



Transcript

Creating Thinking Systems Part 6-2:

**A conversation with senior leaders from Trillium Lakelands DSB,
Waterloo Region DSB, and Hastings Prince Edward DSB**



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Usha James 00:03

Hi everyone. I'm Usha James, and this is *Re:thinking education*.

Usha James 00:18

In this episode of *Creating Thinking Systems*, our joint podcast series with OPSOA, the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers Association, we are continuing a conversation that we started with three superintendents here in Ontario, talking about school visits. We started talking to Tina Jones, superintendent with the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board...

Tina Jones 00:48

If I've said I'm going to do something that I will actually do it, I think is really important in building that trust.

Usha James 00:54

Jay MacJanet, superintendent with Trillium Lakelands District School Board...

Jay MacJanet 00:58

To me, the purpose of a school visit is to make the administrator stronger in the role. It's not about monitoring or checking boxes.

Usha James 01:06

And Vida Collis, superintendent with the Waterloo District School Board...

Vida Collis 01:11

This is where an empathy lens always has to be part of our work. They need to be able to see myself as a genuine leader.

Usha James 01:18

After hearing a little bit about Tina and Jay and Vida and where they were in their careers, I invited them to talk a little bit about what school visits have sounded like and looked like for them. When have they been effective or not so effective?

Jay MacJanet 01:35

Just I was in the area, I decided to come and visit, and she said, you should have seen the office scramble, because it wasn't one of my schools, and they had a code word to say that a superintendent was in the building. I don't want them to feel that way about me coming into the school.

Tina Jones 01:50

So I think, okay, I have relationships with people, and now I'm going out to do school visits, and I'm like - there's no training manual. So what does that mean? What did that mean? What was that going to entail?

Vida Collis 02:04

For me? I think of the different types of school visits that we have. Sometimes we're present and it's very focused on an operational issue. Sometimes it has to do in terms of the follow up of a critical event. And when they don't go well, it's, I truly believe it's what Tina was saying, in terms of intentionality, but also distraction.

Usha James 02:21

Okay, let's jump back into the conversation about purpose and intention and presence and vulnerability and trust and pick up where we left off.

Usha James 02:32

Here's the thing that I notice people always ask me, and I think it's part of the work that we do at the consortium is about asking questions and asking great questions. And so people are always asking me what questions should I ask to get people thinking?

Usha James 02:49

And you all know that I don't always think it's about the question. I don't think you can always question people into awareness, although it's important to ask good ones. And so what are some of those routines that you have when you're in a school, when you're talking to an administrator to try to get them focused on and talking about the things that you care about most?

Usha James 03:20

And I'll tell a really quick story. When I was a teacher, I was Jay, you talked about this plethora of versions of classroom walkthroughs, and I don't remember what version it was, but they were some literacy walkthroughs, many years ago - literacy walkthroughs, and I can't remember who was leading them or what the protocol was, but I remember having administrators in my classroom, and then being invited to sit down and do a bit of modeling, and whoever was facilitating said to me - it was a very long question - Usha, what is the criteria that you used to make a determination about X, Y, Z? I honestly, by the time they got to the end of the question, had no idea what they were asking me anymore. And so I have this feeling about when are questions helpful and when do they get in the way? Now, questions are just one of the routines, but I would love to hear about some of those routines that you have that help facilitate that really authentic conversation and collaboration. Yeah, Jay.

Jay MacJanet 04:38

I think this is again, over time, you learn how to be more efficient. I think more intentional. Every week, I put out a week at a glance to my admin team in my region, just to let them know where I'm going to be, to give them an article to think about, and I have to create a like a message that aligns with where we're going as a system, and that's timely for their learning. So part of the to do list would be things operationally like Vida has talked about, but also an agenda of what - when I come on a school visit,

what will we be talking about? So I give them the context before I get there, so that when I get there, we go right into that agenda. So it always is based on data and evidence. We're usually talking about specific classrooms, specific students, and I want that data to be brought to the table so I can look at it and learn with them and understand their buildings better. And then I want to go into the classroom, and I specifically asked them, "What do you want me to see in your interactions to help you get better at classroom walkthroughs?" So I focus on the principle and the interactions, instead of what I see in the classroom. I want them to tell me what they're working on, and then I can give them feedback. So that's helping.

Vida Collis 06:09

I think if two things that I like to do, and I think my portfolio primarily is supporting schools and principals in their work, is I need to do my homework before and after, right? So before I go into a school site, I've reviewed my notes from our last visit. I reviewed the action and to do steps, any new information that has come out about the school, let's say, for example, some of the big data that comes out. I'm coming in, knowing where we left off after the visit, immediately after. And this is where my challenge is, is to summarize my notes so they stay fresh. And I have, just as I did as a principal, as a VP, I have a model for tracking that myself, so I have a go to place for that information.

Vida Collis 06:52

And as well, and if the school leaders that I work with are my classroom, and I learned this when I was working in one of our PLCs, Usha, what are the skills and qualities and look-fors is that I'm hoping for to see in my with my group of administrators on one access and then the administrator, and then after a visit, I do a bit of a check-in, right, to try to - was I seeing that or not, and did that move over time? And so after every visit, after every school official visit, in terms of the school learning and improvement planning, I refer back to that and try to see where shifts or gains have been made and to me, that grounds me. It also is a bit of a trick, because I know I'll lose that information if I've gone to one school and I'm not, I would say, doing that with precision and fidelity immediately afterwards, before I go on to my next one, because I don't want to lose it, right?

Vida Collis 07:52

And so that's where, that's my own time management organizational skills. And the nice thing is that I have a body of information. So when it's me working with that principal on their, let's say their principal, performance appraisal, I have one set of evidence or a data set at my disposal at all times too, right? That tends to ground me, but that's probably maybe just who I am as a learner.

Usha James 08:21

We were just talking about that practice recently, Tina, about that keeping track of with - where are administrators at in their abilities.

Tina Jones 08:31

We were, because it's an area that I continue to refine and really think about again. You know, being my second year, I learned a lot last year and in the PLC about that backwards design what do I want to be different in terms of skills or leadership by the end of June? And so last year, my focus was really on that data literacy. So what skills were administrators - what did they bring to the table around being able

to analyze data and have dialogue around data, and then how was I tracking that and helping them grow in those areas? Right? So that really came out of my startup story, where there was no data on the table, right? So that's why I said, okay, well, by the end of June, this is what I'm hoping to see. And so then I was able to, like Vita sort of monitor and track and think about, break down, what are those skills, right? In that data literacy and so that was super helpful.

Tina Jones 09:41

And so I've been thinking about, how do I continue to grow that a little bit this year and move that past just the data literacy and those leadership actions, and how am I monitoring those? So I've been thinking about that. And, you know, playing around with a couple of formats. Because when I started in the role, I felt like I was just mindlessly taking all these notes, lots and lots of notes. But then I'm like, what's the impact of all the notes? I felt like that straight A student, whoo, I got all my notes done, but the question I had was, to what end, right? So now, the intentionality around what I am documenting and recording, around leadership moves, or commitment to action, or the skills that I'm focused in on in terms of mentoring and coaching for administrators, that's what I'm taking notes on alongside the student achievement and growth, but it feels more purposeful and intentional.

Vida Collis 10:43

And if I could just add one more thing - in terms of the practice, what is my reflective practice as a result? Right? We ask our educators to be, our teachers to be reflective. We ask our administrators to be reflective, if I'm not doing that and modeling it as well... And to what extent do I take my reflection as part of our broader team of superintendents within our board, and the intentionality that is built into our weekly team meetings with the other superintendents in terms of our problems of practice and our own reflections, and where do we need to change and grow? And like, anything else, sometimes it's difficult to do, like any kind of training, but it becomes just part of the norm. And without doing so, I feel like I've missed something.

Tina Jones 11:35

That's a really good point Vida, because I have to walk away then, and I think, okay, I've asked them, I've asked leaders - what's their commitment to action? So, but then I go away and I reflect, what's my commitment to my next leadership move as well, right? So, I am doing the exact - I'm mirroring that process, right? So what's their next leadership move? If we're talking about math instruction and supporting their educators. But then I walk away and say, okay, what am I doing next as my leadership move as well? So really great point.

Usha James 12:11

I'm so glad you started talking about what is happening for you as a superintendent as a result of your school visits, and not just you individually, but you as a senior team. Because I think it would be really helpful for listeners to hear about what are different ways that the districts are beginning to grapple with, senior teams are beginning to grapple with how to make school visits more purposeful and intentional and coherent across superintendencies. I think that's something that we've seen over time, is this interest in greater alignment and coherence, as opposed to - this family of schools is doing this, but this family of schools is doing that.

Usha James 12:57

And so what's happening in your districts that - aiming for that alignment, or what kind of practices do you think are being put in place by your senior teams that that are aimed at making school visits more focused or more intentional? Jay, I don't know, maybe we can start with you.

Jay MacJanet 13:23

Great question. One of the things I think we've been trying differently, I think both individually and as a district, is a more focused approach to supporting schools that need additional attention. We use a quote unquote, a "focus school approach", is what we call it, and that's where a superintendent gives more support to two or three schools above the supports that you would get normally.

Jay MacJanet 13:49

So the theory behind it is when certain schools receive differentiated support for two or three years, and the data would again support moving on from that school, because it'd be sustained improvement. But the idea really is to just provide more intensive, tailored support, rather than a one size fits all approach. We're differentiating for the system, I guess, in a nutshell. So in these schools, we dedicate additional coaching time so system leaders and coaches can work elbow to elbow with teachers in planning instruction. We also look at removing barriers that might get in the way of learning and everything from budget considerations to access to resources on top of the supports that, like I said, are already in place for all schools. And all of this is grounded in research and explicit instruction. Our belief is that - or our direction is that the best way to move the system forward is to really strengthen that tier one instruction in classrooms. So that means giving classroom teachers the tools, strategies and confidence they need to drive the instruction effectively. And if we can build capacity at that level and then support administrators and teachers through focused coaching, we see meaningful and sustainable growth in student outcomes. And it's an approach, I think, that emphasizes both intentionality and practicality.

Jay MacJanet 15:15

Being deeply involved in classrooms, responding to those unique needs of the school, and then ensuring that that work we're doing aligns with research based practices that actually move learning forward. I we have found that as we - it's muddy work, but we are we're finding success that seems to be sustainable. We've increased the last five years, and I think one of the "a-has" this year was that the data we're using now is much more granular than just EQAO. We're looking at screener data. We're looking at fundamental data in math. We're looking at reading assessment data in the older grades as well. We've started making connections through seven to nine, like all of this data infusion, but also the supports that have been put in place, have built a longing for professional development from our teachers.

Jay MacJanet 16:21

When I first got here five years ago, granted, it was coming out of Covid, when we did PD, there was the same 30 people that would come to the PD. And now we just started a focus on SRSD (Self-Regulated Strategy Development to Enhance Reading and Writing) and writing, and we had to offer three extra PD sessions, and it was after school because they just couldn't get enough of it. So that's was a great indicator that we have the system wanting to learn more, and they're starting to trust the system. So that was exciting for us. We know there's still a lot of work to do, but I feel like we feel as a

team that we're on the right track. And, you know, two steps forward, one step back. But the target is always student achievement. So every decision we make comes back to, how is this going to make our students more successful? And when you ground yourself in that, good things happen.

Usha James 17:15

And Jay, when you connect that back - that intentionality, back to the focus school structure or model that you're talking about - I'm just going to get really granular for a second. How many focus schools? How often are you in those schools? So you talked a little bit about differentiating support, like allocation of resources, but also what are the other logistics around it, I guess.

Jay MacJanet 17:48

We have a director that is strong in this, which helps, right? So that's he's speaking from the top, and it filters down to the classroom, the alignment's there. So we've developed a system where our coaches, our instructional coaches, if it's a math priority school or two days a week in a school, if it's a focus school and a math priority school, it's four days in a school. And if it's doesn't hit either of those, it's one day.

Jay MacJanet 18:16

So every school has access to a coach, but we've differentiated the model depending on the needs of the school and the readiness of the school. Some schools, when we first started, just weren't ready as a community yet. The principal had to build a culture of learning before we could get to the supports. So now it went from I don't want to be a focus school to why am I not a focus school, which is a good problem to have, because they see the benefits of having that extra coaching in the building and the resources that come with it.

Usha James 18:49

And what about you? What about superintendents?

Jay MacJanet 18:52

So I have three focus schools that I choose with a discussion with senior team of who gets that extra support, and then I can tell you that my accountability as the director expects that school to move with these extra supports. So I am in that school probably every other week. And I think if you talk about challenges of this work, it's time, because being in a small board, I have a pretty expansive portfolio, but the expectation is I'm in schools, and I'm in schools two days a week at least. So I really have to be efficient with my time in - and say I'm at a - and because of the travel as well, - so say I'm in a different area, I'm planning my time around a school visit within that area, and hitting portfolio expectations as well. So it becomes a rhythm that you have to develop, but it takes time to do that. I'm not saying, knock on wood, that I'm there yet, but I think I'm getting much more efficient in getting into schools and having that impact. And this last year, I was really pleased with my region.

Usha James 20:08

Exciting. Tina, you also have a focus school sort of approach.

Tina Jones 20:13

Yes, we do. So each superintendent has three focus schools, one being a secondary or seven to 12, and then to elementary, K to six or K to eight. And then at our weekly district meetings, as a team, we rotate weekly who's bringing forward a focus school update and conversation. And often that really morphs into a bit of a problem of practice, like, here's where we are, here's what we've been working on. You know, it's a great opportunity. I am heavily involved in the curriculum side of things, but I'm not leading the curriculum pieces. So, great opportunity to ask the superintendent of curriculum services - can I get access, something different in terms of the math resources. So it's really good dialogue around the table to see what are we consistently seeing as a team, or what are we individually seeing in terms of where we're seeing strength or where we might need to see some more supports. I would say yes, I agree with Jay in the in the bi-weekly component.

Tina Jones 21:32

One of the things I had to maybe concede to a little bit this year because of the travel. So my furthest schools are two hours away, and as the weather can interrupt that a lot, what I'm doing is I'm committing getting there, as much as possible. But I've also instituted bi-weekly 30 minute check-ins with my schools. That way, we're still staying connected, and we're keeping the dialogue moving, but, every other week I would be in the school, like in a classroom, but that has sort of been a structure I've had to adopt a bit, because otherwise I would go too many weeks without being connected there. So schools like it, because they're like, okay, 30 minutes, we're in, we're really focused around the dialogue, it can happen whenever in their day that works, and that has been something I've had to adopt. So I don't lose sight, or get off course because the weather or something doesn't allow for me to travel.

Usha James 22:47

You have to be flexible. I hear you. Vida, you started us there, actually, in talking about the senior team and how you're coming together, and what's your district trying?

Vida Collis 22:59

Well, I think part of it is where the school visit falls on the continuum of support in terms of moving work forward for student achievement. And also do the principals in our system, appreciate the why of our approach and the rationale for it, and the logic. We want our kids to understand that why of what they're learning is in the classroom. That extends to all of us. And so when I look at the continuum of support, the why of the work, the moral imperative, clearly, that's a system message, right? And our director regularly connects with our staff on that and in various ways throughout the year.

Vida Collis 23:35

But the what of the work, in terms of how it will transcend and be across our schools, really comes from our monthly family of schools meetings where each superintendent meets with the administrators of their family of schools together for a session of learning one morning a month. And again, geographically convenient that we can do that here. So the theme of the learning for the administrator, in terms of how it relates to school learning and improvement planning, that's the focus of each month.

Vida Collis 24:05

From there, the school visit is one vehicle that we can really impart the how of the work. Another is our principals meet as small groups and as part of their network learning teams to discuss problems of practice. That's one facet of it. Jay spoke extensively the PD that's offered at his board and as ours as well, targeted for our administrators and educators. And then the school visit being positioned intentionally and communicated very clearly to our administrators at the beginning of the year and throughout.

Vida Collis 24:38

The value added of this is that that is the one on one time with your superintendent to talk about the problems of practice that may not be able to be discussed when you're sitting with other principals, or may not come out in a broader group setting. So this is that one element of the toolkit. And then again, the work is for me to amalgamate that information, bring back to the senior table as we think about what is the learning at family of schools for our administrators, so it gives us time to recalibrate. We might think that this is the next thing for the group learning, but maybe it's not. What are we seeing on the floor? What are we seeing in our schools? Do we need to go back to another piece? There has to be some fluidity there.

Vida Collis 25:18

And very fortunate to be part of a school district that is able to operationalize it that way. As an administrator, knowing clearly why this should be valuable, and hopefully is for me, helps, right and with that, when I listen to Jay and I listen to Tina, and the challenges of being in such a vast board, I'm so highly appreciative of where we're positioned, because I don't know how that occurs. It has to be done very creatively, I think, in other parts of our province.

Usha James 25:56

And I love the way that you sort of situated the school visit in that broader constellation of supports. That it doesn't sit as a siloed, discreet strategy. It's actually so integrated with all of the other pieces all of you are talking about. What is the relationship between the school visit and a family of schools meeting, and a principals meeting, where all of the administrators get together. And so really seeing that as a coherent approach, where the pieces come together, and when you see them together, then, yes, it looks like a constellation. It is the Big Dipper, not just the single star that's there and it doesn't just tell a story. It provides wraparound support. And I love that imagery of it.

Vida Collis 26:54

Right, and I think it's part of our role. Do we clearly articulate the why of what we're doing, or for the how that we're doing it and are we transparent in our thinking and process? And I think we've tried to focus a lot of energy in that regard. And I think just as the student in the classroom, we hope that our teachers are doing that for them, right? How are, how are we aligned with that thinking as well?

Usha James 27:27

You know, I think that our listeners will agree - that I think that you've really provided so much, both big picture thinking and a window into what school visits are like and what they mean to you, and also some really practical approaches and strategies that you're using, that you've learned from each other,

that you've brought to the table. I actually am sure that each of you is writing. I can see you writing notes and learning from each other in this space, in this moment, which is what I love about this group.

Usha James 28:08

So I'd like to maybe close inviting you again to sort of think about where you are in your careers, and maybe ask you to name and notice for yourself something you're really proud of, or that you've noticed as an area you've grown in when it comes to engaging with school visits, something that you can look back and say, I have come a ways, even if it's only been in the last two years. This is something I used to do. This is something that I do now, and I'm really happy about that. As educators, as leaders, we find it very difficult to toot our own horn here. And I know you're all very humble, but I'm asking you to sort of pick something that you might say to other superintendents who are listening. This is an area of growth. And I didn't start there, but this is something I've been able to develop. Anyone want to start by taking a stab at that?

Vida Collis 29:24

Well, I'll be giving it from the pre-retired perspective, so I don't know, I might take up the rest of the airtime.

Usha James 29:36

Give us one thing.

Vida Collis 29:37

All right. So I think when I first started in the role, I would sometimes leave wishing I would have asked a certain question, right and left unasked, how unfulfilling that was. And I think - and I truly believe in the work that I'm doing, I'm going to ask the question, right? There's a way to ask something that might be challenging or awkward, but again, when you have a relationship of mutual respect and trust built over time, hopefully and you can be yourself, because there's a way to say, oh, I wonder about this. Tell me more, or what about this? There's a way to approach that. But I don't want to leave the school visit not having asked the question that I think that might be thought provoking, right?

Vida Collis 30:32

But also, in retrospect, when the principal after a visit - maybe it's the next visit, maybe it's a call, maybe it's an interaction where they say, I tried that. I tried that as part of my next move. Because maybe we're spit-balling what the next steps could be. They've tried it, and they've let me know how it landed, or, more importantly, how it didn't land. And what was the next step. That you know, where there's a reciprocal kind of exchange.

Vida Collis 30:59

And I think, you know what? Maybe I made a difference in terms of moving the needle a little bit, right? And so those have been like some of the quiet moments that you kind of think, okay, something resonated, something landed. And now that I see people that are old enough to be or young enough to be my kids going into the role, you know, the future is in the right hands in terms of school leadership and seeing individuals coming into the role I'm super excited about.

Usha James 31:28

Well, that's got to feel so good, I think, and to sort of know where you've been and where you've come to. And thanks for sharing that. But I really appreciate that. Tina from the other end of the spectrum.

Tina Jones 31:44

From the other end of the spectrum. So I will say that when I started, I feel like I was the note taker. I felt like it was what I was supposed to do. I'm supposed to take all these notes. And it felt very surface to me, and I think what I'm most proud of in terms of my growth as a leader in this role and the work alongside administrators and leaders in our schools is to grow all of us together as critical thinkers, and really create that community of critical thinkers and where we can have that discourse and dialogue and truly be curious.

Tina Jones 32:24

And I feel now like, you know, before I just would be writing, but now I feel like I've got my sleeves rolled up, and I'm in there alongside really digging in and working collaboratively with them to think about change and supporting students. So I am proud of that. And you know, it's taken me some time, I think, to find my own stride and realize that, yes, there are clear expectations around what's the purpose of the role, but for me to be able to find my way in that and be really, truly sitting beside leaders in our schools and thinking with them, I think, is what I'm most proud of.

Tina Jones 33:13

And it's exciting when they come back. And when it's not just EQAO results, but I had a message a couple weeks ago, you have to see, and they were sending me pictures of the math learning, like, look at this. I just had an email today that parents are buying Cuisinaire rods for their for their kids, because the administrators leadership in terms of the work, those are the things that you know, keep you going. But I feel like, for my growth over time, it's being able to say, I'm right beside them and in the work with them.

Usha James 33:51

I love it. I love it. That's really exciting. Jay.

Jay MacJanet 33:55

A couple things, I think I would say, alignment with intention. So when you're going in, you have always an intention. And I like what Vida said about them understanding the why as much as you understand the why, why we're doing this work. But I think that the most important thing I've learned in my five years is that I do not - I remember when my director set the expectation that we'd be in schools twice, two days a week, and I looked at my portfolio, and I would say, how do you expect me to be in schools? I have 13 schools twice a week and an enormous portfolio, and be effective in anything I do? And I think in five years, I now understand, how can we not move a system if superintendents aren't in schools? I don't know how it works. I don't know how you can have a feel for your system. I don't know how you can do a Gaps Analysis with all the superintendents when they come together and talk about trends that they see without being in schools.

Jay MacJanet 35:03

And it's to a point now where my executive assistant will say, oh, it's a Jay in school day. He's really happy! Because I love just being in schools. It brings you back to why we got into education. You feel the buzz of the energy of kids and when a school is on the move and you feel that energy, it just invigorates me as an educator. So you always wonder, as you get away from kids, how you can have impact. To me, impact is being in schools, working with, like Tina said, side by side with admin on a focus to get our kids to learn and be successful.

Usha James 35:46

I am so thrilled with how this conversation has gone. I was a little worried. It's two days before the winter holidays. But I know I should not have been worried, because whenever I get the three of you in a room together, I know it's going to be an animated and engaged and thoughtful and insightful conversation. I just love chatting with all of you, and I really want to thank you for being so vulnerable and thoughtful and willing to share and, yeah, thanks for spending some time with us.

Vida Collis 36:26

Usha, I have to thank you. The two years that I was fortunate enough to be part of your professional learning community with Jay and Tina - you know, that probed my growth and thinking, and I knew that when we were meeting, I was going to leave with a different perspective to do for myself. And you had such a great way of pulling the through-line from what each of us were talking about in terms of our practice. And knowing that those sessions would come up really served as a bit of a prompt to step up my game in terms of what I was doing, in terms of my own reflection. And so I thank you and Jay and Tina for that, because it was good opportunity just to find some time and push pause on everything else and expand my own practice.

Jay MacJanet 37:13

Yeah, I want to say it was comfortable quickly. And I think everyone came to the table in a learning stance and ready to be vulnerable. I think that opened the conversation into - we've had great conversations about what each district and board is doing and how it might relate to all the moving parts in our own so it really helps. And I know Usha, you facilitate like no other.

Vida Collis 37:43

At seven in the morning or five or six o'clock at night. Why did we sign up for seven am I don't know, but we did.

Tina Jones 37:52

I echo that 100%. It was the greatest gift being new in a role, to be in a space with others to do this thinking together. It was truly a privilege and a gift to be part of those conversations and really helped me find my feet being the newest in the role. And Usha, you just are masterful at how you create a safe environment for people to want to be in and to openly share it and discuss. So thank you.

Usha James 38:28

Oh, well, it's a mutual admiration society, and I love that we're closing the podcast with lots of gratitude. So thank you again. I hope that you go off and become rested, and by the time people are listening to

this podcast in the new year that everybody is feeling replenished. Thanks so much everybody for being here.

Usha James 38:57

Wow. That was a great conversation, I think, as a leader, being in a school - so if you're a superintendent and you are intending to visit or be in a school setting, or if you are an administrator and you are intending to be in a classroom setting. So in either case, I think that what we heard today might make you think about some steps.

Usha James 39:29

And for me, a first step is to determine your purpose. Really digging into what is your why? What is the reason that you are there? You might have a purpose that's come to you from the district, just as Jay said, the district said that superintendents need to be in schools. But there are multiple different possible purposes. One purpose of being in classrooms, or for superintendents being in schools, is, I think, just to get doors open, to change a culture, from we need a code word because the superintendent has showed up to, this is part of our regular everyday practice. It's normalized. In fact, it's - we're hungry for it in some way, and if that is the purpose, is to change that culture and to open doors, it might affect the way you engage in it. You're going to choose different actions and different practices as a result of that being your intention and your purpose.

Usha James 40:37

A different purpose might be to really gather evidence for yourself, data for yourself, to inform your decision making. So that could be a data gathering exercise. It's a learning exercise for the leader and the superintendents we talked to today were talking about that as well. Is that, how do you use that as an opportunity to say what's happening in the system, trying to get my finger on the pulse of what's happening in the system. Or what does literacy instruction look like in grade three? I actually am not sure, and so I'm going to be in grade three classrooms. Or this administrator is trying something that I don't really know much about, and I want to gather some data on that. I want to experience it for myself. And if that's the purpose, that again, will change the practices and actions you select.

Usha James 41:35

And a third purpose, I think, whether you're in classrooms or in schools, is really about collaborative thinking, collaborative problem solving and we heard that in this podcast as well, is that there is some sort of shared understanding of a challenge that we're stuck on. You don't know what to do with it. I don't know what to do with it, but somehow, by being together and being in it together, and observing together and having conversations about it, somehow we're going to be able to see our way through it. And that will also change practices. So I would say, if you are thinking about how to refine your practices, you're already in classrooms or in schools, and you want to refine your practices, or you haven't been in as much as you would like to and you want to up that game a little bit, picking a purpose is important as a first step.

Usha James 42:35

A second important step is building a shared understanding of that purpose. So making sure that your why is also their why, and they believe in the purpose, and there's alignment in your thinking about it.

That building of a shared understanding, co-constructing that understanding, I think, is important. So how do you do that? If you're a superintendent, where do you co-construct that with administrators? In your family of schools, meetings or when you meet with administrators, or is it a district wide message? But somehow you want to co-construct that understanding.

Usha James 43:16

The third thing that we heard was that we need some routines in place to help us live up to that purpose. Really concrete, practical routines. How often are you going to be in schools or in classrooms? How do you protect that time? How do you block it off? What do you do before? How do you follow up after? How are you documenting in an effective and an efficient way while you're there? So selecting those routines and putting them into place so that they can support the important intentions that you set. I think those are the three steps that I would really consider.

Usha James 44:02

Finally, Vita made this comment about how the school visits are part of a bigger plan. That they are not a standalone strategy, and there are things that a district does, a thinking system does to support administrators in the effort to support student learning, of course, that are akin to whole group instruction. It's the whole group together. It's all of the principals in a meeting. It's full group messaging. It's central professional development opportunities.

Usha James 44:42

And then there are some things that are more differentiated, sort of akin to small group instruction in a classroom. Those are the family of schools meetings, or the area meetings, or the small group principal learning networks.

Usha James 45:00

It's the school visits that are like one-on-one instruction in a classroom. It's about really personalized, individualized coaching, and I think that seeing school visits within that broader constellation mapping - that these are the abilities that we hope that all administrators in our system have, and they're able to enact them in terms of bringing about greater student achievement, student learning, student well-being.

Usha James 45:36

We have all of these different levers, and so when is one-on-one, coaching or instruction the school visit the more powerful way to go. When is it appropriate, versus small group instruction, differentiated learning versus whole group instruction, or having all administrators together for a similar messaging? I think they're all important pieces of a puzzle, but the puzzle doesn't really look like anything unless they're working together. They can really be standalone pieces that end up, as Jay said, more about compliance or more about the show of it, or more about accountability. But to really have an impact in the way that the superintendents were talking about, I think seeing them as integrated and part of an aligned and a coherent approach is really important.

Usha James 46:37

Many thanks for all of you who have joined us today, and I hope that you've enjoyed this episode and also the previous one, and that you've walked away with something that's helping you think about your leadership.

Usha James 46:57

This has been *Re:thinking education*, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium. If you've enjoyed this podcast and you would like to learn a little bit more about what we do at The Critical Thinking Consortium, you can visit us at www.tc2.ca. There are lots of materials on our website that we would love for you to take a look at. We work with partners across Canada and internationally, districts, ministries of education, schools, other nonprofit organizations, in all sorts of ways. And so if you're interested in becoming a partner or an individual member and you'd like to learn a little bit more, we'd love for you to get in touch with us.

Usha James 47:41

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