our students had grown in our absence in ways we could not imagine. We learned that they were far more resilient than we ever thought. They had many different

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stories to share and they loved being in the community of others. We discovered that when we focussed on students' mental health and well-being, literacy and numeracy skills progressed at a much faster pace than we imagined. Giving myself and our staff permission to go "off script" when needed was critically important to maintaining learning and supporting well-being.

Sustaining hope and optimism

As remote learning moves into the 10th week in our region, the stresses on families, children, caregivers, and staff have increased. Cracks are again forming, and a sense of desperation has begun to creep in once more. I've shifted my messaging to both staff and our community. To my staff I've asked them to remember how we re-engaged students and values and beliefs that created the optimism and gratitude we felt during face-to-face and to use that to maintain and convey hope.

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

Reaching out to families and community

To our families and community, I continue to ask them simply to remain connected with us. I reach out with supports, some technical, some just morale boosting. Finding technology solutions and helping parents and guardians find a balance between "school" and life at home are some of the ways I try to mitigate inequities.

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

As a school, we've tackled the known inequities, one at a time, on a case by case basis through community supports, communication, and encouraging off-script learning. This has resulted in our students sharing everything from fiddlehead harvesting and recipes to baby chick hatching and animal husbandry. I've kept my messaging open, transparent, and honest and ensure we have regular communication through School Council Zooms, newsletter, and regular updates through email and social media channels.

Above all we keep in mind the lessons we learned and from those lessons we maintain hope and optimism and know that we can tackle challenges when we return.