

Fostering a Positive School Climate: Implementing a Bias-Free Approach

An interview with Barbara Hall, Cecil Roach and Bernard Roy

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that an equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental and recognized internationally as critical to delivering a high-quality education for all learners. It is with this in mind that we focus this issue *In Conversation* on the importance of ensuring a bias-free approach to building safe and accepting learning environments.

For many years, the Ministry of Education has been supporting the work of schools and districts to help them create and maintain positive school climates. This includes the work of the Safe Schools Action Team and subsequent legislative and policy changes, the release of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, implementation of a provincial Parent Engagement Policy, and fostering safe, inclusive and accepting schools. The ministry's renewed goals for education – achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence – further demonstrate its resolve to ensure the success and well-being of every child and every student.

Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide for School and System Leaders, which was developed collaboratively with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, likewise illustrates this commitment. The guide confronts highly complex, sensitive and often contentious issues and provides school and system leaders with essential information and suggested practices for taking a bias-free approach to progressive discipline. It holds the promise of helping us to look within ourselves,

to reflect on and understand our biases and consider their impact on our behaviour, our choices, and our actions.

To support implementation of this guide, *In Conversation* brings together three leaders whose day-to-day work involves helping to ensure equity and inclusion and who recognize the importance of applying a bias-free lens in all our learning environments. Barbara Hall, formerly Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) brings a powerful human rights perspective to the conversation. She is joined by two Ontario system leaders, Bernard Roy and Cecil Roach, who describe some of the ways their districts are putting bias-free progressive discipline into practice using a whole-school approach that recognizes the importance of parents and the wider community as partners.

Together Barbara, Cecil, and Bernard challenge us to consider the relationship between equity and inclusive education, human rights principles, behaviour and discipline. They urge us to work together and act as agents of change to create an education system that reflects the democratic values of fairness, equity and respect for all. I encourage you to consider their ideas deeply, to explore them with your colleagues, and to put them to the test in your own professional practice.

George Zegarac
Deputy Minister of Education



ABOUT BARBARA HALL, CECIL ROACH, AND BERNARD ROY

Barbara Hall, formerly Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), has over 40 years of experience as a community worker, lawyer and municipal politician. Barbara has served as President of the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies, worked with a number of non-profit boards and committees, and has a strong record of bringing diverse groups together to build safe and strong communities.

Cecil Roach is the Co-ordinating Superintendent of Equity and Community Services in the York Region District School Board. In his 33-year career, Cecil has maintained a strong view that – as classroom teachers, school leaders, or as superintendents – we have a shared mission to positively impact the lives of young children. His own personal background as an immigrant to Canada has given him particular insight into the dynamics of immigration and its impact on the achievement and well-being of children and youth.

Bernard Roy formerly Director of Education of the Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (CECCE) has been a teacher, secondary school principal and superintendent of education. He has led many initiatives promoting student success, including the implementation of a new technological vision for secondary schools and 21st century learning. Bernard has been recognized for his leadership on issues of sound management and governance.

BIAS-FREE PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE: WHY & HOW

Your leadership has been instrumental in promoting a bias-free approach to progressive discipline. What are your thoughts on how this work will help us reach our goals as an education system?

BH: What comes to mind first is that it is an enlightened and open-minded approach to discipline that will both challenge and encourage educators to think in new ways about the relationship between human rights, the behaviour of children and youth, the purpose and process of discipline and, of course, school environments and student success. It encourages both innovation and thought leadership which I believe are needed as we work together to strengthen our resolve to make this a reality in our schools and in our communities.

The **Policy/Program Memorandum No. 145: Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour** defines progressive discipline as “a whole-school approach that uses a continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour, as well as a variety of strategies to promote and foster positive behaviours. Disciplinary measures are applied within a framework that shifts the focus from one that is solely punitive to one that is both corrective and supportive.”

BR: I couldn't agree more. Educators need to be aware of the importance of taking mitigating and other factors into account as a critical step in understanding and effectively addressing a student's inappropriate behaviour. We need to provide supports to build their awareness.

To this end *Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide for School and System Leaders* which has been jointly developed by the Ministry of Education and the Ontario Human Rights

Commission (OHRC) will assist us in building understanding and implementing early prevention and intervention practices to support positive student behaviour. It reinforces the need for us to consider the root causes of behaviour and take into account human rights principles always keeping at the forefront supporting high levels of achievement and well-being for all.

Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy

sets out the vision for an equitable and inclusive education system in which:

- All students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected;
- Every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

The **Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 119**, "Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario schools," provides direction to school boards on the review, continued development, implementation and monitoring of equity and inclusive education (EIE) policies. The accompanying *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*, 2014 also provide comprehensive direction to school boards on the development and implementation of their policies. Another important resource is

'**How Do We Know We Are Making a Difference?**', a reflective tool designed to support school and system leaders in their ongoing reflection on how to strengthen implementation of Ontario's EIE Strategy in their schools and boards.

BH: It's also important to acknowledge that implementing a bias-free approach to progressive discipline is another point on a continuum of progress. People in education have been working very hard on these issues. For example, Ontario's Safe Schools and Equity and Inclusive Education Strategies are important milestones. They have

had an impact on the way discipline is implemented and likewise on our attitudes around discipline which previously didn't fully take into account human rights or equity.

CR: I agree – and so it extends beyond discipline. It's also about dealing with the entire learning environment and with the way we can and should prepare children and youth to become well-adjusted, assured and contributing citizens and community members.

Of course we do that by creating and maintaining the kind of positive school environments that are equitable and inclusive. We can't get to equity and inclusive education unless we address very openly and honestly some of the challenges that exist in our schools and districts.

We know from research that students' perceptions of their school climate greatly influence their experiences and their choices about how to behave and respond to the behaviour of others. And from my own experience, when a school has a positive climate, students know it and feel it and tell us about it. This is the value and importance of a bias-free approach to progressive discipline. It is directly related to what we do to prepare accomplished and confident students for their futures.

"Schools must strive to truly become 'partnerships schools' where families and communities are equal partners in relationships that are built on trust and mutual respect. School teams must take an audit of their current circumstances, intentionally reach out to their communities, learn who their communities are, and consciously work with this knowledge to go beyond the limited traditional roles for families and community members. They must also create a positive school climate free from discriminatory barriers and develop an action plan for partnerships that creates a culture of learning and achievement, as well as strong supports for community members and broad deep outreach to the entire school community."

Source: *The Principal as Leader of the Equitable School* (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012)

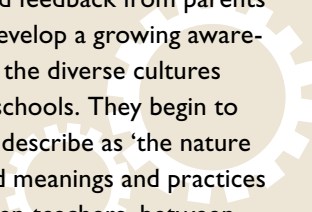
BR: Yes, although getting there isn't necessarily easy. Building a learning environment with an awareness of bias is a complex enterprise. One important consideration that is frequently missed is creating a context in which we feel comfortable acknowledging that we all make assumptions and we all have biases.

We need to recognize that our biases are founded on beliefs and attitudes that can affect our behaviour and actions and have an impact on others. It includes all of us in becoming aware of and managing our own inevitable biases. Certainly, this involves a lot of dialogue and discussion and a great deal of reflection that can ultimately have an impact on our professional judgement as educators.

CR: Definitely. This entails professional learning that often begins with awareness-building on the part of the school district, senior officials, school teams, and the community. The message to parents in our district has always been that their children will perform better when their learning environments are inclusive and bias-free.

What I mean by bias-free is acknowledging that we all have biases. Biases are beliefs and attitudes that can affect an individual's behaviour and actions and may have an adverse impact on students. Biases may be intentional or unintentional, and may have been adopted unconsciously through the influence of the social environment and the media.

The question is, "How can we make bias-free a reality in all schools?" I believe we are, as a system, taking important steps toward realizing this vision of caring, safe and accepting schools and systems even though there is more to do.



"Through conversation and feedback from parents and students, educators develop a growing awareness and understanding of the diverse cultures and communities in their schools. They begin to explore what researchers describe as 'the nature of relationships and shared meanings and practices within the school – between teachers, between staff and students, between teachers and school leaders – and beyond the school, into children's families and communities' (Epstein & Sanders, 2010; Flessa, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004)."

Source: *Parent Engagement: Working with Families/ Supporting Student Learning* (Student Achievement Division – Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012)

What comes to mind as essential to this vision of effectively acknowledging and managing bias is the importance of understanding key human rights principles. What role can schools and districts play?

BH: To begin, we know that many attitudes are formed outside school. And so the family can impart many values. That's unquestionably true. At the same time, children and youth spend a very large part of their lives at school. And so we shouldn't underestimate the significant impact that the attitudes, ideas, and ways of living encountered at school can have on youngsters.

CR: Exactly. The work we do in our schools and in our districts – whether immediately or over the long-term – does have an impact on the entire community. In fact, everyone benefits. We start with staff, children and youth. When youngsters come into a building that is free of discrimination, into a place where they know they'll be treated fairly, where they'll be respected, there's no question that leads to a better learning environment. And of course it leads to a better teaching environment for educators as well.

To achieve this vision, districts and schools strive to foster a professional culture that promotes awareness of the issues, understanding of what needs to change and a shared commitment to action and follow-up by

all partners. This is a process that includes an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement.

In this way we bring concepts related to human rights into the broader community. In our district we've engaged the community in discussions about this. What happens as a result is that the community develops a better understanding of our schools, what they are trying to achieve and what we stand for as a district.

Practicing a bias-free approach in schools and in districts helps everyone and this includes every stakeholder in the community. A bias-free approach is one that respects all people and groups, and reflects human rights principles.

“A wealth of research is available both nationally and internationally on culturally responsive instructional strategies. At the core of these strategies is a) holding high expectations for learning while b) recognizing and honouring the strengths that a student's lived experiences and/or home culture bring to the learning environment of the classroom.”

Source: *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Towards Equity and Inclusivity in Ontario Schools* (Student Achievement Division – Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013)

The Ontario **Human Rights Code** is a provincial law that gives everybody equal rights and opportunities without discrimination in specific social areas such as jobs, housing, services, facilities, and contracts or agreements. The goal of the Code is to prevent discrimination and harassment because of race, sex, disability, and age, to name a few of the 17 grounds. The Code has “**primacy**.” This means that it is more important than most other laws.

Learn more about the Code in **Teaching Human Rights in Ontario: A Guide for Ontario Schools**, a resource that the Ontario Human Rights Council (OHRC) has developed to support teaching about human rights. This guide can serve as a starting point for “lifelong learning about human rights, and the value of respecting the dignity, worth and inclusion of all Ontarians.”

BR: The work that districts have been doing with support from the ministry in promoting professional learning communities that foster collaboration focused on evidence-informed instructional practice has resulted in increased deprivatized practice. Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP) and Professional Learning Cycles (PLC) are examples of approaches schools have found are building capacity of educators to share practice, examine student work and access opportunities to build their instructional skills and knowledge as colleagues and in teams.

And similarly there are evidence-informed practices that have been shown to be effective in fostering an equitable and inclusive environment. Just as we, in our role as educators implement the curriculum, we need to come to a common understanding about how we're going to work together on the kind of school climate we're going to create collectively.

In my experience, that is why building and strengthening relationships with parents and the community – as challenging as it may be – is so critical. We may have a way of doing things in the school that we as educators all understand but have we considered how parents may respond to our decisions and actions? Reaching out to and including parents has to remain a priority in this work.

BH: I'd go further and say that no one aspect of this – the family, the school, the community – has the capacity to solve our challenges around bias – it takes the whole school community.

If we bring children and youth into the process, if we engage parents, and if we involve community leaders we will create a sense of shared interest and of being equal partners. We will also develop a deeper understanding about the stake we all have in this – as residents of communities, as family members, and as citizens in a society. And of course, as professionals in all roles and at all levels in our education system, we have a very important and invested interest in this.

The Ontario Curriculum integrates human rights themes throughout many subjects including Social Studies, History and Geography, Canadian and World Studies, and Social Sciences and Humanities. There are also many opportunities for students to learn about human rights across the curriculum in subjects in a variety of subjects such as English and the Arts.

Why is it important that all educators are aware of and embed human rights principles in their everyday thinking and practice?

BH: Let's begin with the most basic reality. In Ontario we have the *Human Rights Code*. It's the law. It applies to all Ontarians and it applies to the education system as a provider of public services in Ontario.

Beyond these legal requirements, most people in the education system are doing what they do because they want to educate, because they want children and youth to learn, and because they want them to be successful and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Applying human rights principles helps them do that.

We know that there are many examples of how children and youth who are bullied, or who feel discriminated against, may experience more barriers to learning and reaching their potential. That's the reality and as Bernard has pointed out, to take the first step to eliminate these barriers, we need to acknowledge we all hold on to biases and stereotypes that have an impact on our actions.

CR: A human rights perspective also helps us to consider, "what is the purpose of discipline in the first place?" That's a question we certainly need to be focusing on as school and system leaders. Should we, for example, be including goals for bias-free progressive discipline in school improvement plans? And, should we include a similar goal in our Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA)? That's something we really need to discuss, so that we can ensure these concepts are embedded in everything we do to ensure safe and accepting schools and systems. We must be relentless in our pursuit of this.

School boards should review and use the information gathered in their K-12 Improvement Planning Assessment Tool (IPAT) to identify the most appropriate strategies to include in their bullying prevention and intervention plans. Making these linkages assists the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) process, as school boards are required to identify targeted goals and strategies that are focused on improving the achievement of all students. In addition, a well-planned and well executed Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS) helps build coherence by supporting the achievement of goals outlined in the BIPSA and the development of a positive climate in the district and its schools."

Source: *Working Draft: Safe and Accepting Schools Model Bullying Prevention & Intervention Plan* (January 2013)

The *K-12 School Effectiveness Framework (K-12 SEF)* is a self-assessment tool that supports schools in the complex inquiry process and ongoing self-reflection, specific to the indicators each school has identified in their school improvement plan. For example one indicator is that "staff, students, parents and school community promote and sustain student well-being and positive student behaviour in a safe, accepting, inclusive, and healthy learning environment."

The *Foundations for a Healthy School* resource is closely aligned with the *K-12 SEF*. It is designed to help support schools, districts, parents and community partners to work together and develop a comprehensive approach to healthy schools policies, programs and initiatives, as part of ongoing efforts to promote child and student well-being. It includes sample strategies and activities that can to help create a positive school climate.

ON THE GROUND: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

How do we “relentlessly” apply bias-free progressive discipline?

BR: One way of achieving this is by implementing a whole-school approach. A whole-school approach engages all key learning areas, all grades, and the broader community. Students and adults in the school and in the community develop awareness and an understanding of the factors that contribute to safe, inclusive, caring, and accepting school climate.

Imagine students going from classroom to classroom and finding that they are not quite clear – from one room to the next – what’s expected of them. In a whole-school approach, all of the teachers, all of the staff – the lunch monitors, the bus drivers, – all of the parents, everyone involved in the school – knows and understands and is committed to, “This is the direction we’re taking; this is how we are going to get there; and these are the expectations we have of ourselves and others.”

“Self-regulation is not about compliance with external authorities – it is about establishing one’s own internal motivation for adapting to, and understanding emotional and social demands. In fact, for many children, requiring compliance undermines their own abilities to self-regulate.”

Source: *Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program Draft* (2010, p.7)

BH: Absolutely. This brings to mind the mitigating and other factors that come into play in student behaviour. We know that there are many reasons why children and youth act out and break rules and do things that are inappropriate according to the accepted way of being part of the school and the community. So it’s important, when discipline is called for, that those who are applying bias-free progressive discipline approach are aware of the factors that may be contributing to the behaviour.

Even in a school such as the one Bernard describes – where the expectations are clear and everyone understands them – there may still be a youngster

who unintentionally behaves in disruptive ways and another who deliberately behaves in a similarly disruptive way. The difference could have something to do with self-regulation – one has it and the other needs to build it. But in order to figure this out we must look at mitigating and other factors.

The complexity of this work must be acknowledged. We may make mistakes and there will be lessons learned from these mistakes which will bring about improved practices in future. And among lessons learned from my experience is the importance of collaboration and creating a culture of trust.

Mitigating Factors” are:

- The student does not have the ability to control his or her behaviour.
- The student does not have the ability to understand the foreseeable consequences of his or her behaviour.
- The student’s continuing presence in the school does not create an unacceptable risk to the safety of any person.

“Other Factors” as set out in the regulation are:

- The pupil’s history.
- Whether a progressive discipline approach has been used with the pupil.
- Whether the activity for which the pupil may be or is being suspended or expelled was related to any harassment of the pupil because of his or her race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation or to any other harassment.
- How the suspension or expulsion would affect the pupil’s ongoing education. The age of the pupil.
- In the case of a pupil for whom an individual education plan has been developed:
 - i) whether the behaviour was a manifestation of a disability identified in the pupil’s individual education plan,
 - ii) whether appropriate individualized accommodation has been provided, and,
 - iii) whether the suspension or expulsion is likely to result in an aggravation or worsening of the pupil’s behaviour or conduct.

To review “mitigating factors” and “other factors” to be taken into account refer to **Ontario Regulation 472/07: Behaviour, Discipline and Safety of Pupils**.

CR: Yes, the context in which any behaviour occurs is very important. Many of us may once have held a more one-dimensional and a somewhat simplistic view of responding to misbehaviour. The process for addressing misbehaviour appeared to be straightforward and somewhat uncomplicated. A youngster behaved inappropriately and that youngster had to face the same consequences as all the others in the school who had behaved in a similar way.

That said, there were always times when I felt uncomfortable about choosing a rigid and inflexible approach to addressing discipline. And I know for many of my colleagues this approach was problematic. Now we are aware of the many factors that need to be taken into account. For example, context matters. It matters whether children and youth are growing up in an urban or a rural setting, or whose families are living in poverty or who are members of a particular cultural community with different worldviews or have experienced marginalization because of their sexual orientation. We also know that it matters whether students are of Aboriginal heritage.

BH: I would add that, on a more individual basis, we also have to remember that a child or youth who has been discriminated against – maybe bullied as an example because of race, religion or disability – that child may strike back in defence. That’s a very different thing than the behaviour of a child or youth who sees violence as a way of routinely dealing with life issues. Both of these situations must be responded to appropriately.

“Leading by example, or modeling, is associated with ‘authentic’ approaches to leadership. Modeling can serve to demonstrate such productive practices as transparent decision-making and such positive dispositions as confidence, optimism, resilience and consistency between words and deeds. To be an influential model, however, leaders need to be highly visible ... when leaders serve as models of appropriate behaviors and attitudes they help build trust and respect among their colleagues. Being a visible presence ... also helps nurture a safe, welcoming environment for students, parents and other community members.”

Source: *The Ontario Leadership Framework 2012 with a Discussion of the Research Foundations* (Leithwood, 2012)

So how do we bring this change about as leaders, at a system level and at a school level? What do we know about what works?

BH: What stands out as very important is that leaders walk the talk. We need people leading by example at every level of the system – the administrative assistant in the front office, the educator in the classroom, the principal in the school, and the senior leaders within the district. That’s truly how we communicate the importance of these issues – through our own ideas and our own behaviour.

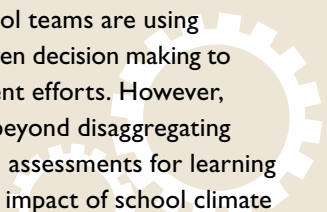
CR: We know we live in a society where discrimination exists. We all have to speak very openly about stereotypes, about prejudice, about discrimination. In other words we need to confront power imbalances. We can’t speak about these things in muted tones. And we may need to have some courageous and learning-focused conversations as co-learners. For example, our evidence demonstrates that students from some identifiable groups have lower achievement levels, I’m going to speak openly about that, and work with them and others to problem solve how we’re going to better support them.

Ideas Into Action: Exploring Five Core Leadership Capacities – Engaging in Courageous Conversations and ‘Having Courageous Conversations’ (PW2K # 6)

provide research insights and practical strategies and tips focused on deepening our understanding of learning-focused, often difficult conversations – what they are, why we need to have them and how we improve how we engage in them.

BH: Right, and that kind of open dialogue leads to a sort of tipping point – what Malcolm Gladwell describes in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* as that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. And it is school and system leaders who are going to get us to that point. It is leaders who will make it clear that this is important, that this is a priority, and that there are opportunities for conversation, opportunities for feedback on how well we’re doing, opportunities

for professional learning to improve what we're doing and how we are acting.



School leaders and school teams are using evidence-based data-driven decision making to guide school improvement efforts. However, discussions need to go beyond disaggregating standardized testing and assessments for learning data to also address the impact of school climate on student achievement. School climate is not an intangible; it deserves serious attention in the effort to improve student achievement. We need to ask ourselves: "Am I responding to the physical, cultural, spiritual, emotional, social, and intellectual needs of the learner?" And we need to be able to answer, "Yes" to all facets of that question. Careful and regular monitoring of school climate is an essential exercise in ensuring that we continue to remove all barriers to student learning and create a learning environment that is permeated with the principles of equity.

The Principal as Leader of the Equitable School
(Ontario Principals' Council, 2012)

BR: To bring all of this into reality, on the ground and in our practice, we need to start with a very clear vision. We need clarity. We need to know where we want to go. And then with collaboration and problem-solving, move toward that vision. There will be challenges – some bigger than others – but we have to believe that, as a community of professionals along with our community partners working together, we can find solutions. As an important part of this process we need reliable data to help us decide where to focus our attention and allocate our resources; for example, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAQO) data and school climate data.

CR: And we need to put this into action, first of all by including it in our professional learning plans and then by incorporating it in our Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) and our Board Leadership Development Strategy plan (BLDS). It needs to be a lens that we use to view all of our policies and practices. It can't be viewed as an isolated piece.

Once we can understand and view this information in a coherent way, aligned with school and district "smart" goals or theories of action for improvement, then leaders will be better able to track the impact of the interventions and supports that are being applied to address improved student achievement and well-being.

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), for example, includes maintaining a safe and healthy environment as an essential leadership practice. The OLF also provides evidence-based examples to show what this practice looks like when enacted. For example, one way leaders put this into practice is by communicating standards for non-violent behaviour and upholding those standards in an equitable manner. Other ways cited in the OLF include empowering staff in the school to play a leadership role in promoting a positive school climate and modelling appropriate behaviour, developing with the input of staff and students, processes to identify and resolve conflicts quickly and effectively, and providing opportunities for staff and students to learn about effective conflict resolution strategies.

And one more strategy also proven in the research is the importance of sharing those practices that are having a positive impact on improved outcomes for students, between and among schools and between and among districts.

You have referenced a whole-school approach and how it matters in fulfilling the vision of a bias-free approach to discipline. What is the role of leaders?

CR: First I think building a whole-school approach begins at both the system and the school levels of leadership. For me, it's a way of thinking about schools and districts as multidimensional and interactive. It also implies change that involves staff and all members of the community working together. Questions we need to ask ourselves include: what does a whole-school approach look like in the everyday reality of schools? Do we have commitment on the part of school leaders and staff to ensure a bias-free learning environment in their schools?

And then there are some key questions we need to ask in assessing the extent to which a whole-school approach is in place.

Are equity and inclusive education principles reflected in professional development opportunities? Do children and youth from cultural communities in the neighbourhood see themselves reflected in the school? Do children and youth see themselves reflected in classroom displays, on the walls of the school, in the resources offered by the school, in instruction, in what's being learned? How is the wider community being included in the life of the school? How effective is the involvement of school councils? Do parents know that we care about equity and inclusive education, that it is important, and that it matters? How are child care programs and family support programs being included in the daily life of the school? How are programs and services for children and families being integrated to ensure seamless access?

These are some of the questions we should be asking ourselves as we assess whether a whole-school approach is evident.

“The school climate may be defined as the learning environment and relationships found within a school and school community. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted, and actively promote positive behaviours and interactions. Principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded in the learning environment to support a positive school climate and a culture of mutual respect. A positive school climate is a crucial component of the prevention of inappropriate behaviour.”

Source: **Policy/Program Memorandum No. 145, “Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour”** (December 5, 2012)

“A whole-school approach is an evidence informed-practice which engages all key learning areas, all grades, and the wider community. Students and adults in the school and the wider community develop awareness and understanding of the factors that contribute to safe, inclusive, caring, and accepting school climates. All aspects of school life are considered, such as curriculum, school climate, teaching practices, policies, and procedures.” Learn more in **‘A Whole-School Approach to Promoting a Safe, Inclusive, and Accepting School Climate’** tip sheet.

BR: I would add that a whole-school approach is all-encompassing. And so we also have to take into account the power of peer relationships. Children and youth have a profound effect on the culture of the school. Having an authentic whole-school approach really comes down to asking ourselves, “How do we want to live and learn together?”

Everyone in the school has a role to play in promoting a whole-school approach to creating and maintaining a positive school climate including, parents and school community.

Consider bullying as an example. Other than the primary people involved who are intervening, all the bystanders and the other adults in the school have a role to play. We need to talk about bullying behaviours and about roles and responsibilities everyone has in preventing them and intervening when they happen. We need to understand bullying in the context of power relationships and recognize that students who are marginalized are more often bullied. We need to work with children and youth to help them develop strategies including the language they can use if they feel bullied.

We need to show them how to deal with bullying behaviours. We also need to teach bystanders about their roles and responsibilities and coach, give them opportunities to practise responding and guide them with some language, “If you are a bystander, this is what you can be saying and doing.”

We've learned that schools help prevent bullying by empowering students with the awareness, skills, relationships, and opportunities they need to prevent bullying. Some ways that schools do this is through role play and open classroom discussions about bullying and by using educational resources to promote social awareness and socio-emotional development, specifically by emphasizing conflict resolution and perspective taking.

One of the biggest challenges for youngsters is the silence and sense of isolation they experience in not knowing what to say or do about being the target of bullying. They may not feel safe or confident enough to talk to an adult or they may think that the adults aren't going to do anything. This is why it is so important that we create a culture that encourages bringing these thoughts and feelings out into the open through conversation in a safe environment.

BH: And of course this extends to the broader community as well. There need to be opportunities for listening to and learning from the community. School staff must not only work with parents but also with other institutions including the police or regulators within government and within the relevant ministries.

And certainly, schools have to deal with the broader community in response to public reaction to events in the school. When a story about an incident appears on the front page of the local newspaper, it takes on a whole new dimension that can have an impact on the outcomes not only for the students, staff and families involve, but also for the reputation of the school and board. Public responses need to be offered with balance and sensitivity, and with considerable care to ensure that comments and positions will not unintentionally do more harm to vulnerable students and families. Working collaboratively with mental health professionals such as the district Mental Health Leader is a helpful strategy. And so, it is critical to engage the whole community in understanding human rights including the principles, policies, and practices that are being applied when behavioural issues arise.

“There are many ways parents make a difference in their children’s success at school. Parents who talk with their children about their day at school or who make sure there is a quiet place to do homework or who serve on school councils or who volunteer on school trips are all examples of engaged parents. Parent involvement that is focused on student learning has the greatest impact on student achievement. Leadership expert Ken Leithwood, in fact, has suggested we need to think about shifting our focus from ‘how to get more parents into the school to how we can support them at home,’ where he says, ‘half of the achievement we’re responsible for as educators happens’.”

Source: *Parent Engagement* is one monograph in the *Capacity Building Series* produced by the Student Achievement Division to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools to provide successful strategies for working with families to support student learning.

Students whose learning is supported at home are more successful in school and stay in school longer. The Council for Ontario Directors’ of Education (CODE) has developed the *Parent Tool Kit* to support the work parents do as the first and most important teachers of their children. *Building Healthy Relationships*, the newest addition to CODE’s tool kit, includes a series of five booklets that provide parents with strategies to help their children develop healthy relationships.

We All Belong is another useful multimedia toolkit that Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA), a Francophone agency that serves French- and English-speaking schools and communities, has designed for parents and schools to help foster parent engagement and help prevent bullying.

CR: It's important to mention too that we have a variety of ways to assess parent and community engagement. For example, attendance at a school council meeting is just one measure. There are many parents who show up regularly and others who want to be there but can't because of work schedules or other commitments. So we first need to be sure that we are reaching out and communicating by every means possible so parents have access to school information. Not only this, we want to ensure that all parents feel that they have a voice in school matters.

We also need to look for ways to get our message into the community. Community centres and places of worship can provide opportunities to help us communicate what schools are doing to support bias-free progressive discipline.

BR: Added to this are the many indirect ways that schools communicate to parents that our schools are safe and inclusive and have positive school climates. Parents who are visiting the school can see visible evidence in the school. They observe us interacting with their children in a caring and supportive manner when we draw attention to behaviour and make suggestions either about how to improve it or to recognize it as positive. In addition, our district has developed resources for parents so that they can use similar strategies at home to reinforce what's happening at school.

The Ministry of Education has developed English- and French-language video resources and viewer guides to show how K-12 educators are supporting student learning about mental health and well-being, including building supportive learning environments, using the Ontario curriculum. These resources can be used to stimulate discussion and thinking about planning instruction to support learning about mental health and addictions, as part of professional learning for educators.

Source: EduGains link to these resources to be added

MOVING FORWARD: FROM VISION TO REALITY

Given that this entails culture change which in itself is an adaptive challenge, how do we successfully make the transition to ensuring that safe and accepting school environments are the norm?

BH: Any kind of adaptive challenge requires that people adopt new attitudes and learn new ways of behaving. And so, one thing we know for certain is that the time and effort needed is going to vary from organization to organization. In human rights work, we always want to win the hearts and minds of people who are engaging in discriminatory behaviour. We want them to understand why their behaviour is biased, how it puts up barriers for people, how it is disrespectful, and how it makes the individual being discriminated against feel.

And so our goal is to help them achieve that understanding. Because once that understanding has been reached and a change in attitude is observable in words and actions, then we are unlikely to see that person engaging in that kind of behaviour again.

Implementing bias-free discipline requires an understanding of key human rights principles: human dignity, substantive equality, power imbalance, individualized approach, impact – not intent, removing barriers, historic/ongoing systemic disadvantage, and intersectionality. These include rights and obligations that have been articulated through a broad interpretation of the Code and set out over the years in provincial case law and policy. Learn more about these principles in the [*Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide for School and System Leaders*](#).

BR: As Barbara points out, different organizations will be at different stages of readiness in making this transition and will need to assess their starting points. In our district, for example, getting everyone on board is an ongoing challenge. The leadership of the principal and vice-principal is crucial in developing awareness and understanding that results in commitment to the changes that may be needed even though some staff members are already dedicated to the work. Once all staff begin to see the impact of these changes on school climate including a reduction in inappropriate behaviour, their commitment will be strengthened and will grow to include others.

A Comprehensive Toolkit for Creating Safe, Accepting and Inclusive Schools is a handbook that offers a continuum and checklist approach to help school leaders get started with establishing and maintaining a positive school climate. Chapter 3 provides a “stages of change model” for bringing about safe and accepting schools and includes assessment and action planning tools to support data-informed decision making. Each stage in the change process which includes “developing awareness,” “planning and responding,” and, “educating and leading,” differs from the previous stage in terms of readiness to take action.

Visit the Institute for Education Leadership’s (IEL) **Leading Safe and Accepting Schools Project (LSAS)** website for a full range of resources.

BH: Related to the challenges of creating a positive school climate is the reality that there are often changes in staff composition over time. Added to this change in personnel is the movement of families and their children who come and go from schools each year.

So the professional learning and other supports that are provided in one year must be offered on a continuous basis as the need is identified. And that begins with looking at who we are as an organization. Who is a part of the school community? What is the impact of our bias if left

unchecked? And how and when do we need to examine our current policies and practices to ensure growth and responsiveness to the school environment?

“When they [children and youth] have relationships and when they have a sense of connection, their stress hormones and cortisol are lower. And when cortisol is lower, the learning parts of the brain are much more accessible. We know that parenting makes a huge difference, not only in how well children and youth do in school, but also in how well they will be able to develop relationships with others, how well they will deal with loss, how resilient they will be, and so on. The parenting relationship is the most important relationship as a foundation and that’s why as communities we need to be paying a whole lot more attention to young families who are under so much pressure and stress. But support can come from caring adults in any context, family, school and community.”

Source: **Understanding the Whole Child and Youth – A Key to Learning. An interview with Dr. Lise Bisnaire, Dr. Jean Clinton and Dr. Bruce Ferguson** (In Conversation, Spring, 2014)

CR: I believe that a critical dimension of this entire process is the quality of relationships. Teachers need to have positive relationships with their students and their families. School leaders need to have positive relationships with staff and with students and their families. So in addition to the policies and practices we also need to pay attention to the human element. We want children and youth to know that we care about them, and we want them to feel safe and included – regardless of their social identity.

They may be from diverse communities. Their families may be faced with the challenges of poverty. They may be experiencing mental health problems to mention a few possible scenarios. The school is a place for all children and youth irrespective of any differences. The school is a place where they all belong and they feel that they belong.

BH: This is so true and it's true above all because of course all children and youth are unique and their differences need to be taken into consideration when you are addressing their behaviour. You can have checklists and other ways of monitoring and tracking behaviour but there isn't an iron-clad constant. There has to be an individualized component to understanding why the behaviour occurred – what are the root causes? These understandings will help educators identify the disciplinary measures most likely to address the behaviour effectively and the resources most likely to provide the student with constructive ongoing support.

And I'd also mention that this isn't about shaming and blaming. It's about acknowledging that something has occurred, and then taking appropriate action. I mean the best thing – the preferred thing – would be for us to recognize our own bias and change our behaviour, as I mentioned earlier. But in some cases that may not happen for a long time or it may never happen at all. We have to ask ourselves why we're responding to a particular situation in the way we are. Is it our biases that are shaping our behaviour? And if this is the case then we need to change it so students and families are supported in the best possible way.

“Each school must have in place a safe and accepting schools team responsible for fostering a safe, inclusive, and accepting school climate that should include at least one student and must include at least one parent, one teacher, one non-teaching staff member, one community partner, and the principal. An existing school committee (e.g., the healthy schools committee) can assume this role. The chair of this team must be a staff member.”

Source: *Policy/Program Memorandum No. 144 Bullying Prevention and Intervention*

Regular monitoring of school climate is essential. The Education Act requires boards to collect information by conducting school climate surveys with staff, students, and parents at least once every two years. This can help schools:

- Assess perceptions of safety – from students, parents and school staff
- Make informed planning decisions about programs to help prevent bullying and promote safe and inclusive schools
- Determine the effectiveness of their programs on an ongoing basis
- Build and sustain a positive school climate.

Results of school climate surveys inform the development of **Bullying and Prevention and Intervention Plans**, including the selection strategies, practices, programs, etc. A pre- and post-evaluation strategy is critical.

CR: Our school-based safe and accepting schools teams which include parent members are essential to supporting this work. Having these teams in every school is mandated but school and system leaders must make sure that these teams are knowledgeable and effective. This means providing professional learning that builds understanding on a range of topics and themes to include factors that influence school safety and school climate to policies and procedures and bullying prevention strategies.

So as Barbara mentioned, we need to provide the supports as a system that will ensure that these capacity building needs are met.

BH: I don't think, ultimately, there's a single image of what this looks like in practice. In fact, it involves trying to understand your own organization, and providing opportunities for input from the people involved in a non-judgmental way. We need to hear different points of view rather than just taking things at face value.

And we need to ask a lot of questions – the kinds of questions we see in the scenarios that are part of the *Bias-free Progressive Discipline in Schools – A Resource for School and System Leaders*. For example, the rules may say that we do not condone aggression

between students. But what are the possible reasons this aggression is arising? What information and what mitigating factors should be considered when a youngster is sent to a principal's office. What information will provide insights into the root causes of inappropriate behaviour? What supports and interventions can be provided?

There are many more questions to keep in mind but above all we need to give our children and youth the opportunity to tell their stories.

As we move along this road, presumably we need some means to gauge our own success. How can we monitor and assess our progress?

BH: Commenting very generally, I'd say there are two ways we can do that. The first is through the use of data. Which youngsters are having problems? Who is being disciplined? How do the experiences of people in one identifiable group vary from those in another identifiable group? The second way is through active listening, as I've alluded to – giving people opportunities to talk about how they feel and give and receive feedback on how they are reacting to a particular situation.

“Schools begin to change only when leaders use equity as a lens through which they recognize the disparities that exist between students who are well served in the system and those who are underserved. Equity is not about treating everyone the same. Students, families, and communities are not a monolithic group, and we must advocate, lead, and keep at the center of practice and vision the issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historical forms of marginalization.”

The Principal as Leader of the Equitable School
(Ontario Principals' Council, 2012)

CR: We've actually taken fairly substantial steps on the data side of things. We've established right in our Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) what it is we need to know. One example is the percentage of students who feel respected and safe and supported in school – and we've established goals informed by this

information. And so over time, we can capture our own progress toward those goals. We have been using current census data and, of course, we have our student achievement data. We have school climate survey data, and we're about to collect demographic data as well. And that supports the anecdotal knowledge we already have about some of the issues we need to address.

We know about the challenges our students and their families who are newcomers face. We know some of the challenges our students who are living in poverty face. We are aware of the challenges faced by an increasing number of students from same sex families. We know some of the challenges of students in other identifiable groups also face. Our aim is to produce reports that not only tell us the numbers – how many suspensions did we have this month? We want to know what the story is behind the numbers. Who are these students who are repeatedly being suspended? And with this knowledge, how can we address the problem?

BR: We have also taken a data-driven approach that is similar to the approach Cecil has described. The safe and accepting schools team plays a very important role in this. The team not only examines the data but also explores and recommends changes to our interventions that will alter that data picture over time.

THE BOTTOM LINE: SERVING CHILDREN & YOUTH ... SERVING SOCIETY

Our children and youth will, of course, have strong points of view on these issues. What are they telling you?

CR: It's very clear what children and youth want. They want to be heard. They want to know that their voice is important. They want to know that they are respected. They want to know they are accepted. They also want to know that their input is reflected in the school and if not they want to know why this is the case. This might be a big change for many of us as leaders, but the overall message is clear: talk less and listen more.

BH: Both children and youth have a very clear sense of what's fair and what isn't fair. And they have a very important perspective on whether things are working well and what needs attention and should be improved. They have great instincts about people, in particular people who say one thing and do another. And so, if we are to help them in achieving their goals, we need to listen and show them that we understand their viewpoints. Students play a big role in solutions to our challenges. They bring wisdom and understanding to the table. They can be real allies in effecting change when we reach out to them and respond respectfully to their thoughts and opinions.

The **Ontario Minister of Education's Student Advisory Council (MSAC)** asked students to SPEAKUP and they identified the following **nine indicators** of schools that engage students and ensure that all voices are heard. They would:

1. Have activities outside the classroom
2. Help students learn life skills
3. Offer a socially inclusive environment
4. Be an academically inclusive environment
5. Empower students to speak their mind
6. Allow students to give feedback on learning experiences
7. Keep students informed
8. Provide a high-quality education
9. Encourage eco-friendly practices.

Read ***Understanding the Whole Child and Youth – A Key to Learning*** (In *Conversation*, Spring 2014) to deepen understandings about child and youth development and their implications for building and maintaining a positive learning environment.

BR: That's a very good point. We talk about human rights and how we must take them into account in our day-to-day leadership practice. But the talk isn't enough. It is relationships that really matter – how students feel, how adults behave toward and regard students, and similarly how students act toward and respect adults. And students can give us those answers. How do you feel about your school? How

confident are you that the school, hallways, change rooms, washrooms, and school yard are safe and secure? How do adults interact with you and others in the school? How helpful are the adults when you go to them with a problem or when they see you in difficulty? Do you feel that the adults in the school care about you? Do you feel that your voice counts?

CR: Certainly, we know from our school climate surveys that students feel issues of harassment and discrimination are sometimes not handled properly by schools. Students have told us that we're not picking up on all the issues of discrimination and bias. Sometimes students think that there is an apparent lack of fairness and a lack of transparency in terms of how discipline is administered, and they feel that some groups of students receive more than their share of discipline. That's what students have said, very clearly.

Stepping back to a broader, more societal question: can we in fact achieve these goals in our diverse society? How realistic is it to believe we can make progress?

BH: Without question, the answer to that is candidly and unmistakably, "Yes, we can." There are many, many examples of attitudes in society that have changed over time. Today, we enjoy and assume that there will be diversity among our colleagues, friends, and family members and all are equal and full members of society, safe to express the full range of their identities. We are in a culture shift that recognizes that diversity is a contributor to success.

Now we know it's not easy to make these things happen and that our society is always changing. It's changing in terms of diversity. It's changing in terms of our broad values. It's changing in terms of the use of social media. It is ever-changing on so many fronts. So we will always have to be continuously open to learning and adapting and knowing that the work will never be done. This is how we will make progress!

"Ontarians do not hold prejudices in their hearts. I want kids to feel that, as they grow up, and understand what a gift it is to live in a place where anyone can be premier."

Source: Premier Kathleen Wynne (***University of Toronto Magazine***, Autumn 2014)