# Superintendents' Work (Intensification) in a Shifting Policy Climate: Enacting a Student Discipline Strategy

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## Abstract

In this case narrative, senior superintendents reckon with the challenges of implementing a revised strategic policy for student discipline in an intensified work environment. Challenges include: (a) providing professional learning to familiarize leaders and educators with regulatory requirements; (b) a problematic trend of school and district leaders avoiding long-term suspensions; (c) the disproportionate number of minoritized students who are suspended/expelled; and (d) securing the resources needed to realize the punitive and preventative elements of the strategy. The case description is followed by three exercises—*case framing*, *reflective practice*, and *action plan*—that instructors can use in graduate-level courses and professional development workshops**.**

*Keywords: leadership, school district, work intensification, case study, organizational improvement*

## Case Narrative

*Ding!*

It was 8:00 a.m. on Monday morning when Linda accepted an impromptu meeting invitation from her school district's Director of Education. The goal of the meeting was for her to meet fellow superintendent colleagues and learn more about her role and portfolio as Superintendent of Safe Schools and Well-Being. It also happened to be her first day.

"Yes, absolutely, I can be ready for 11:00 a.m."

Linda had transferred to SunnySide School Board (SSSB), a medium-sized school district in a Canadian provincial K–12 public education system that serves approximately 40,000 students. The school district's service area was geographically large, including one major urban centre and several smaller, mostly rural, villages. The large urban centre was demographically diverse for the region, with multiple racial, religious, and ethnic groups represented—although the rural communities were considerably less diverse. Her previous school board, which neighboured her new district, was much smaller (serving approximately 10,000 students) with a catchment area serving mostly rural communities. The residents in her previous board were mostly Caucasian, of similar faith, and of European ancestry.

Prior to starting her new role, Linda had been widely regarded by her board and regional education colleagues, as well local community members, for her work leading the implementation of the provincial government's "revised" *Safe and Accepting Schools Policy*, which had been introduced only a couple of years before. Under her two-year leadership, the total number of suspension and expulsions in her catchment decreased by 3% each year. Her colleagues attributed her success—though not proven by any formal research or evaluation study—to her work spearheading the provision of new school-level programs and services that were consistent with the philosophy of *progressive discipline*. Broadly understood as a holistic approach to student discipline in schools, progressive discipline addresses inappropriate student conduct while also trying to prevent such conduct in the first place by providing a range school-level interventions aimed at encouraging positive student behaviour. Importantly, progressive discipline is the

guiding philosophy of the revised Safe Schools Policy: the provincial government's vision is to shift all school boards away from using only "traditional" punitive methods of discipline toward more "progressive" proactive approaches, which include prevention. However, she had heard rumours that educators and school leaders in the SSSB interpreted progressive discipline as "going easy" on the students. Linda figured that she was hired, in part, to help make changes to the climate in the schools and board office.

Even though Linda was familiar with the provincial Safe Schools Policy, she thought it prudent to review the relevant provincial policy and program memoranda, district-level policies, and other literature to get a sense of how the policy had been interpreted in her new district. She turned her attention to the piles of paper left on her desk. She had wisely called ahead and asked that all of the district-level policies, data, and other information related to suspension and expulsion be printed and left waiting for her on her desk when she arrived.

*Ding!*

"I think I will just hold off from responding to these messages, for now," thought Linda.

There were many different documents on her desk: relevant provincial policy and program memoranda; the school district's code of conduct policy; information about specific before, in, and after-school activities to promote positive student well-being; a list of post-suspension/expulsion programs to prevent recidivism; information on mental health and behavioural supports offered at the school level to prevent behaviours that lead to suspension and expulsions; the most recent board-level data on student suspensions/expulsions; information about the school board's three alternative schools for students serving long-term suspension or expulsion; and three draft PowerPoint presentations put together by her predecessor, which he appeared to have been developing to lead professional development sessions. One presentation was designed to either introduce the policy to new school and district leaders, or serve as a refresher for those with more experience; the second file seemed aimed at engaging school and community stakeholders in a discussion about the concept of progressive discipline, and the challenge(s) of implementing the concept/policy in practice; and a third file read like a business case, appealing to district leaders and trustees to allocate additional professional development funds for educators—specifically, materials about the effective classroom management approaches they can use to deal with the disruptive behaviours that lead to suspension and to better address mental health challenges.

The hours passed quickly as Linda reviewed each document in detail. When she had finished, she concluded that suspension and expulsion programming in the board was being implemented, generally speaking, according to the provincial guidelines. However, four items did stand out as a bit unusual. First, she noticed there was a multiyear trend indicating the vast majority of suspensions were for less than five days, with hardly any over five. Second, she found it curious that the SSSB had three alternative schools, given the low number of longer term suspensions handed out and how costly the schools are to operate in terms of staff, utilities, and so forth. Third, she read a confidential internal memo that detailed one teacher filing a grievance with the union because a student had recently been transferred into his classroom after being expelled from another school, and the teacher was denied information regarding the reason for the student's expulsion. The teacher had reported having concerns for his own safety and the safety of his students. Fourth, she also found it unusual that her predecessor developed these three different presentations and never used them.

*Ding!*

"Damned phone," she thought.

She entered the meeting room and discovered that her Director and superintendent colleagues had already arrived. The Director asked each superintendent to introduce themselves, their portfolio, and share any information they felt would help Linda take charge of her new portfolio.

"I guess I'll start. Hello," said Katerina. "I'm Superintendent of Research and Assessment. On the whole, I can report that the total number of suspensions and expulsions have been going down over the past few years—1% each year, to be precise. Based on the limited student demographic information that we collect, I can report that students from specific groups are over-represented in the data on suspensions and expulsions, such as boys and students who receive special education services. We strongly suspect that this is also true for students who are non-White, LGBTQ+, and Indigenous. However, we do not collect any data connected to these student demographic characteristics, partly because the province does not require it, and also because it would require more staff in my unit to collect, compile, and report on so much data. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yes, I have one comment and one question," said Linda. "My comment is that we really need to start collecting the additional variables connected to the student demographic characteristics you mentioned, as we will never quite know if we are making improvements with these groups of students or not without that data. My question is connected to something I noticed when I was reviewing the data: The vast majority of suspensions seem to be less than five days long, with hardly any suspensions over five or 10. Have you looked into this?"

"That seems like a good cue for me to jump in. Hi, I'm Roger, Superintendent of Student Achievement. As you know, the duration of a suspension is determined by the nature of the offence, but school principals have some discretion to take context into account when determining how to discipline inappropriate student behaviour. And, as you know, mid to long-term suspensions, or suspensions five days and over, trigger academic supports that help students keep up with their academic work, as well as nonacademic supports to help them better manage the issues that led to the suspension or expulsion in the first place. I've heard rumours of principals in the school board not handing out suspensions longer than five days because of the additional strain that preparing homework packages places on teachers and, frankly, the paperwork for the principal. I don't know what the working conditions were in your previous board, but everyone here feels stretched to the max given the steady stream of new policies and curricula the government has been introducing, in addition to the increasingly complex student needs in our schools. For example, lots of jobs are leaving the community. More and more students are coming to school hungry and not ready to learn."

"And if I can also just jump in, Roger? My name is Emma, Superintendent of Parent and Community Relations. I also believe that some principals are inclined to hand out suspensions of less than five days because they feel pressured by the community agencies that work with our minoritized students and, of course, their parents. They are concerned that suspensions longer than five days take students out of the classroom with their regular teachers and, consequently, reduce the quality of their education. Moreover, they believe that the principals in their schools are interpreting the rules more strictly than others in our board, leading to suspensions for offences that, in these other schools, would only result in an in-school suspension or some other type of lesser disciplinary action. This perception has led to negative relationships between some of the students, parents, teachers, and principals in our community."

"That's helpful information, thank you," Linda replied.

"And now, my turn. The name is Finn, Superintendent of Human Resources. Building on what both Roger and Emma shared with you, it isn't just the parents, students, and community agency workers who have concerns about the Safe Schools Policy—so do our teachers and principals. Many feel that progressive discipline, and the preventative strategies that go along with the policy, enables bad behaviour to continue because these behaviours go unpunished. Given this perspective, you might think that principals would be willing to suspend students for longer than five days. However, in addition to the reasons Roger shared, I've had principals tell me that they feel pressure *not* to suspend longer than five days because the Ministry really seems to push this idea of progressive discipline, and they believe it will look good when Ministry officials review our data if there are fewer suspensions over five days. The logic being that more suspensions under five days means that students are committing less serious infractions, and 'progressing.' And the grievances don't end there, literally. We have one teacher who has filed a grievance with the union because we can't disclose that reason why one student was expelled from one of our schools and transferred into his classroom. Because the union got their lawyers involved, our lawyers are now involved, and I really have no idea how this matter is going to play out because it places the right of the student to start again against the rights of the teacher and classmates to a safe learning and working environment. So, you can imagine how happy I am now that you are with us now because I could use some fresh ideas on how to resolve all of this."

"Thank you for your candour, Finn," replied Linda. "I did come across some information about the grievance; it's a shame that lawyers are now involved because it adds an additional level of complexity and expense—money that could be better spent supporting students."

"Watching the money—I like the way you think, Linda. If I can add my two cents? I'm Arjun, Business Superintendent for the school district. We are one of the fortunate boards with growing student enrolment, which means we've enjoyed having some more dollars to spend. Our enrolment has been increasing for the past three years, and I can tell you that we have been allocating more funding for services such as mental health. For example, we have hired more guidance counsellors, psychologists, and the like.

We have also been offering more in-school activities before and after school and during lunch to engage students in positive well-being activities, like yoga. We also operate three alternative schools that each operate at one-quarter capacity, which is just killing our budget."

"Yes, I was going to ask about that," said Linda. "Why does this medium-sized board operate three alternative schools?"

"That's a legacy decision," said Munira, the Director of Education. "Prior to the 'revised' Safe Schools Policy, we handed out far more mid to long-term- suspensions and expulsions to send a strong message that bad behaviour will not be tolerated in our schools. During this period, we needed three schools to handle the volume. Plus, some of our students living in the city apparently belong to rival gangs. When we are confronted with cases where two students from rival gangs get suspended, we prefer that they are not in the same school for the safety of everyone involved. Now that we have fewer students, we don't need all three—likely just one. But if we have only one school it will likely be the city-centre school, which means rural students will have to travel longer distances, and, naturally, students and parents will complain. Plus, students from rival gangs will be housed in the same school. In light of all of the other issues we're facing with the community connected to this policy, we thought it best to leave closing the school or schools until we have a complete plan in place to sort out all of these other issues as well."

"Thankfully," Arjun added, "We've had a growing budget to pay for all of this. But this is not a good use of money or personnel. Having only one school, and paying for students to take expensive cab rides each day across town isn't ideal either, because some students will spend upwards of 45 minutes each way in a cab, but it will be a *lot* cheaper than keeping schools open."

"And while we're on the topic of the dollars, I'm equally concerned about the rising costs of providing these mental health services," added Munira. "Okay, I get it. We need to help students who have mental health challenges, but we are not hospitals and don't have hospital-sized budgets. The more services we offer our students, the more demand there seems to be. And is it working? Heck if I know. That we have a 1% decline in overall suspensions each year, but with a huge skew toward suspensions shorter than five days, does not leave me reassured about the effectiveness of these services."

"Well, Munira, I can only report on the data that are being reported to me. Plus, I keep telling you, we need more staff in my unit," quipped Katerina.

"Oh, I agree. I'm just saying that I would like to feel more confident that our data are telling us the full story. Regarding new staff, we have talked about this a few times. I agree that we would benefit from more research staff. But, if we are going to increase our staff levels, my preference is always to place staff on the front-lines where they can support students directly. In any case, Linda, our school board enrolment projections are telling us a clear story. In a few years' time, our enrolment is expected to flat-line along with our budget. If you think parents are upset now, we all know what happens when we need to cut front-line services to students and families. You can see why we are all so happy to have you on board, Linda. Do you have any questions for us?"

"Well, I do have one question. On my desk, I found three PowerPoint presentations, all apparently in draft and never presented…"

"Oh right, those things," Munira interrupted. "Your predecessor had good ideas for professional development that could address some of these challenges. In addition to everything else we have going on, we've had high levels of staff turnover with our school and district leaders as a result of work intensification. He figured one way to address inconsistencies in the implementation of the policy would be to bring all school and district leaders together for an afternoon session to review the policy in detail. He also wanted to lead sessions with district leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents, and community agencies to talk about progressive discipline again, hoping that this would clarify misunderstandings about what the concept is about and lead to more consistent interpretations of the policy. I think the third file is directed at convincing our trustees to make additional funds available for teachers who have reported wanting more professional development for classroom management strategies to address behavioural issues and spot mental health issues. These are all fine ideas, but they all cost money.  I told him a few weeks back that we can't afford to do that and that he probably didn't have the time to manage all three PD sessions and presentations; we are trying to lessen people's workloads in our board, not increase them. I then told him to choose which of the three professional development needs are the greatest priority, and then didn't hear anything back from him. I suppose that he was still deciding; I guess it's your decision now. What can we do to help you to get started with all of this?"

Linda looked around the room, and she could feel the room looking back at her. Her new board was facing issues that were similar to the issues of her past board, but these problems were more complexly nuanced. She knew she would not be able to rely exclusively on her past experience to solve these issues. Ultimately, she did get the sense that her new colleagues were competent and seemed genuinely interested in working together to address these challenges, which were clearly connected to their own portfolios. With that conclusion in mind, she replied,

"Yes, actually. I would like each of us to step away from this discussion and reflect a bit more on the challenges we talked about today, and begin to think more deeply about framing the problem(s)—in other words, what is the root cause (or are the causes) of each challenge? Then, I'd appreciate if everyone could consider the solutions that are available to us, given our constraints, and how we might go about leading effective organizational change. My aim here isn't to pass off my work. Rather, I would like to get us all thinking about these issues because, in a week's time, I would like us to meet again to put together an organizational action plan to address this issue. We need to do this as a team."

## Teaching Notes

This case narrative and the activities described below can be used to demonstrate the challenges district—and, to a certain extent, school—leaders face when implementing policies and strategies that have no clear solutions. Linda faces several challenges related to the new strategic policy for student discipline, which includes: (a) providing effective professional learning opportunities for staff; (b) school leaders neglecting to use long-term suspensions, even when they are warranted; (c) determining and addressing the reasons why students from minoritized backgrounds are suspended and expelled at much higher rates than their peers; and (d) securing the resources necessary to fully engage with the preventative aspects of the student discipline strategy to ensure that all students have an opportunity to succeed in school. It is important to note that all of these challenges exist within, and are partly a manifestation of, a context of work intensification.

We suggest that this case would be best used in settings where current and emerging district and school-level leaders, such as supervisory officers and school principals, engage in graduate education coursework in the area of educational leadership/administration or professional learning, and development in school boards. For example, the case and accompanying exercises could allow participants in supervisory officer qualification programs, graduate courses in educational leadership, and/or additional qualification courses for current district-level leaders, to develop evidence-based solutions to problems of practice they face on a daily basis. Workshop facilitators for professional learning opportunities delivered at the district level, or by professional associations, may also find the practical, interactive, and collaborative nature of these exercises to be beneficial.

This case exercise is designed to encourage participants to reflect on the case details individually and asks them to bring their perspectives to a collaborative, problem-solving discussion. Specifically, participants are encouraged to reflect upon and articulate the various lines of inquiry that stem from each cause connected to the problem of practice and devise solutions that connect research to practice by grounding them in academic literature and good leadership practice. If used in a course, the exercises will likely need to be spread over multiple classes; if used in a professional learning setting, all three exercises could take more than two hours.

The first exercise involves participants assuming one of the district leadership roles mentioned in the case description by engaging in *case framing*. The second exercise is designed to have participants engage in *reflective practice* by responding to guided questions that connect the practical and theoretical elements of the case. The third and final exercise involves participants devising solutions to the challenges Linda faces in this case by co-creating an initial action plan that is not only rooted in their practical experiences but also demonstrates their knowledge of course concepts and related research.

### *Activity 1: Case Framing*

Participants are asked to flesh-out the problem of practice (PoP), and associated causes, drawing from key features that are relevant to the case in the case framing exercise. The instructor divides participants into groups no larger than seven (but no smaller than five) and tells each participant that they will be taking on the role of one of the supervisory officers or the director of education mentioned in the case description.

Participants will either be portraying:

- Munira, Director of Education;
- Arjun, Superintendent of Business;
- Emma, Superintendent of Parent and Community Relations;
- Finn, Superintendent of Human Resources;
- Katerina, Superintendent of Research and Assessment;
- Linda, Superintendent of Safe Schools and Well-Being; or
- Roger, Superintendent of Student Achievement.

Participants will (1) first work individually to identify the PoP, supported by case details, and how the PoP is directly applicable to the work of the superintendent or director that they have been asked to portray. Participants should also identify what they believe could be possible causes connected to the PoP and describe any contextual factors that might add to the complexity of how their superintendent views the case (e.g., relevant policy and jurisdictional regulations, geographic size of the school district, demographic characteristics of the student population, etc.). Next, (2) participants should identify any opportunities or challenges their leader may face when contributing to the development of the board action plan to address the four challenges that Linda and her senior team of colleagues face in the case description. Those challenges include providing effective professional learning, district leaders avoiding long-term suspensions, addressing the disproportionate number of minoritized students who are suspended/expelled, and securing the necessary resources to operationalize all elements of the strategy. Once participants have individually reflected on these matters, organize them into larger teams so they can compare and collate their notes into a single case-framing.

## Activity 2: Reflective Practice

Engaging in reflective practice is one way that current and aspiring system-level leaders can make connections between theory, research, and practice (Davey & Ham, 2010; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). In this exercise, the instructor, or workshop facilitator, uses guided questions that encourage leaders to consider more deeply the causes connected to their PoP and develop solutions. The following questions can be used to encourage participants to engage in self-reflection:

1. Are there any similarities or differences between the problem (and potential causes) described in the case description and your own school board, province, or jurisdiction?
2. What is your understanding of progressive discipline, both in theory and practice?
3. What challenges do you foresee in getting all district staff to support a singular vision of a complex concept, such as progressive discipline? Is a single vision even desirable or feasible?
4. What are the ethical considerations around the schools in this district not giving out long-term suspensions, even when student behaviour warrants such action? For example, do you see any legal or ethical concerns arising from these schools placing the focus on reducing the number of suspensions, rather than creating a positive school climate?
5. What is the role of parental involvement in this case? Are Linda and her colleagues doing enough to respond to staff and student perspectives?
6. How do you ensure that programs have an adequate budget and are resourced (e.g., adequate personnel, time, space, equipment, etc.) in a way that best meets student needs?
7. How can this school district help students access the supports they need within budgetary and wider resource constraints?
8. How can the district provide effective professional learning so that leaders and educators are familiar with regulatory requirements? What does this professional learning look like (e.g., courses, online learning modules, workshops delivered by district leaders, etc.)?
9. How can Linda and her colleagues help foster a climate that ensures staff feel safe and protected when engaging in activities and practices related to student discipline?
10. What strategies can the school district implement to avoid teachers and other staff perpetuating stereotypes and other expectations around particular groups of students? For example, Linda found that students from minoritized backgrounds are suspended and expelled at much higher rates than their peers in her school district. How can Linda and her colleagues deal with teachers othering students?

11. How is work intensification influencing the role of district leaders and how can this be addressed through individual coping strategies, board policies, and practice?
12. What policies or initiatives can the district school board implement to help reduce work intensification for school leaders and educators?

After reflecting on some of these questions, participants should share their reflections with their team members. Participants will likely express competing ideas about causes connected to the PoP, notions of progressive discipline, the ethical issues at play, strategies for resourcing programs, and/or the professional learning opportunities that would be most effective. Instructors and workshop facilitators are encouraged to frame these disagreements as "lenses" or "frame perspectives" that each brings different and important insight(s) into the issues being discussed and potential solutions. In addition, instructors can use these disagreements as teachable moments and opportunities for their participants to engage in further reflection. For example, the instructors could assign participants to support a particular stance on an issue, such as having Participant 1 oppose zero tolerance policies for various disciplinary infractions, and Participant 2 take a position in support of zero tolerance policies.

Participants in Exercise 2 should be encouraged to reflect on their knowledge of the relevant administrative and leadership theories, research evidence surrounding this issue, as well as their own personal experiences. Furthermore, students can be encouraged to consider how the research evidence related to these questions aligns with their personal understandings and the context in which they work.

### *Activity 3: Action Plan*

Using an outline grounded in organizational improvement principles (Cawsey, Deszca, & Ingols, 2015; Hughes, 2016), participants develop an initial organizational action plan that proposes solutions to challenges that Linda and her colleagues face by drawing from the existing case/course concepts, their experiential knowledge, and outside research. The exercise requires participants to outline a vision and detailed plan for how they would mitigate the challenges surrounding the student discipline policy, and identify any barriers that would impact the efficacy of their proposed solutions. (See Appendix A for a sample organizational action plan template.)

## Grounding the Case in Jurisdiction-Specific Policies

Although the case description focuses on the challenges that Linda and her senior partners face when implementing a student discipline policy within her school district, this case can easily be applied to almost any school district in Canada. Instructor, or workshop facilitators, are encouraged to consider their participants' educational contexts and gather relevant policy materials, as they are described in the case, that are jurisdiction or district-specific to enhance the realism of the case exercise.

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## Appendix A: Sample Initial Organizational Action Plan

1. Outline the vision, mission, values, purposes, and goals of your school board.
2. Briefly articulate your proposed PoP in a single sentence. Follow this step with a brief overview of the relevant historical information about your organization that informs your PoP and the need for change, and the political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental contexts that are driving and shaping the need for change in your organization, including an intensified work environment.
3. Formulate initial lines of inquiry (i.e., guiding questions and potential causes) that emerge from your PoP.
4. Consider how the existing structural, political, cultural, and symbolic factors of your organization, and its surrounding context may serve to foster, impair, or facilitate change that can address the problem of practice.
5. Situate your PoP, associated potential causes, and the factors affecting action in your context in academic literature (research and theory) on organizational analysis and change. Explain how research evidence can be used to better understand your PoP and develop solutions.
6. Using the preceding analyses and reflections, create an action plan that addresses your PoP. Your action plan should include: (a) an initial change vision that considers the mission, values, purposes, and goals of your organization as well as the PoP being addressed; (b) articulate a range of alternative solutions to address the various facet of the PoP, including an estimate of the resources required to implement each alternative; and (c) provide a rationale for the final solution(s) proposed in the action plan.