

# in conversation

## Understanding the Whole Child and Youth – A Key to Learning

**An interview with Dr. Lise Bisnaire, Dr. Jean Clinton and Dr. Bruce Ferguson**

It comes as no surprise that the cognitive development of children and youth in combination with their social, emotional and physical development and their mental health, has a profound effect on their well-being and potential to succeed at school and in life. What educators recognize now, more powerfully than ever, is the pressing need to more effectively integrate those fields of knowledge with teaching and learning. And we need to do this in a way that gives us genuine and practical leverage in influencing positive outcomes for children and youth.

With this in mind we were fortunate to have the opportunity to talk with three of the thought leaders who are helping us build our knowledge and understandings in these areas through the Accepting Schools Expert Panel. Although you will have your own insights in reading this material, I would offer these three perspectives:

First and most evident is that paying attention to child and youth well-being matters. This means paying attention to all aspects of child and youth development, paying attention to healthy relationships, and paying attention to building positive learning environments. All are vitally important to giving every learner the opportunity to succeed.

The second insight revolves around the importance of relationships with caring adults. Children mature into adulthood in large part by observing and emulating the adults around them. It is through caring relationships and positive role models that children come to feel safe, supported, respected and hopeful.

The third insight is that we can only make progress if we acknowledge that the development of children and youth happens through the collective interactions with adults and peers that take place at home, in school and in the community. And so, we are better together, supporting positive child and youth development and their well-being, as a whole school community.

In closing, I hope you will find the ideas presented in this issue of *In Conversation* as thought-provoking and motivating as I have. I encourage you to explore them with your colleagues with a view to strengthening your own leadership in promoting the mental health and well-being of all our children and youth.

George Zegarac  
Deputy Minister of Education



## ABOUT LISE BISNAIRE, JEAN CLINTON AND BRUCE FERGUSON

**Dr. Lise Bisnaire** is the Director of Autism at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), Associate Investigator at the CHEO Research Institute and Clinical Professor of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. She holds associate appointments in the Department of Family Medicine, the Department of Child Psychiatry at the University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children. Prior to her current role, Dr. Bisnaire was Clinical Director of Inpatient Psychiatry and Professional Practice Leader for Psychology at the CHEO for 12 years. Dr. Bisnaire has a wealth of experience as a service provider, clinical professor and researcher. She is internationally recognized for her work on assessing mental health outcomes for children and youth. Dr. Bisnaire holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Ottawa.

**Dr. Jean Clinton** is an infant, child and adolescent psychiatrist and associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience at McMaster University and Children’s Hospital. She is an associate member of the Offord Centre for Child Studies, leading the provincial primary care education strategy for an enhanced 18-month well-baby visit program. Dr. Clinton has been a consultant to child welfare and children’s mental health programs for 25 years. Her skill as a knowledge translator of brain development in infancy and the adolescent years is frequently called upon and she speaks with teachers, parents, the legal profession and many others throughout North America.

**Dr. Bruce Ferguson** is the Founder of the Community Health Systems Resource Group at The Hospital for Sick Children. He is a Professor of Psychiatry, Psychology and the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto and has been a visiting scientist at the Biological Psychiatry Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States. Dr. Ferguson has created the Community Health Systems Resource Group to promote and facilitate integration and collaboration in service delivery, and advocate for the implementation of evidence-based interventions and standardized outcome measurement in health, mental health, social services and education.

## CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: FROM BIRTH THROUGH THE TEEN YEARS

**Why, as educators, do we need to understand the stages of child and youth development? Why does it matter?**

**JC:** It matters because it is a core concept in supporting student learning and well-being. And of course at different ages and stages of development, children’s brains are different and their ability to understand certain concepts will be very diverse.

We know that we go from learning a simple concept to a very complex one through brain development. But the brain requires the experience and exposure to relationships and surroundings to do that. If we’re not aware of this we may be inappropriately using instructional strategies and material for children – either below their ability or above it.

For example, in the cognitive domain we wouldn’t ask four-year-olds what “no ifs, ands, or buts” means. On the other hand, because of brain development, by the time children are seven years old they might give you some kind of answer.

And at age 13 they will understand this as clearly as they would a figure of speech. In the social and emotional domains, we wouldn't have the same expectations of six year olds as we would for 12-year-olds.

Decades of research help illustrate why child development, particularly from birth to five years, is a foundation for a prosperous and sustainable society. Key findings include the following:

- Experience shapes brain architecture by over-production of connections followed by pruning, the ones that fire together, wire together.
- Brains are built over time, from the bottom up simple skills first to more complex – skills beget skills.
- “Serve and return” relationship interaction builds healthy brain architecture.
- Cognitive, emotional, social and physical development are connected: you can't do one without the other.
- Toxic stress such as being constantly ignored, neglected or abused, damages developing brain architecture.
- The ability to change brains and behaviour decreases over time.

Visit [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu) to learn more about these 'Core Concepts in the Science of Early Childhood Development.'

**BF:** To this I would add that we need to pay attention to the stages of development because whatever we do to support young people in their development, if we don't pitch it at the right level, it's not going to work.

So, for example, some children come to school as early as three years old and many are in child care settings before that. The big issue here is figuring out where each child fits on the developmental continuum as it applies to self-regulation in an organized classroom. That's a reasonable question to consider, and then adjusting supports and tailoring them appropriately as a child's developmental trajectory moves upwards over time.

And so if you think about moving the developmental curve up one degree at age four, then consider what the difference will be at age 16 and into adulthood. That one degree of difference translates into an exponentially bigger difference later on in a child's life.

*Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings (ELECT)* describes how young children learn and develop. It includes a “continuum of development” that outlines the sequence of skills children can be expected to acquire as they develop. It covers a broad range of developmental domains – physical, social, emotional, communication/language and cognitive – and is a base for observation and discussion of children's growth and learning.

The Overview sections for Grades 1-3, 4-6 and 7-8 in Ontario's Health and Physical Education curriculum acknowledge that program design and delivery must take into account the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of students. The curriculum notes that “The descriptions of the developmental characteristics of students are general in nature, and individual student characteristics will vary depending on the child's age, sex, body size, experience and background.”

Source: *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, Interim Edition (Revised, 2010)*

**LB:** Right. And I think that while all educators understand that there is a trajectory in terms of cognitive and physical development, they might not fully understand that it applies equally to social and emotional development. Children of course are multidimensional and that's why we have to keep in mind the whole concept of readiness. So when you think about the children in your class, even though they might be the same age, or at the same stage of development, you'll find that some children are

ready to advance to new challenges or tasks while others are not. So you need to engage them in different ways to get them there. It's critically important to understand this.

The other concept that comes into play here is the role of temperament. All children are unique – some adjust well to change, others take a bit more time, and some are resistant to change. You have children who may be perceived to be “easy” or “difficult” or “slow-to-warm-up” and you have children whose temperament appears to be a blend of these patterns. And temperament is also something that evolves as children grow and develop. We have to have some understanding of these concepts related to temperament when we are teaching or working with children.

As an example, how does temperament play out in taking a bus? Some young children will have no problem with getting on a bus and going to school. With other children, you'll have to do some teaching. You'll have to show them what the bus is and then practice as needed. Then there will be other children who will just plain refuse and it will be very difficult to get them on the bus.

That's a simple example but I think it illustrates how important it is to understand where children are in their different developmental stages and to apply this knowledge so you will be successful in the teaching and learning process.

Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess provided one of the most influential definitions of temperament: “Temperament is a general term referring to the *how* of behaviour. It differs from ability, which is concerned with the *what* and the *how well* of behaving and from motivation that accounts for *why* a person does what he/she is doing.”

Learn more about the research of Thomas and Chess (1977) in *Temperament and Development*.

In *Temperament in the Classroom*, Barbara Keogh (2003) explores the effects of temperament on the educational experience. She identifies three aspects of classrooms that are important in the “fit” between students and classroom environments:

1. The content and nature of the curriculum and modes of instruction.
2. The organization and management of space, time and resources.
3. The nature of the interactions between students, peers, and teachers.

### How do these concepts apply as children move into their preadolescent, adolescent and teen years?

**BF:** Relationships are key elements in healthy development. Adults provide essential relationships in facilitating and guiding children as they navigate the years from childhood to youth. That means we have to adjust our interactions and expectations to take into account their capacity to deal with the experiences in the world around them.

This sensitivity on our part to keep them stretching, but not exceeding their ability to negotiate the pre-teen and teen years successfully and responsibly, is key to building a view of themselves as competent and participating members of their families, peers, school and community.

Jean, I know you will want to comment on how different brain areas and capacities mature at different rates.

*Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development* (MCYS, 2012) provides strategies for identifying and responding to the needs of youth at each stage of their development. It is an evidence-based resource that represents development through four domains, cognitive, social, emotional and physical, with maturation always taking place as part of a whole.

Refer to *Stepping Stones* to access chart-based summaries of key developmental events for early adolescents, adolescents and young adults, suggested supports aligned with each development stage, and tips for implementation.

**JC:** Yes, an understanding of development in these ages is also essential for successful education. From a social perspective, children in these ages are aware and influenced by the presence of their peers in very different ways. For example, the preadolescent is less influenced by what peers will think of their efforts in school than they will be within even a year of moving into the adolescent years. Remember the onset of puberty as an indicator of adolescence is happening earlier and earlier. In early adolescence the peer group plays an increasingly important role, and young people strive to belong, even to the detriment of school effort. By late adolescence, this influence lessens as the horizon of emerging adulthood draws closer.

In terms of brain development there are changes too with major pruning of brain connections occurring. What adolescents are busy doing is what sculpts their brain. If it is sports or music or drama, these are the areas being refined and strengthened. If they are engaged in activities where they are primarily on their own, then these are the areas being developed.

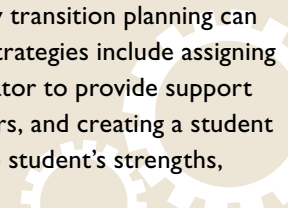
In addition, the emotional areas are being refined and pruned ahead of the executive functioning areas of the brain. That may explain why activities that are novel, exciting, low effort and full of thrills are preferred over mundane and tedious activities. Young people need to take risks to grow. They have huge potential for creativity. It means our educational system needs to recognize and respond accordingly.

**LB:** I would add that as children move into their adolescent years, it marks an important phase of transition at all levels of cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. It is as if the unique building blocks they have forged throughout their childhood and that were once so familiar and formative are now suddenly shaken up. During their adolescent years they are expected to give a new order or shape to who they are so that they are equipped to deal with the next phase of adulthood.

It will be easier for some than for others but all will experience new and unique challenges and may need support and guidance to make sense of

their experiences. Recognizing that these changes are taking place and that adolescents are trying to relearn how to use their skills in a new way is so important.

As educators, we can support them in this period of transition by helping them to navigate this new path. They look to educators for structure, predictability and consistency in a world where they may feel unprepared or ill-equipped to cope. Educators have an opportunity to be their beacon – to be an example and inspiration highlighting the path ahead and allowing them to find their way.



Elementary to secondary transition planning can help support students. Strategies include assigning a teacher or other educator to provide support during the transition years, and creating a student profile that highlights the student's strengths, needs and interests.

Learn more about supports available help students' transition successfully from elementary to secondary school at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentssuccess/transition.html>.

### **And what about brain development beginning in the early years?**

**JC:** Well, the brain is built by experiences – so how much exposure a child has to things like language and rhymes and rhythm will affect those foundational pathways for later reading and math skills, as examples. We know babies need to hear lots of language and have people in their lives who respond to their efforts at communicating back by pointing, gesturing, crying, and so on. If children have not heard many words by age four, when someone asks them to point to the dog on the couch pictured in a book, they are busy figuring out what a dog is, and then a couch, and will be much slower at pointing them out than children who have heard all of those words over and over.

The same goes for rhyming and rhythm and math skills. Ability to understand math concepts will be different at different ages. For example, a baby can tell that the colour of a written number five is black but have no idea what the number five actually represents. Four-year-olds looking at that same black number have had a lifetime – well a four-year lifetime – of accumulating “serve and return” experiences with those around them, so that they recognize what the number five represents, “Oh there’s a five and we’ve got five people in our family.”

“The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. During the first few years of life, 700 new synapses (neural connections) are formed every second. After a period of rapid proliferation, connections are reduced through a process called pruning, so that brain circuits can become more efficient. Early experiences affect the nature and quality of the brain’s developing architecture by determining which circuits are reinforced and which are pruned through lack of use. Some people refer to this as ‘use it or lose it.’”

Source: *Core Concepts in the Science of Early Childhood Development*, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

The renowned Dr. Fraser Mustard was a determined and impassioned advocate of the importance of human development, and in particular of early human development. He was also a leader who relentlessly acted on his deeply held belief that we go to school to learn how to continue learning throughout our lives. In fact he was known to have recommended that Ontario’s Ministry of Education ought to be renamed the Ontario Ministry of Human Development.

Refer to *In Conversation* (Winter 2010/11) titled ‘Strong Roots, Bright Futures: The Promise of Education and Early Human Development – An Interview with Fraser Mustard’ and learn about the many threads that guided Dr. Mustard’s path and how they are reflected in what we are doing in Ontario.

**BF:** And if you understand children’s cognitive development, then you have a good idea how to set things up so that they’re building a world framework. Because what they’re doing is creating a framework of the world that changes every day with their experiences. And so we need to set things up optimally.

**LB:** It’s important to keep in mind too that even relatively small differences in age can have a significant effect. For example, a group of children may all enter school around the age of four but where their birthdays fall in a calendar year will make a huge difference in their readiness, in their development, and in their experiences. Our interactions with a four-year-old who’s been four for almost an entire year will be quite different than with a four-year-old who’s only been four for a month. It doesn’t sound like a big difference but that one year is much more significant for a child than it is for an adult.

### **What happens to brain development beyond the early years?**

**BF:** During the early years, brain development is focused on building interconnectedness – billions of connections are made among billions of cells. This leaves the early brain capable of successfully adapting to many cognitive and cultural contexts. However, as children move into pre-teen and teen years, experiences lead to trimming of the brain. Now those connections that are used are maintained and elaborated while those not used will disappear.

Thus, our brain gets us ready to perform efficiently and competently in the environment in which we live. So it is easy to see how important it is for children and youth to be exposed to a wide range of appropriate experiences. These experiences we provide at school, at home and in the community are literally directly reflected in brain development and so underlay the child’s/youth’s cognitive, emotional and social development.

“The brain continues to adapt beyond the early years. As recently as the mid-1990s, the prevailing belief among neuroscientists was that the more important aspects of brain development ended by about age three. We now know that the brain continues to organize, adapt and change well beyond the early years. In fact, the changes that occur in the brain during late childhood, adolescence and young adulthood are particularly dramatic.” (Jetha and Segalowitz, 2011, cited in *Stepping Stones*).

Learn more about brain development beyond the early years in *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development* (MCYS, 2012).

**JC:** Bruce has really captured a key concept. The pre-teen and teen years are another great time of opportunity for youngsters to develop and refine new interests, creativity and perhaps even change some earlier areas that were less well formed, including relationships and skills development.

We know so many stories of young people who have had an unstable educational start who then go on to shine in high school through the supportive relationships of trusted teachers who saw and supported their strengths and uniqueness. What is happening is in that emotionally safe and positive environment the young person feels confident to take learning risks and the brain pathways are getting more refined, are getting more efficient in connections over time. This is a process called “myelination” which helps the signals go faster.

#### **And where does the nature versus nurture debate enter into the discussion?**

**BF:** Well, we’ve always wondered how much of what children do is a result of their genetic make-up and how much is a result of their world experience. And for a long time there was little agreement about which – nature or nurture – is “in charge.” But gradually we’ve come to learn that the two continually interact. In fact, what makes the question so complicated is that we’ve found that our experiences can actually change how our genes express, or fail to express, what it is they’re meant to control.

We now know that nurture in early life as well as nature is important in early human development and that nurture in the early years has major effects on learning and physical and mental health throughout the life cycle. Learn more about the way in which the early years of human development establish the basic function of the brain in:

- *Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action* by McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007
- ‘Early Brain Development and Human Development’ (Mustard, 2010)

#### **Do you mean physically?**

**BF:** Yes. Experts in a field called epigenetics have determined that the experiences young people have, actually change their genetic structure. So where this becomes interesting is in pinpointing not how much the nurture side of the equation matters, but rather, how it interacts with the nature side.

Some years ago, a multi-disciplinary council was established at Harvard focused on bringing the science of early childhood and early brain development to bear on public decision-making. One of the key findings of the council was that the active ingredient of the environmental contribution to development lies in relationships.

If you put aside all the complexities of the debate about nurture and nature, what it boils down to is that our number one developmental task is to learn and know who we are and to develop our sense of self and identity. We do that through our interactions with others – in particular, through having engaging and continuous relationships with adults.





So these little ones come into the early learning context and are able to say, “I would like to do this. Can I have a turn now?”

On the other hand, with young children who have not experienced a situation similar to a formal early learning setting before, there’s likely going to be some acting out including yelling, screaming, and possibly hitting, when they come into a structured learning environment. And this is because the interconnectedness hasn’t happened.

So self-regulation, the ability to recognize and be in charge of your emotions, your attention and behaviour, is a central developmental concept. Social and emotional learning is about being connected to the world, to your peers, and to your teachers. It’s about the development of empathy.

And what’s very exciting about this is that we have research evidence to show that as a society, it is to your great peril to ignore children’s social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning – how much children are excited about coming to school and how well they get along well with others – is a better predictor of success than IQ.

#### Shanker’s Six Critical Elements to Optimal Self-Regulation:

1. When feeling calmly focused and alert the ability to know that one is calm and alert.
2. When one is stressed, the ability to recognize what is causing that stress.
3. The ability to recognize stressors both within and outside the classroom.
4. The desire to deal with those stressors.
5. The ability to develop strategies for dealing with those stressors.
6. The ability to recover efficiently and effectively from dealing with stressors.

Source: *Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation* (Shanker, 2013).

There is growing empirical evidence that confirms the positive impact of social emotional learning on academic achievement.

See for example ‘The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions’ (Durlak, Dymnicki and Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger, 2011).

#### **You mention putting yourself in someone else’s shoes which some would refer to as having empathy. Can we, in fact, successfully teach empathy?**

**LB:** Yes, we can. And it’s something we can teach at a very young age. We have to adjust our tactics and strategies depending on what stage of development the children are in, and we won’t be using big words. But there are opportunities to weave it into the conversation, “That child is screaming; maybe he’s feeling sad; what does sad mean?”

To give another example, we were able to approach teaching empathy with very young children by having them dress up differently in clothes that belonged to other children. This was a very concrete experience and very developmentally appropriate. For children to understand other children, they have to feel like they really are the other child.

And when we dressed them up like that, they were able to have an “ah-ha” moment and understand “so this is what it feels like to be Carlos or Fatima.”

“Social skills are built on empathy and emotional intelligence; when you understand your own feelings and can recognize those of others, you are able to reach out and make connections.”

Refer to *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World, Child by Child* (Gordon, 2007) to learn more about empathy, what it is, why it matters and what contributes to its development.

## THE CARING ADULT: AN ESSENTIAL FOUNDATION

**What about the adults in the lives of our children and youth? How do relationships with one or more caring adults support healthy development?**

**LB:** Family is important. That's where children learn the basics. That's where children learn how to interact. These are their relationships. The family is the nest.

**BF:** And, as I've mentioned before, we begin to learn about ourselves through our interactions and continuous relationships with adults. This is because adults are the people we rely on when we first come into the world. And what we need most are reliable, caring, nurturing adults so that we feel secure and develop a strong sense of belonging.

And so adults are incredibly important to young people and they always have been. That's where the African proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child" comes from. A child can survive with a single adult who cares for them but children thrive when they have a tribe of adults who care for them continuously.

"What does it mean to make a 'connection' to another and to think about the strong connections we have with the children in our care?" Dr. Jean Clinton argues that it is "in our hearts and minds that we are likely to feel connected to those we spend our days with." And she cautions, "Routinely, we may find ourselves spending more time on *Correcting* and *Directing*, leaving little time for *Connecting*" and asks, "On a daily basis, what is your *C:D:C Ratio*?"

Source: 'The Power of Positive Adult Child Relationships: Connection is the Key' (Clinton, 2013)

**JC:** I would add that relationship with adults is one of the most fundamental things we should be thinking about in education. How are we helping our children and youth experience the world and their significant relationships with caring adults? When they 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. As Bruce said, we also need to be thinking about whole community support for families. It truly does take a village.

The authors of 'What Can Parents Do to Help their Children Succeed in School?' assert that "most parents know instinctively, that spending more time with their children and being actively involved in their education will give their children a good head-start in life." The good news coming from analyses of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data, they say "is that it does not require a PhD or unlimited hours for parents to make a difference." What is needed in parent-child activities is "genuine interest and active engagement." Other key findings show not only that "the performance advantage among students whose parents read to them in their early school years is evident regardless of the family's socio-economic background" but also that "students are never too old to benefit from their parents' interest in them."

Source: [www.oecd.org/pisa/](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/)

**LB:** I will add that while I believe that children who come from families that are socioeconomically disadvantaged do not have as much opportunity in general, it doesn't necessarily mean these children will do poorly. Because in my experience, the majority of these families teach their children core values. I have encountered so many examples of families who, in spite of their challenging circumstances, teach their children how to be kind and caring with one another in ways that contribute to their social and emotional competence and their overall well-being.

And even where this may not be the case, there are a lot of children whose family backgrounds are challenging, who learn to do very well at school and in life. This comes from their ability to seek positive and influential adult role models. This is why the school has such a huge role to play.

Findings of *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Engagement from Secondary School*, a study of the processes of disengagement from school and of early school leaving conducted by Dr. Bruce Ferguson, Dr. Kate Tilleczek, Dr. Katherine Boydell and Dr. Joanna Anneke Rummens (2005) include:

- The main “protective factors” that counter risks associated with early school leaving are “flexible and alternative programming and caring and supportive teachers.”
- Alternative settings are characterized by “flexibility, small classrooms, off-site classrooms, correspondence credit work, availability of assistance, and options to work at a student’s own pace.”
- “Teachers who function as protective factors are characterized by their ability to listen to students, ask questions, make connections, and engage in conversation.”

**BF:** Yes, and in fact both the school and the community are important in providing this adult support. One of my worries about our current society is that we now organize our work and

community lives away from our extended families. What happens as a result is that many of our children and youth have too few adults who are a constant in their lives – adults who genuinely care about them and with whom they have on-going and engaging relationships.

Our brains are designed so we are apprentice learners and so we learn to be adults by watching the adults we know be adults. And so, adults are incredibly important in the lives of young people.

Educator Nan Henderson (2013) draws on a large body of research to show “that schools are filled with the conditions that promote resilience. These include caring, encouraging relationships, role models and mentors, clear and fair boundaries and structure, exploration of other worlds and possibilities, stories of overcoming adversity in literature, films, and history, and basic human dignity...”

Henderson argues that “teachers can often be, or at least can consistently bring protective factors against forces that threaten to tear down resilience.” She says that teachers often don’t even realize that they’re doing so and argues that “caring, respectful teachers can provide an ‘alternate mirror,’ showing students their strengths rather than their fragility.” She says that one of the most effective resilience-building actions educators can engage in is to “dig for and reflect back to students their strengths – the internal protective factors that students have often honed during times of stress.”

Source: ‘Havens of Resilience’ (Henderson, 2013), author of *The Resiliency Workbook*.

### **In a school setting who can be the caring adults?**

**BF:** Well every adult in the school has to be a caring adult, from the teachers to the administrative and caretaking staff. What it looks like to children is that they are in a place that feels welcoming and safe. It’s a place where everyone acknowledges you and sees you as an individual. You’re not a number and a name; you are a person.

**And do you think that any limitations related to family circumstances, where they exist, can be overcome in the school or community setting?**

**LB:** I do. Because fundamentally it's about opportunities and it's about the whole system. It's not about one dimension. It's not only family; it's not only school; and it's not only community. It's how you weave and integrate all those pieces together that is important. And certainly, within the school and/or community setting, you can create opportunities for children and youth that will help them develop their potential and be successful.

We know through the research that it is important to have one key adult in your life. This person can cause a dramatic shift in how a child or youth develops. This adult can be a parent, an educator, a coach, a school principal, a school counsellor, a hockey coach outside of school, and so on.

I'll add that, because school is such a huge part of a child's life, the opportunities in the school setting are significant and must not be overlooked. I do think the onus is on us to develop opportunities within the school system to make sure all youngsters and, especially those who have fewer opportunities outside the school setting, have a chance to get them at school.

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**When working with individual children and youth, how do we determine where they are – developmentally – so that we can engage them appropriately?**

**LB:** This is about watching children as they interact. It's about observing them in a range of contexts from coming into the classroom in the morning to completing their tasks to interacting with peers – it has to be a multi-pronged approach. It's through this observation and this interaction that you're going to learn about children.

So if there are children who cry easily, for example, when they are asked to do something that is a bit more challenging – that is an important indicator of their developmental stage. Having worked with

children who have learning disabilities, one of the things that you gauge is the emotional reaction children have to the work they're given.

When children have a task that is too difficult, some will refuse to do it, some will become more aggressive, and some will actually have the communication skills to tell you they can't do it. Not all children have those skills, but they communicate differently depending on how they feel or how they are able to share that with you depending on their developmental stage. So, those are the kinds of things we can watch for.

One of the first things you do is to stop and listen – listen to the students, listen to their discussions, listen to their questions, listen to what they're grappling with, listen to where they're making errors. And then ask yourself, "If this is what they're thinking at the moment, if these are the errors they're making, if that's the success they're having, then what is it that I need to do next."

Source: *Know Thy Impact: Teaching, Learning and Leading?* – In *Conversation with John Hattie* (2012)

**And what are the developmental changes that we need to consider when it comes to engaging youth?**

**BF:** We need to be sensitive to how both children and youth understand the world at each stage of their development and know what cognitive and developmental tasks face them. As they approach the teen years, their peers and friends become more important to them and so we need to incorporate those friend relationships into their classroom learning and their community participation. As we care for them and pay attention to their safety and well-being, we have to adjust our expectations to their capacity both in learning and in social spheres.

This is not an easy job for us either as parents or as educators. Getting the appropriate level of expectation or responsibility correct is not easy. Deciding when they are ready to walk home alone or have friends over without supervision or drive the car are examples of worries we have about "getting it right." However, it's important that we give them these opportunities when they are ready.

It's also important to understand that they may make mistakes. And we will know when they are ready to be challenged because we have established caring relationships with them. Although this is a natural state of affairs for parents, educators too have to understand that in order to teach a student, you have to have forged a caring relationship with that student.

In *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* John Hattie (2009) shows that the “power of positive teacher-student relationships is critical for learning to occur.” He argues that relationship “involves showing students that the teacher cares for their learning as a student.” He argues passionately that “it is teachers using particular teaching methods, teachers with high expectations for all students, and teachers who have created positive student-teacher relationships that are more likely to have the above average effects on student achievement.”

Learn more about the role of teachers and leaders in student success and well-being in *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*.

**LB:** Being a youth can be hard. It can be scary and overwhelming and exciting all at the same time. At this age, youth are changing – physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively. They are constantly trying to regulate how they feel and to process the changes they are experiencing and then navigate through the transitions.

Youth is a time of preparing for independence and applying the knowledge and skills they have learned so far. Every task seems more challenging, and the impact greater than ever before. But it doesn't mean that this is not an exciting time. As an educator, students are looking to you as an example of what an independent adult looks like. You have the ability to inspire, and to embody the potential of what they can become. I would encourage educators to continue to lead by example – to show their students what life can be as an adult and how to cope. Listen to what they are saying; accept that this is a challenging time for students; help them to identify their challenges; and show them the potential for resolution and growth.

Carol Dweck (2006) identified two sets of beliefs that people can have about students' intelligence and that students can have about their own intelligence:

- A fixed mind-set: intelligence is a static trait.
- A growth mind-set: intelligence can be developed.

Dweck has shown that “teaching a growth mind-set seems to decrease or even close achievement gaps.”

Read more about Dweck's research and its implications for student success in *Mindsets: Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.

### **You've alluded to identity or sense of self – how can educators contribute to positive sense of self among children and youth?**

**JC:** Sense of self is an underlying concept in supporting children and youth. How you go about building it is through relationships. It is the relationship, the day to day activity and interaction. It's not about giving out stickers – it's not saying, “Great job.” Instead it's saying, “Wow, you worked hard here – that is so much better than where you started; what did you do differently?”

There are a couple of critical periods in which a sense of self develops into one of two outlooks. It's either, “I can make change in the world,” or it's, “I can't make change in the world.” Of course, sense of self continues to develop throughout our lives but there are two key times. One is in the early years and the other is in the adolescent and teen years. Educators have a unique and important opportunity to help youngsters determine who it is that they want to be and who they can become.

What is it that they can do? Well, in the case of the teen brain, for example, there is so much change taking place within the brain and the way in which it is making connections that the openness to new experiences is huge.

So a teacher who says to a young person, “You know I really like what you've written here” has opened a dialogue that's not just about “Let's make sure that this work is in line with the curriculum.” Instead it's, “Wow, I see you as a person and I enjoy what you are doing; tell me more.” Then of course, that

youngster will reflect on this conversation and say, “You know what? Miss Smith thinks I’m pretty good. I hadn’t thought of myself as a writer before.”

On the other hand, a Grade 12 student approaches her chemistry teacher and says, “I wonder if you could write me a reference letter; I want to become a dental hygienist.” If the teacher’s response suggests that this may not be the right path or is any way unsupportive or discouraging, in all likelihood the student will tear up the application and abandon this goal. So teachers have a massive influence on how students view themselves.

In ‘Mindsets that Promote Resilience: When Students Believe that Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed,’ David Yaeger and Carol Dweck (2012) argue that “all students will face adversity at one time or another, whether it is social or academic in nature.” In their view “a central task for parents and educators is to prepare students to respond resiliently when these inevitable challenges arise.”

Their research has examined adversity through the eyes of students to capture the underlying psychology of what causes some students to feel vulnerable, discouraged, or stressed when they face challenges.

Their findings show that what students need most is not “self-esteem boosting or trait-labeling” but instead mindsets that represent challenges as things that they can take on and overcome over time with effort, new strategies, learning, help from others, and patience.” This emphasis on people’s potential to change, they argue, prepares students to face life’s challenges resiliently.

“The education and career/life planning program provides students with the opportunity to develop personally meaningful answers to four key questions: *Who am I? What are my opportunities? Who do I want to become? What is my plan for achieving my goals?* By engaging in the inquiry process and having a conversation with teachers and parents, students learn more about themselves and their opportunities. They also learn how to set goals and make plans to achieve them.”

Source: *Creating Pathways to Success, An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools, Policy and Program Requirements, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2013*

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/cps/CreatingPathwaysSuccess.pdf>

### **What is the connection between developing a positive sense of self and resilience?**

**JC:** First of all, resilience isn’t an individual characteristic of a person – it’s a process and we all have a role to play in building the resilience of children and youth. I would agree that there are some characteristics that an individual may have that will help with resilience, but a positive sense of self and community connectedness also come into play. It’s important to note that resilience is more than just coping – it is about getting through a bad experience and bouncing back, to be better than expected.

Schools play a huge role in building resilience because of the opportunity educators have to influence students in developing a positive sense of self, self-efficacy and sense of hope. It’s helping them build their confidence and feelings of optimism – I can do well and I do have a future – I can hope for and believe in and aim for something big – even a goal that appears to others to be out of reach.

Internationally esteemed psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman believes that, “traditional wisdom is incomplete. A composer can have all the talent of Mozart and a passionate desire to succeed, but if he believes he cannot compose music, he will come to nothing. He will not try hard enough. He will give up too soon when the elusive right melody takes too long to materialize.”

Learn more about positive psychology and explanatory style – what you say to yourself when you experience set-backs – and how it influences your life in Seligman’s writings that include *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* and *The Optimistic Child: A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience*.

In ‘Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors’ Kingsley Hurlington (2010) shows that “protective social environments, which provide refuge in high-risk situations, are an important aspect in the development of resilience.” His research confirms that “regardless of which social environment children find themselves in (family, school or community), three protective factors are essential:

- caring relationships
- high expectations
- opportunities for meaningful contribution.

To learn more about how educators can foster the development of resilience in elementary school children refer to [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WW\\_bolstering\\_students.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WW_bolstering_students.pdf).

**BF:** Resilience is developed slowly and across different settings. It’s essential that children and youth are encouraged to try many things and especially tasks that take practice to master. They have to learn who they are and what they are good at and what they are not good at but can improve at with practice. They become resilient by understanding that no matter who they are, they are special, valued and cared about and that they will have a good future.

In our relationships with them, we as adults can never forget that we are shaping how they will view themselves and their future worlds. It is adults who enable them to feel like worthwhile, valued and loved people who will find a productive role in a future world. When they are young, this comes down to knowing that no matter what happened today, tomorrow they will be loved, safe and happy.

**LB:** I agree. Every child and every youth has a unique gift. When we recognize that, and make supporting the gift of each child a priority, we help each child develop emotionally, socially and cognitively. As educators, our ability to recognize, support and nurture those unique gifts supports a strong sense of self and builds resilience. Building a strong sense of self and resilience is an on-going process.

For some, it may come easily – and it may grow with the acquisition of new skills or experiences. For others, it may take more time and require more support.

“Positive mental health and emotional well-being are closely related to the development of psychological and emotional resilience. Resilience involves being able to recover from difficulties or change – to function as well as before and then move forward. It is often referred to as the ability to ‘bounce back’ from difficulties or challenges.”

Source: *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, Interim Edition (Revised, 2010)*

## MAKING CONNECTIONS: DEVELOPMENT, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

**Why is it important to understand mental health and well-being in relation to child and youth development?**

**BF:** First of all, it’s important to remember that being mentally healthy is not just being free of symptoms. It means being in a psychological and emotional and spiritual state so that you can actually enjoy your life and enjoy your interactions with everyone in your life and also participate in your community.

Even when life is wonderful, it's not always easy. So if young people are anxious or depressed or have such a serious attention problem that they can't cope, they won't be able to meet everyday challenges. These include going to school, succeeding in their studies and trying to fit in socially, all of which are very important developmental tasks.

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that "there is no health without mental health." WHO defines mental health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

To access the WHO resources and research related to mental health including key facts, determinants, and strategies and interventions visit [http://www.who.int/topics/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/mental_health/en/).

"Most estimates suggest that 15 to 20 percent of children and youth struggle with a mental health problem. This could mean that in a classroom of thirty students, five or six students may be experiencing a mental health problem, and three or four of them may have a problem that significantly interferes with their daily life."

Source: *Supporting Minds: An Educators Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-being* available at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf>

**LB:** I'd add that being mentally healthy doesn't mean that you're always going to cope perfectly. But the one thing that is most salient is communication. It's about knowing where to go get the resources you need if things don't go well.

Being mentally healthy is like having a toolbox. You know where to go and who to talk to, or, what to do yourself to feel better about who you are. Fundamentally it's also about feeling comfortable with who you are, how you are with other people, and where you're going.

All children and youth have the potential for great mental health. If you think about depression or anxiety or other illnesses like schizophrenia, some children and youth unfortunately do come with a predisposition for these illnesses. And for those children and youth, it's about knowing how to recognize the problem and how to get the help that's needed. So even children and youth who we think don't have good mental health have the potential for better mental health in future.

### **Social stigma is one of the barriers to making these connections – how do we address the social stigma around mental health issues in schools?**

**LB:** Social stigma comes from two places – first, it is the unknown and second, it is the fear. We are always afraid of what we don't know and we tend to push aside things we don't know or understand. At one point in my career I was teaching social skills and one of the most difficult things to teach, whether to children or to youth, and I dare say to some adults, is empathy – how to put yourself in another person's shoes.

As I mentioned previously, it was fascinating to see how children react when they experience the "a-ha" moment of putting themselves in another's shoes and they say, "Oh, this is what it's like." I think it's the same thing with mental health. When you talk about depression, most people don't have a realistic sense of what it means to have depression. This comes from a lack of knowledge. It's not part of the everyday conversations we have.

So that's one thing that has to happen. We need to talk about depression, for example, and get it out into the open so that it is viewed as commonplace and is familiar and so that help can be provided if needed. And we need to start by having conversations about this with children when they are young. We are still a few generations away from this being the reality.

The other thing we need is to be open and confident in our conversations about mental health. When we talk about having health challenges such as diabetes or arthritis, we don't hesitate with our words. We have discussions. We don't do such a good job when we see that a child or youth is anxious or appears disheartened. We sometimes keep it hush-hush.



But it needs to be brought out into the open. For that to happen of course we need some knowledge and I don't think we're there yet. We're still coming at it from a place of the unknown, from a place of fear and worry. We all have to work at that.

“Children, young people, and adults all agree that one of the major barriers to seeking help for mental health problems is fear of being stigmatized or negatively perceived by others. Educators have a unique opportunity to influence all students' perceptions and understanding of mental health problems. Teachers can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems by discussing mental health issues in class and helping students to find and use reliable, in-depth information on the topic.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has made anti-stigma programs aimed at children and youth one of its priorities. The MHCC is working with a number of resource providers to develop effective programs for the classroom.”

Source: *Supporting Minds: An Educators Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-being* available at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf>.

### How can educators have influence in the area of mental health?

**BF:** I think first it's simply through awareness and observation, because mental health issues will show up in children's learning. Get to know every child – develop that relationship. If children are anxious, their attention span gets so narrow that they don't pay attention and can't get all the information they need to solve problems.

It's important to note that anxiety is a normal thing. If we as a civilization didn't have anxiety we'd be extinct by now. It's what has kept the human race alive. On the other hand, when anxiety gets out of control, it's maladaptive.

So, as I mentioned, previously when young people are depressed they have no motivation, they tend to

withdraw, and they have trouble paying attention. Anxiety often travels with depression so they're not learning as they should learn. They're actually not present in the classroom.

We as a system need to work harder with educators to raise awareness about the behaviours that should tip them off. These behaviours signal that young people are not engaged in what is happening in the classroom because there's something else going on in their lives. If a youngster doesn't feel safe in school or at home, or is worried about whether the electricity is going to be cut off, or if there's going to be any food at home, it's hard if not impossible to pay attention to Grade 4 Mathematics. The math is just not very relevant. So for that child, there is a mental health problem at work and in this case, it's anxiety.

Educators and others who work with children and youth need to be sensitive to these behaviours so they can provide support. We need to help educators do this important work. Even when we can't change the youngster's world in all the ways we would like to, we can help make them feel safe and give them hope. Children – particularly teenagers – really travel on hope as much as cars travel on gas.

*Supporting Minds: An Educators Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-being* (draft, 2013) is a resource designed to help educators understand mental health in order to promote the mental health of all students that:

- Provides information to help educators recognize students who may be experiencing distress and support them in their pathway to care.
- Discusses the role of educators in recognizing students who may be at risk of developing mental health problems.
- Outlines ways in which educators can promote the mental health and well-being of all students.
- Offers suggestions for talking about mental health with parents and students.
- Provides information about the types of mental health problems children and youth may experience.
- Offers strategies for enhancing students' ability to function at school both academically and socially.

*Leading Mentally Healthy Schools* is a resource created by school principals with the support of mental health professionals and the Ministry of Education. It is intended to complement school district initiatives related to promoting student mental health and well-being and is meant to be used as a companion to *Supporting Minds*. To create the school conditions that support mental health, it recommends that three areas form the basis for initial action:

1. Create a school-level Mental Health Leadership Team (can be part of an existing Well-being/ Safe Schools Action Team).
2. Assess your school's initial capacity for school mental health.
3. Develop a Mental Health Strategy/Action Plan to guide your efforts.

**LB:** And from a leadership perspective, I'd say that you also need to get a pulse inside the school. You have to know your audience. Do you know the teachers well? Do you know what they know and do you have an understanding of what knowledge gaps they may have? Do you know teachers from the perspective of their varied temperaments, their different personalities, and their backgrounds? Do you understand what the children or youth in your school need? And do you have a method in place to assess that?

It's so important to get this information. Without it, leaders won't understand who the adults and the children and youth in their school are and will not be able to identify their strengths and gaps in any reliable way.

**That said do you agree that educators are not expected to have the knowledge and understanding that psychologists have?**

**JC:** Well yes, it goes without saying that the job of educators is not about diagnosis or treatment. In fact, we must avoid jumping to conclusions about mental health however unintentionally. For example, we must avoid making comments such as, "this student is behaving in this way because of X, Y and Z" when we don't really know what the reasons are.

We need to encourage educators to step back from taking this stance. Instead let's take time to find out as much as we can by asking the child or youth. When there is something that we observe about a youngster or a concern develops about behaviour the question we need to ask is, "What do we know about this?" rather than making hasty judgments.

And then we need to be so careful about the language we use to describe the behaviours we are observing. This means keeping an open mind and avoiding uninformed comments and inappropriate labels or drawing conclusions. We must also be ready to challenge those who do so. There are all kinds of myths that are based on interpreting and trying to manage behaviour without having all the information.

In this way we create openness, especially for the teacher of the student, to be able to get at what's really going on and then to look for advice and support on how to address the real needs. I will say once again, that the power the educator has in the human one-to-one connection is huge and will contribute significantly to helping all children and young people.

"Educators have an important supporting role in the diagnostic process, as they can observe aspects of a student's behaviour in the school setting that may not be evident to the parent or the mental health professional."

Refer to *Supporting Minds: An Educators Guide to Promoting Students' Mental health and Well-being* (Draft, 2013) to learn more about policies and procedures related to any observations educators make.

Leadership is defined in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) as “the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals.” It is through this influence that leaders fulfil their role as “champions” in creating and maintaining a positive school climate that not only ensures student success but also supports mental health and well-being.

Some examples of relevant school-level leadership practices identified in the OLF include:

- Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents.
- Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership.
- Building productive relationships with families and the community.
- Maintaining a safe and healthy environment.

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

### **How can we continue to build on this work to support child and youth mental health and well-being?**

**LB:** There is no magic wand or formula. There are, however, some important steps that can be taken. One is to improve communication to build awareness, not only at the school level but also in the broader community and at the school district level. We all need to have a common understanding of what we mean by mental health and what we mean when we talk about various strategies for promoting it. In other words, we need a common language about mental health and well-being. Without that it is very difficult to move forward.

Added to this is our need for champions. It’s almost impossible to spearhead an initiative that addresses these issues if you don’t have someone on point to address them. All too often the effort loses its momentum and gets watered down or forgotten. That’s just human nature. So we desperately need champions in schools and in school districts to take on this commitment to mental health and well-being.

*School Mental Health ASSIST* is an initiative of the Ontario Ministry of Education designed to build school district capacity related to student mental health and well-being. Evidence-based resources, tools and implementation supports focus on three key areas:

1. Organizational conditions and leadership for effective school mental health.
2. Capacity-building for education professionals.
3. Implementation support for school mental health promotion and prevention programming.

Source: *School Mental Health Assist* at <http://smh-assist.ca/about/>

**BF:** And this need for consistency in communication is one of the reasons that a number of us are working together on the Accepting Schools Expert Panel to provide advice on the development and implementation of the most promising practices and protocols for adults, teachers, principals and parents to follow when any inappropriate behaviour, including bullying occurs. That’s something we – adults, youth and children – need to understand collectively.

**JC:** To make all of this happen we also need a consistent vision and a genuine commitment right across the organization, including the school secretary and the lunch monitors, all the way to the director of education. All of these people have to be saying, “This is who we are; we’re in the business of supporting the inherent goodness in human children and youth.” This mindset puts us all on the same page and in the same business regardless of the tasks we might perform day to day.

### **And what about outside the school walls?**

**LB:** Yes, it is very important to build opportunities to create those relationships within the whole school community. We have to be very creative about finding out where links are possible. Certainly, we have to look at every community individually and what is unique in each. Rural communities are going to present very different types of opportunities than urban communities.

In fact, sometimes rural communities have better networks and connections or “réseaux,” which is what we say in French, because they are smaller and people have strong relationships. Regardless, it’s about how we create connections and how we develop relationships. For me that’s the key. And of course this is what I think school leaders should have in mind when using a whole school approach to creating and maintaining a positive school climate.

“The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children’s education and development.”

Learn about Joyce L. Epstein’s six types of involvement essential for a comprehensive program of school-family-community partnerships in ‘School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share’ (Epstein, 2010).

**JC:** I also think that the focus in creating a positive school climate needs to be on making the school as an organization a caring, healthy, safe and accepting community.

The mindset of educators in a school has to be that we are a capable and competent education unit supporting students. Then we build on that in partnership with other people who have varied expertise, ideally through the creation of community partnerships so that the partners are themselves an integrated part of the school community, and there is a strong relationship and connection.

## A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE: BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

**How does the development, mental health and well-being of children and youth factor into building safe, inclusive and accepting schools?**

**BF:** I think it boils down to optimizing opportunities for development. Because the priority is maintaining a strong focus on what the human developmental tasks of children and youth are. That’s what matters.

And the learning environment also figures prominently. It’s interesting. In conversations I have had with educators in a high school, they often will say that the most important class is the graduating class. But really, if we are trying to optimize opportunities to create and maintain a positive school climate, it’s the students in Grade 9 who play a crucial and important role. And that’s because the Grade 9 students are the students who are going to determine what kind of school it’s going to be over the next four years. They will have a big impact on the school culture and climate.

So what this means is that we need to think differently about “our product is our graduates.” We adjust our thinking and instead say, “our product is great human beings who I would like to live and learn with.” And what matters is how students and all those who are a part of the educational experience care about one another.

“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.”

Source: PPM 144 – *Bullying Prevention and Intervention* posted at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/144.pdf> and PPM 145 – *Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Behaviour* posted at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/145.pdf>

**LB:** I agree completely – all of this matters because not only are you defining a school, as Bruce mentioned, but you’re also defining a whole generation – children and youth who are becoming adults. It’s very important work!

A positive school climate, to me, is about creating a place where children and youth feel safe to express their views. They know what the expectations are in terms of a code of conduct – and what their role is. They can express themselves with words, with their dress, or with their ideas in ways that are going to be accepted. They have the freedom to participate.

And of course they’re not excluded. There are opportunities for all youngsters – with all skill sets – since not all will be athletes for example. It’s a place where children can develop and feel good about who they are. It’s a place where they feel confident with the skill set they are developing in the learning environment, a skill set that will help them move forward in their lives. I think that’s the greatest gift we can give children and youth.

I’ve done a little probing on this question. I’ve asked young people about their high school experience. Those who felt positively about their high school said they felt heard and they felt that there was a

good program in place – one that would get them where they wanted to go in the future. They felt they were respected. They also felt that students and teachers were respectful among themselves. They pointed out that the school principal was very respectful of the teachers and students. And the students knew when to stand up for others who were not treated so well. So a positive school climate impacts every aspect of the high school experience. It is a very pervasive environment.

Jonathan Cohen, president of the National School Climate Center in the United States identifies the following evidence-based educational and mental health informed efforts that support students’ ability to be successful in school and develop in healthy ways:

- Prosocial learning, such as character education and social emotional learning, that makes school a time and place where children and youth learn to understand and address the tests of life, rather than having school feel like a life of tests.
- Helping students feel safe, supported and engaged in school.
- Anticipating and addressing barriers to learning.
- Using effective instructional strategies.
- Having effective school-parent-guardian-community partnerships.

Source: ‘Oversight: Examining School Climate and Safety’ (Cohen, 2013 posted at [www.schoolclimate.org](http://www.schoolclimate.org))

### **What specific advice do you have for principals about building healthy relationships?**

**JC:** Steven Covey wrote an important book about trust, appropriately titled, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. Trust is an important part of this discussion. Covey makes the point that when you have trust, everything moves faster. Without trust, everything moves much more slowly. And so it seems to me that we really need to have authentic dialogue with everyone in the organization.

Again it's much more than, "Okay, we've got some new math approaches in place" – again that's more about "what we do" rather than "who we are." I appreciate that there are many, many pressures to deal with day to day in schools.

But when schools work magnificently it's then that "who we are" is the guiding question. And you get there through authentic engagement.

At the 2013 Ontario Leadership Congress, keynote speaker Megan Tschannen-Moran made a powerful case for trust as the underpinning of successful leadership influence. Tschannen-Moran drew on her research into relationships of trust in school settings to show how trust can impact on the collective-efficacy beliefs of a school staff, teacher professionalism and student achievement.

Learn more about Tschannen-Moran's views about trust and their implications for educators in 'Healthy Relationships: The Foundation of a Positive School Climate,' the fall 2013 issue of *In Conversation*.

The OLF identifies "building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents" as key to fostering "both organizational effectiveness and efficiency ... when people trust one another, they are more likely to take the risks needed to innovate and to make significant improvements to their practices ... a trusting organizational climate, it has been suggested, is a 'boundary condition' on leadership influence."

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

**BF:** We all have our own styles, but the first thing I would do is get to know every staff member, as much as it makes sense and there is willingness on everyone's part. Get to know them well enough to understand who they are as professionals – their beliefs and their values – and what their hopes are from you as the positional leader. If you have

a staff of 100 people, it's likely that they are all at different points on a continuum of engagement and commitment.

A principal's leadership can have a great influence on the type and level of engagement. For example, there will be those who are totally, crazy in love with what they do and they are 100 percent engaged and committed to continuing to refine their teaching practice. And there are those who are not open to change of any kind mainly because they are experiencing success with their current approaches. And then there are those who are somewhere in between. And so the extent to which educators move in the direction of building or strengthening their commitment and engagement in the school will depend a lot on the principal's leadership.

In my view, a first step as a principal who is new to a school, is learning as much as possible, and as quickly as possible about the staff in the school. And then with this knowledge about them in mind, I would work towards finding common ground including having them see that I view my role as working with them to figure out how to make each and every one of them really successful. I would find ways to open the dialogue about human development and the role we play in supporting it. I would do my best to convey that we are in the human development business and that the business of the school is our vehicle for accomplishing that.

And then, the next thing I would do as a school leader is get to know the families of as many youngsters as possible in that school. And my goal in doing that would be to be able to address every student by name by the end of the year. One of my favourite educators of all time was a high school principal whose school had just over 1,000 students. This principal made every effort to be on a first-name basis with every one of the students, although he admitted that it was hard to get much above 700 or 750.

This school leader was not only "present" but also created ways to empower and collaborate with students. And was that a good school? Yes! In fact, it was a phenomenal school. I followed that school and one of the leadership challenges for the incoming principal, when this principal left, was building on the legacy of the departing principal.

This speaks to the huge power in these relationships and it also speaks to the need for school districts to provide strategic support for leader transitions, so that progress made by leaving principals is sustained when a new principal takes over.

Researchers\* have firmly established the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement arguing that no school-based factor – apart from teaching quality – matters more to student success in the classroom than the school principal. Among the five key practices of effective leaders that this research identifies is “creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.”

In keeping with these findings are studies\*\* that confirm the influence principals have on teaching and learning by creating a safe and supportive school climate. This research shows that principals have a direct effect on school climate and that a positive school climate is associated with better staff morale, greater student academic achievement, lower absenteeism, fewer discipline problems, and lower school dropout rates.

\* *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson, 2011)

\*\* *Measuring School Climate for Gauging Principal Performance* (Clifford, Menon, Gangi, Condon and Hornung, 2012)

**LB:** Yes, I strongly agree – leadership is key. There are many examples in the school setting where this is true. There are challenging situations, and when you have a school leader with a positive and an open attitude, a very effective communicator, somebody who has brought in the community – it can change the dynamic of the school completely. How leadership engages parents is also key. This includes how the leader communicates with the parents, the school council, and the school community, how often and the type of things that are being communicated. It is true of any field if you are working with a child or youth, you must work with their families. Children and youth come to school, not as blank slates but with everything they have learned and experienced in their families.

## INTO PRACTICE: INTEGRATING STUDENT WELL-BEING WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING

**How possible is it for teachers to incorporate student mental health and well-being in their teaching and learning?**

**BF:** First let’s be very clear. Yes, we’re saying, “You need to pay attention to the mental health and well-being of your students.” And I wouldn’t be surprised if an educator’s response was, “We don’t want to be psychologists or social workers.” Good gracious, this is not what we are saying – we are not saying that we expect educators to take on the role of mental health professionals in the classroom. Instead, we are saying that we want a caring adult in classrooms who has all the skills needed to help children and youth learn the things they’re supposed to learn.

So what does that look like? Well, what do you do when you notice that students are uncomfortable in class? You have a chat with them to see if they will tell you what’s going on, and to determine how you can help. And you need to be open to this feedback. Maybe it will tell you that you need to work on making your classroom a place where children and youth feel more accepted and supported and comfortable and safe. And in turn, you benefit because this removes some of the barriers to teaching and learning.

Of course we recognize that mental health, like so many other things, is a community and a family responsibility. But when young people come to school for five or six hours a day, we are part of their community and part of our job is to pay attention to their physical and mental health needs. And that’s why we have initiatives to promote and support healthy schools and that’s why we wish all homes were healthy homes. But it goes without saying that schools will always be an important place for promoting mental health and well-being, because that’s where the children and youth are. It’s the only place where we have access to them all.

Do we want to impose an impossible burden on schools? No. Can school systems do all the things we want them to do by themselves? No. In fact, I'd be discouraged if that's what happened because so much gets downloaded on schools already. We're asking schools to collaborate with the community, and with community organizations, in such a way that all these organizations are intertwined, and their fingers and hands are joined together as an interconnected whole in order to avoid having any child fall through the cracks. That's the point.

Educators support students in developing healthy relationships by modelling strong relationships among the adults in the school environment. We also help students by effectively intervening when they need support in challenging relationships. Students also learn explicitly about developing healthy relationships through curriculum expectations in elementary and secondary curriculum documents, including the Dynamics of Human Relationships (HHD3O) course in *Social Sciences and Humanities, Grades 9-12* (2013).

There is broad agreement in empirical research about the characteristics of social emotional learning programs that have the greatest impact on academic learning. They are programs that:

- use a sequenced step-by-step instructional approach
- use active forms of learning
- focus sufficient time on skill development
- have explicit learning goals.

Source: 'The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions' (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger, 2011)

### Can this be integrated with classroom instruction?

**JC:** Yes and quite simply. By way of just one example, let's say youth in a biology class are learning about stress systems – a rat comes across a snake and there's a fight or flight response. That's a great opportunity to stop for a moment and talk about how we get stressed ourselves. It relates the learning to students' lives, and it's brilliant for building emotional connections, not to mention reinforcing the curriculum learning. And of course this is not about "okay, now stop your math we are now moving on to empathy." Rather, it's a part of the learning process in the context of a positive learning environment.

Making curriculum connections where appropriate provides relevant opportunities to build capacity among students to promote their own and their peers' mental health. Students have opportunities to learn about different aspects of mental health and well-being in explicit and implicit ways through the Ontario curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12, in a range of programs, subjects, and courses.

The most direct curriculum links can be found in the following:

- *The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program* (Draft, 2010-2011)
- *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, Interim Edition* (Revised, 2010)
- *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9-10 and 11-12: Health and Physical Education, Interim Edition* (1999 and 2000)
- *The Ontario Curriculum, Social Sciences and Humanities, Grades 9-12* (Revised, 2013)

Educators can plan instruction to support learning about mental health in a wide variety of curricula such as language, English, science and the arts. By proactively establishing and maintaining a supportive learning environment, educators can support student mental health and well-being with all instruction.



**So you clearly have a vision here of an integrated approach, in our schools, in our communities and across the province. How are we doing?**

**BF:** I think we're still very much working on building awareness. I worry because every time I turn around I see a report on bullying or violence framed in the media as if these are a school problems. For example, we hear about a violent incident in a school or tragically even a death and all of a sudden the media depicts this as a school problem – the message becomes “violence is a school problem” and “bullying is a school problem.”

To be clear, if there is violence in a community, and there is a school in that community, there will be violence in that school. Violence is a societal and a community problem and we need to get to the position of not tolerating it and doing what we as a community need to do to stop it.

Just recently an Ontario district school board revised its student census survey to, for the first time, include questions about mental health and well-being. The survey was implemented and findings showed that three out of four high school students surveyed said they were worried about the future and more than a third reported that they were under a lot of stress and that they were nervous or anxious often or all of the time. And the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health released a survey that shows that as many as 10 percent of young people reported thinking of suicide in the last year, and about a third say they had felt unduly stressed within the three weeks prior to being surveyed.

Right now, both children and youth are feeling stressed or anxious, generally. That's a mental health issue. And as adults we need to be giving youngsters optimistic messaging that communicates our positive and high expectations. I don't think there's anything better in the world than a child or youth hearing from a parent or educator the words, “You'll get there – and with full effort and commitment you will learn the things you need to learn to do well in your life and that's your job. My job is to keep you safe and secure while you do that.”

And so, rather than making this a school problem which is what the media tends to do, we need to emphasize that it is a community problem and not offload this to schools. It is the community's responsibility to look after and raise and nurture and educate and love our children and make them feel valued and accepted. School is just one part of it.

We need to call the community to the table to play its role. And we need to call families to the table. Why? Well, to paraphrase a comment made by the former Prime Minister of Norway, children and youth make up 25 percent of our population, but they make up 100 percent of our future. And that's something worth thinking about.

“Picture your brain forming new connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going.”

Source: *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2006)

