



UNLEASHING POTENTIAL, HARNESSING POSSIBILITIES:

AN ODYSSEY OF CREATIVITY,
INNOVATION & CRITICAL THINKING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Creativity, Innovation and Critical Thinking

A New Imperative

Today's leaders in business, government and not-for-profit organizations are increasingly calling for creativity, innovation and critical thinking in employees, volunteers, community leaders and citizens. This presents an exceptional and unprecedented opportunity for educational systems to not only step up and answer the call, but to also research and determine exactly *how* we can best help learners of all ages to become the creative, engaged, critical thinkers required for their future.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) has been a leader in this discussion and has invited a number of critical thinkers in education to join us in this conversation. For example, Sir Ken Robinson, Professor Emeritus of Education, University of Warwick, says educational systems were originally created to meet the requirements of the industrial economy. Like several of his peers, Robinson believes we have now moved into what is being called the Creativity Age, and we must rethink the current educational structure to make education relevant in today's world¹.

The big question is how society in general, and educational systems in particular, can make this shift to creativity, innovation and critical thinking. Ontario and the OCDSB began making this transition in classroom instruction a number of years ago, but there is still much to be discovered and learned. At the OCDSB, this transition has required an entire organizational shift. The organization has taken the opportunity to "lead the way" in finding answers to the query: "Under what conditions do healthy and creative individuals and organizations flourish?"

Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities is the action research paper that provides a snapshot of the OCDSB's seven-year journey, working in collaboration with a variety of educators, researchers and stakeholders to understand creativity, innovation and critical thinking, and the conditions that allow these to flourish.

The OCDSB believes that this work will have a significant impact on improving student achievement and well-being. This work is rooted in the belief that the more the organization recognizes, values and taps into the creative and unique capacities of everyone within and connected to the OCDSB family, the greater the opportunity to reach and teach all of the students in our care. This is the imperative in fostering a truly engaged and creative approach to learning and to individual and organizational health.

This is a living document, and regular updates will be shared at www.leadthewaytcreativity.com.

The OCDSB Journey is Leading the Way

The impetus for this report began in 2005, when an OCDSB Leadership Study revealed that some employee groups within the organization felt disconnected and undervalued.

A dedicated effort was initiated to change and improve the situation. First, the OCDSB developed a Leadership Narrative and Principles of Creative Leadership, both focused on shaping the culture of the District into a more positive environment—one that encouraged and supported the ideas and creative capacities of every person in the OCDSB family. The Leadership Narrative challenges individuals to think of leadership not in terms of positional authority, but in the way in which people can positively influence and motivate those around them. The focus of the Principles of Creative Leadership is to engage the array of diverse talents and abilities of everyone throughout the organization.

To this end, the OCDSB altered the structure of its leadership initiatives through a dynamic Lead the Way campaign, to ensure more inclusive opportunities for involvement of all employees, parents and community members. In short, the OCDSB has fostered creative engagement throughout the organization, encouraging ideas to emerge from all employees and stakeholders.

In 2009, the OCDSB also started to look more deeply into the implications of imagination, creativity and critical thinking at the school and classroom level. Educators within the organization realized that effective instructional practices also needed to foster the diverse talents and abilities of every learner as a "community of thinkers" in the classroom and school. To this end, an enhanced focus on instructional strategies (such as differentiated instruction to appeal to different learning styles, for example) has provided more authentic, engaging, joyful learning environments for all students.

This dual strategy to foster creativity across the organization and in our teaching and learning is central to the OCDSB's plans to improve the achievement and wellbeing of all students in our care.

An Expanded Definition of Creativity

To begin the journey, the organization first needed to define creativity. The research identified that for an idea to be considered creative, it must be original, have value, and be acted upon.


Our definition of creativity includes appreciative inquiry

At the OCDSB, we've expanded the definition of creativity to include a fourth factor: appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry expands creativity beyond the boundaries of problem-solving to "...a strength-based, capacity building approach to transforming human systems toward a shared image of their most positive potential."²

In other words, creativity is usually seen as a tool to solve problems. Adding appreciative inquiry to the definition breaks away from the problem-centred view and inspires the use of creativity to focus on discovering "what could be" through transformation and change.

¹ Sir Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. (The Penguin Group, 2009)

² Frank J. Barrett and Ronald E. Fry, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity* (Taos Institute Publications, 2005).



As the OCDSB continues on its journey, its definition of creativity includes something that:

- is original, new, innovative;
- has value or the capacity for effectiveness;
- is or can be practically implemented or created; and
- can be used to solve problems or has applied appreciative inquiry techniques to catalyze positive transformation and change.

The Conditions that Allow Creativity to Flourish

An examination of global research in the growing field of creativity revealed seven key conditions essential for the fostering of imagination and creativity. These included: embracing creativity as an organization; understanding the critical connection between diversity and creativity; recognizing that good ideas can come from anywhere—within, or outside of an organization; providing permission to experiment and fail; creating a balance between autonomy and structured processes; embracing new forms of leadership; and understanding the need to create fun, meaningful environments.

The OCDSB also Conducted its own Research

The OCDSB conducted an extensive review of current studies and expert opinion, and recognized there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can be applied across all organizations to foster a creative environment. Moreover, the District has its own unique set of requirements, challenges and opportunities to address. The District's research was conducted under four main initiatives:

1. **The OCDSB Report on Leadership Survey (Fall 2006)**
This survey provided a better understanding of how leadership is viewed and practiced within the District. The results helped determine next steps to support and foster a district definition of leadership and exploring leadership practice.
2. **The OCDSB 2010–2011 Employee Census and Student Survey**
In 2010–2011, the district undertook an employee census and a comprehensive student survey. These two initiatives collected valuable data which seems to uniform our work. This not only supports our leadership work, but is also critical to our diversity and equity framework.
3. **Call for Creative Initiatives**
With a goal to begin building and celebrating a library of best practices, a request was sent out across the District asking for examples of creativity happening in classrooms and at all levels of the District. The response was outstanding, and these submissions will soon be posted to the www.leadthewaytcreativity.com website.
4. **The OCDSB Lead the Way Campaign and Events**
The OCDSB has hosted several significant events to foster and support imagination, creativity and innovation, including opportunities to participate in workshops and hear from renowned keynote creativity experts such as Sir Ken Robinson, Daniel Pink and Sir John Jones. These events are attended not only by employees, but also by students, parents, community members, employers and representatives from many stakeholder groups, and have provided a forum to conduct more research.

At each event, participants were asked: **What are the conditions under which healthy and creative individuals and organizations flourish?**

Once the results of this research—literally thousands of submitted ideas—were compiled, recorded and categorized, participants were invited to recommend ways that these conditions could be implemented.

Finding the Common Conditions

The OCDSB research identified the following conditions for fostering healthy and creative individuals and organizations: a safe and positive environment; time to create; autonomy and empowerment; respectful and trusting culture; open communication, feedback and recognition; methods/tools/resources supported by professional development; leadership; purposeful environment; teamwork and collaboration; and, passion.

Putting the Research into Action

In addition to providing input on the conditions that foster and support creativity, participants also recommended ways that these conditions could be implemented. Thousands of ideas were submitted, and these have been categorized into i) actions that could easily be implemented over the short term or immediately and ii) actions that could be implemented over the long term.

The learning gained from the Lead the Way initiative is now embedded in the OCDSB's 2011–2015 Strategic Plan, with a focus on supporting the four key priorities of Well-Being, Engagement, Leadership and Learning (W.E.L.L.), as well as the OCDSB Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) for 2012–2013, and the School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement (SIPSA) for 2012–2013.

OCDSB Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement

The OCDSB developed two key strategies for improving student achievement: a focus on creative, innovative and critical thinking and problem solving, and ongoing assessment and feedback. An "instructional coach" model encourages collaborative discussions amongst teachers and the sharing of best practices.

Next Steps

The OCDSB has an amazing opportunity to move the organization forward on two complementary and intricately connected fronts. The first is to continue to imbue the entire organization with a spirit of engagement; the second is to utilize the deepening understanding of the conditions that support creativity to further inform our teaching and learning. Fostering creative potential will ultimately strengthen our collective thinking and reveal the brilliance of the students in our care.

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"IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT
THAN KNOWLEDGE. FOR
KNOWLEDGE IS LIMITED TO ALL WE
NOW KNOW AND UNDERSTAND,
WHILE IMAGINATION EMBRACES THE
ENTIRE WORLD, AND ALL THERE
WILL EVER BE TO KNOW AND
UNDERSTAND."

Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize winner for physics

