A District Vision for Equity

Strategies from Surrey Schools

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Acknowledgements

"THE SURREY WAY"

This case study explores "the Surrey Way," which emphasizes the well-being of *all* students, while also tracking and supporting the most vulnerable learners. While many school systems may refer to such practices as "equity," that term is not used frequently by Surrey staff. Rather, the Surrey Way is the inclusive lens through which decisions are made from the district level down to the school level. This report discusses how the Surrey Way is operationalized to bring to life the district's vision.

SURREY BLENDED

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Surrey Schools implemented [Blended Learning](#) to ensure students were given instruction during the pandemic. Belnded Learning combined Home Based Learning (HBL) and optional in-person schooling days. Every student received a personal learning device to support Home Based Learning. The district trained teachers at each school to be Blended Learning specialists who could support other teachers in their schools.

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A District Vision for Equity: Strategies from Surrey Schools

In 2021, Policy Studies Associates (PSA) was engaged by the Center for Global Education at Asia Society (CGE) and Surrey Schools in British Columbia, Canada, to develop an action-focused case study of school system strategies to support the implementation of equity-driven, anti-racist policies and practices. Without question, this is essential and timely work: school systems worldwide have a clear call to action to address the long-standing inequities that have become more and more visible over the last few years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention to systemic racial injustice. Some school systems are just beginning their journeys to grapple with the structures that can perpetuate or dismantle structural inequities, whereas others have been committed to this work but are now accelerating it, including the districts participating in CGE's Global Cities Education Network (GCEN) and the Equitable School Systems learning cohort convened by CGE and Digital Promise in the 2019-20 school year. This work is ongoing and will continue through 2023.

Regardless of where a system is in its transformation to authentically center equity, translating that commitment into action in schools and classrooms is not easy and requires both significant shifts in mind-sets and practices and supports for those shifts. This requires courageous, adaptive, and morally centered leadership. CGE identified Surrey Schools as a "bright spot" of a district meaningfully engaged in this application of its equity commitment, as evidenced through its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on document reviews, interviews, and focus groups conducted by the PSA team in spring 2021, this report details Surrey Schools' implementation of equity strategies, including how these strategies facilitated experiences aimed at maintaining the quality of learning and supporting students and parents emotionally. Strategies presented in this case study are foundational to Surrey Schools' equity practices and core beliefs, and explored largely through the lens of how those foundations, norms, and practices came to life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this report, the PSA authors distill strategies that Surrey Schools has enacted at the district level, intended to enable a large, diverse district to operate equitably and serve all learners. Although Surrey Schools isn't perfect (district leaders themselves would say the same), these strategies are presented in the hopes that they can be applied more broadly to other large, diverse districts seeking to embed equity in the vision, operations, and everyday practices of their schools. This report also highlights school-level examples of these strategies and their impact in action.

Surrey Schools: Grounding Principles

The vision of the Surrey School District is to prepare learners to think creatively and critically, communicate skillfully, and demonstrate care for self and others. A public school system in British Columbia, Surrey is one of the largest school districts in Canada, with more than 6,000 teachers serving more than 74,000 students. Surrey is also a very diverse school system: many cultures are represented within the student population. There are more than 3,200 students of Indigenous[1] ancestry. More than half of students are from a household in which a language other than English is spoken. More than 150 languages are represented, with the highest percentages being Punjabi, Tagalog (Filipino), Mandarin, Hindi, and Arabic[2].

Surrey Schools operates under the auspices of the British Columbia Ministry of Education, which provides leadership and funding to the K-12 education system, through governance, legislation, policy, and standards.

"THE SURREY WAY"

A culture and climate of inclusivity and instruction for all students in the Surrey School District has been coined "the Surrey Way" and involves several components:

- A school district vision for student learning, developed through district-wide collaboration, called Learning by Design;
- An acknowledgment that there are vulnerable students throughout the district and identification of methods to support their learning and to ensure that the vision of inclusion for all children is at the core of the work;
- A planning structure that puts those closest to the students in charge of development of a school-level plan;
- Data monitoring of the effectiveness of the support on learning;
- A backbone to instructional design that is used throughout the province of British Columbia;
- A belief that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is central to belonging and learning; and
- A strong commitment to collaborative inquiry as practice and a builder of cultures.

District leadership is empowered and enabled to embrace these components through a governance structure led by the Board of Education. The Surrey Way connects these

components by acknowledging student needs, creating plans to address those needs, and training staff to support them. The Surrey Way is intended to create a culture where educators are supported and empowered, school leaders are focused, and students are engaged in meaningful educational experiences.

A LENS OF INCLUSION

In Surrey Schools, decisions are made using a lens of inclusion. The paramount questions guiding leaders are: Is every student getting what they need, want, and deserve? What adaptations should be made to ensure that every student gets what they need, want, and deserve? An assistant superintendent said, "…any time we are faced with challenges or are implementing new initiatives or moving forward with learning, our key question is: 'How do we level the playing field to help kids who need it most?' It's an intuitive question addressed in all things we do."

Integral to this guiding lens of inclusion is the recognition that certain factors (or, as discussed in Strategy 1, "complexities") create barriers to learning for certain students. These factors vary by community and by individual and often are determined by environment, culture, point in time, historical inequities, etc. These factors include housing instability, food insecurity, and generational poverty but also family pressure and expectations. It is the job of district leadership and its school partners to constantly be aware of and analyze how these factors create vulnerabilities (e.g., high levels of anxiety, lack of access to physical nutrition) in students that impact their ability to learn. Ultimately, the district wants to remain cognizant of whether certain students are vulnerable to not moving successfully to the next grade or on to the next adventure in their life and provide any extra support(s) needed to assist those students. This drives the district to design for inclusion while attempting to address vulnerabilities of certain learners. As the superintendent says, "Any learner can be 'vulnerable' at any particular time."

This focus on inclusion is felt by Surrey principals who believe that students who are vulnerable today may not be vulnerable in the future because of the supports provided and identification processes at the school level. At a district elementary school, the principal said, "[The district] makes it like really clear to all of us [school leaders] that we really want to support our vulnerable learners. And they do that by having tools in place to support us. In our schools, we have a counselor, a childcare worker, and an integration support teacher who

> "We are in a perpetual state of defining vulnerability and revisiting and challenging our assumptions. So, because a particular community, school, population, etc., is in a place yesterday, are they still there today? Are there other ways to look at this? Are there other groups we haven't thought about? Do we need to expand our definition? What other information do we need to gather?"
>
> *— Assistant Superintendent*

works with special needs and designated children." Ensuring that this lens is both communicated to, and has an impact on, school leaders is critically important.

SYSTEM-LEVEL PROCESSES AND SUPPORTS FOR SUCCESS

Enacting the Surrey Way requires district offices to develop strategies and plans that address the needs of all students. "We design [systems, strategies, and plans] for inclusion" so that "people have the tools they need," says the superintendent. However, the district recognizes that "people can have all the tools they need and still be vulnerable," so it also prioritizes processes for surfacing and addressing the particular needs of students who may be struggling academically, emotionally, or socially.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As part of the Ministry of Education's Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, Surrey Schools collects and analyzes quantitative and qualitative data from students on intellectual development, human and social development, and career development, paying special attention to populations such as the district's Indigenous students, economically disadvantaged students, and other diverse student groups.

Learning by Design is "the lens through which [Surrey] view[s] the design of [its] learning environments." The framework has three core aspects—Learning, Structures, and Tools—that support innovation in Surrey Schools and are grounded in four key beliefs:

- Truth and Reconciliation
- A Foundation in Inclusive Learning
- Focusing on the Evidence of Learning
- Anchored by Priority Practices

Learning by Design is intended to be an ongoing, inquiry-based process that is built upon year after year and incorporates new knowledge and insights from the district.

INSTRUCTIONAL BACKBONE

Preparing learners to think creatively and critically, communicate skillfully, and demonstrate care for self and others is at the core of the district's Learning by Design framework and the backbone of instruction in all schools throughout Surrey. Learning by Design empowers teachers to design learning conditions that are student-centered, inquiry-focused, engaging, and steeped in real-world experiences. According to the superintendent, "Learning by Design would fit [into the instructional program at any school] because … who can't see themselves under that umbrella?" Learning by Design provides all educators with a common language. As one principal said, "It's nice to have that cohesiveness and that vision. It doesn't matter where you are in Surrey as a teacher, this is what we are. This is what we do."

SCHOOL PLANNING

The superintendent recognizes Learning by Design is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but should be a model that is "in service of school priorities." To ensure school priorities are reflective of school communities and needs (and are, therefore, encapsulated by the district vision), Surrey Schools' Strategic Plan commits to inquiry-focused school planning that:

- engages teachers in meaningful conversations about evidence-based teaching practices that lead to improved student learning and engagement;
- improves student learning in areas that are foundational to student success (e.g., literacy, numeracy, etc.);
- views school planning in a more holistic way, incorporating the district priority practices (i.e., Curriculum Design, Instructional Strategies, Quality Assessment, and Social and Emotional Learning) as a key aspect of school development; and
- ensures that students are developing Core Competencies as mandated by the Ministry of Education.

How the district implements these principles is described in greater detail in the pages that follow. There is a common thread through all the equity strategies identified in this case study: Every decision and policy in Surrey Schools is made with the intention of knowing, understanding, and supporting students and communities. Although district leadership is levels removed from classrooms and communities, it has strategies in place to ensure it has the best "finger on the pulse" possible through teachers, administrators, and evidence.

> *"… There is context to a community … when there is an equity challenge, we meet to [address] that challenge, find out more about it, and find out how we can address it."*
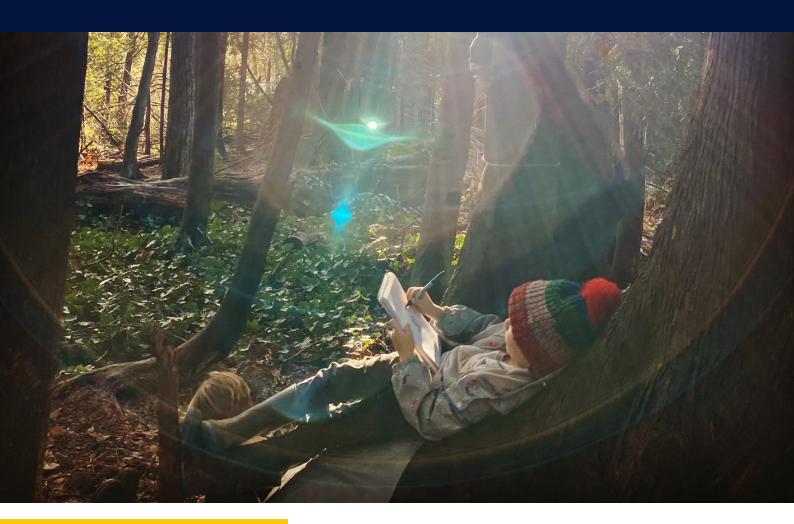>
> *—Assistant Superintendent*

METHODS

Policy Studies Associates (PSA) conducted interviews and focus groups to gather data from system leaders and school communities in spring 2021. At the district level, PSA conducted a focus group with six assistant superintendents and interviewed the district superintendent.

PSA also gathered data from three Surrey schools, nominated by system leaders because of the diversity of the school contexts and populations served:

- A secondary school in the Clayton community that offers both French immersion and English programs and operates with an inclusion model.
- An elementary school in the Guildford community, which serves around 500 students coming from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, a large portion of whom live in poverty.
- An elementary school in the South Surrey/White Rock region, serving about 370 students from an overall affluent community, but with a large English Language Learner population.

The PSA team spoke with educators and community members at these three schools, including four principals, three vice principals, seven classroom teachers, one Blended Learning teacher, two inclusion teachers, one childcare worker, one counselor, four parents, and two students.

Strategy 1: Establish a common vision and language for the district.

Upon assuming his role in 2014, the superintendent found that the senior district team could not clearly describe the direction of the district and lacked a cohesive vision. Surrey Schools worked collaboratively over a 16-month period to develop a vision in which all community members could see themselves. The vision-setting process engaged all community stakeholders—teachers, principals, and families—and resulted in top-down clarity on where the district was headed through the creation of the Learning by Design framework.

Learning by Design established a vision to "prepare learners for a world in which they think creatively and critically, communicate skillfully, and demonstrate care for self and others." The superintendent emphasized: "Teachers are the designers of engaging learning environments. From the start, we wanted to recognize teachers. We want to give them permission to challenge the structures that exist and give them the tools to succeed. That was the inception of Learning by Design." This view encompasses the three core aspects of the vision—Learning, Structures, and Tools.

According to a school principal, "… as large of a district as Surrey is, it's nice to have that cohesiveness and that vision … it doesn't matter where you are in Surrey as a teacher, this is what we're [about]." The framework is all-encompassing; it addresses curriculum, SEL, and assessment, which means no element operates in isolation. To school leaders, this comprehensiveness is what makes the vision so strong. Leaders are able to see the vision in action, both in their buildings and across the district in conversations and meetings with colleagues. Learning by Design "created common language upon which all district leaders and educators can rely and use." Principals interviewed for this report agreed that Learning by Design is a strong foundation for their work: "It's good to have a guideline on the district goals and having that common language at the school [is important]."

> "Everything we do in the district really tries to fit into the mobilization of Learning by Design. How does this [framework] create the tools, the structures that are needed for students to thrive?"
>
> —*Elementary Principal*

LANGUAGE IS A CATALYST FOR ASSET-BASED THINKING AND STRATEGIES, AND IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING

"The amazing thing about Learning by Design is that it encompasses all domains. You've got your curriculum in there; you've got your Social Emotional Learning in there; [and] you've got your assessment practices in there. And I think that that's the beauty of it all; it's not [in] isolation. I think that's what makes it such a strong framework in which we are able to work within in our building. Not just our building; I see it everywhere: when we have conversations with other colleagues, and we have meetings. The work that's being done is quite strong."

—School Administrator

Intentional, asset-based language threads itself through district communication and planning in Surrey Schools. The district is intentional about its language and word choice when speaking about its communities. The way in which district-level leaders speak about equity, about vulnerable students, about challenges and areas of opportunity, all reflect a human-centered, asset-based view. The intentionality in language reflects Surrey's broader culture of ensuring all district stakeholders (students, families, communities), regardless of level of vulnerability or need, are valued as deserving, contributing members of the Surrey community.

An assistant superintendent spoke of their school zone saying, "We have the benefit of [having a] high frequency of newcomer students and their families." This asset-based language choice at the highest level of district leadership demonstrates how leadership views diversity: as a benefit, not a challenge. Language is not enough to drive change, but it can be an indicator of and catalyst for the way in which decisions and policies are made.

In Surrey, "equity" is more than language, or a buzzword; equity is a mind-set that is threaded through every initiative, decision, and conversation. As the superintendent shared, there is a "strong thread of equity, but we don't talk about it that way…. We're being more purposeful in using language, but it's always been about inclusive practices for all children. We wouldn't separate that language out into something different." Equity must be operationalized by the creation of and adherence to inclusive practices. The decision-making process at the district level was described by an assistant superintendent: "When we look at new programs, we ask how it lands for the most vulnerable and who's missing from this picture, and work to support inclusion in these processes."

District leadership is aware, though, that for some, using the term "vulnerability" as a part of this inclusion lens brings negative connotations. Indeed, "vulnerability" is commonly equated with difference from the "norm" (i.e., able-bodied, non-poor, majority children). However, in Surrey, leadership recognizes that unique vulnerabilities exist for all students and vary greatly based on context and community. As the superintendent says, "[Vulnerabilities] can exist based on a range of factors" and, for that reason, "[vulnerability] is not linked to a specific indicator." For example,

students who experience significant external and/or familial pressure to be admitted to an elite college upon graduation are "vulnerable" due to high levels of anxiety for those learners; students whose families experience housing instability are also "vulnerable" when that instability impacts their daily attendance and engagement at school. It is the district's job to be aware of the plethora of evolving factors that can make any learner "vulnerable" to not reaching their goals and to consider how all decisions and policies impact each community, while considering its known vulnerabilities.

The district has begun using the term "complexity" to encompass these factors that impact a student's learning experience, including in its data dashboards. However, both leaders and school-based staff used the term "vulnerable" in interviews; as a result, the term appears throughout this report. The continuous equity-driven intentionality that drives Surrey's decision making also appears in its re-examination and adaptation of language; the superintendent embraced the authenticity of this process saying, "We're evolving our language around this [vulnerability versus complexity]. And if it seems a bit messy, it's because it is."

An indicator in Surrey's district data dashboards that once was referred to as the "vulnerability index" has been reframed as a "complexity indicator." This language shift better represents the idea that unique and complex factors intersect to impact certain learners' school experiences.

Strategy 2: Create organizational structures and supports that foster community and equity.

SURREY ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES PROMOTE BOTH COMMUNITY AND BEST PRACTICE

Surrey district leaders recognize their distance from classrooms, with one assistant superintendent saying, "The longer we stay in these [district office] roles, not school-based, the harder to imagine what policy decisions to [address]." This recognition has driven change and policy at the district level to provide leadership with the most proximity to, and deepest understanding of, the impact of their decisions.

Prior to 2014, system leadership in Surrey was isolated by geographic silos (North, South, East, and West), where each assistant superintendent was responsible for only their assigned regional work. The other functions of the district offices were distributed to other staff members (called directors), who oversaw specific instructional areas (e.g., curriculum, assessment). The assistant superintendents did not always get notified of changes being implemented by directors, who were not required to consult with assistant superintendents to discuss how the changes would affect the students, staff, or communities in each assistant superintendent's assigned geographic area. This lack of alignment and collaboration meant that community-centered policies and decisions by assistant superintendents were disjointed from instructional decisions made by district directors. It was through the visioning process of Learning by Design and the plans for implementation that these structural disconnects became evident to all.

To address this, the superintendent made an organizational decision in 2016: To address growth in the district and to build the capacity to support Learning by Design, the district would align assistant superintendents with other functions of the district office through direct supervision of directors. Assistant superintendents would continue to be responsible for a region of the district that was titled by that region's name, rather than its cardinal direction. The assistant superintendents worked collaboratively with the superintendent to determine which regions each would serve, as well as the instructional areas, or "portfolios," that each would "own" through supervision of, and collaboration with, assigned directors. This alignment supported a recent move of the Board office and a consolidation of district services. In 2010, the district built new offices, consolidating office space and workspace into one building, bringing district leaders and staff together physically to work together toward a common vision in a space that allowed for improved relationships and collaboration. This organizational structure reflects a desire to focus on best supporting all populations by making community-centered, culturally relevant, and learning-focused policies and decisions.

In practice, this restructuring has broken down silos that contributed to increased "distance" of leadership from school communities in the past, increased communication across the district, and ensured that district leadership is speaking with one voice that reflects its vision and priorities.

The connection to a region in addition to a "portfolio" keeps each assistant superintendent connected to the needs of families and students in their portfolio. Assistant superintendents feel that they are able to better understand what a departmental decision will look like at the school level when it is rolled out. The assistant superintendents collaborate with the principals in their assigned geographic area, and they have a team of directors to support principals as needed in specific instructional areas. The assistant superintendents are tasked with becoming intimately familiar with the schools and communities in their geographic area and with how their portfolio will impact not only their geographic area, but all schools in Surrey. The superintendent believes that if leaders become highly aware of the struggles and successes in their assigned regional areas, they will be able to make sure that policies and programs adopted consider "How will it affect my region?" and "How will it affect the most vulnerable students in my region?" and through their portfolio can then consider how each initiative will unfold across all schools in the district in addition to having shared responsibility with their senior executive peers.

The restructuring that better linked assistant superintendents with instructional directors also fostered increased dialogue between assistant superintendents to evaluate new policies as a group and adapt and adopt those based upon the needs of the students in their region. There is a shared and collective responsibility across all regions where, although each director reports to an assistant superintendent, all assistant superintendents are looped in to critical decisions being made that will impact their regions. For example, if the assistant superintendent to whom the director of curriculum reports has been presented with a new elementary reading program for the district, that assistant superintendent then works with the director to present the idea to all assistant superintendents. Each assistant superintendent then utilizes their regional lens to detemine if the new policy makes sense for their community. This structure allows for consistency and intentionality in the

"We meet in something that we call a Family of Schools sometimes.… And our area superintendent can enjoy this too.… We talk about issues that pertain to our students because they're usually quite similar. That's usually a demographic or geographic thing. We can all relate to each other. So having an area superintendent who is assigned to an area, I think, helps the efficiency and the understanding of the learners."

—*Elementary Principal*

language and direction of changes implemented across the district.

Not only is this organizational structure geographically based, but it is community based. In the words of an assistant superintendent, "Our 'zones' or regional approach is somewhat geographic, but we also organize in a family of schools, which is a community concept.... Zones are geographic but are also communities." This structure contributes to district leadership feeling grounded in the communities in which their decisions and policies have real impact. District relationships with principals in their zones are critically important to this improved understanding, and those relationships better enable students and families in a community to have more direct connection to district decision makers through principals as their "access point."

Organization by "zone" not only allows assistant superintendents to remain connected to the needs of their communities, but it encourages expertise and collaboration. An assistant superintendent shared, "To have some of those areas under the overarching supervision of an assistant superintendent, we can connect with each other and bring information from our areas and portfolios to each other to learn from each other as well. It's a structure that's had benefit for us." It also means that critical conversations occur between district leaders about resource allocation to ensure that schools and communities in need can receive necessary supports like afterschool programming, extra staffing, early literacy programs, operating budgets, and extra summer learning programs.

SYSTEMS TO IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE STUDENTS

Student populations in Surrey Schools determine the number of positions each school will receive to address the needs of all students and the full complexity of their assets and challenges. Indigenous specialists, inclusion specialists, and guidance counselors are positions that are determined by population thresholds and need. These positions not only provide student support but also, through modeling and professional learning, allow teachers and school leaders to learn important skills that influence decisions for students.

Every Surrey school engages in a similar process, reliant on the expertise and commitment of teaching staff and specialists, to identify vulnerable students. Teachers are empowered to submit struggling students' names to an internal School-Based Team—teachers might identify students based on academic, behavioral, home-based, and/or social needs. This team reviews each student's history and develops a support plan for their improvement. These teams are composed of a combination of staff who know the student, support the student, and/or have expertise relevant to the student's situation. Team members can include a child psychologist, school administrators, Indigenous advocates, social development teachers, childcare workers, and/or counselors. Schools know their students best and can make decisions that are best for their students. The frequency at which the School-Based Team meets is left up to the discretion of school leaders.

The COVID-19 pandemic and pivot to Surrey Blended amplified issues of vulnerability. Surrey Blended allowed teachers to have a unique view into students' home lives in an unprecedented way that allowed for a more complete picture of vulnerabilities and challenges faced by students. Students were identified in Blended Learning who otherwise had "slipped through the cracks" during in-person learning. According to one teacher, "A lot of students come from very challenging households. We knew that, but this year, I can honestly say, being an online teacher, and having that window into their home life, where I can hear what is being said to them, I can see what they look like in the morning.... I don't think I actually knew what a lot of these kids are going through." In response, teachers sought to strengthen relationships and communication with students' families.

> "I've never been so close to parents as I am this year. Reaching out to families, I actually feel like I know a lot of these families. Now we're on the phone a lot more. I've had to reach out.... I've actually gained a much deeper understanding of what is actually happening at home, and what those environments look like inside."
>
> —*Teacher*

ALLOCATION OF SCHOOL-LEVEL STAFF TO REFLECT STUDENT NEED

Surrey Schools believes that those closest to the students should make decisions for their students and that district staff should be allocated in a way that allows the most supportive, appropriate, and necessary staff to be in schools where they can have the most direct impact. The central district office offers support positions to the schools based upon their student population's need. Inclusion specialists, Indigenous specialists, childcare workers, and educational assistants are assigned based upon school demographics and need. Equity is operationalized in the placement of these staff. The district intentionally adjusts staffing levels annually to provide more resources where needed that go above and beyond "the formula" prescribing suggested staffing allowances. An inner-city elementary school childcare worker described this staff allocation saying:

> *"Yes [equity is a priority]. Because a lot of the kids with special needs, they all have an educational assistant with them. [Students] that require behavioral support, the childcare workers connect with them or the principals themselves. And [we have an] Indigenous childcare worker that works with the Indigenous kids in school…. So I feel like we do [prioritize equity]."*

What makes this allocation of staff so unique in Surrey is that while specialists are assigned based on the needs of particular students, there is a school-level culture of inclusion and teamwork to best utilize all staff to help all students. For example, not all students who might require an educational assistant have been identified and gone through the official process to receive that support; regardless of paperwork, school staff know which students might benefit, which is where inclusion comes into play. In the words of a secondary

principal, "What you'll often see [in schools] is a model where these teachers are assigned to these students … everybody has their silo. And so, what we do with inclusion is we say, 'We are all one team. We support all students.' And we believe the best learning happens in the classroom with the classroom teacher." In Surrey, each school organizes to provide the supports necessary to keep each child learning. This means that all staff step up regardless of their assigned group; it truly takes a village, and a village is what each school aims to provide to students. An elementary school principal echoed a similar sentiment saying:

> *"Teachers [and support staff] do a great job of working together as a team to support our vulnerable learners. If we didn't have the specialist positions, it would be tremendously difficult to support all of our vulnerable learners. By everyone taking a few vulnerable learners to work with, we are able to make it work."*

This strategy of allocating staff positions where needed was operationalized during the pandemic for Blended Learning. The district supported schools with additional staff in the form of mentors for Blended Learning teachers. As a Blended Learning teacher described:

> *"[The mentors] were hired to specifically support the Blended Learning teachers. And they organized a lot of sessions. They were kind of our go-to people if we had any specific questions. They offered workshops or, if you had a question specifically about a child, [offered] what they would do in the situation. So that was kind of a neat opportunity that I didn't have to always go to my principal. I had someone else who was doing the same kind of work to communicate with."*

For instance, the pandemic necessitated reorganization of an elementary social development program; the

program became regional, rather than school-based. Not all children served by the program were from a single school, so students from neighboring schools were combined, which created stress and change for students and teachers alike. Amid this change, the elementary principal housing the program reached out to her assistant superintendent, district principal, and district behavioral specialists for help. The district responded by providing an extra teacher for the program, which helped alleviate the stress experienced by both students and staff.

Nonetheless, there remains room for growth in hiring and deploying sufficient staff to meet the needs of schools and students in Surrey; administrators acknowledge that not all schools and not all learners are receiving everything they need. For example, an inner-city and high-needs elementary school reported having two full-time childcare workers to meet the needs of its students, whereas other schools have access to a childcare worker one or two days a week. While this is an allocation of resources to better serve high-needs students, it is still insufficient. A childcare worker said, "I wish there were more hours for more childcare workers [for] caseload reduction," reflecting on her current caseload of fifty students. Guidance counselors were concerned with the amount of anxiety that students are experiencing because of the problems associated with the pandemic and highlighted a need for more counselors. A school had lost its Indigenous specialist, and reported that this created a gap in student and teacher support for that population.

Strategy 3: Cultivate relationships with school-level leaders. They are the best source of knowledge about student and community needs.

Surrey Schools district leaders focus on three priorities at the school level to meet the unique needs of Surrey students: (1) building relationships with school leaders, (2) empowering schools to develop their own plans that encapsulate the strengths and needs of their communities, and (3) ensuring that adequate supports are provided to all educators. At every level of the system—either through supporting administrators from the district office or teachers being supported by leaders—support is delivered to schools through the lens of students and community. The belief that the leader and teacher are closest to the students and should be making the decisions for their students is evident at every level of the system. Ownership for planning and decision making is placed at the principal level. The district office supports the principal by acting as a thought partner, and not the final decision maker.

KNOW YOUR SCHOOLS THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR LEADERS

With more than 90 percent of the principals being promoted from within the Surrey School District, assistant superintendents typically have strong relationships with and trust in their principals. Every principal interviewed felt that the coaching and autonomy "comes down to trusting school-based leaders." Principals trust the assistant superintendent to support them. The assistant superintendent in turn "navigates at the district level [and] knows, if I [the principal] am saying, 'I need help' ... who to talk to to get help."

Decision making at the school level is coached rather than directed by assistant superintendents. Surrey Schools has invested significant resources in intentionally developing a culture of coaching[3]. Principals reported that assistant superintendents do not make decisions for them, but rather serve as coaches and provide information and ideas so that the principal is then "empowered ... to find a resolution to the problem." One principal said, "I don't need [my supervisor] to come in and give me the answer. I need him to listen to me," and together they come up with the answer. Another principal said, "[My supervisor] gave us a lot of autonomy before and we knew she was always there for support." Principals feel that supervisors "trust your abilities, and they trust your judgment" in making decisions, which is evidenced by their providing context and information but not answers. This trust builds up the confidence of leaders and trickles down to school staff.

The interactions between assistant superintendent and principals is based upon a trusting relationship and provides insights into the needs of the community, parents, and students. Assistant superintendents become more knowledgeable from the interactions with principals and school staff to make informed decisions about the vulnerable students in their region.

ALLOW SCHOOL LEADERS TO FORM SCHOOL PLANS THAT ADDRESS THE STRENGTHS AND NEEDS OF THEIR UNIQUE COMMUNITIES

According to the superintendent, principals resisted the prior district culture of "being told what to do and how to be compliant." In response to their feedback, under the current leadership, Surrey Schools has shifted how school plans are developed. Previously, school plans had been compliance-based. Now this has shifted to inquiry-based school plans where the school and community co-determine goals for the students and collaboratively develop a plan for student success. The district administration believes that "those closest to the students should be making the decisions for the students" and that if you "place trust in your professionals," said an assistant superintendent, then they become the closest and best source of evidence and wisdom that you have about student progress.

The process of school planning creates more opportunities for the principal to involve all stakeholders. One school involves the teachers and department heads to "produce goals and share those with other department members." These plans are then summarized for the parent association. One principal stated, "The students who are in front of us are who we're most concerned about. It's not a theory. We care about the individual. These are your vulnerable students. We're going to support [them] by knowing their names and their stories." This is how the principals think through the development of their plans. They include everyone involved in the school in the process and come up with goals for their schools.

This shift from compliance-based to inquiry-based planning is not easy, and has been met with discomfort by some principals unaccustomed to such autonomy and responsibility. In the words of the superintendent, the notion of "Over to you!" requires adjustment, but is ultimately intended to "empower the profession to do the work."

Surrey's superintendent acknowledged there's "room for growth" and that the school planning process "hasn't lived up to the vision that we intended; it's a lot of work for principals." The shift continues: not all schools have submitted school plans or have complete, up-to-date plans. This is partially because of the onset of COVID-19 and the ongoing unpredictability it has caused.
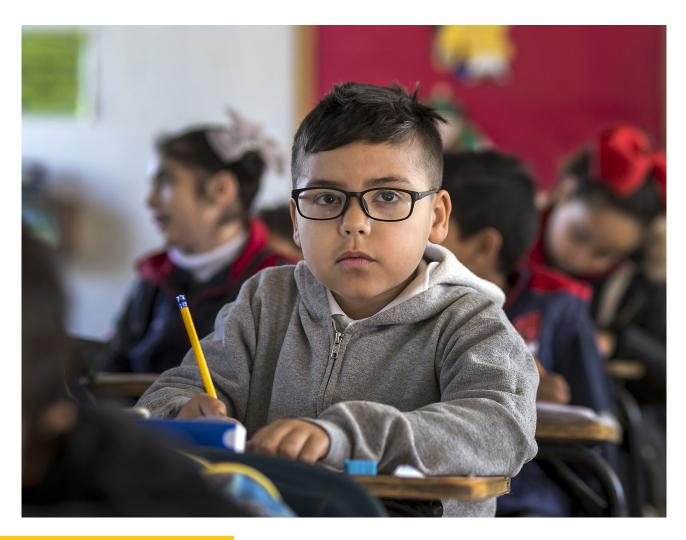
"I remember the shift [to school plans]. Schools would have autonomy to develop their own goals … the people I worked with on that really appreciated the fact that it was unique to each school."

—Secondary Vice Principal

"So, does empowering schools to write school plans actually work? We don't know. Our attempt to making it authentic is failing, but how do we help schools value school planning?"

—Superintendent

However, district leadership recognizes that "COVID descended in 2020, but some plans haven't been updated since 2017." Part of the challenge is that it's hard for principals to engage in inquiry-based processes in the region when there is no systemic evidence. For example, the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) is a "terribly tainted measure" and one that has been fraught with tension, according to the superintendent. The lack of provincial measures means that school planning must, according to district leadership, rely on "engag[ing] with staff in meaningful school-wide evidence [collection], which is tough." Another challenge is staff turnover: When leaders are not remaining in buildings long enough to generate school plans, that complicates the process.

Despite this, school planning remains an integral piece of the Learning by Design vision.

PROVIDE ADEQUATE SUPPORTS TO TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

School leaders (principals and vice principals) have powerful positions that have a direct effect on how educators teach and how students learn. Surrey Schools puts significant resources into the development of leaders internally; 80–90 percent of Surrey principals are selected from within the district. School leadership development is provided by in-district leadership development classes designed to prepare future school system leaders, and the district has recently incorporated online tools as an additional mechanism of support. Principals and vice principals participate in a yearlong onboarding program called "Leading the Learning," which is led by other principals in the district under the tutelage of the assistant superintendent team. This ensures that there is consistency—from the competencies the district wants to see to the leaders it develops. Principals are provided time to participate in professional learning to meet, network, and share ideas. This care of principals is integral to the autonomy that the district affords leaders.

School staff have access to a range of supports aligned with district priorities and policies. For example, one school staff member interviewed stated, "The district [provides a] guide to inclusive education. That's a framework that the district has compiled. [It is] a huge document [that] covers the laws and policies around inclusive education, the role of the Ministry, [etc.].… It outlines all the different district programs, district roles and responsibilities." Surrey Schools is also integrating concepts from the Pratt Race Equity Continuum to increase the intentional focus of its professional learning on anti-racist practices.

Having systems of support in place prior to the pandemic meant that Surrey School District officials were able to more rapidly develop programs and support for teachers and administrators to respond to the pandemic. The district provided professional development for teachers in each school to become Blended Learning teachers. The professional learning was administered by "hiring three Blended mentor teachers … who were hired to specifically support Blended Learning teachers" across the district.

Strategy 4: Grant school-based staff flexibility and autonomy, which is warranted by their expertise and proximity to communities.

"The district says, 'You know your learners best.' They encourage us to get to know the students. They believe that we know our students the best and they provide flexibility with options and choices.... The district says, 'This is what the plan is, but you figure it out at your site how this is going to best work for your community.'"

—Elementary Principal

Surrey recognizes that however well-intended a practice or policy might be, each school, each principal, and each community is unique, especially in such a large, diverse district. One of the approaches Surrey takes is to allow its professionals a great deal of autonomy and flexibility: in curricular adherence, school planning (described in Strategy 1), pandemic adaptations, and school-level resources. Allowing flexibility at the school level permits school-based leaders and teachers to address what is most salient to the needs and experiences of their students in a way that is most impactful.

CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY

Respecting community ties and professional knowledge is exemplified by Surrey Schools' policy that provides flexibility in the delivery of curricula at the school level. While curricula are important for guiding and framing instruction, prescriptive and rigid adherence to provided curricula can inhibit a teacher's ability to meet their students where they are. A teacher in an inner-city elementary school described the practice of curricular flexibility:

> "We as a school have permission that we do not have to cover every little piece of our curriculum. So, we all have curricular goals, we have themes for the year, but … the focus has always been on the kid, not the work. And I think that is huge for equity, because that gives us permission [to focus on the kid, not the curriculum]."

This policy creates a community-based classroom, rather than a curriculum-based classroom. The autonomy and flexibility create a normed

and respected child-first focus where each child is met where they are, while grounded in shared accountability to school colleagues and the district vision. Progress can be made without being pushed at a pace dictated by a prescribed and prioritized curriculum. This policy reflects how Surrey addresses the full range of student needs, without the need to separate or "other" students who may need inclusion services or additional learning supports. An elementary school principal praised the ability of her teachers to differentiate learning, saying it happens because "there's so much autonomy in being creative with programming."

RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND SELECTION BY SCHOOL LEADERS

Surrey gives school leaders the ability to select and opt in to the district resources that are most needed and will best serve their students and communities. The principal of a Surrey elementary school described this practice saying, "I do appreciate the autonomy that the district gives the school administrators, like, 'Take what you need, and apply it to your context.'" Indeed, Surrey has empowered school leaders to have great power over how their funds are expended.

For example, an inner-city elementary school serving large numbers of refugee and immigrant students receives additional funding because of its need to customize instruction and provide additional supports for these students. The principal has the autonomy to purchase whatever they see fit, including extra time with education assistants or childcare workers. The principal described this flexibility saying, "There are some guidelines to it, but [the funding is intended] to purchase supplies to support vulnerable students, whether that's computers or whether that's … art supplies…. I have the autonomy as a principal to bring that to my staff and make a decision as to what best fits this school." This autonomy is acknowledged and appreciated by the teachers, who benefit from these intentionally curated resources. A teacher at this school shared:

"[Our principal] always provided lots of money for us to get sand puzzles, art supplies, magnetic sand … audiobooks, headphones … new seating. Some of us have whiteboard tables where [students] can draw things on them as well, too. So that's been a key part—getting money for us to be

"Teachers are the designers of engaging learning environments. From the start, we wanted to recognize teachers. We want to give them permission to challenge the structures that exist and give them the tools to succeed. That was the inception of Learning by Design."

—*Superintendent*

able to use in the classroom, and everyday things that can be implemented for the kids every day." This philosophy has augmented the focus on building relationships (described in Strategy 3), which ensures that district leadership is able to have these conversations with school leaders familiarizing them with policies, changes, and resources and enabling and encouraging them to take advantage only of what most benefits their students.

PANDEMIC ADAPTATIONS

Although this practice of acknowledging school-based expertise with a degree of autonomy was normalized in Surrey prior to the pandemic, it became especially important during the tumultuous pandemic period when, even in the face of learning loss, academics were not always the priority of teachers and administrators. The prioritization of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Learning by Design meant that SEL was also a predictable and appropriate foundation for the design of Surrey Blended. The ability to, and expectation that one should, operate from a child-first lens allowed teachers to prioritize SEL (expanded upon in Strategy 6) and meet the mental and behavioral needs of students exacerbated by the fear, uncertainty, and change of the pandemic. As the superintendent said, "Social and Emotional Learning isn't something added to the plate. It is the plate."

Schools had the autonomy to decide which pandemic learning model worked for them. As an elementary principal said, "With regards to COVID, for example, everyone's communities were handling it differently. Some schools had a large number of students in the Blended program; other schools had everybody showing up. This is the attempt to make sure vulnerable learners are okay. We're totally different, so a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work." Just as the district gave principals autonomy to adapt their approach to pandemic learning, principals gave autonomy to their teachers. A Blended Learning teacher reflected:

> "My principal just said, 'Do what you think is best for the students.' I didn't have to check in with her every day or show her my plans. It was very much like 'You've got this. We'll take it one step at a time. And kind of learn as you go.' We had full autonomy of our program, whatever that looks like … each kind of teacher did what was best for them and what was best for their learners."

Recognizing the autonomy of professionals and their ability to know their schools and populations intimately made these responsive pandemic adaptations possible both for school leaders and for their teachers.

At a Surrey elementary school serving a large refugee population with many students, something as "normal" as a fire drill requires adaptations and care from leaders.

"The sound of the bell scares a lot of [students].... They go back to trauma [from war-torn places]." And, for district policymakers outside of the community, that intimate understanding of trauma and need is simply "not trainable." It's knowing the school environment and what its kids need. According to the school, district leadership is "phenomenal" with understanding and allowing adaptations for their fire drills. The school is able to confidently say, "Okay, yeah, we're doing this a little bit differently." *– Principal*

Strategy 5: Value qualitative evidence as a critical indicator of need and progress.

As with most large, urban districts, using evidence to inform decisions is common in Surrey. Surrey Schools recently created data dashboards, which look at certain "vulnerability factors" drawn from internal district data, external municipal and federal census data, and provincial data. Indicators utilized in these dashboards include attendance records, administrative turnover, unemployment rate, student language, and more. These data inform what the district calls "a complexity indicator," a term that is intended to demonstrate that student need can be complex and exacerbated by a wide range of factors that "can get in the way of a student having a successful experience" (see Strategy 1). The complexity indicator is "the launch point into the narrative of students" for district leadership, but not "the end-all-be-all" of evidence to inform decisions. An assistant superintendent elaborated:

"Our district values the qualitative and values the narrative in addition to the quantitative. [Evidence] lives at the school level, and we've tried as a system to honor it and elevate it and highlight it. We're not defined by a dashboard. It is a piece of the puzzle, but we engage in the process of collecting the narrative [at the school level] and using that to inform [decisions]."

According to the superintendent, "If you want to know how your kid is doing, ask the teacher." This priority was reinforced by a principal: "We care about that individual…. They don't need to have all these tags to be classified as a vulnerable learner. If it's [student name] who's vulnerable, we're going to support them. It's knowing their names and knowing their stories."

While there is value in and space for the use of quantitative metrics and these dashboards, Surrey Schools places great emphasis on the collection, analysis, and use of qualitative evidence. The district also seeks to make this evidence publicly

accessible through the work of its new department focusing on data visualization, which seeks to make evidence accessible and meaningful to the public. As the superintendent said, "Professional judgment is an important part of the evidence equation." This emphasis on qualitative evidence is felt at the school level where formative assessments do occur, but evidence is also collected anecdotally. As an elementary vice principal said, "I think a lot of it is what's happening in the classroom with our teachers in the assessment that they're doing both formatively and subjectively.... With our learners that we're concerned about, we're doing a lot of your observation type data to be able to say, 'Okay, this is what we've noticed over the year; these are some of our concerns.'" Childcare workers and teachers also communicate frequently in check-ins that are grounded in qualitative evidence about each student.

This emphasis on qualitative evidence becomes apparent in many ways, including assisting in transition supports both between schools and between grades. At a secondary school in the district, qualitative data points are used to discuss the needs of students transitioning from the local elementary school into their secondary years. As the vice principal said, "District resource counselors meet with our team. We try to think ahead about what supports they'll need. In the pandemic, we reviewed attendance. Students who were missing X classes or so. We went through with the staff (inclusion, counselors). Ten to 15 students each meeting, each week." This process relied on the use of qualitative evidence and quantitative evidence stored in Power BI that provided other evidence like demographics.

Similarly, the process of relying on qualitative evidence to create classes for upcoming years was described as critical to meeting the needs of students. Teachers and support staff analyze strengths and struggles of students to make classroom placement recommendations. Teachers meet their students and

"pilot" the classroom assignments before agreeing that the student groupings work for them and their students. A teacher described the process saying:

> *"There's a lot of thought put into class organizations. A nice thing about Surrey is this: The teachers get to make the classes. They all come together, so we meet with the teachers from the previous year, and they give us their input. Rather than just like an algorithm on a computer of putting classes together. It's very much a process at the beginning of the year for about a week. We do rotations and mix kids together and see what works, who you work well with. So, it's very much we take that [qualitative] data and then utilize it for class organizations."*

This value placed on qualitative evidence goes hand in hand with the district's strategy of respecting the expertise, autonomy, and relationships of its professionals. Their proximity to students and communities means that their observations and insights are an important source of information for identifying and meeting the needs of all students.

Developing practices to effectively braid the quantitative and qualitative evidence is an ongoing improvement effort for Surrey Schools. In particular, the accuracy—and therefore utility—of the data dashboards is inconsistent. In interviews, elementary school leaders reported not using these data dashboards at all, whereas secondary leaders were familiar with the existence of these dashboards but did not find their evidence reliable or useful. A secondary principal shared, "Honestly … what they collected [in these dashboards] is not relevant to us.… We got a list of students who are vulnerable and at-risk generated from that [dashboard], and [it was] not even close to who we had [identified]." Other school leaders added, "We felt much more comfortable with the data we were producing from the school [versus district-level data]."

Strategy 6: Embrace SEL as an equity strategy. Students cannot learn if their social-emotional needs, behavioral health, and mental health are not addressed.

The Surrey Strategic Plan outlines "Priority Practices" that guide the implementation of the Learning by Design vision. One of these Priority Practices is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Surrey defines SEL as:

> *"The process through which young people acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions; set and achieve goals; demonstrate empathy for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make effective decisions. It includes a number of competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making."[4]*

Surrey highlights SEL as a priority for enhancing students' overall well-being, while also contributing to achievement and positive life outcomes. Surrey students are supported by intentional SEL instruction. Surrey recognizes that SEL is not only a strategy for improved learning outcomes, but also a mechanism by which equity is achieved. SEL skills like self-awareness, emotional identification and regulation, and social awareness all contribute significantly to ensuring that all students are able to maximize learning time, build supportive relationships with peers and teachers, and cope with challenging life circumstances outside the walls of schools.

The district's SEL focus extends to its educators as well. Emotional exhaustion and stress among teachers can negatively impact instruction while also increasing stress levels of students, leading to unhealthy classroom environments and behavioral problems[5]. Learning by Design incorporates the support of teacher well-being through ongoing professional learning, exhibited by district-wide initiatives designed to improve educator well-being, self-efficacy, and connectedness:

- SEL for Educators (SEL4E): This series of workshops provides educators with the tools to improve their social and emotional competencies. These tools contribute to improved teacher-student relationships, healthier classroom climates, greater SEL and academic achievement, and more effective SEL and classroom management strategies. The sheer size of the district, however, means that the demand for this SEL4E outweighs supply, but the district is committed to expanding this learning opportunity.
- The Surrey SEL Initiative: This school-wide systems approach uses resources from the CASEL Guide to School-wide Social and Emotional Learning to guide schools in assessing the SEL climate and integrating academic, social, and emotional learning. Research shows that a system-wide

approach to SEL improves social and emotional competencies for students and staff[6]. A school-based SEL Team (of both teachers and administrators) is supported by the District SEL Team, and an SEL Lead at each school receives release time one day a week to support the implementation of SEL practices school-wide by working alongside classroom teachers to co-plan and co-facilitate SEL-based curriculum.

- Mentor36: This initiative between Surrey Schools and the Surrey Teachers' Association aims to build a culture of collaborative mentorship at every school in Surrey, which supports learning and growth of teachers while creating a sense of belonging through strength-based, non-evaluative learning opportunities.

At the school level, SEL strategies are an integral part of a school's schedule, curriculum, and culture. A Surrey teacher reflected, "Social Emotional Learning is such a huge part of what we do here at [our school]. Social Emotional Learning is usually at the forefront in my classroom. I feel like that needs to be addressed before learning can happen for a lot of students." At that school, a "soft start" has been implemented where the day begins with activities that acclimate students to school settings and ground them for the day. This might look like an art activity in the morning that is followed by a feelings check-in. Another SEL-related strategy described was a system called Zones of Regulation, intended to assist students in emotional self-regulation. In a community with a large immigrant population, many students also lack the vocabulary to describe emotions and feelings, so common language and color-coded emotions allow for more clear and accessible expression.

The district intentionally gathers evidence to inform itself of how well it is meeting the needs of both students and employees. Surrey administers the Student Voice Survey (SVS) to students in Grades 10 to 12 as part of a student leadership series on student voice; it administers the Surrey School District Employee Well-Being Survey annually to its staff; and the district administers the Student Learning Survey (SLS), which informs the district about students' educational experiences, including safety, school environment, and human and social development. These tools are designed to help district leadership better understand how well SEL needs are being met district-wide so that initiatives can be sustained, expanded, or adapted to better serve educators and students.

This district-wide SEL focus was in place well before COVID-19, but its impact was felt more acutely during the pandemic. Indeed, SEL became

arguably even more important, as dynamics at home differ greatly from those at school; Surrey Blended Learning meant new home-based triggers were relevant during learning time, and a trusting community had to be established because peers and teachers were gaining access to personal lives outside of school. Schools were able to use previously established SEL-related goals cultivated through Learning by Design to ensure that, during the pandemic, students were as ready as possible to learn. While the immediate focus shifted to health and safety of students and staff, the root of that shift remained in social and emotional well-being.

One principal described the relevance of the SEL framework saying, "We're so aware of that social emotional component and how important that is to be able to now get the curriculum and to be able to feel like you can learn because the rest of your body is ready to learn." As the superintendent says, "When we designed Blended [Learning] at the onset [of the pandemic], the first comment was, 'It has to start with SEL.'"

Evidence gathered by the district indicates that students and staff alike felt the impact of the uncertainty, fear, and instability of the times, although it believes that the impact was mitigated by the SEL focus. For example, 62 percent of students reported feeling calm and safe at school on the SVS in 2020-21, a 22 percent decrease from 2019. Similarly, the Employee Well-Being Survey showed that 46 percent of teachers felt calm and confident more than half the time during the pandemic, a 15 percent decrease from pre-pandemic. SLS data also showed that students' feelings of being welcome at school, their sense of belonging, and their sense of having at least two adults who care about them at school also decreased with the disruption to normal schooling[7].

The district firmly believes that the way forward in a time of such uncertainty, and recovery, needs to begin, as always, with its focus on SEL.

> "When our students walk in [to the school], it doesn't matter which classroom they walk into; they know that there is a shared kind of language around expressing emotions and feelings, and it kind of actually frees me up [as a teacher], where we can now talk about some higher-level strategies to help us with [regulating those emotions]."
>
> —*Teacher*

Learning from Surrey Schools: Considerations for Equity-Driven School Systems

The strategies that have emerged from this case study of Surrey Schools suggest that equity can and should be made actionable through decision making that prioritizes the creation of inclusive, human-centered environments that recognize and attempt to mitigate the complexity of factors that impact learning. Schools and districts cannot simply "do equity." In Surrey Schools, equity practices and mind-sets are embedded in the district vision, organizational structures, policies, norms, and values. This work is challenging, is iterative, and requires continuous improvement and reflection practices to push districts toward further growth and change.

The following considerations emerge from this case study for school districts exploring how to best create equity-driven, anti-racist systems:

- What is the vision of the school system? Which communities and stakeholders have contributed to and see themselves in that vision? To what extent has the system utilized the vision-setting process to establish common language district-wide? A system-wide vision is essential for centering equity and should include district priorities and norms that key players (i.e., leaders, teachers, families) have contributed to and are invested in. Articulating a vision and the terminology "normed" by that vision create a roadmap for the district as well as common language that allows for understanding and recognition of what matters most to the district.

- How does the system organize itself to foster community? In what way(s) does the system allocate its resources to support equitable access to learning? Organization at the district level can have a drastic impact on how leadership is connected to and aware of community strengths, challenges, and needs. Intentional identification of factors creating barriers to learning for students should inform the allocation of human resources across the district while ensuring that district-

> Schools and districts cannot simply 'do equity.' In Surrey Schools, equity practices and mind-sets are embedded in the district vision, organizational structures, policies, norms, and values.

and school-level processes are in place to continually identify and/or reassess those factors.

- How does system leadership engage with, relate to, and develop its school-level leaders? How invested are school leaders in vision-setting and planning for their school community? A district leadership role too often means removal from day-to-day realities of communities served; school-level leaders are the most consistent and knowledgeable point of access to communities. Intentional relationship-building and consistent communication with these leaders are key and are a form of support that is critical to school-level growth. These relationships ensure that policy and decision making are human-centric and community-focused.

- To what extent are school-based staff granted flexibility and autonomy to make decisions that are responsive to and reflective of community strengths, needs, and cultures? How receptive are district leaders to the voices of their school-based staff? School-based staff (teachers and leaders alike) have unique access to and understanding of the communities that they serve, as well as professional expertise that should be respected by district-level leadership when implementing policies. Schools should (when possible) have the authority and ability to expend resources and adapt curricula and policies in ways that are most beneficial to their circumstances.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND REFLECTION

In spring 2021, the Surrey Board of Education commissioned an Environmental Assessment on Racial Equity in Surrey Schools. A report on the findings was given in November 2021. The report drew evidence from 39 listening circles held across the district to gather and reflect upon experiences with racism in school communities. The report identifies inconsistencies between the district's values and the lived experiences of its community members while producing a set of recommendations to ensure that Surrey Schools moves further toward its vision of ensuring that all students receive a "high quality, culturally sustaining, and socially just education." Surrey's intentional pursuit of inclusive, anti-racist education is evidenced by this intentional effort to understand shortcomings and take action.

- How does the district collect qualitative evidence? What value, if any, is placed on that evidence? Qualitative evidence should go hand in hand with quantitative evidence as key indicators of progress, strengths, and needs. Qualitative evidence ensures that the human elements of learning remain elevated and do not get lost in statistics or numbers while also placing great emphasis on the proximity to communities and the content expertise of school staff.

- How does the district incorporate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)? Do staff feel empowered and encouraged to prioritize SEL? Do language and supports exist for students and staff to communicate effectively about their emotional, behavioral, and/or mental health needs? The wholehearted embrace of SEL at the district level is an equity-centered decision; if prioritized by the district, SEL can be prioritized by schools.

Students cannot learn and staff cannot thrive if all of their needs are not met, which makes SEL critical to the success of a school community.

School systems have an obligation to examine ways in which their policies, systems, and structures contribute to or are complicit in historical inequities. These inequities have been illuminated and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and increased attention to and conversation about systemic racial injustice. Districts participating in the Center for Global Education's Global Cities Education Network (GCEN) and the Equitable School Systems learning cohort continue to commit to this work. This report aims to provide those districts and others worldwide with tangible strategies and ideas on how to create equity-driven, anti-racist policies and practices based on promising practices from Surrey Schools.

About

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Endnotes

1 In this report we use "Indigenous" as the collective name for original peoples of North America and their descendants, as it is the internationally recognized and increasingly preferred term.

2 From the 2020/2021 Surrey Schools Fact Sheet, available at: www.surreyschools.ca/page/412/parent-information-brochures

3 Tinney, J., & O'Brien, T. (2020, December 4). "Professional Well-Being Through Coaching." EdCan Network. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from www.edcan.ca/articles/professional-well-being-through-coaching/

4 From Surrey's Principles for Social and Emotional Learning page, available at: https://surreylearningbydesign.ca/school-planing-process/social-and-emotional-learning

5 Schonert-Reichl, K. (2017). "Social and Emotional Learning and teachers." The Future of Children, 27, 137–155.

6 Bear, G. G., Whitcomb, S. A., Elias, M. J., and Blank, J. C. (2015). "SEL and Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports," in Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2015).

7 From the 2021 Enhancing Student Learning Report, available at: https://surreylearningbydesign.ca/framework-for-enhancing-student-learning/