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The Cultivation of Systemness for Enhanced Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity at a Mid-sized District School Board in the Province of Ontario

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Abstract

The cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at a mid-sized district school board in the province of Ontario is addressed. The development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols (system alignment) that support the optimization of the multi-year strategic plan may, at times, prove difficult to achieve, especially as it relates to bias awareness and critical consciousness, as well as ameliorated fairness and impartiality throughout the organization. Viewed constructively as an opportunity for organizational improvement towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, strategies to facilitate the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the removal of systemic barriers to learning are explored. A seven-step model for effective change management is utilized as the framework to lead the change process to address the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, and, the goal statements of the empowering equity priority of the multi-year strategic plan for the district. As a tool that utilizes a blend of face-to-face and digital interactions to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with colleagues, professional learning networks (PLNs) are the selected solution to address the problem of practice. PLNs are endorsed as an innovative, forward-thinking approach for knowledge mobilization and solution generation in public education (Briscoe et al., 2015; Trust et al., 2016; Whitby, 2013).

Keywords: systemness, alignment, coherence, equity, diversity, inclusivity, professional learning networks

Executive Summary

The three key drivers of organizational improvement espoused by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – are foundational to the establishment of an authentic awareness, appreciation and understanding of the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at a mid-sized district school board (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020). The Organizational Improvement Plan (OIP) is a culminating, capstone document submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Western Ontario. As a major persuasive research paper that provides an evidence-based pathway to address an organizational problem, and more broadly, serve the societal good, the OIP is a practical, yet theory- and research-informed plan that aims to mobilize knowledge and generate solutions through effective change management over time (University of Western Ontario, 2021).

The OIP introduces the problem of practice for Valley County District School Board (VCDSB, a pseudonym) as a complex, multi-faceted institution of public education. The OIP establishes a leadership framework, conducts a thorough analysis of organizational data, and develops a plan to implement, monitor and communicate a transition management process in order to address the cultivation of systemness towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity. As a legitimate form of quality improvement, the improvement plan serves as a systematic approach to making meaningful change that has the potential to lead to stronger performance, and thus, better outcomes for the organization. In particular, the OIP strives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, and ensure greater equity, diversity and inclusivity throughout the organization (University of Western Ontario, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Through the OIP, systemness is defined as the commonly-held sense that individuals and/or groups have at all levels of the organization that they are indeed “the system” itself. It is a mind-and-action stance for all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization, in how they think, act and feel about the system. More specifically, Fullan (2021) explains that individuals and/or groups within the organization have “a responsibility to interact with, learn from, contribute to and be a living member of the system as it evolves” (p. 33).

As a problem of practice, the ability to cultivate a systematic approach throughout the organization can be a challenge as the objectives of the multi-year strategic plan and its associated annual action plans may be interpreted diversely by staff in schools and central departments. Moreover, the development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols (system alignment) that support the optimization of the multi-year strategic plan may, at times, prove difficult to achieve, especially as it relates to bias awareness and critical consciousness, as well as ameliorated fairness and impartiality throughout the organization (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2015; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Looney, 2011; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017). Viewed constructively as an opportunity for organizational improvement towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, what strategies might facilitate the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the removal of systemic barriers to learning through the development of coherence and implementation of alignment at the system level?

As a scholar-practitioner, the Director of Education at VCDSB is uniquely positioned and privileged to study the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB. In an ever-evolving educational landscape – including the rising importance of equity

and anti-racism, human rights and inclusivity – the ability to establish systemness throughout the organization holds the potential to augment the interconnectivity of the constituent parts of the district, as stakeholders and structures, through an agile, learning-oriented, systematic approach to making meaningful change over time (Buffone, 2021; Fullan, 2021). Through adaptive leadership – a practical and pragmatic approach that merges instructional leadership, operational management and organizational citizenship, along with an emphasis on building and maintaining productive working relationships with stakeholders – the director is able to guide and influence stakeholders in creating value-added change for the district (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

A seven-step model for effective change management is utilized as the framework to lead the change process (Rotman School of Management, 2016) in order to address the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, and, the goal statements of the empowering equity priority of the multi-year strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). As “a system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning” (Trust, 2012, p. 133), professional learning networks (PLNs) are the selected solution to address the problem of practice. A tool that utilizes a blend of face-to-face and digital interactions to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with colleagues, PLNs are an innovative, forward-thinking approach for knowledge mobilization and solution generation in public education (Briscoe et al., 2015; Trust et al., 2016; Whitby, 2013).

The DICE framework for assessing and monitoring the change process – through the four factors of duration, integrity, commitment and effort – is used evaluate and refine the transition over time (Sirkin et al., 2005). Further, a detailed summary of the strategic communications plan and an articulation of next steps for consideration are included in order to ensure the ideal future state is achieved (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

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As a culminating, capstone document submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Western Ontario, the Organizational Improvement Plan (OIP) has been a rewarding and fulfilling experience. It has provided me with the opportunity to serve as a scholar-practitioner, personally and professionally.

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And last, but certainly not least, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my wife, Cheryl, and our daughter, Sara, for their unwavering encouragement and understanding throughout the process. Without their steadfast support, this accomplishment truly would not have been possible. All my love, P

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Acronyms

BIEP (Board Improvement and Equity Plan)

DICE (Four-part framework for Duration, Integrity, Commitment and Effort of change management)

EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity)

IEAC (Indigenous Education Advisory Committee)

OIP (Organizational Improvement Plan)

OLF (Ontario Leadership Framework)

PDSA (Model of Plan/Do/Study/Act)

PESTEL (Analysis of Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal factors)

PIC (Parent Involvement Committee)

PLN (Professional Learning Network)

SEAC (Special Education Advisory Committee)

SWOT (Matrix of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats)

VCDSB (Valley County District School Board, a pseudonym)

Definitions in an Educational Context

Adaptive Leadership: the act of mobilizing a group of individuals to handle tough challenges and thrive in doing so (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009, p. 1).

Agility: an ability to think and understand quickly and to move smartly through the ever-evolving educational landscape (Buffone, 2021, p. 1610).

Diversity: the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, p. 4).

Equity: a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, p. 4).

Inclusivity: education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students, where students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, p. 4).

Interpretivism: a social science paradigm that seeks to provide rational explanations for the world in the realm of individual consciousness (Al Riyami, 2015, p. 413).

Systemness: the commonly-held sense that individuals and/or groups have at all levels of the organization that they are indeed “the system” itself; a mind-and-action stance for all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization, in how they think, act and feel about the system (Fullan, 2021, p. 33); people deliberately doing their own part as they contribute to and benefit from the agenda of the larger system (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015, p. 18).

Chapter 1: Introduction and Problem

The first chapter of the Organizational Improvement Plan (OIP) describes the problem of practice for a mid-sized district school board in the province of Ontario, including the organizational context, the leadership approach taken to address the problem, as well as a vision for organizational change related to the problem itself (University of Western Ontario, 2021). The chapter provides insights into the three key drivers of organizational improvement delineated by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – from the perspective of the scholar-practitioner (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020).

More specifically, the first chapter outlines a profile of the organization, introduces key concepts pertinent to the problem, and explains the organization’s structure and strategic direction. Further, the chapter shares the leadership position and lens statement of the scholar-practitioner, as well as guiding questions that emerge from the problem of practice. The first chapter also includes a thorough delineation of the leadership-focused vision for change, along with a fulsome overview of the organization’s state of readiness for change.

Organizational Context

Valley County District School Board (VCDSB, a pseudonym) is a mid-sized district school board in the province of Ontario. With a population of close to 10 000 students and a staff of over 1800 employees, VCDSB is comprised of 21 elementary schools and seven secondary schools, as well as four adult and continuing education centres. The district covers a significant geographic area of the eastern region of the province with a blend of rural and urban settings throughout. Indeed, the area is widely recognized as a “unique community of diverse communities” with a

total of 17 municipalities and a number of fascinating political, economic, social and cultural contexts that shape the county, as well as the district as an organization (VCDSB, 2021a).

Profile of the Organization

Located in the “heart of the valley”, only an hour’s drive from a large urban centre, the vast majority of the county’s approximately 100 000 residents work the lands of the valley as farmers, are employed as tradespeople in factories and shops of the region, or work in the public and/or private sector of the major city nearby. Politically, the residents of the county are staunchly conservative, having elected predominantly conservative members of parliament, provincially and federally, for the better part of a half-century (Heard, 2021). In many respects, a number of the county’s communities are considered “bedroom communities” of the city itself, and as such, the county is significantly influenced by the economic conditions of the city centre. The county is tremendously diverse in terms of the socio-economic status of its residents, although much less so in regards to its ethno-cultural diversity. That is, there is a wide variation in average household income across communities of the county, as well as from household to household within distinct communities themselves (Baird et al., 2017). It is important to note that the district is one of the largest employers within the county, second only to the hospital and health care centre. As a result, the district has a very influential presence as an integral part of the social fabric of the county and is a source of local pride (Baird et al., 2017). Culturally, the skills and talents of the county’s residents, as well as their professional expertise as contributing members of society, are reflected in the educational experiences provided. At the elementary level, numerous guest speakers from across the county are welcomed into classrooms, including elders of the local First Nation community for beading activities integrating arts and mathematics in a cross-curricular manner, for instance. At the secondary level, the connection to local industry partners through various

Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs are clearly evident in culinary arts, construction, forestry, emerging technologies, manufacturing, and transportation, as wonderful examples. The certifications available to students through these programs, as well as French-language certification in either extended or immersion, reflect the richness of the authentic, experiential learning available at VCDSB. In fact, over half of the district's students acquire at least one certification during their years of secondary schooling (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The political, economic, social and cultural contexts that shape VCDSB as an organization, as well as the leadership within it, may be considered as both advantageous and disadvantageous in regards to effective change management over time. For instance, beyond the policy-driven changes mandated at the provincial level, locally-developed policies and procedures, practices and protocols of the district are predominantly well-established, long-standing in nature, and often require extensive stakeholder consultation in order for meaningful change to take place. Moreover, significant consideration and extensive deliberation is required on the part of stakeholders in order for genuine ownership or buy-in of a change process to take place, as Kotter (1995) has identified. On the one hand, the consistency of 'the way things are always done around here' provides predictability and stability for students, staff and school communities. On the other hand, the organization's ability to adapt and innovate in response to the fluidity of the circumstances may often be hindered by an approach that is far too set in its own ways – a concern also raised by students, staff and school communities of VCDSB through the most recent consultative process for the renewed strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a).

As an additional example pertinent to the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity across the district, the recruitment, retention and subsequent promotion of staff tends to be from within, especially for positions of added responsibility such as vice-principals, principals, and

senior managers. Although this traditional human resource practice can be beneficial as it rewards the efforts of existing employees, it may also be considered unfavourable. In particular, the practice discourages external applicants and limits the integration of a greater diversity of professionals into the system, nor does it allow for the introduction of fresh ideas and new perspectives into the collective work of the organization (Hannay et al., 2013; Savage-Williams, 2018; VCDSB, 2021d).

Introduction to Systemness as a Concept

Defined by Fullan (2021) as the commonly-held sense that individuals and/or groups have at all levels of the organization that they are indeed “the system” itself, systemness is a mind-and-action stance for all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization, in how they think, act and feel about the system. More specifically, Fullan (2021) explains that individuals and/or groups within the organization have “a responsibility to interact with, learn from, contribute to and be a living member of the system as it evolves” (p. 33). Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2015) further characterize systemness as people “deliberately doing their own part as they contribute to and benefit from the agenda of the larger system” (p. 18). They add, when networks of individuals and/or groups become better partners with other networks and with system leaders, they also contribute to the improvement of the whole system. All of these networked partnerships represent an increase in the links between schools and central offices, and more aptly, the state where a majority of people come to see themselves as system players (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015).

Through their analyses of effective change management in schools and systems, Fullan and Quinn (2016) contribute other essential elements for organizational systemness, including focusing the direction of people within the organization to build collective purpose and cultivating collaborative cultures to develop capacity from the inside out. Of importance, they emphasize that the ultimate goal of the organization’s leader is to “build a coherent collaborative culture for five

or more years to the stage where the leader becomes dispensable” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 34). Systemness, therefore, represents a state of organizational existence where there is accordance – harmonization, moreover – amongst all aspects of the system, and where each network of individuals and/or groups is working optimally towards the vision and goals of the organization and doing their part to facilitate its function, effectively and efficiently.

Definition of Terms for Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity

It is important to define the concepts of equity, diversity and inclusivity in the context of VCDSB as an organization. The Ministry of Education Ontario (2009) describes equity as “a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people” (p. 4). The definition of equity, it clarifies, does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences. Diversity is delineated as “the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society” (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, p. 4). The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Inclusivity is explained as “education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, p. 4).

From a human resource lens, Stewart (2021) shares that equity relates to the effort to ensure that all employees, regardless of characteristics and identity, can equally access organizational opportunity. She explains that “while diversity is about the make-up of your workforce, inclusion is about culture and belonging” (Stewart, 2021, p. 1). At its core, Stewart (2021) claims the organizational goal is “to ensure that all employees – regardless of their identity, race, culture or

perspective – are able to be their genuine and authentic selves at work” (p. 2). Interestingly, she adds, a true culture of inclusion moves well beyond modifications to workforce planning and hiring practices, or tweaking of human resource strategies, to the enablement of differing viewpoints and opinions in conversations that are appreciated by others. These credible and reliable conversations ultimately contribute to a vibrant workplace that is more likely to attract and retain talent and deliver on its organizational objectives (Stewart, 2021).

Provincial Direction related to Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity

Over the past two decades, successive provincial governments have also influenced the broader political, economic, social and cultural contexts of society at large, and the education sector more specifically, with respect to equity, diversity and inclusivity. Through sequential iterations of its equity and inclusive education strategy for Ontario schools, the Ministry of Education has embraced diversity and moved beyond tolerance to acceptance and respect in order to strive towards the aspirational goal of making Ontario’s education system the most inclusive in the world (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009, 2017b). By acknowledging the changing demographics of the province, and establishing a well-articulated vision in its original policy direction, the Ministry of Education set in place a path to success in the form of three key goals. The goals are specified as: shared and committed leadership; equity and inclusive education policies and practices; and, accountability and transparency (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009).

Under the strategy, all 72 school boards developed equity and inclusive education policies that included a religious accommodation guideline and procedures for students and staff to report incidents of discrimination and harassment. In addition, seven regional equity networks were established to support schools and systems in effective implementation of the strategy. The

Ministry of Education also supported student conferences designed to empower youth as leaders of social change, including initiatives of global citizenship (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2009).

The ensuing version of the policy direction builds upon this initial strategy in the creation of an action plan for education equity in four areas: school and classroom practices; leadership, governance and human resource practices; data collection, integration and reporting; and, organizational culture change (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b). In order to execute the action plan, the Ministry of Education also created the Education Equity Secretariat to coordinate resources in support of the identification and removal of systemic barriers and further the interests of Ontario's schools and systems (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b).

The evolving emphasis of this most recent policy direction continues the pursuit of equity, while augmenting human rights through the emergence of an Indigenous Education Strategy (The Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, 2016), as well as a variety of programs to support Black youth (including Ontario's Three-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan, 2016, the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, 2016, and Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan, 2016). In addition, the Ministry of Education has collaborated with the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario on developing an education accessibility standard (Ontario's Accessibility Action Plan, 2016). These initiatives open up new fronts in the collective efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers in school communities across the province (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b).

Organizational Structure and Strategic Direction

As an institution of public education, the organizational structure of VCDSB is predominantly hierarchical in nature and traditional in function (Blackledge & Hunt, 1985;

Lessnoff, 1969). Moreover, the board of trustees serves as the governance body that oversees all policy-related and fiduciary matters of the district (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a). The board of trustees are also responsible for hiring the Director of Education, as their sole employee. The Director of Education, subsequently, is responsible for the oversight of all operational matters of the district, including the hiring of all staff (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a).

The senior staff at VCDSB is comprised of eight educators, including the Director of Education, that oversee all central departments and/or portfolios, as well as all families of schools. At the system level, a group of senior managers (eight in total) oversee staff in corporate services (facilities and finance) and employee services (human resources). A group of centrally-assigned principals and vice-principals (seven in total) oversee staff in program services (curriculum, teaching and learning) and special services (special education), including all instructional coaches, consultants and coordinators. At the school level, a cadre of principals and vice-principals (approximately 60 administrators in total) oversee all students and staff at school sites, as well as the adult and continuing education centres.

Established as an entity in 1969, VCDSB amalgamated a number of smaller, community-based boards of education that had existed previously for over fifty years into a consolidated district school board for public education in the county (VCDSB, 2019). Since that time, the district has graduated students from a diverse array of backgrounds and interests to all post-secondary pathways – apprenticeship, college, community living, university and the workforce.

With respect to the current context for organizational improvement, the district's leadership (senior staff and trustees alike) realizes the significance of enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity. The mission of VCDSB's renewed strategic plan focuses on "working together to foster outstanding educational experiences" (VCDSB, 2021a, p. 4). Further, there is an explicit

emphasis on inspiring and empowering students to achieve their fullest potential through the district's vision, linked to its new motto: *Inspire, Empower, Achieve*. The values of the organization – respect and responsibility, care and courage, honesty and initiative, as well as optimism and perseverance – are promoted in activities and events, initiatives and projects, system-wide. The renewed strategic plan places a greater emphasis on knowledge generation and sound governance related to equity, diversity and inclusivity as an integral part of the future direction. In fact, three key goal statements have been established in this regard: opportunities for professional development for all stakeholders of the organization; a review of all policies and administrative procedures, as well as resources for teaching and learning, through the lens of equity and human rights; and, the elimination of systemic barriers to programs and services offered (VCDSB, 2021a).

As outlined in VCDSB's administrative procedure related to equity and inclusivity, the promotion of its values and preparation of its learners to exhibit tolerance rather than prejudice towards diverse communities will undoubtedly help combat racism and better position students to participate successfully in the global community of the future (VCDSB, 2015). The district also acknowledges, via its administrative procedure, a commitment to fairness and impartiality as essential principles of the system, including all its programs and/or services. Through the intentional focus on equity, diversity and inclusivity as a strategic priority for organizational improvement, the district's leadership believes the goal statements provide operational targets that are specific, measurable and results-oriented as next steps for action (VCDSB, 2021a).

The Organization as a Complex Adaptive System

As a veritable complex adaptive system, VCDSB is comprised of a number of stakeholders and structures that continuously engage in a dynamic series of interactions. The interactions that emerge between stakeholders (as individuals and/or groups) and structures (as elements internal

and/or external to the organization) may be linear, non-linear or chaotic in nature (Schneider & Somers, 2006). As Schneider and Somers (2006) outline, the emergent quality that comes from the interaction of the system's elements, sub-systems, parts or agents may be ordered and predictable, or more likely, chaotic and unpredictable.

The district's leadership is also a dynamic, sophisticated process that emerges through the interactions between stakeholders and structures (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Moreover, as emergent processes within complex systems that operate at all levels of the organization in process-oriented, contextual, and interactive ways that generate adaptive knowledge and creative solutions with sufficient significance and impact to effect change, complexity theory is particularly useful in understanding the organizational context (Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Described as the interactions and accompanying feedback loops that constantly change systems, complexity theory has been utilized broadly in the fields of strategic management and organizational studies, and aptly frames leadership as a complex, interactive dynamic from which outcomes such as learning, innovation and adaptability emerge (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Mason (2014) reveals that new patterns of behaviour appear not only from the elements that constitute a system, but from the diverse myriad of connections amongst those elements. He claims it is "in this shift from linear to exponential orders of magnitude, but of course only in systems of incredible scale, that the power of complexity theory lies" (Mason, 2014, p. 9). Schneider and Somers (2006) add that leadership in the context of complexity theory "remains about influence of others above routine compliance", and, that leadership in complex adaptive systems is not always reliant upon formal authority structures (p. 356).

Involving multiple stakeholders across the different levels of governance and operations, increasing knowledge sharing between schools and central departments, and transforming policy

interventions to bring greater flexibility in change management processes emphasize the adaptive nature of the leadership required for large, complex educational organizations (Jacobson et al., 2019; Snyder, 2013). As it applies to VCDSB, knowledge mobilization and solution generation are essential aspects of the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity, system-wide. In fact, it is through authentic conversations amongst stakeholders, along with meaningful community engagement, that a more culturally-responsive, equity-focused district school board is created (Lazzell et al., 2019; National School Boards Association, 2021).

Implications for Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity at the System Level

In the context of systemic equity, Fabillar (2018) conceptualizes a multi-component approach to help educational leaders take a deeper look at inequities that affect their organizations. It is a three-phased process that: reviews assets and challenges related to equity; develops a theory of action; and, strives to implement an equity improvement plan. In this mixed methods approach, traditional forms of data are integrated with educational ethnography, “a human-centred method that allows for a holistic perspective on equity assets and challenges” (Fabillar, 2018, p. 1). Yost (2018) adds that while data alone will not be enough to change educational systems, looking at data can serve as an objective starting point for deliberations about equity and bias. Savage-Williams (2018) reinforces the value of educational leaders knowing their district demographics, “developing partnerships and allies with community organizations such as local universities, faith-based institutions, and city government” to advance the equity agenda (p. 6).

Leadership Position and Lens Statement

As a scholar-practitioner, the study of the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity in a multi-faceted, complex institution of public education is of

tremendous value as Director of Education for VCDSB. In an ever-evolving educational landscape – including the rising importance of equity and anti-racism, human rights and inclusivity – the ability to establish systemness throughout the district holds the potential to augment the interconnectivity of its constituent parts, as stakeholders and structures, through an agile, learning-oriented, systematic approach to making meaningful change (Buffone, 2021; Fullan, 2021).

Leadership Position as Director of Education

The Director of Education at VCDSB is the sole employee of the board of trustees and is responsible for the effective and efficient operation of the organization (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a). In fact, as outlined in the *Education Act* for the province of Ontario, all authority of the board of trustees is delegated to staff through the director (Ontario Education Act, 2012, c E-0.3 s.169.1). Areas of responsibility for the Director of Education at VCDSB include: student welfare; educational leadership; fiscal responsibility; organizational management; strategic planning; personnel management; policies and procedures of the district; director/board relations; communications and community relations; student, staff and district recognition and public relations; and, system leadership (VCDSB, 2021b).

As described in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), the director exercises considerable influence on “organizational members and diverse stakeholders towards the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, pp. 18-19). With such an extensive array of responsibilities, the director is only able to account for the objectives established in the multi-year strategic plan via the delegation of tasks to staff in schools and central departments. As is common across the province, the Director of Education at VCDSB coordinates a weekly meeting with senior staff, referred to as Director’s Executive Council, in order to provide oversight of initiatives and discuss operational matters of

the district. Indeed, it is through the dedication and diligence of the entire staff that the objectives of the annual action plans and multi-year strategic plan are accomplished (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014a, 2017a; Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021b).

Lens of Adaptive Leadership

In regards to leadership agency, the director holds a unique position of privilege in addressing the cultivation of systemness as defined by Fullan (2021) for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity throughout institutions of public education. The Director of Education at VCDSB sees the problem of practice through the focused lens of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership, as described by Heifetz et al. (2009), is the act of mobilizing people to tackle both existing and emerging challenges and thrive in doing so. Through adaptive leadership – a practical and pragmatic approach that merges instructional leadership, operational management and organizational citizenship, along with an emphasis on building and maintaining productive working relationships with stakeholders – the director is able to guide and influence stakeholders in creating meaningful change over time (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). As it pertains to instructional leadership, the OLF emphasizes the provision of a coherent instructional guidance system for educational leaders, including the alignment of curricular goals, instructional practices and teaching resources (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 18). In the area of operational management, the OLF highlights the coordination of budgets, time, personnel, policies and procedures with the district’s mission, vision and goals (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 19). And, lastly, organizational citizenship behaviours refer to individual, discretionary actions by employees of large, complex organizations that are outside of their formal job description. These behaviours reduce the need for supervision, improve workplace morale and result in cost-savings as well as cost-avoidance measures that improve the effectiveness and

efficiency of the organization (Smith et al., 1983). Adaptive leadership allows the organization to flourish, taking along best practices of its past and promising practices for its future, in the context of the ever-evolving educational landscape of its present (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016; Baltacı & Balcı, 2017; Watkins et al., 2017).

With respect to the adaptive leadership of VCDSB, specifically, instructional oversight ensures the coordination of curricular goals, pedagogical practices and teaching resources through the lens of human rights and social justice. Aspects of operational planning and management include the explicit, intentional shift to more equitable, diverse and inclusive protocols such as hiring, retention and promotion practices. And, elements of organizational citizenship are exemplified in the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders and structures throughout the system, where the collective totality of language as words and behaviours as actions of all individuals and/or groups amount to much more than the sum of their words and actions taken in isolation.

Most intentionally, the Director of Education plays a key role in the cultivation of systemness through the ongoing supervision and support of staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB, as well as the proactive coordination of thoughtfully-planned stakeholder consultative sessions for feedback and/or input on progress over time. In particular, the inclusion of those traditionally marginalized by institutions of public education through increasingly extensive outreach will facilitate the district's processes of communication and participation towards legitimacy in the eyes of its stakeholders (Belle, 2016).

Building upon VCDSB's administrative procedure related to equity and inclusive education, the organization declares a commitment to fairness, impartiality, equity, and inclusive education as essential principles of the system (VCDSB, 2015). In all of its policies and procedures, programs and services, the district outlines eight areas of focus as important for an

equitable and inclusive educational environment: policies, programs, guidelines and practices; shared and committed leadership; school-community relationships; inclusive curriculum and assessment practices; religious accommodation; school climate and prevention of discrimination and harassment; professional learning; and, accountability and transparency (VCDSB, 2015).

In the earnest attempt to identify and remove all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, the district's leadership must be responsive to the concerns shared by its school communities (Hannay et al., 2013; Harris & Jones, 2015). The lived experiences of stakeholders shared through consultative sessions will assuredly provide perspectives regarding equity of opportunities and outcomes that serve to adapt the very policies and procedures, programs and practices that govern the organization itself (Lazzell et al., 2019; 2013; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

The district's leadership will also need to encourage and endorse the equity-minded voice of students as it relates to issues of social justice through student councils on site in schools and the student senate at the system level. The promotion of student voice will allow knowledge mobilization and solution generation, as well as sound governance to emerge, from the most important system stakeholder – the students themselves (Hannay et al., 2013; Lazzell et al., 2019; National School Boards Association, 2021).

Leadership Problem of Practice

The organizational problem to be addressed is the lack of coherence and alignment of the annual system-level action plan for equity and anti-racism associated with the goal statements of VCDSB's multi-year strategic plan. As chief education officer and chief executive officer, as well as secretary to the board of trustees, the director is responsible for the execution of the multi-year strategic plan (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a; Ontario Education Services Corporation,

2014). Through each renewed strategic planning process, a three-to-five year cycle, a number of associated plans of action by portfolio and/or department are created annually by staff to operationalize the objectives of the multi-year strategic plan, including action plans related to achievement, equity, well-being, finance (budget), as well as information and communication technologies (VCDSB, 2021a). The ability to cultivate a systematic approach throughout the organization, as director, can be a challenge as the objectives of the multi-year strategic plan and its associated annual action plans may be interpreted diversely by staff in schools and central departments. Moreover, the development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols (system alignment) that support the optimization of the multi-year strategic plan may, at times, prove difficult to achieve, especially as it relates to bias awareness and critical consciousness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2015; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Looney, 2011; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).

Key Elements of the Plans of Action

The annual action plan for equity and anti-racism at VCDSB is organized into four distinct areas that mirror the categories provided by the Ministry of Education Ontario (2017b) as follows:

- school and classroom practices (with an equity-related goal embedded in both the school and board improvement planning processes);
- leadership, governance and human resource practices (through professional development on human rights, equity and anti-racism);
- data collection, integration and reporting (including an equity audit of schools and central departments, as well as surveys of stakeholders internal and external to the organization); and,

- organizational culture change (through advisory group sessions with individuals and/or groups who have been historically marginalized by the system) as integral to the plan (VCDSB, 2021c).

As previously noted, the multi-year strategic plan at VCDSB includes three goal statements under the strategic priority to ‘empower equity and well-being’, stated explicitly as follows:

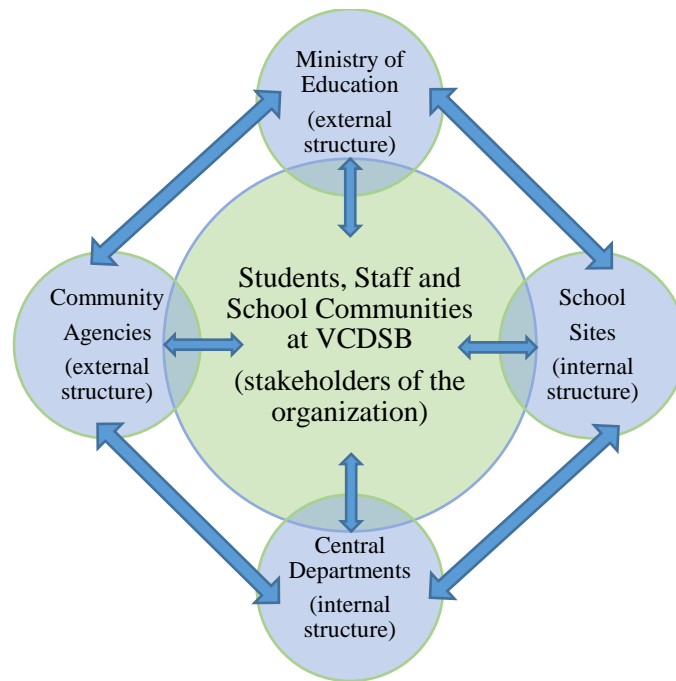
- the coordination of opportunities for authentic, engaging learning for students, staff and school communities related to anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion (including professional learning for staff regarding bias awareness and critical consciousness);
- a review of all policies and administrative procedures, as well as resources for teaching and learning environments, through the lens of human rights to ensure equitable, diverse and inclusive practices (in order to be reflected in schools and central departments); and,
- the provision of equity of access by eliminating barriers to the range of high-quality programs and services offered (such as transportation considerations for instance), either by family of schools or district-wide to meet the needs of all learners (VCDSB, 2021a).

Complex, Dynamic Interactions of the System

The complex, dynamic interactions between stakeholders and structures of VCDSB are depicted in Figure 1. The stakeholders, linked through relationships as actors within the network, include: students, parents/guardians, staff, federation/union partners, trustees, and community members. The structures, including schools and central departments (internal to the organization), and branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies (external to the organization), form the nodes of the network itself. The process-oriented, contextual, and interpretive exchanges between stakeholders and structures of the organization are at the heart of the leadership problem of practice.

Figure 1

Complex, Dynamic Interactions of Stakeholders and Structures at VCDSB



Although these interactions have the potential to generate adaptive knowledge and creative solutions with sufficient significance and impact to effect change (Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), they also create the possibility for misinterpretation and/or misunderstanding, especially in multi-faceted, complex organizations such as district school boards (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016; Snyder, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). This is notably the case in the aspirational attainment of enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB, where bias awareness and critical consciousness are relatively nascent endeavours (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). Stakeholders' unconscious attitudes, reactions, stereotypes and categorizations that affect their behaviour and understanding, as aspects of bias awareness, along with the ability of individuals and/or groups to recognize and analyze structures of inequality within systems and commit to take action against these structures, as elements of critical consciousness, are integral to the learning journey of the district.

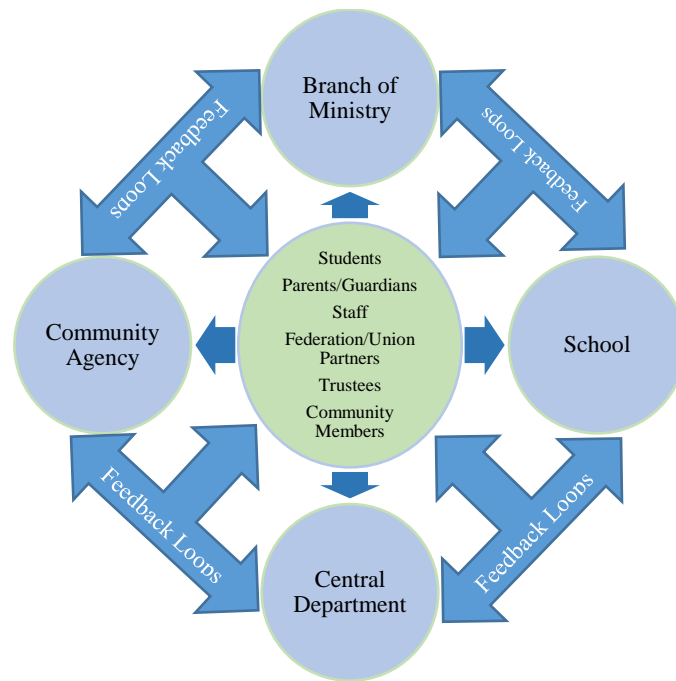
Viewed constructively as an opportunity for organizational improvement towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, what strategies might facilitate the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the removal of systemic barriers to learning through the development of coherence and implementation of alignment at the system level?

Framing the Problem of Practice

The organizational problem may be further substantiated by the broader contextual forces that shape the sophisticated, complementary connections amongst different elements of the large, complex institution of public education. Indeed, from the perspective of the Director of Education at VCDSB, the key elements of the plans of action as described above, are not as aligned and coherent as they could optimally be. As emphasized by Cross et al. (2007), viewing large, complex organizations as networks can help leaders make meaningful change by working through influential employees in order to focus on points within the network where relationships are to be expanded or reduced, and, to measure the effectiveness of major initiatives and projects. They highlight the identification of “brokers” as individuals who are quite influential and who interact frequently with others inside and outside of the organization, serving as “bridges” across groups and/or sub-groups within the network (Cross et al., 2007, p. 2).

The Worldview of Interpretivism

Based upon the worldview of interpretivism, as a theoretical underpinning, the conceptual framework proposed is a multi-dimensional web of interconnectivity between actors within a network, as illustrated in Figure 2. A social science paradigm, interpretivism seeks to provide rational explanations for the world in the realm of individual consciousness (Adom et al., 2018; Al Riyami, 2015; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Heck, 2015; Howe, 1998; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Figure 2*Conceptual Framework of the Multi-dimensional Web of Interconnectivity*

As a theoretical framework that values and respects the subjectivity of individuals and/or groups, interpretivism may be utilized aptly to address the interconnectivity of VCDSB's stakeholders and structures as an organizational problem of practice. Whether it be students, parents/guardians, staff, federation/union partners, trustees or community members (as stakeholders) through a school, central department, community agency or branch of the provincial ministry (as structures), the subjective rationalizations of their interactions contribute significantly to the multi-dimensional nature of their interconnectivity (Adom et al., 2018; Al Riyami, 2015; Heck, 2015; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

The multi-dimensional web of interconnectivity integrates aspects of complexity theory in the explanation of the elaborate and often reciprocal connections between various stakeholders and structures of the network (Betts, 1992; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Snyder, 2013; Trombly, 2014). Complexity theory emphasizes that interactions and accompanying feedback loops developed and sustained by stakeholders and structures, in their relationships, constantly change

the system itself. That is, although systems can be unpredictable, messy and complicated, they are also constrained by order-generating rules and routines that ultimately coordinate their function (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Koliba et al., 2016; Mason, 2014; Schneider and Somers, 2006).

In its application to VCDSB, districts are bound by policies set forth by the Ministry of Education Ontario, and guided by legislation and regulations of the *Education Act*, which can be interpreted in a number of ways by stakeholders of the system (Al Riyami, 2015; Ontario Education Act, 2012, c E-0.3). As a “constructivist paradigm” rooted in the fact that realities are multiple and socially constructed, interpretivists discern that knowledge is gained through a process that “respects the differences between people and the objects of natural science and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman, 2008, as cited in Al Riyami, 2015, p. 413). Interpretivists, as such, construct meaning in social contexts that embrace the subjectivity of actors involved in the interactions of networks they create. Further, beyond the policies established provincially, a number of policies and administrative procedures are developed locally by districts themselves. Despite the clearly prescribed nature of policies and procedures created by districts, a high degree of complexity lies beneath the surface in terms of their operationalization across schools and central departments of the system (VCDSB, 2021a). Underpinned by interpretivism as a key paradigm of social theory, complexity theory provides a sensible and sophisticated way to frame, conceptually, the multi-dimensional web of interconnectivity between stakeholders and structures at VCDSB, nuanced and unpredictable as the web may be.

A Rationale for Interpretivism

Proponents of the interpretive worldview hold that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work”, and as a result, emphasize that meanings are varied and multiple, as well as socially constructed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The construction of

meaning is based, therefore, on historical and social perspectives bestowed upon individuals by their culture. It is for these reasons that an acute awareness and appreciation of organizational context is so fundamental to a deep understanding of the problem of practice.

Critics of the interpretive paradigm, in particular those of a transformative (critical theorist) worldview, argue that the application of interpretivism for organizational improvement planning simply does not suffice, especially for those who have been marginalized in society or who have faced issues of power and social justice, discrimination and oppression that must be addressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In essence, critical theorists believe that the interpretivist stance “does not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda to help marginalized peoples” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9). A transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda in order to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs in a system (Mertens, 2010).

As is the case for all well-established sociological paradigms, especially in regards to organizational analyses, the viewpoints of critical theorists have merit (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, the perspectives of the critical theorists must remain at the forefront of the minds of all leaders of complex institutions of public education as they endeavour to enhance equity, diversity and inclusivity throughout their organizations, especially in the service of marginalized populations. In reality, if equity truly existed throughout systems of public education, it would not have such a priority focus at this time for the provincial ministry, as well as society at large (Lazzell et al., 2019; National School Boards Association, 2021).

As a scholar-practitioner interested in the study of the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB, the theoretical underpinning of interpretivism is the worldview chosen as it allows for the problem of practice to be interpreted as

a complexity of views and perspectives (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Notwithstanding the thoughtful criticisms mentioned above, the interpretivist worldview believes in the mobilization of knowledge and the generation of solutions from various stakeholders who hold diverse, yet valued views and who come to a problem of practice from differing perspectives. In many ways, then, interpretivism may be viewed similarly to the construction of a house, where individuals and/or groups assemble the structure, each with their own knowledge, skills and expertise for contribution to the overall endeavour (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

In regards to leadership agency as Director of Education at VCDSB, the interpretivist lens permits the engagement of a multitude of stakeholders and structures associated with the system in the making of new meaning over time. As incremental, iterative processes that are reasoned and respectful – through daily interactions that take place throughout the organization – interpretivism provides a very sensible and sophisticated approach to addressing the problem of practice in a collaborative and constructive manner (Al Riyami, 2015; Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Robson, 2013; Sattler, 2012). This is particularly the case for the unique position of privilege and power, as Director of Education, as there are a number of collectively-bargained agreements with various stakeholders that are negotiated in good will, and must be abided by and enacted through structures of the organization, as an integral part of VCDSB as a multi-faceted, complex institution of public education.

Pertinent Factors of a PESTEL Analysis for the Organization

In light of the macro-level factors influencing a system's environment, a PESTEL analysis is useful as a strategic tool to consider the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal factors that may impact an organization (Albu, 2014; Matovic, 2020). The chart shared in Appendix A provides a summary of the most influential PESTEL factors impacting the function

of VCDSB as an organization. A number of the factors detailed in the chart have had a significant influence on stakeholders and/or structures, contributing significantly to the lack of coherence and alignment with respect to the annual plan of action for equity and anti-racism associated with the objectives of the multi-year strategic plan (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). In particular, the political, social and legal factors, including the intersection of legislation and regulations of the *Education Act* (Ontario Education Act, 2012, c E-0.3) and the *Human Rights Code* (Ontario Human Rights Code, RSO, 1990, c H-19), form an integral part of the organization's move forward in the empowerment of equity.

Politically, the board of trustees hold fiduciary and governance responsibilities that include the approval of policy decisions that affect the educational environment of the organization (Savage-Williams, 2018). If considered from an equity lens, Savage-Williams (2018) explains, unless trustee members are “on board” with the implementation of equity-related initiatives within the district, there are many opportunities for failure (p. 1). In particular, increasing awareness of system barriers that disadvantage specific groups of students, and, supporting the adaptation of leadership practices (both instructional and operational) that allow staff to respond more effectively to the needs and aspirations of all students served are highlighted as essential to the role. More specifically, differentiation of the budget for schools in order to prevent disparities, and, the development of goal statements and/or policies with a strong equity focus, while identifying and dismantling policies that support disparities, are also suggested best practices (Lazzell et al., 2019; Savage-Williams, 2018). Moreover, knowing the district's demographics more deeply and creating structural changes that challenge the status quo and support equity for all are essential for progress (National School Boards Association, 2021; Savage-Williams, 2018).

In effect, educational equity is achieved when “all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school” (National School Boards Association, 2021, p. 3).

Socially, there is unquestionably a tension that exists in the reality of four coterminous school boards (English-language, French-language, Catholic and Public), as well as a number of smaller private schools, vying for the same student population across the county. Ensuring access to high-quality and high-level curriculum through its programs and/or services, as outlined by the National School Boards Association (2021), is a key objective for the board of trustees and senior staff alike. At VCDSB, the ability to demonstrate equity, diversity and inclusivity through ameliorated fairness and impartiality serves not only as a moral imperative, but also offers a potential major ‘market share’ advantage for the organization through increased enrolment over time. Indeed, parents/guardians of the school communities have explicitly sought programs and/or services through districts that make a concerted, publicly declared effort to reduce and/or minimize operational barriers such as transportation to/from educational programs and openly accessible services for community use of schools. Further, parents/guardians of school communities have indicated that they are looking for districts that demonstrate fairness and impartiality in school discipline practices (McIntosh et al., 2018). These sentiments have been corroborated through the feedback provided by VCDSB’s Parent Involvement Committee (VCDSB, 2021c).

Perhaps, the most intriguing of all factors of the PESTEL analysis are the legal implications for the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity. As described in the Ministry of Education’s policy documents, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) and *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan* (2017), the provincial government continues to integrate actions outlined in policy documentation into the refocused and refined work of the education sector. Of significance, the Ministry of Education created the

Education Equity Secretariat in the Spring of 2017 to strategically resource the identification and removal of systemic barriers in order to uphold and further the interests of the province's students, staff and families, as well as to ensure their empowerment (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b). The mandate of the Secretariat is to facilitate the strengthening of cultures of respect for equity in districts – in the spirit of collaborative professionalism alongside all education partners – with the assurance of intentionality, accountability, and equity across the system.

Specific Components of a SWOT Analysis for the Organization

The “big picture” factors outlined in the PESTEL analysis differ in comparison to the more specific focus of a SWOT analysis – a detailed examination of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing an organization (Albu, 2014; Matovic, 2020). As a technique used to evaluate competitive position and develop strategic priorities, the SWOT matrix is useful in assessing the current and future potential of the organization. The detail shared in Appendix B provides an overview of the matrix for VCDSB. In particular, the SWOT analysis emphasizes the importance of market share across the county and highlights long-term benefits of increased enrolment through the provision of high-quality programs and services, system-wide. Moreover, it is important to note that through the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, VCDSB has a veritable opportunity to address strategic priorities for organizational improvement, eliminating all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning (VCDSB, 2015).

Guiding Questions Emerging from the Problem of Practice

The organizational problem of practice raises a number of interesting questions that will guide the development, and subsequent potential implementation, of the plan for organizational improvement at VCDSB. Most specifically, the evolving nature of the learning journey related to

equity and anti-racism across the province has raised credible concerns and queries on the part of all stakeholders, including directors, as senior leaders of large, complex institutions of public education (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2014). With the support of the Ministry of Education Ontario, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) developed a tool for system leaders of districts to support current implementation of their equity and inclusive education policy through more intensive applications. The tool facilitates the full integration of equity and inclusive education into school and board improvement planning, as well as multi-year strategic planning. Presented in the form of a rubric, the tool provides a description of critical performance indicators for each policy outcome (eighteen in total), organized into three phases of development along a continuum: planning, effective practices, and integration. The strength of the tool, from the perspective of Director of Education, is that it has stimulated conversations amongst members of senior staff at VCDSB in the desire to identify effective strategies and promising practices along the journey as an organization (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2014).

Further, as delineated in the provincial scan of equity-related policies across districts conducted by Shewchuk and Cooper (2018), many topics remain unaddressed in school board policy coverage, including aspects of religious accommodation, anti-racism and ethno-cultural discrimination, anti-discrimination procedures related to LGBTQ2+ students, gender identity and socio-economic status (p. 917). The seminal work of Shewchuk and Cooper (2018) spurs queries related to the identification of knowledge mobilization processes – structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination, and transfer – that districts employ to increase equity policy engagement (pp. 923-925). The research offers three insightful suggestions for continued improvement on the part of districts. First, in order for school boards to mobilize knowledge effectively, it is imperative that institutional structures address how policies are housed,

communicated, disseminated, and utilized by educators. Second, active knowledge brokering is needed across districts to inform the development of equity initiatives for marginalized groups. Third, co-production of knowledge, including dissemination and knowledge exchange, is critical to improvement planning (Shewchuk and Cooper, 2018). Here also, the suggestions offered allow for rich deliberation regarding the policy directives that trustees and senior staff are ultimately responsible for (Lazzell et al., 2019; McIntosh et al., 2018; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a).

Central Guiding Question and Associated Sub-questions

The conversations among senior staff and trustees at VCDSB have led to a series of guiding questions emerging from the problem of practice. The central guiding question is as follows:

- How might the cultivation of systemness mitigate the lack of coherence and alignment throughout the organization in the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity?

Associated sub-questions, in addition to the central question posed above, include:

- What challenges exist as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, and, what leadership opportunities arise within the system for change?
- What leadership approaches facilitate knowledge mobilization and solution generation for enhanced human rights and equity, anti-racism and inclusivity through the organization?
- How might individuals and groups who are underrepresented or underserved become genuinely engaged in the change process, and, how can their voices be heard authentically?

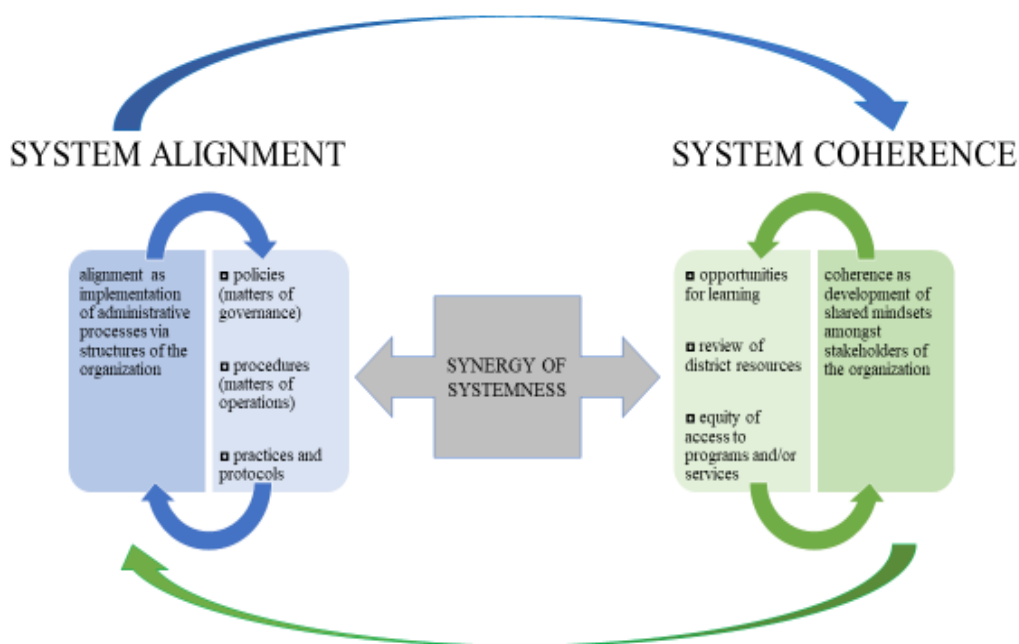
As described in the guiding principles of the framework for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (2020), these queries can serve as a catalyst for further exploration and lines of inquiry to bring about solutions to the problem of practice, especially as it relates to equity, ethics and social justice. The engagement of traditionally marginalized stakeholders may allow for

the development of shared mindsets that are more inclusive in nature as a healthy display of system coherence. And, the inclusion of an increasingly diversified set of voices in the change process may allow policies and procedures that better reflect the needs of school communities as a beneficial demonstration of system alignment (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

The emergence of coherence and alignment at the system level have the potential to create a synergy of systemness, cultivated by interactions of stakeholders and structures throughout the organization. The multi-dimensional web of interconnectivity between stakeholders and structures – as collaborative efforts towards the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity – have the possibility of producing a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Smith, 1983). The synergy of systemness potentially created is shared in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The Synergy of Systemness at VCDSB



The development of shared mindsets amongst stakeholders of the organization through opportunities for professional learning related to bias awareness and critical consciousness, review of resources in schools and central departments, as well as improved equity of access to programs and/or services offered contribute to coherence at the system level. The implementation of administrative processes such as governance-oriented policies and operationally sound procedures, as well as other practices and protocols for the effective and efficient function of the district, ensure alignment at the system level. It is the interconnectedness of these elements - their intersection, per se – that has the potential to create a synergy of systemness for VCDSB as an organization.

Leadership-focused Vision for Change

As Director of Education at VCDSB, the desired organizational state – as a vision for change – is one that ensures all stakeholders are (and genuinely feel that they are) a part of the system itself. Interacting with others through coherence of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, and, alignment of administrative processes that better serve the needs of students, staff and school communities, form the essence of the outcome desired for the organization. Ideally, it is through the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders and structures that the envisioned future state will be actualized. That is, through observed conversations amongst students and staff, as well as other stakeholders of school communities, “common ground” in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions will constructively facilitate system coherence (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Further, the consistent application of district policies and administrative procedures in the decision-making processes of stakeholders, in their collective efforts to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments will productively support system alignment (Fullan, 2021; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Campbell (2020) examines the strategies and actions of districts across the province with respect to excellence and equity in their desire to advance an equitable and inclusive education system. Of note, she clarifies at the outset that – over the past two decades or so – Ontario has gained international recognition for becoming a jurisdiction that has been successful in achieving both excellence and equity in educational outcomes (Campbell, 2020; Mourshed et al., 2010). Through her comprehensive review of districts’ work in the area of equity, diversity and inclusivity, Campbell (2020) reveals that two central strategies were key to large-scale reform that have closed the gap in educational achievement and improving student success across the province.

The first strategy includes the establishment of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat for elementary schools and the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy for secondary schools. Both initiatives, she claims, included attention to capacity building and supports for developing school and system leadership to advance achievement. In terms of the focus on developing leaders and leadership practices, specifically, she highlights the creation of the Ontario Leadership Strategy with two priority goals: attract the right people to the principalship, and, help principals and vice-principals develop into the best possible instructional leaders they can be (Campbell, 2020).

The second strategy, Campbell (2020) shares, builds upon the first in the creation of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy by retaining the goal of reducing gaps in achievement, but enhancing it through the lens of diversity, equity and inclusive education. The strategies for equity and inclusive education established across all 72 districts of the province have ensured the creation of policies and/or procedures in the areas of: overall equity and inclusive education plans; accessibility; voluntary self-identification; workplace violence; workplace harassment; anaphylaxis; and, progressive discipline (Campbell, 2020; Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). The widespread creation of these policies and procedures, Campbell (2020) insists, demonstrate a long-

term commitment on the part of school boards in terms of truly having equity and inclusive education plans in place, moving forward. She does, however, indicate that while committed to removing systemic barriers and discrimination in all forms, “some of the most ingrained and pressing inequities – such as issues of race and ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, and poverty – still require considerably more focused attention” (Campbell, 2020, p. 14).

Pertinent to the roles and responsibilities as Director of Education at VCDSB, the OLF also establishes system-level leadership practices for senior leaders. The leadership practices include: establishing a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on aspirational images of the educated person; providing a coherent instructional guidance system; building staff capacity and commitment to make informed decisions; and, creating learning-oriented improvement processes (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013; Leithwood, 2013). Especially crucial as VCDSB’s Director of Education, the leadership practices of the OLF and the areas identified for additional attention through the analyses of equity-related plans of action across districts to date, serve as useful context in the cultivation of systemness through a leadership-focused vision for change. Infused with the concepts of adaptive leadership and complexity leadership theory, priorities for change may be established through the organizational improvement plan that seek to balance the interests and tensions of stakeholders and structures of the organization (Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Stakeholders and Structures as Drivers for Change

The drivers for change, as expected, include stakeholders of the organization – members of the broader school communities, trustees, federation/union partners, parents/guardians, staff, and the influence of student voice, most importantly – as well as structures internal and external to the organization. Through the Student Senate established at VCDSB a half decade ago, a number of very

thoughtful suggestions have come forward to senior staff and trustees with respect to desired change within the organization as it pertains to equity, diversity and inclusivity. Moreover, beyond equitable access to programs and/or services already mentioned, the student body seeks a greater diversity of student voices – of all backgrounds and interests – so that students’ perspectives are reflected in activities and initiatives, system-wide. In fact, this very goal statement was established in the renewed strategic plan for the strategic priority related to inspiring community engagement and partnerships (VCDSB, 2021a). The Student Senate has coordinated a number of student-led initiatives for athletics, arts and LGBTQ+ alliance days, for instance. The parents/guardians of school communities within the district have shared their fresh perspectives for change as well, especially for topics such as transportation and cross-boundary transfers. Other stakeholder groups, of course, have provided useful ideas for change, including staff and federation/union partners who have workload considerations, as well as health and safety of the working environment, as priority foci.

Through oversight of the delegation of key tasks to members of staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio, as well as the coordination of thoughtfully-planned stakeholder consultations over time, the envisioned future state may most certainly be achieved. As previously mentioned, the steadfast support and involvement of the Director of Education of VCDSB in equity-related professional learning sessions and personal reflective activities can also serve to inspire the system-wide change sought (Belle, 2016; Hannay et al., 2013).

Organizational Change Readiness

A number of recent data sources for VCDSB indicate an optimal state of readiness for meaningful change as an organization. The latest student survey conducted in the Spring of 2021, and the most recent workforce census conducted in the Fall of 2019, collectively indicate that stakeholders internal to the organization seek change in a number of respects (VCDSB, 2021c). Of particular

significance, survey results indicate a readiness for change in the following areas: equity of access to all programs and/or services offered, regardless of home address (from students); opportunities for continuous professional learning to ensure appropriate preparedness for quality teaching and learning environments as professionals, including culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy (from staff); and, ongoing support for mental health and wellness (from both students and staff). Interestingly, responses from the student survey indicated a desire to address well-being not only for students themselves, but also for their educators, so that they could all be at their very best in the context of teaching and learning environments. In the same light, responses from the workforce census revealed the importance of coordinated services related to mental health and well-being not only for students, but also for themselves as colleagues on staff (VCDSB, 2021c). To add, feedback from external stakeholders including the Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee and Special Education Advisory Committee, signal a continued desire to seek stakeholder perspectives for all significant decision-making processes. This will ensure the voices of external stakeholders are heard and acted upon, especially in regards to the enhancement of opportunities for their children to explore post-secondary pathways. As many parents/guardians shared, the district should help their students “keep as many doors open as possible” throughout their journey of public education so that their children may select the pathways most suitable to them as they graduate (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The renewed strategic plan at VCDSB, in turn, proclaims a commitment to the above stated desires in the creation of goals that further solicit the input of stakeholders in shaping decisions made, moving forward. The strategic priority to inspire community engagement and partnerships, for example, includes a statement regarding the ongoing collaboration with federation/union partners in order to serve the diverse needs of students (VCDSB, 2021a). In addition, an operational objective related to stakeholder feedback (such as student questionnaires, staff censuses, and focus group sessions with

parents/guardians and community members) has been established as a metric in the measurement of progress over time for the organization (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

As a result of the feedback and/or input garnered by stakeholders, the organization is clearly in an optimal state of readiness for change. Coupled with the Ministry of Education's commitment, VCDSB will have a formidable combination of pressure and support to achieve its envisioned future state of enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity as a district (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021).

Other Forces as Drivers of Change

Other forces that have the potential to shape the change process regarding the cultivation of systemness are both internal and external in nature. These forces include: collective bargaining processes, hybrid learning and workplace environments, and operational issues for schools and central departments (as internal forces), as well as provincial funding formulas, and most recently, the global pandemic (as external forces).

In regards to internal forces, frequent collective bargaining processes and the seemingly inevitable labour disruptions that accompany such processes have the real possibility of interrupting the professional learning related to bias awareness and critical consciousness. For better or worse, the current collective agreement cycle of every two-to-four years ensures this factor remains a constant consideration in the actual accomplishment of the district's objectives. The evolution of hybrid learning environments – through in-person learning at school and/or on-line learning at home – also has the potential to shape the change management process related to the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity across the district, including connectivity issues for many students and staff. And, last but certainly not least, the operational challenges of staff shortages and occasional staff replacement impede the opportunity to conduct professional learning sessions.

In terms of external forces, the allocation of funds/grants provided by the provincial government through the ministries are an omnipresent consideration as it relates to the effective and efficient operation of the organization. As the vast majority of the budget for public education is sourced through taxation, districts rely on the stability of funding to move initiatives and projects forward. Most recently, the impacts of the global pandemic are a further, substantial external force that has significantly influenced the management of change processes. It is very likely that the ramifications of the pandemic period will last long after the effects of the coronavirus have subsided (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

First Chapter Summary

The first chapter of the OIP provides a detailed description of the problem of practice for VCDSB as a lack of coherence and alignment of the annual system-level action plan for equity and anti-racism associated with the goal statements of the multi-year strategic plan. It includes pertinent organizational context for consideration, as well as a sensible rationale for adaptive leadership and complexity theory in the oversight of the complex, dynamic interactions between stakeholders and structures of the system, conceptualized as a multi-dimensional web of interconnectivity (University of Western Ontario, 2021).

The chapter describes a leadership-focused vision for organizational change through the synergy of systemness – as collaborative efforts between stakeholders and structures that produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects. It also shares a summary of the organization's readiness for change, clearly evident through the most recent survey of students and census of staff, and prepares for the development and implementation of an organizational improvement plan (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Chapter II: Planning and Development

The second chapter of the OIP develops a leadership framework for understanding change and analyzes district data in order to select the best possible change path for the organization (University of Western Ontario, 2021). The chapter continues to build upon the three key drivers of organizational improvement described through the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – from the perspective of the scholar-practitioner (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020).

Moreover, the second chapter provides a sound rationale for the leadership approach to change taken by the scholar-practitioner, outlines a multi-step model for effective change management, and conducts a critical analysis of the organization. In addition, the chapter details possible avenues of exploration as solutions to the problem of practice, and shares aspects of leadership ethics and organizational change towards the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity.

Leadership Approach to Change

As a leadership-focused vision for change, the aim of the organizational improvement plan for VCDSB is to address the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual system-level plan of action for equity and anti-racism, and, the goal statements for empowering equity of the multi-year strategic plan. The multiplicity of perspectives and perceived understandings of the objectives of various plans of action is an issue typical of large, complex institutions of public education, especially as there are so many stakeholders and structures present in the day-to-day function of the organization (Fullan, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Looney, 2011; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015). In the development of shared

mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals related to equity, diversity and inclusivity (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols in a consistent manner (system alignment) that support the optimization of the multi-year strategic plan, an ideal future state is envisioned.

Defined as the activity of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive, adaptive leadership is central to the approach leading the cultivation of systemness throughout the organization (Heifetz et al., 2009; Nelson & Squires, 2017). Through adaptive leadership, dynamics of interaction emerge between stakeholders in relationships (as actors within the network) and structures internal and external to the organization (as nodes of the network itself) that are key to the creation of meaningful change over time (Cross et al., 2007; Heifetz et al., 2009; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). It is important for leaders to understand that different contexts require flexible and adaptive behaviour, with each situation diagnosed thoughtfully and responded to appropriately (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

As it applies to VCDSB, adaptive dynamics exist between students, parents/guardians, staff, federation/union partners, trustees and community members (as actors within the network) in schools and central departments (as internal elements of the network), as well as branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies (as external elements of the network). These adaptive dynamics play out in the decision-making processes that take place on a day-to-day basis between the district's stakeholders and structures (Heifetz et al., 2009; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). As previously noted, it is the careful creation of common vocabulary, including functional definitions for daily use of terms related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, that facilitate the development of coherence at the system level. In the same manner, it is the

steady application of governance-oriented policies and operationally sound procedures in the decision-making considerations of stakeholders regarding administrative processes – in their earnest efforts to encourage fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments – that support the implementation of alignment at the system level. The day-to-day interactions of stakeholders in authentic relationships, through structures internal and external to the organization, cultivate a synergistic, interactive connection throughout the district as depicted in Figure 3 (Smith, 1983; Fullan, 2015, 2021).

The Importance of Agility

In helping individuals and/or groups of a system adapt (and hopefully thrive) in the face of volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times, a leadership approach that is agile in nature prepares educational leaders to take on the process of change (Buffone, 2021; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). As Buffone (2021) states, “an ability to think and understand quickly and to move smartly through the ever-evolving educational landscape” is especially valuable in regards to a leader’s continuous interactions with their multi-faceted environment (p. 1616). Leadership that is flexible and adaptive involves changing behaviour in appropriate ways as the complexity of the situation changes (Hannay et al., 2013; Jacobson et al., 2019; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

Through the exercise of influence on both stakeholders and structures, the Director of Education at VCDSB plays an essential role in leading the facilitation of problem diagnosis, as well as the identification of key elements of interruption and innovation as part of the solution. The delegation of key tasks to members of staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio, as well as the coordination of thoughtfully-planned stakeholder consultation sessions for feedback and/or input on progress over time, are constructive means of moving the organization towards the ideal future state envisioned.

Framework for Leading the Change Process

In leading change at VCDSB, utilizing both adaptive leadership and complexity theory, the Director of Education must diagnose and analyze the problem and understand the symptoms and effects in order to take meaningful action (Jacobson et al., 2019; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). The gap analysis conducted between the present and desired future state is essential, as is the identification of priorities for change. The director is also uniquely positioned to mobilize other change agents throughout the organization, potentially including the identification of key “brokers” in the network, as noted by Cross et al. (2007). In addition, the director must consider the appropriate tool to assess, monitor and evaluate the change process (Baltacı & Balçı, 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Koliba et al., 2016; Levy, 2000).

Complexity leadership theory – a dynamic process that emerges in the interactive spaces between people and ideas – may also be a useful, complementary theoretical lens through which to study the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016; Lichtenstein et al., 2006). In fact, Lichtenstein et al. (2006) emphasize that complexity leadership “transcends the unique capabilities of any one individual alone”, and rather, “is the product of the interactions, tensions and exchange rules governing changes in perceptions and understanding” of all stakeholders involved in the change (p. 2). Through these interactions, creative and innovative outcomes may emerge (Arena & Uhl-Bien, 2016; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

With respect to organizational change, Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) surmise that most organizations must undertake minor changes at least once a year, and major changes every four to five years (p. 130). In particular, they argue that the impetus for these organizational changes stem from a multitude of factors, potentially including updated governmental regulations imposed,

consumer desire for new products and/or services, emergence of technological developments, and increasing complexity of marketplace competition (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008, pp. 130-131).

There are a number of relevant types of organizational change that may be considered in the context of the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB. In many ways, organizational change types may be viewed on a continuum from adaptive to transformational in terms of the extent to which change management processes take place, as well as their intended impact on the organization itself (Hitz, 2021). Adaptive changes, for instance, are usually small, incremental adjustments that organizations make in the short-term to meet the challenges of the day. These changes improve and optimize processes or strategies that are already in place. Transformational changes, on the other end of the spectrum, typically alter the fundamental elements of the organization over the long-term, including culture, values and operations. These changes are much grander in scope and significantly adjust the processes or strategies utilized by the organization (Hitz, 2021).

As it applies to the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB, organizational change will undoubtedly be of both an adaptive and transformational nature. As a scholar-practitioner, the Director of Education at VCDSB sees adaptive changes as potentially applicable to the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism (in the short-term), while transformational changes would arise through the renewed multi-year strategic planning process (for the long-term). Further, these organizational changes may also be considered in terms of various dimensions that include a progression from reactive to proactive, sub-system to system-wide, as well as unplanned to planned (McNamara, 2005). In the development of coherence through shared mindsets and the implementation of alignment via administrative processes that systemness requires, effective change management that is proactive and planned is key to the leadership approach at VCDSB (Hitz, 2021; Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).

A Multi-Step Model for Effective Change Management

The Rotman School of Management (2016) outlines a seven-step process for effective change management. The multi-phased model ensures that the Director of Education, as a key change agent, must fully understand the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level at VCDSB as the problem of practice, as well as the corresponding need for change in order to cultivate systemness throughout the organization (diagnose). The Director of Education then coordinates the change initiative, cultivating systemness along the journey by engaging a multitude of stakeholders and structures during the process, including individuals and groups traditionally underrepresented or underserved by VCDSB as an organization (enlist). Moreover, the change management model requires the collaboration and cooperation of a number of stakeholders as students, staff and members of school communities, through established structures internal and external to the organization, in order to function properly. Further, VCDSB's Director of Education must have a clear vision for change (envisage) that can be leveraged to inspire and empower others (motivate) and must be messaged frequently, system-wide, throughout the endeavour (communicate). In taking concrete steps to implement the change, thereby ensuring a synergy of systemness between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements of the empowering equity priority of the multi-year strategic plan, the Director of Education at VCDSB oversees the change process (act). The Director of Education at VCDSB must then maintain a focus on the key elements of the process for change in order to ensure a new culture is created for the entire organization (consolidate). As outlined in Appendix C, the process allows for the change initiative at VCDSB to be assessed, monitored and evaluated (Rotman School of Management, 2016).

In regards to the enhancement of equity and engagement, ethics and social justice, the change management process for VCDSB is timely as the system is in the midst of a very insightful self-

reflection related to anti-racism and human rights, diversity and inclusivity, across all aspects of the organization. Most explicitly, the district has established a series of initiatives and projects to move this collective work forward that include:

- professional learning sessions for all staff (academic and non-academic) related to bias awareness and critical consciousness, in addition to the ongoing professional development of academic staff regarding culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy;
- de-streaming at the secondary level based upon a ministry directive (from academic and applied classes into one stream) that is inclusive of all students for first year of secondary school; and,
- coordination of a leadership development and mentorship strategy for positions of added responsibility (supervisory officer appointments, principal and vice-principal competitions, as well as postings for senior managers) that is intended to diversify the workforce (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

These initiatives and projects highlight a very compelling and inspiring social justice context for the district, especially as it relates to the closure of gaps that exist for typically marginalized populations of students, staff and school communities. More categorically, for VCDSB, a disproportionately large number of students have been streamed into applied classes in the transition from elementary to secondary schooling in the past, particularly students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as Black and Indigenous students. The streaming that has taken place historically has undoubtedly impacted equity of access to programs and/or services for students, system-wide (Pichette et al., 2020; VCDSB, 2021c). Changing the attitudes of stakeholders, including staff in schools and central departments, to encourage a growth-oriented mindset with respect to students' potential, as well as an explicit focus on improving fairness and impartiality in decision making, will also be essential aspects of systemic change, moving forward (Fabillar, 2018; VCDSB, 2021c).

In terms of workforce diversification, human resource practices traditionally in place at VCDSB have not mirrored the diversification of society across the region and the province. As such, the intentional actions of the district's leadership development and mentorship strategy will serve as crucial to the endeavours of systemic change as well (Stewart, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d).

The detailed contexts outlined herein for students, staff and school communities clearly speak to the compelling need for systemic change through a multi-phased change management model. A multi-phased model, as described, will most certainly facilitate the organization's efforts to address the problem of practice (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Metwally et al., 2019; Stewart, 2021; VCDSB, 2021c).

Critical Organizational Analysis

Leading the change management process towards the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB includes an account of the organization's readiness for change, a gap analysis of the organization, as well as the organizational 'fit' for the change plan. Specifically, the commonly-held sense that individuals and/or groups have at all levels of the organization that they are indeed "the system" itself, as described by Fullan (2021), have proved challenging for the district, especially as the educational landscape related to equity and human rights has evolved so significantly in recent years (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b, 2021).

Moreover, from the viewpoint of VCDSB's Director of Education, there are significantly varied perspectives observed in the conversations amongst stakeholders as it pertains to the "common ground" in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions that facilitate system coherence. That is, students, staff and members of the district's school communities have differing interpretations of what it means for the organization to truly be equitable, diverse and inclusive.

From an interpretivist viewpoint, these interpretations may be based upon each individual and/or group's own experiences in public education. Further, there are inconsistencies noted by the Director of Education at VCDSB in the application of district policies and administrative procedures in the decision-making processes of schools and central departments as structures that support system alignment. That is to say, the implementation of policies and procedures from school to school, or across central departments, varies as noted through the feedback of stakeholders and their structures. It is the differing interpretations and varied perspectives of decision making that create a lack of coherence and alignment at the system level, impacting the efficacy of the equity-related action plan and multi-year strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Survey Data as Indicators of Readiness for Change

As described previously, the latest student survey conducted in the Spring of 2021, and the most recent workforce census conducted in the Fall of 2019, indicate that stakeholders internal to the organization, as students and staff, seek change in a number of respects. Particularly, survey results indicate a readiness for change in the following areas: equity of access to all programs and/or services offered across the district, regardless of home address (from students); opportunities for continuous professional learning to ensure appropriate preparedness for quality teaching and learning environments as professionals (from staff); and, ongoing support for mental health and wellness (from both students and staff alike). As mentioned earlier, responses from the student survey indicated a desire to address well-being not only for students themselves, but also for their educators. In the same vein, responses from the workforce census revealed the importance of coordinated services related to mental health and well-being for not only students in the system, but also for colleagues as staff (VCDSB, 2021c).

Feedback from external structures of the organization, including input from the Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee and Special Education Advisory

Committee, revealed the legitimate expectation that their voices are heard and acted upon accordingly by senior staff and trustees of the district. These valued stakeholders appreciated that not every idea suggested would necessarily make its way into action, but that the spirit of their feedback would be considered and acted upon if/as appropriate for the system. Intriguingly, as described previously, a key theme emerged from the feedback/input of parents/guardians through the committee structures regarding the enhancement opportunities for their children to explore post-secondary pathways of interest beyond their years in the public school system. That is, as many parents/guardians shared, the district should help ensure their students “keep as many doors open as possible” throughout their public school journey so that their children may select the pathways most suitable to them as they graduate (Cross et al., 2007; Metwally et al., 2019; VCDSB, 2021c).

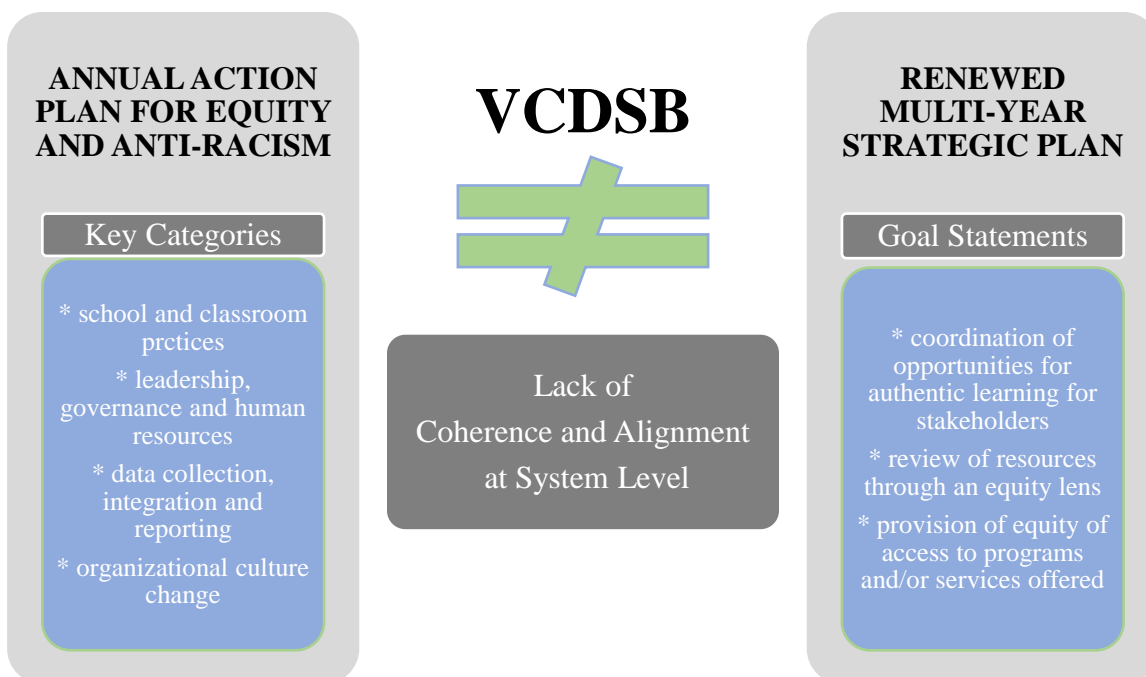
Organizational Gap Analysis

A gap analysis for VCDSB as an organization reveals a significant disconnect between the key categories outlined in the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, and, the goal statements of the empowering equity priority of the multi-year strategic plan. As outlined in Figure 4, the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism focuses on instructional practices across classrooms within schools, in addition to operational aspects of leadership, governance, and human resources at the system level. Further, the annual plan of action is driven by the effective utilization of data to support decision-making processes in schools and central departments, as well as organizational culture change, more broadly. The priorities to empower equity through the multi-year strategic plan emphasize the coordination of authentic learning opportunities that are equity-related for all stakeholders (including educators as academic staff), along with a review of resources through a lens of anti-racism and human rights, diversity and inclusivity. The multi-year plan of action also addresses the provision of equity of access to programs and/or services offered at the elementary and secondary levels, system-wide.

There are a number of legitimate explanations for the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level at VCDSB as a complex adaptive system. For instance, the stakeholders who execute the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism (typically centrally-assigned staff within the organization) are not the same individuals and/or groups who establish the goal statements of the multi-year strategic plan (predominantly trustees and senior staff, including the director). In the same manner, the structures utilized (internal and external to the organization) for feedback and/or input on the action plans and their progress over time are not one in the same. That is, the consultative processes for multi-year strategic planning are often broader in nature, and much less frequent, than the regularly-scheduled interactions of monthly committees as structures that review aspects of the annual action plans. It is for these reasons that the key elements of the plans of action are not as aligned and coherent as they could optimally be (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Figure 4

Lack of Coherence and Alignment at the System Level at VCDSB



Building upon the organization's state of readiness for change – including the information collected through the student survey and workforce census, in addition to the feedback and/or input provided by stakeholders through committee structures – one of the key categories of the annual action plan, most specifically, highlights the importance of data analysis as a leader of effective change management. In fact, the OLF identifies the “deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions” as one of the nine common leadership practices of system-level leaders (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013, p. 18).

As Director of Education at VCDSB, data collection, integration and reporting remains a key focal point for deeper exploration and discovery as it relates to equity, diversity and inclusivity, including its integration into board and school improvement planning processes (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). To date, the data collected through system-wide assessments (including early literacy and numeracy interventions such as the Phonemic Awareness Project utilizing the Heggerty approach and Leaps and Bounds towards Math Understanding), as well as the provincial assessments (for reading, writing and mathematics in the primary and junior divisions, Grade 9 Mathematics and Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test), have not disaggregated data from an equity-related perspective beyond gender and special needs (excluding giftedness). The move forward will include increasingly detailed and frequent surveys/censuses of students and staff in order to disaggregate data further and include these sources of evidence for decision-making purposes, as well as a more consistent return to assessment measures for achievement that track progress over time through established targets (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021).

Another key category of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism addresses instructional practices in classrooms and schools. This category corresponds to the goal statements related to both

the coordination of opportunities for authentic learning on the part of all stakeholders of the organization, as well as the review of resources provided to students and staff through an equity lens.

From the perspective of Director of Education at VCDSB, the collective works to take place in this respect have not happened sufficiently, and as a result, represent a detachment between the espoused objectives of the organization and the reality of current teaching and learning environments. In particular, the resources utilized in classrooms remain predominantly colonial and/or Eurocentric in nature. The diversification of resources in schools and central departments is a key action for the organization, moving forward. Also, the focus on professional learning related to bias awareness and critical consciousness for educators has been identified as a priority for reflection and growth as part of the path ahead for organizational change (Belle, 2016; Lazzell et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, 2009, 2021; VCDSB, 2015, 2021c).

An additional key category of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism deals with leadership, governance and human resource practices of the organization. This category is complimentary, in many ways, to the goal statement that specifies the provision of equity of access to programs and/or services offered across the system.

From the viewpoint of VCDSB's Director of Education, the collaborative efforts to take place in this regard have also not taken place adequately to this point in time, and as such, reflect a disassociation between the goals stated and the real-life, decision-making actions on site in schools and central departments. Specifically, the fiduciary and governance aspects of the roles and responsibilities of trustees, as well as the operational authority of senior staff, must ensure that policies and procedures established strive to eliminate all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning throughout the organization. The availability of transportation services for students to/from programs across the county, as well as the transition planning processes for students as they move from elementary to

secondary to post-secondary options in their educational journey, are areas of further learning and action as part of the change path forward for the organization. The diversification of the district's staff through recruitment, retention and promotion strategies is also a future area of growth for the organization (Mason, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2017a, 2021; National School Boards Association, 2021; VCDSB, 2015, 2021a, 2021c).

As a final critical element of the analysis related to the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level at VCDSB, organizational culture change is specified as a key category of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism. In many respects, this key category represents the spirit of the entire organizational improvement endeavour as Director of Education at VCDSB. As previously noted, through a worldview of interpretivism – a paradigm that is rooted in the fact that realities are multiple and socially constructed – the organizational improvement plan seeks to enhance equity, diversity and inclusivity through an iterative, incremental change management process over time (Al Riyami, 2015; Belle, 2016; Howe, 1998; Lazzell et al., 2019; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). Valuing the voices of all stakeholders in the management of the transition, and validating the form and function of existing structures – internal and external to the organization – in a manner that is reasoned and respectful, rational and responsive, will surely move the organization towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Organizational Fit for Change

The cultivation of systemness at VCDSB 'fits' within the context of the organization as the feedback received from stakeholders clearly reinforces the importance and urgency of a cohesive and complementary improvement plan. As previously mentioned, the overarching theme emerging from the input received to date – equity of access and opportunity – reinforces the desire of members of the district's school communities to ensure the enhancement of opportunities for their children to explore

post-secondary pathways of interest beyond their years in the public school system. Both in terms of the challenges of the relatively large geography of the county, as well as the concerns related to the inequitable streaming of students along their educational journey, equity of access and opportunity remain foci for reflection and improvement as a district (VCDSB, 2021c).

Through the goal statements of the multi-year strategic plan and key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, as described above, aspects of ameliorated fairness and impartiality throughout the system, as well as human rights and social justice, may be adequately addressed (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). The focus on equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB represents a broader societal ‘fit’ well beyond public education, as other sectors of society also strive to address the very same focus (Stewart, 2021).

Perhaps, as a result of its relatively large geographic size, stakeholders and structures of the organization place a particularly high value on connectedness. In truth, it is a warranted perspective as otherwise schools or central departments (internally) and branches of the provincial ministry or community-based agencies (externally) may feel isolated from one another. The organizational fit for change – through the development of coherence and implementation of alignment – ensures that all stakeholders and structures are working, in their day-to-day interactions, from a common understanding of the objectives of the plans of action they operationalize (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Possible Avenues of Exploration as Solutions for the Problem of Practice

The exploration of possible solutions towards the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB includes a thorough description of three distinct, yet viable options for consideration. Along with a more fulsome explanation of the preferred option for the organizational improvement plan, a framework for the plan of action is detailed, as are the

ethical considerations for leadership to effectively enact the change management process as Director of Education (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Each option for consideration as a possible solution towards the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB is adjudicated based upon a common set of criteria, including: applicability for alignment and coherence at the system level; allocation of resources required; and, assessment of risk in regards to effective change management. An overview of the adjudication of each option, including the relative viability for each criteria – noted as low, medium or high – is provided in Appendix D.

Adherence to Ministerial Directives as a First Potential Solution

The establishment of the Education Equity Secretariat, as an integral part of the Ministry of Education's plan of action for equity, district school boards are building a relatively new partnership with stakeholders (as education officers) and structures (as a branch of the provincial ministry) has tremendous potential to enhance equity and human rights across the province (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b). As described in the *Education Act*, and as is the case for other secretariat-like structures of the provincial government, districts are required to implement the policies developed by branches of the provincial ministry (Ontario Education Act, 2012, c E-0.3). As such, strict adherence to ministerial directives shared through the Education Equity Secretariat may be considered a viable option as a solution to the problem of practice.

Although districts have made great strides in creating schools and classrooms that are safe and welcoming, systems of public education are still not free of all forms of discrimination, and as a result, not all students are realizing their full potential (Lazzell et al., 2019; Savage-Williams, 2018). Further, collective efforts to improve educational outcomes must recognize these realities

and work to dismantle the policies and procedures that underpin the systemic barriers to learning that continue to disadvantage particular groups of students (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b, 2021). More specifically, the Education Equity Secretariat has led the evolution of improvement planning processes by creating a Board Improvement and Equity Plan (BIEP) for all districts. The BIEP includes the collection of voluntary student demographic data by district in order to better understand who their students are and more precisely identify where gaps in achievement exist. Developing a greater awareness and understanding of which students are underserved by systems of education is at the heart of the human rights and equity-related work for districts (Fabillar, 2018; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021; National School Boards Association, 2021).

As a standardized tool for districts to identify local actions that will lead to improved outcomes, the BIEP sets out provincial goals and performance indicators under four educational priority areas: achievement; human rights and equity; mental health, well-being and engagement; and, transitions and pathways (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021). Moreover, the BIEP is a demographic data-driven tool designed to capture the experiences and outcomes of Indigenous students, Black and other racialized groups of students, students with disabilities and/or special education needs (non-gifted), 2SLGBTQ+ students, and students from low-income households. Through the provision of baseline data, districts set aspirational targets for each performance indicator outlined for each educational priority of the BIEP (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021).

The goals of the BIEP are based upon information collected at the system level, either as voluntary student demographic data, as stated above, or as data captured in the student information system. As a result, the resources required to complete the improvement planning analyses (human, material and/or fiscal) are predominantly at the system level. That is, for VCDSB, the responsibility for BIEP completion (and monitoring over time) would be held by supervisory

officers and system principals in central departments, as well as staff of the information and communication technologies department. For this reason, the relative costs of this potential solution are minimal, beyond the time and effort required by the centrally-assigned staff involved (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014a, 2017b, 2021; VCDSB, 2021c).

A significant benefit of the adherence to ministerial directives, through the BIEP, is a focus on goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (Aghera et al., 2018; Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012). The emphasis on metrics through goals that are ‘smart’ allows VCDSB to intentionally address areas of growth and improve performance over time (Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012; VCDSB, 2021c). One of the costs for consideration related to the strict adherence to ministerial directives via the BIEP is the lack of stakeholder and structure engagement. That is, very few members of the organization are actually involved in the completion of the report template, and subsequent monitoring, of the improvement plan. As a consequence, the ability to build capacity in demographic data collection and analysis is limited to a select few key leads within the organization, all located in central departments (Aghera et al., 2018; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014a, 2021; VCDSB, 2021c).

The very narrow involvement of predominantly centrally-assigned staff in the BIEP does not permit the synergy of systemness detailed in Figure 3. The careful creation of common vocabulary – including functional definitions for daily use for terms related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from – that facilitates the development of coherence across schools and central departments are not likely to materialize at the system level with such narrowed stakeholder involvement.

For the same reasons, the steady application of district policies and administrative procedures as structures of the organization – in the earnest effort to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools

and central departments – that will support the implementation of alignment at the system level will also not likely be nurtured across the organization. With the above in mind, the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders in authentic relationships, through structures of the organization, that cultivate a synergy of systemness across the district will not likely emerge (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

As a result, the adherence to ministerial directives as a first potential solution - with low to medium applicability for alignment and coherence at the system level, and, the risk to effective change management as relatively high – is not sufficient to address the organizational problem of practice described. This option’s greatest strength, in reality, may be the minimal allocation of resources required to complete the objectives of the BIEP, especially as the vast majority of the report template can be completed by centrally-assigned staff who do not require costly release coverage. There are aspects of this first potential solution, however, that will be considered as part of the preferred, proposed solution.

Procurement of Equity Consultants as a Second Potential Solution

The procurement of third-party professionals with expertise in human rights and equity is a strategic consideration of many districts seeking to grow and learn in this important work (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2014; Lazzell et al., 2019; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b, 2021; National School Boards Association, 2021). In many ways, it is the leadership of senior staff and trustees alike that can serve as an exemplar for other stakeholders and structures of the organization to follow in the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity through partnerships with experts in the field. Through a governance lens, Lazzell et al. (2019) discuss the power of local school boards to “impact students’ education experiences”, and emphasize the benefits of an equity-centred school board (p. 1). They challenge elected officials of school boards to think critically about the ways in which they will plan to lead the district in the pursuit of equity and inclusion, including equity-focused professional development. They also

stress the importance of listening attentively to marginalized voices for the benefit of their entire community, as the diversity of these voices will undoubtedly serve to strengthen public education (Lazzell et al., 2019).

From an operational perspective, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (2014) also realize their power and agency, as a collective body that represents chief educational officers and chief executive officers of their districts, in the integration of training on equity and inclusive education into their organizations as a strategic priority. As a result of the widely-acknowledged issues related to ongoing forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, the directors appreciate the need for third-party expertise in helping address the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level as highlighted in Figure 4.

Equity consultants can facilitate growth at VCDSB in both the short-term and long-term. Concrete actions facilitated by third-party expertise that are proximal in nature include: coordination of opportunities for authentic learning on the part of all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization (professional activity day sessions for staff and community forums for equity); adoption of effective instructional practices that are high-yield and research-based in schools and classrooms (culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy); and, provision of assistance with data collection, analysis and reporting (familiarization with tools for data analyses and how to report publicly in a sensitive and respectful manner). Next steps that are more distal in nature, facilitated by third-party expertise, include: organization of a thorough review of resources utilized across the system through an equity lens (review of all instructional materials and teacher guides to ensure a greater diversity of authors and sources, globally, for example); facilitation of professional development sessions for senior staff and trustees in leadership and governance (training sessions on bias awareness and critical consciousness from a human resources

perspective); and, recommendation of a number of strategies for organizational culture change over time (such as a model for the cyclical review of effective change management to be integrated into the renewed strategic planning process).

One of the explicit benefits of the procurement of equity consultants is the ability to rely on the knowledge and expertise these individuals and/or groups bring to the organization (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2014; Lazzell et al., 2019; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017a, 2017b; National School Boards Association, 2021). Their reputational credibility and influence have the ability, in many ways, to augment stakeholder engagement. As described by Shewchuk and Cooper (2018), knowledge mobilization processes – structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination and transfer – that districts employ to increase equity-related policy engagement can further the worthy cause of human rights and equity (pp. 923-925). In essence, equity consultants may be considered as ‘active knowledge brokers’ needed across districts to inform the development of equity-related initiatives (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018).

In fact, at VCDSB, a key strategic decision of senior staff and trustees has often been to query stakeholders for a short list of names to consider in regards to future consultative processes, with this direction now integrated into the ‘inspire community engagement and partnerships’ strategic priority of the renewed strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a). A cost for contemplation regarding the procurement of equity consultants deals with the impression, perceived or real, that the collective work to be done in the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity must be driven externally. That is, a reliance (perhaps, over-reliance) on third-party professionals gives an impression to stakeholders and structures of the organization that the solution to the problem of practice must be generated through others, outside of the organization itself.

The procurement of equity consultants is limiting for VCDSB as an organization as it also will not likely allow for the synergy of systemness described in Figure 3. As was the case for the first potential solution, the careful creation of common vocabulary – including functional definitions for daily use for terms related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from – that will facilitate coherence across schools and central departments, are not likely to develop at the system level alone. That is, the utilization of third-party professionals will require a significant investment of funds (for procurement and release coverage alike) in order for the functional definitions to emerge and/or establish themselves on site in schools and central departments. In the same vein, the consistent application of district policies and procedures – in the earnest efforts to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments – that will support the implementation of alignment at the system level are also not likely instilled through the procurement of third-party professionals solely.

To this end, with medium applicability for alignment and coherence at the system level at best, and a significantly high cost for the services of third-party consultants and occasional staff coverage (especially as scalability across schools and central departments is required), as well as a medium-level risk assessment in regards to effective change management, this option is also not sufficient to address the organizational problem of practice (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). There are aspects of this second potential solution, however, that will be considered for the preferred solution as well.

Establishment of Professional Learning Networks as a Third, Preferred Solution

The formation of professional learning networks (PLNs) amongst stakeholders and structures of the organization is the third, preferred solution to address the problem of practice. As a vibrant, ever-changing system of interconnectivity that supports sharing and learning, PLNs are educator-driven networks that decrease isolation and promote independence (Trust, 2012).

Defined as a “system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning” (Trust, 2012, p. 133), PLNs are a tool that utilizes a blend of face-to-face and digital interactions (including social media and other emerging technologies) to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with colleagues. In essence, PLNs are an innovative, forward-thinking approach for thought leadership in education (Trust et al., 2016; Whitby, 2013).

In the provincial context, Briscoe et al. (2015) describe the use of networks in public education as one of many strategies for knowledge mobilization. They imply through their research that building a network for successful outcomes is complex and akin to finding the “sweet spot” in terms of aligning structures and processes to achieve more success in mobilizing research into practice (Briscoe et al., 2015, p. 19). Trust et al. (2016) add that although PLNs “offer no panacea or easy fix for the educational challenges of our time”, they do allow for “diverse and multi-faceted networks of people, communities, tools, platforms, resources and sites” (p. 31). Moreover, PLNs allow for engagement in a continuous process of professional growth and empowerment through collaboration with colleagues (Trust et al., 2016).

As a variation of both the PDSA model (plan/do/study/act) and the Professional Learning Cycle (plan/act/observe/reflect) that take an inquiry stance, PLNs move from a challenge of practice to a working hypothesis for action through an inquiry question, and then implement strategies outlined in the plan of action (Ministry of Education, 2014b, 2014c). The PLN, as a result, has become a very viable option in order to shape an inquiry in a much more flexible and adaptable manner (Moen & Norman, 2009; Whitby, 2013).

In fact, Prenger et al. (2021) claim that, over the past decade, there has been a shift in focus from within-school to cross-school cycles of professional learning in the form of PLNs (p. 13). Their research suggests that on-site leadership in schools and central departments, the perceptions

of the shared goals of the network, as well as the structure of activities engaged in by stakeholders (including collaboration, facilitation and support provided) all appear to influence the success of the outcomes (Prenger et al., 2021, pp. 46-49). They add, however, that there is the additional challenge in terms of knowledge transfer from the PLN back to participants' own schools and central departments as a limitation for further consideration (Prenger et al., 2021, p. 49).

Depicted by Kemmis et al. (2004) as four 'moments' of action research – reflect, plan, act, observe – the process has been utilized for professional learning in a multitude of contexts. The focus of the process is: develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening; act to implement the plan; observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs; and, reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning and subsequent action (Kemmis et al., 2004, pp. 1-2).

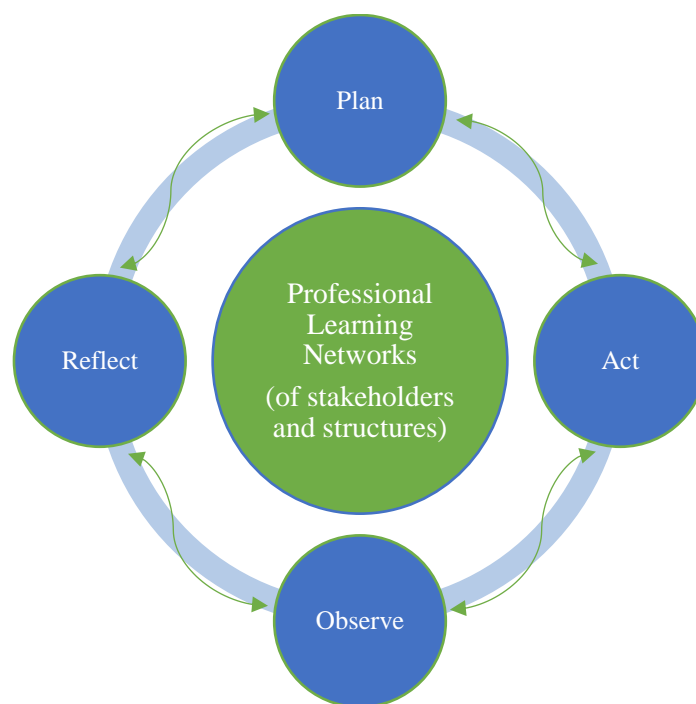
The PLN provides an opportunity to build capacity amongst stakeholders and structures of VCDSB through an emphasis on collaborative inquiry – a practice of engaging educators as researchers in action. The PLN has proven to be of great benefit as an effective means to enhance both professional learning and student learning across the province (Hannay et al., 2010; Ministry of Education, 2014b, 2014c, 2015). Through the exploration of human rights and equity as a learning journey, collaborative inquiry serves as a most suitable invitation to explore professional wonderings and personal reflections, as well as examine existing practices and assumptions (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014b, 2014c, 2015).

Set in a context of schools and central departments at VCDSB, in partnership with associated branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies, the PLN provides an ideal process for all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization, to become engaged in the journey towards enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity. Through the promotion of reflection and collaboration both in-person and on-line, PLNs offer a focused and flexible approach to

professional development. In fact, the Education Equity Secretariat (as a branch of the provincial ministry), as well as the Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee and Special Education Advisory Committee (as community agencies of VCDSB), have the potential to serve as advisory bodies throughout the change management endeavour, adding value to professional learning sessions. Adapted from the work of Marzano et al. (2001), the four-part process is described in Figure 5.

Figure 5

The Process for Professional Learning Networks at VCDSB



The PLN process at VCDSB begins with the ‘reflection stage’. It is an opportunity for individuals and/or groups within the organization to review and acknowledge both strengths for celebration and areas for growth, as well as gather multiple sources of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to plan forward. This particular stage aligns seamlessly (and is timed beautifully) with the insightful self-reflection related to anti-racism and human rights, diversity and inclusivity currently underway throughout the organization. The ‘plan stage’ and ‘act stage’ build upon

the key categories established for the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, and integrate the target-setting elements of the BIEP as part of improvement planning processes at the school and system levels. Meanwhile, the ‘observation stage’ of the PLN addresses the monitoring and evaluation of the change management process as a form of data-driven decision making, moving forward (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). It is important to note that the process also includes double-sided arrows, where the educators can move back and forth from one stage to another, as needed.

The option for PLNs requires a significant commitment of resources (human, material and/or fiscal). Most specifically, the process for the PLN necessitates the release of stakeholders for professional collaboration during the workday, working with other stakeholders internal and external to the organization, in order to address the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level shown in Figure 4, and, permit the synergy of systemness demonstrated in Figure 3 to be cultivated. The provision of funds for release time (predominantly as occasional staff coverage), in particular, is essential for effective change management.

The careful creation of common vocabulary, including functional definitions of equity-related terms for daily use, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, that will facilitate the development of coherence across schools and central departments requires that stakeholders develop shared mindsets through collaborative inquiry, as noted. Further, the consistent application of district policies and administrative procedures as structures of the organization – in the earnest effort to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments – that will support the implementation of alignment at the system level will most certainly follow as coherence is established. It is the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders in authentic relationships, through structures internal and external to the organization, that will cultivate systemness across the district, as previously emphasized (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015).

Incidentally, the most significant benefit of the establishment of PLNs is related to the adaptability and flexibility it provides for the organization and all of its stakeholders. That is, the PLN model can be applied in a variety of settings across schools and central departments, in partnership with branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies, allowing for widespread engagement in the change management process through in-person and/or on-line environments, both formally and/or informally (Trust et al., 2016). In many ways, the third, preferred solution of PLNs allows for all staff to collaborate in authentic learning related to the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity, whether staff are academic or non-academic in certification. In terms of costs associated with the preferred solution, although significant, the PLNs allow for a blended, hybrid approach that can be optimized depending upon the funds available. That is, funds can be allocated to release professionals to engage in face-to-face networks if/as available during the day, or, sessions can be established in an on-line format for a more modified, cost-effective approach. As noted previously, though, with respect to organizational change, the importance of the provision of adequate time as part of effective change management cannot be overlooked (Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Mento et al., 2002).

It is also of importance to share that aspects of the first and second potential solutions are of value to integrate, as elements of the third, preferred solution (Martin, 1999, 2007; Rotman School of Management, 2016). The adherence to ministry directives and procurement of equity consultants are both required for the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB. That is, the targets set through the improvement planning processes of the BIEP, and the engagement of third-party experts in human rights and equity to facilitate organizational change, are welcome aspects to enhance the PLNs to take place.

As detailed in Appendix D, with the applicability for both alignment and coherence at the system level high, and the allocation of resources required in a very reasonable, realistic medium range, along with the assessment of risk for effective change management low, the establishment of networks

for professional learning is the optimal solution to address the problem of practice described. In fact, the third, preferred solution capitalizes upon the value-added benefits that all three solutions provide, allowing the organization to flourish in the move forward.

Leadership Ethics and Organizational Change

As stated previously, in regards to the enhancement of equity, ethics and social justice, the timing of the change management process for VCDSB is impeccable as the system is in the midst of a very insightful self-reflection related to anti-racism and human rights, diversity and inclusivity across all aspects of the organization. Moreover, the district has already initiated a series of initiatives and projects that include professional learning sessions for all staff (academic and non-academic) related to bias awareness and critical consciousness, in addition to the ongoing professional development of academic staff regarding culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy. The district has also begun de-streaming at the secondary level, based upon a ministerial directive, from academic and applied streams into one stream for the first year of secondary schooling. In addition, the coordination of a leadership development strategy for positions of added responsibility (supervisory officer appointments, principal and vice-principal competitions, as well as postings for senior managers) that diversifies the workforce has been initiated as a system-wide priority (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Further, it is clearly evident in the school communities of VCDSB that there is an expectation that the district lead and model endeavours that are socially just. The most recent, broadly-based consultations for the renewed strategic planning process revealed the desire for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity on the part of stakeholders, and ultimately, shaped strategic priorities of the multi-year strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). The feedback and/or input for meaningful change was, perhaps most markedly, pronounced by students themselves. In many ways, students are modelling and leading the empowerment of equity through their words and action (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The Closure of Gaps

The initiatives and projects described above highlight a very compelling and inspiring social justice context for the district, especially as it relates to the closure of gaps that exist for typically underrepresented or underserved populations of both students and staff. More categorically for VCDSB, as mentioned already, a disproportionately large number of students have been streamed into applied classes in the transition from elementary to secondary schooling, particularly students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as Black and Indigenous students. The streaming that has taken place, historically, has undoubtedly impacted equity of access to programs and/or services for students, system-wide (VCDSB, 2021c). Changing the attitudes of stakeholders, including staff on site in schools and central departments, to encourage a growth-oriented mindset with respect to students' potential, as well as an explicit focus on ameliorating fairness and impartiality in decision making, will be essential aspects of systemic change, moving forward (Fabillar, 2018).

In terms of workforce diversification, also noted previously, human resource practices traditionally in place at VCDSB have not mirrored the diversification of society across the region and the province, more broadly, and as such, the intentional actions of the district's leadership development strategy will also serve as crucial to the endeavours of systemic change. The detailed contexts outlined herein for both students and staff clearly speak to the compelling need for systemic change through the multi-phased change management model as it relates to the problem of practice (Christensen, 2014; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Metwally et al., 2019; Watkins et al., 2017).

As Director of Education for VCDSB, the establishment of PLNs will be complemented aptly by the integration of thoughtfully-planned consultative sessions for all stakeholders, and especially, for those traditionally underrepresented or underserved by public education. The four-part process for PLNs established will permit for a broader, more inclusive application across the

organization, specifically as the feedback and/or input from stakeholders consultative sessions will assuredly impact the ‘reflect stage’ of the iterative cycle (Trust, 2012; Trust et al., 2016).

In the spirit of the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, the PLNs also allow for a dynamic interaction of job-embedded and/or experientially-driven learning within and across schools and central departments, along with branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies. These networks will allow stakeholders and structures to continue to evolve and innovate, create and emerge in the interactions, tensions and exchange rules governing changes in perceptions and understanding (Lichtenstein et al., 2006).

The Director of Education at VCDSB will play a key role in the cultivation of systemness, through the oversight of and participation in PLNs, along with the delegation of key tasks to members of staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio, as well as the active coordination of thoughtfully-planned stakeholder consultations for feedback on progress over time. The director’s genuine involvement in PLNs, as well as authentic coordination of consultative sessions for stakeholders, will unquestionably serve to value and legitimize the district’s endeavours to enhance equity, diversity and inclusivity both for its own organizational benefit, as well as in the perceptions of its stakeholders (Belle, 2016; Lazzell et al., 2019; National School Boards Association, 2021; Savage-Williams, 2018).

Second Chapter Summary

The second chapter of the OIP provides a sound rationale for adaptive leadership and complexity theory as the leadership approach to change taken by the scholar-practitioner, and thoughtfully develops a framework for leading the change process at VCDSB (University of Western Ontario, 2021). The chapter outlines a multi-step model for effective change management,

and conducts a critical analysis of the organization through the examination of district data from the most recent student survey and workforce census, as well as feedback/input from various committees of the system. The information garnered from district data supports the establishment of PLNs as the best possible change path for the organization towards the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity, moving forward.

The chapter also emphasizes the importance of agility as a leader of a multi-faceted, complex institution of public education. It continues to build upon the three key drivers of organizational improvement described through the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – from the perspective of the scholar-practitioner as Director of Education at VCDSB (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020).

Chapter III: Implementation, Evaluation and Communication

The third chapter of the OIP delineates key aspects of the change implementation plan, including monitoring, evaluation and communication of the change process, as well as a clear articulation of next steps for consideration as an organization (University of Western Ontario, 2021). The chapter solidifies the three key drivers of organizational improvement described through the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – from the perspective of the scholar-practitioner (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020).

In particular, the third chapter provides an overview of the objectives and priorities of the planned change, along with a detailed explanation of the steps to manage the transition. The chapter also provides an acknowledgement of the limitations of the selected strategy for meaningful change throughout the organization, a framework to assess and monitor the change management process, as well as details of a summary of the strategic communications plan.

Change Implementation Plan

As a means of addressing the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual system-level plan of action for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements for empowering equity within the multi-year strategic plan, the establishment of networks for professional learning (PLNs) is proposed as the third, preferred solution to the problem of practice. As previously shared, the PLN provides an opportunity to build capacity amongst stakeholders and structures of VCDSB through a blend of face-to-face and digital interactions to cooperate and co-construct meaning amongst colleagues. The PLNs are a creative and innovative way to mobilize knowledge and generate solutions, as well as ensure sound governance for the organization

(Hannay et al., 2013; Lazzell et al., 2019; National School Boards Association, 2021; Trust et al., 2016). In fact, the “system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning” described by Trust (2012) allows for diverse and multi-faceted networks of people, communities, tools, platforms, resources and sites to emerge (p. 133).

As depicted in the four-part process of Figure 5 – reflect, plan, act and observe – PLNs as a preferred solution allow for engagement in a continuous process of professional growth and empowerment through ongoing collaboration with colleagues, internal and external to the organization (Prenger et al., 2021; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017; Trust et al., 2016). Through the careful creation of common vocabulary including functional definitions for daily use of terms related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, PLNs hold tremendous potential to facilitate the development of coherence at the system level. In the same manner, the steady application of governance-oriented policies and operationally sound procedures, through daily decision making that encourages fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments in support of the implementation of alignment at the system level, will also be amplified by the professional growth and empowerment of PLNs.

Selected Strategy for Change

The seven-step model for effective change management (Rotman School of Management, 2016) outlined in Appendix E details the plan for change implementation. As the selected strategy for change, it allows VCDSB’s Director of Education to engage stakeholders in networks for professional learning, serving as a ‘lead learner’ of the organization. Further, the multi-step model easily permits the utilization of structures, such as libraries and gymnasias as common gathering spaces of schools and central departments or foyers and meeting rooms of ministry offices and

community agencies – as venues for the professional learning sessions, as well as consultative sessions (Rotman School of Management, 2016).

The multiplicity of perspectives and/or perceived understandings of the objectives of various plans of action described is an issue typical of large, complex institutions of public education, especially as there are so many stakeholders and structures present in the day-to-day function of the organization (Fullan, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Looney, 2011). In the development of system coherence and the implementation of system alignment, the seven-step model for effective change management considers “what is needed to achieve the organization’s vision and what is possible in terms of time, resources and collective motivation” (Rotman School of Management, 2016, p. 1).

As Sirkin et al. (2005) explain, change management must take into consideration both “hard factors” which include “the time necessary to complete it, the number of people required to execute it, and the financial results that intended actions are expected to achieve”, as well as “soft factors” such as “culture, leadership, and motivation” (pp. 108-109). In fact, they emphasize that if organizational leaders “don’t pay attention to the hard issues first, transformation programs will break down before the soft elements come into play” (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 109). The four key factors that determine the outcome of a transformation initiative described by Sirkin et al. (2005) include: duration – the length of time until the change process is completed, or, the amount of time between reviews of milestones for the initiative; integrity – the ability of the team enlisted to oversee the change to complete the initiative on time; commitment – of both senior executives and employees affected by the change; and, effort – the additional endeavours, over and above the usual work that employees engage in, that the change initiative demands (pp. 108-109).

Further, Walters (2012) explains that “we must take care to strike a balance between change for progress and the need to consolidate and stabilize” (p. 119). That is, for change to occur, the move from an industrial (machine) age to an information (systems) age “supports the characteristics associated with a social constructivist view of learning through a focus on knowledge building and collaborative learning” (Williams and Burden, 1997, in Walters, 2012, p. 119). Extending the link between leadership agency and the proposed interpretivist (social constructivist) view of learning, a model of leadership arises “where cognitive, emotional and social intelligence interact to enable a coherent vision to emerge, built on the strength of relationships of those involved in its realization” (Walters, 2012, p. 124).

As it applies to the organizational improvement plan proposed for VCDSB, the ongoing, iterative process of professional growth and empowerment through PLNs (Trust et al., 2016) adeptly facilitates the process-oriented, contextual, and interpretive exchanges between stakeholders and structures at the core of the leadership problem of practice. In essence, the conditions for informal learning created will surely facilitate the ‘common ground’ in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions sought for system coherence (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). In a similar manner, the informal learning established through PLNs within and across schools and central departments, as well as branches of the provincial ministry and community agencies, will most certainly further consistency of decision-making processes to ameliorate fairness and impartiality desired for system alignment (Fullan, 2021; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The proposed schedule for PLNs at VCDSB outlined in Table 1 provides an overview of the professional growth and empowerment envisioned for the district. The table includes the various stakeholders and structures engaged, as well as the key leads for each network.

Table 1*Proposed Schedule for Professional Learning Networks at VCDSB*

Stakeholder / Structure	Key Lead for PLN	Notes
Professional Activity Day (for staff in schools)	Administration of school (principal and/or vice-principal)	A portion of one professional activity day during the school year (half-day) will be dedicated to the launch of the creation of common vocabulary for EDI, as well as explicit examples as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from with staff.
Support Staff Day (for staff in central departments)	Managers of central departments (senior managers and/or assistant managers)	
Meetings of Senior Administration (monthly)	Director of Education, Supervisory Officer responsible for Equity Portfolio & System Principal for Equity & Anti-Racism	For senior staff, principals/vice-principals and senior managers, key learnings related to the enhancement of EDI will be a ‘standing item’ on the monthly agendas at these meetings.
Monthly Staff Meetings (in schools)	Principal and/or Vice-Principal, Instructional Coaches/Consultants	Key learnings related to the enhancement of EDI are to be integrated into monthly staff /managers meetings, once launched by the half-day professional activity session.
Monthly Managers Meetings (in central departments)	Senior Managers and/or Assistant Managers	
Meetings of Student Senate, Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee & Special Education Advisory Committee (quarterly meetings)	Chairpersons of Student Senate, IEAC, PIC & SEAC (student trustees and/or community members, respectively)	A portion of regular committee meetings during the school year will be dedicated to the creation of common vocabulary for EDI, as well as explicit examples as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, with community members.
Note: The PLNs scheduled will include adherence to ministerial directives, as well as the procurement of equity consultants as ‘invited guest speakers’, if/as required.		

Through these networks of professional learning as the selected strategy for change, and the strength of the relationships created through stakeholders and structures identified above, coherence and alignment at the system level can be nurtured and supported (Fullan, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014b, 2014c, 2015; Walters, 2012). Further, the

PLNs will include guidelines shared through ministerial directives, as well as invited equity consultants as guest speaks, where appropriate.

Beyond the ongoing, iterative process of professional growth and empowerment through PLNs (Trust et al., 2016), the Director of Education at VCDSB will oversee thoughtfully-planned consultative sessions in order to monitor progress over time. The tentative itinerary for stakeholder consultative sessions offered in Table 2 provides an outline of the consultations envisioned, including the various stakeholders consulted, and key leads for each session.

Table 2

Tentative Itinerary for Stakeholder Consultative Sessions at VCDSB

Stakeholder Consultative Session	Key Lead for Session	Notes
Student Senate	Senior Staff Liaison for Student Senate	An annual check-in with the student body to guide edits and/or revisions of common vocabulary for EDI, as well as refinement of explicit examples as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from as a system.
Meetings with federation/union partners	Superintendent of Human Resources	As part of the regularly-scheduled meetings, key learnings related to the enhancement of EDI will be a 'standing item' of the agendas at these meetings.
Indigenous Education Advisory Committee	Supervisory Officer responsible for Equity Portfolio & System Principal for Equity & Anti-Racism	The ongoing provision of feedback and/or input by stakeholders related to the enhancement of EDI is to be integrated into regular meetings of these committee structures.
Parent Involvement Committee	Director of Education	
Special Education Advisory Committee	Superintendent of Special Education	
Note: Additional venues for stakeholder consultative sessions will be considered by the director, senior staff and trustees if/as required.		

As outlined in both tables above, the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders in authentic relationships through structures of the organization, nurture and support coherence and alignment at the system level (Fullan, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014b, 2014c, 2015; Walters, 2012). Indeed, these interactions cultivate a synergistic connection throughout the district as described in Figure 3 (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Smith, 1983).

Of importance to highlight, there are a number of resources recently created by the Education Equity Secretariat, or currently in development, that support districts in the establishment of realistic goals to help bridge gaps and disparities in achievement for all students across the province (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b). The diverse array of resources include: samples of equity and inclusive education policies; guidelines for gender identity and gender expression; recommendations for religious accommodations; and, effective strategies for progressive discipline of safe and accepting schools (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b).

These resources will assist stakeholders and structures of the organization to create common vocabulary for terms utilized regularly related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, such as respectful protocols for names, pronouns and honorifics, for instance. The resources will also serve as exemplars of forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, such as revised option sheet processes for course selection in the transition from elementary to secondary schooling that avoids streaming students into pathways prematurely, as has traditionally taken place, for example (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b; VCDSB, 2015, 2021c).

Transition Management Plan

Brisson-Banks (2010) shares that “a crucial factor in the effectiveness of an organization is the ability to adapt to change” (p. 241). The managing of organizational change and transitions

has commonalities, she claims, regardless of the model selected (Brisson-Banks, 2010). Significant commonalities that assist organizations through the complexities of constant change include: analyzing the present condition; setting goals for the future; and, implementing a plan of action to get from the present reality to the future envisioned (Brisson-Banks, 2010).

The multi-phased change management process initiated by the Director of Education as an integral part of the improvement plan for VCDSB seeks to proactively enlist the perspectives and voices of representatives of a wide array of stakeholders. As studied by Holten and Brenner (2015), leadership styles that are both transformational and transactional are positively related to the engagement of stakeholders. Further, they claim, leadership style has a long-term effect on stakeholders' change appraisal. In particular, stakeholders' appraisal "seems to be influenced by the leadership style expressed during the initial phases of the organizational change process and not by the leadership style expressed during the final phases" (Holten & Brenner, 2015, p. 12). Most interestingly, they state, transactional leadership performed during the initial stages of change has a negative effect on stakeholders' change appraisal, but that during the later stages of change, leadership styles do not seem to play an important role in directly determining the stakeholders' change appraisal. What seems to matter most, then, is how leaders actively engage in change, especially at the start of the change management process (Holten & Brenner, 2015).

As it pertains to the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity, the proactive enlisting of stakeholders will be a priority of the Director of Education at VCDSB. The inclusive, strategic representation of diverse stakeholders, especially the inclusion of individuals and groups who have traditionally been underrepresented or underserved by institutions of public education, is key. As shared in the second step of Appendix E, the diversified inclusion of marginalized voices will facilitate the organization's understanding of the impact of the change initiative from the

perspectives of those most greatly affected. Hearing the perspectives of these marginalized voices will permit the potential adjustment of the change during the implementation process, further legitimizing the district in the eyes of all of its stakeholders, as noted earlier (Belle, 2016).

Selecting the appropriate staff (internal to the organization) and community members or representatives of branches of the provincial ministry (external to the organization) to allow for engagement in a continuous process of professional growth and empowerment through ongoing collaboration with colleagues via PLNs is fundamental to achieving the envisioned future state (Belle, 2016; Trust et al., 2016). Most specifically, centrally-assigned staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB – the supervisory officer, system principal and instructional coaches and/or consultants involved – may serve as essential contributors to the change process as they are influential employees or “brokers” who interact frequently with others inside and outside of the organization (Cross et al., 2007). As noted in the fourth step of Appendix E, these influential, centrally-assigned staff also have the potential to inspire and motivate the involvement of diverse stakeholders and can assist the Director of Education at VCDSB in facilitating the coordination of thoughtfully-planned stakeholder consultations for feedback and/or input on progress over time.

Through the provision of adequate resources and supports, such as time at regularly-scheduled meetings, as well as the blend of face-to-face and digital interactions to cooperate and co-construct meaning amongst colleagues, the PLNs offer a creative and innovative way to mobilize knowledge and generate solutions towards coherence and alignment at the system level (Hannay et al., 2013; Lazzell et al., 2019; Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014a; National School Boards Association, 2021). In addition to the reasonable expectation of time and effort required of centrally-assigned staff to coordinate and lead the networks, as shared in Appendix E, the investment of funds for the release of staff in a professional capacity (predominantly through

occasional staff coverage), as well as the procurement of equity consultants, are other reasonable requirements of the change process. In fact, as many of the regularly-scheduled meetings with representatives of community agencies already take place in the late afternoons and early evenings, the funds for occasional staff coverage required (that is, for staff leading the PLNs with external stakeholders) will be nominal in nature. The PLNs to be established for staff in schools and central departments can also be integrated seamlessly into existing commitments such as monthly staff meetings and monthly departmental gatherings, as collectively-bargained agreements with federation/union partners permit, in order to minimize costs for the networks throughout the organization (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Setting direction and inspiring action as outlined by the Rotman School of Management (2016) acknowledges the identification of potential change implementation issues, including: ensuring the organization's vision is properly understood by all stakeholders; determining what is possible in terms of time, resources and collective motivation; as well as, communicating the plan of action consistently and in a multitude of ways (Rotman School of Management, 2016, pp. 1-2).

In support of the adaptive leadership approach undertaken by the Director of Education at VCDSB through the change management process, Wilson (2018) highlights that ongoing iterative change – change that is meaningful and sustainable – is required at the core of the work of educational transformation. She insists that it involves “a shift away from the mental model of ‘How do I manage change resistance?’ to ‘How do I build change resilience?’ and that this shift is critical” (Wilson, 2018, p. 3). More specifically, the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB will require a clear, concise explanation and rationalization on the part of the Director of Education – broadly communicated to stakeholders of the organization on an ongoing basis – in order for the envisioned future state to be well understood (Fullan, 2021; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015).

Further, in terms of time, resources and collective motivation, VCDSB's Director of Education will need to continue to encourage and nurture "adaptability, systems thinking, shared decision-making power, and openness to learning" throughout the organization (Austin & Harkins, 2008, p. 105). Austin and Harkins (2008) also argue that leadership – more than any other factor – is most clearly responsible for creating the necessary environment to nurture organizational learning (p. 109). It is through this adaptable, agile and open-minded approach, coupled with the genuine involvement of stakeholders in consultative sessions planned, that the director intends to garner ownership in the change process (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

As described in the fifth step of Appendix E, key updates on progress to date at each step of the change management process will ensure consistent and effective communication of the plan of action (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Mento et al., 2002). The importance of multiple modes of communication – verbal and/or written – will surely instill confidence in stakeholders that their voices have indeed been heard and that the change initiative is being managed competently by the director, senior staff and trustees (Holten & Brenner, 2015; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).

Along the journey towards the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity as a desired future state, it will be important for the Director of Education at VCDSB to build momentum through benchmarks established and the attainment of key performance indicators (Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). The identification of short-, medium- and long-term goals for VCDSB through the transition management plan include:

- confirmed care and commitment of influential, centrally-assigned staff (supervisory officer, system principal and instructional coaches and/or consultants) who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB as essential contributors to the change as a short-term goal;

- clear, concise communication of the vision regarding the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity by the director that generates initial excitement and authentic interest of all stakeholders in the change as an additional short-term goal;
- determined dedication and diligence on the part of stakeholders regarding their active participation in networks for professional learning and/or consultative sessions (especially for marginalized individuals and/or groups) as a mid-term goal of genuine involvement in the change and a long-term goal for perspectives on progress over time; and,
- refinement of the “common ground” established in the development of shared mindsets regarding use of language as words and behaviours as actions towards the enhancement of equity and human rights, and greater consistency in the implementation of administrative processes (policies, procedures, practices and protocols) as a long-term goal.

The short-, medium- and long-term goals identified have the potential to alter fundamental elements of the organization, including the culture, values and operations of the district, as they are consolidated over time in the seventh step of Appendix E (Hitz, 2021; Sirkin et al., 2005).

Acknowledgement of Limitations

As noted in Appendix E, the transition management plan acknowledges a series of limitations of the selected strategy for meaningful change throughout the organization, including the fact that networks for professional learning and carefully-coordinated consultative sessions, despite their best intentions, cannot possibly include the voices of all potential stakeholders. At best, the district can attempt to strategically ensure representation from all known stakeholders, as outlined in both tables above, with the explicit intention to include those who have traditionally been underrepresented or underserved (Belle, 2016). It is important to note that other venues for

consultative sessions will also be considered by the director, senior staff and trustees, as these authentic opportunities arise, in order to ensure the greatest possible diversity of representation.

In addition, the centrally-assigned staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB – the supervisory officer, system principal and instructional coaches and/or consultants involved – are influential employees who serve as important “brokers” of knowledge mobilization and solution generation. These “brokers” will need to ensure that the use of common vocabulary and clearly-defined terminology, as well as exemplars of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, are carefully integrated into the effective and efficient function of the organization, including the professional learning networks (Cross et al., 2007). The integration of knowledge mobilized and solutions generated by these key system leaders will require explicit, steadfast application into the culture, values and operations of the district – through future plans of action – so as not to result in the very challenges of lack of coherence and alignment that established the current problem of practice in the first place (Hitz, 2021; Sirkin et al., 2005).

The Director of Education at VCDSB is cognisant of this concern, especially as fragmentation of initiatives has been a concern of large, complex institutions of public education. As such, the Director of Education will continue to ensure the strategic and explicit integration of knowledge mobilized and solutions generated for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity into future plans of action for VCDSB. As a scholar-practitioner, the Director of Education at VCDSB will also ensure consultative sessions with stakeholders become an integral part of action plans, moving forward (VCDSB, 2015, 2021a).

Change Process Monitoring and Evaluation

The change implementation plan in regards to the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB also includes tools and measures proposed to monitor

and assess, evaluate and refine the transition over time. These tools and measures are a crucial component of the monitoring and evaluation of the change process.

Framework to Assess and Monitor the Change Management

The four key factors introduced by Sirkin et al. (2005) that determine the outcome of a transformation initiative – duration, integrity, commitment and effort (DICE) – led to the establishment of a framework that can help senior leaders of organizations evaluate their processes for change management, and highlight interventions that might improve their chances for success (p.112). Through the framework, senior leaders and other key stakeholders are able to assign scores to the DICE factors and then combine these individual scores to arrive at an overall project score (Sirkin et al., 2005). The scoring system for the DICE factors is based upon a scale from 1 to 4 (with the possibility of using fractions, if required) with lower scores on the scales representing improved chances for success. As such, Sirkin and his colleagues (2005) confirm “a score of 1 suggests that the factor is highly likely to contribute to the program’s success, and a score of 4 means that it is highly unlikely to contribute to success” (pp. 112-114). Appendix F provides a summary of the prompts and scoring guidelines related to the DICE factors that allow executives as senior leaders of large, complex organizations to rate transformation initiatives effectively.

Sirkin et al. (2005) state that senior leaders of large, complex organizations can combine the four factors into a project score for the change initiative, with the formula calculated doubling the weight given to team performance and senior leader commitment, as outlined in Appendix F. Through a 1 to 4 scoring system, the formula generates overall scores that range from 7 to 28. Large, complex organizations such as institutions of public education can compare a change initiative’s score with those of past projects and their outcomes in order to assess whether (or not) the change management process is expected to succeed or fail. Scores registered between 7 and 14

are very likely to succeed and constitute what is termed as the “win zone”. Scores higher than 14, but lower than 17 constitute what is termed as the “worry zone”. Scores over 17 are considered extremely risky, with scores registered between 17 and 19 as risks to success being very high and scores beyond 19 as unlikely to succeed. Scores above 19 constitute what is termed as the “woe zone” (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 115).

Interestingly, Sirkin et al. (2005) point out that “the simplicity of the DICE framework often proves to be its biggest problem” (p. 115). That is, senior-level executives seem to “desire more complex answers” for their change management processes, and as a result, overlook the obvious and end up making compromises that are not value-added for their organizations (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 115).

It is understandable that senior leaders prefer to be alerted of challenges to the success of a change management initiative as soon as outcomes become unpredictable. As such, calculated scores in the 17 to 20 range provide an opportunity for re-evaluation of the selected strategy by the senior leadership of the organization (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 115). According to Sirkin and his colleagues (2005), these types of system alerts allow for the review of change projects more often, along with the potential reconfiguration of enlisted teams, and the possible rethink of the resources allocated to the change initiative.

As it applies to VCDSB as a multi-faceted, complex institution of public education, it is essential that the multi-step model for effective change management be positioned for success at the outset. More specifically, as Director of Education at VCDSB, the authentic awareness and deep appreciation of the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual system-level plan of action for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements for empowering equity of the multi-year strategic plan forms the impetus for cultivation of systemness towards

enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity throughout the organization (Fullan, 2015, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Cultivated by the interactions between stakeholders and structures across the district, the provision of networks for professional learning and thoughtfully-coordinated consultative sessions allow for the development of shared mindsets throughout the organization. Through opportunities for authentic learning related to bias awareness and critical consciousness, review of resources in schools and central departments, as well as improved equity of access to programs and/or services offered, system-wide, coherence at the system level is developed.

These very same interactions between stakeholders and structures throughout the organization via PLNs and consultative sessions account for the implementation of administrative processes throughout the organization. Via governance-oriented policies and operationally sound procedures, as well as other practices and protocols across schools and central departments for the effective and efficient function of the institution, alignment at the system level is implemented.

The interconnectivity of these elements – as stakeholders and structures in the development of coherence and implementation of alignment at the system level – facilitate the drive towards a synergy of systemness for VCDSB as an organization. This organizational synergy is construed explicitly in the change implementation plan of Appendix E (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015).

Measures to Evaluate and Refine Progress Over Time

The DICE framework shared by Sirkin et al. (2005) emphasizes the importance of four key factors in change management – duration, integrity, commitment and effort (p. 109). In the context of VCDSB, formal reviews of the change initiative are expected to occur regularly, for both the

key categories of annual action plan for equity and anti-racism, as well as the goal statements for empowering equity as a priority of the multi-year strategic plan (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). In fact, reviews of the annual action plan will take place at monthly meetings of centrally-assigned staff dedicated to the equity portfolio, while reviews of the multi-year strategic plan will occur at board meetings three times throughout the course of the school year (start, mid-year and end). As such, the Director of Education at VCDSB – as a scholar-practitioner – is confident that these steps of the change management process are absolutely achievable, with the average time period between reviews at significantly less than two months, ensuring that the ‘duration’ factor receives the more favourable lower score of 1 on the DICE framework.

In regards to the diagnosis of the problem of practice and the enlisting of key stakeholders, including centrally-assigned staff and a diversified array of voices that represent a wider variety of individuals and/or groups such as those traditionally marginalized by the system, the director has intentionally specified these key tasks as part of the change management initiative. It is important to note, however, with the realities of the array of roles and responsibilities of staff involved, not all team members will be assigned at least 50% of their time to the initiative, including the Director of Education at VCDSB himself. For this reason, the ‘integrity’ factor of the DICE framework receives a mid-range score between 2 and 3, on balance.

The commitment of the district’s leadership, including the senior staff and trustees alike, is unequivocal. The Director of Education at VCDSB has made the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity an integral aspect of the work plan for staff, and, has worked collaboratively with the chairperson of the board of trustees to ensure it is also a key component of the board’s work plan (VCSB, 2021a). The senior leaders at VCDSB have, through both words

and actions, clearly communicated the need for change, and as a result, the ‘senior level commitment’ factor receives a relatively low score of 1 on the DICE framework.

The motivation of stakeholders to engage genuinely in the PLNs and/or consultative sessions, and the multi-modal communications required on a consistent and persistent basis, though, will most certainly be a challenge from the perspective of the Director of Education at VCDSB, as a scholar-practitioner. With the above in mind, the ‘other key stakeholder commitment’ factor of the DICE framework receives a relatively high score of 3. These steps require a disciplined desire on the part of stakeholders to holding themselves accountable for their own reliable presence and active participation. Further, in spite of the effectiveness and efficiency of communications on the part of VCDSB’s Director of Education and staff in communications, it does require that stakeholders be perceptive and open-minded to messages sent. For these reasons, the scholar-practitioner believes a low-mid-range assessment is prudent.

The effort required for the execution of goal statements (for the multi-year strategic plan) and key categories (of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism), as well as the actualization of these objectives, are likely the most challenging steps of the change implementation plan, and as such, receive the less favourable higher score of 3 on the DICE framework. As is often the case for change initiatives in district school boards, the accomplishment and subsequent sustainability of the tasks can prove to be the most challenging and elusive of all steps. This is particularly applicable to the extent of change required for equity-related endeavours that eliminate all forms of discrimination and remove systemic barriers to learning that are so typically entrenched in large, complex institutions of public education. The challenges of execution described are particularly sticky at VCDSB as bias awareness and critical consciousness are so nascent to the social justice efforts in public education, requiring a sophisticated level of

self-reflection, humility, conviction, and subsequent action on the part of individuals and/or groups within the organization (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Sirkin et al. (2005) state that, to mitigate the risks, senior leaders often decide to analyze their change projects at several levels throughout the organization (p. 118). In order to gauge the progress of the transition accurately, these leaders commonly review efforts each month until they feel confident that the endeavour is on track. In addition, some of the most proficient and skilled employees join the effort full time in order to ensure its progress to completion. Further, the human resource department may take an active role in the recruitment, retention and/or promotion of team members, “thereby creating a virtuous cycle in which the best people begin to seek involvement in various initiatives”, further ensuring the success of the endeavour (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 118).

As the score accumulated for VCDSB calculated at the end of Appendix F lands in the 14 to 17 range, deemed by Sirkin et al. (2005) as the “worry zone”, it will be essential for the Director of Education to carefully monitor the progress of the transition management plan on an ongoing basis (Sirkin et al., 2005, p. 115). By seeking the feedback of key “brokers” during the change process (superintendent, system principal, instructional coaches and/or consultants responsible for the equity and anti-racism portfolio, for instance), the Director of Education at VCDSB will be able to determine any ‘system alerts’ as they arise. This may precipitate adjustments to the change management process, as well as the potential reconfiguration of enlisted teams and the possible rethink of the resources allocated to the initiative, if/as required (Sirkin et al., 2005).

A Reflection Upon the Central Guiding Question and Associated Sub-Questions

Through the PLNs to take place across the system, as well as subsequent consultative sessions for stakeholders of VCDSB established in Appendix E, a leadership opportunity arises to

address the forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning present within the organization. Moreover, as previously noted, through the observed conversations amongst students and staff, as well as members of school communities, “common ground” in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions will constructively facilitate system coherence. Further, via the consistent application of district policies and administrative procedures in the decision-making processes of stakeholders, in their collective efforts to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments, system alignment will assuredly be supported. Indeed, it is the synergy of systemness created by the web of interconnectivity of stakeholders and structures that will mitigate the lack of coherence and alignment throughout the organization (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The challenges that exist as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning – through stakeholders and structures of the organization – include resistance in favour of the traditional operational forms of ‘the way things are always done around here’. As well, the willingness of stakeholders to engage in the open-minded, growth-oriented, self-reflection required for professional learning related to bias awareness and critical consciousness may constitute a significant challenge for the district. Thundiyil et al. (2015) observe that resistance to organizational change stems from employees’ cynicism about the change outcomes. They note that “when many employees are cynical about change, new initiatives are difficult to initiate and sustain” (Thundiyil et al., 2015, p. 445). As a result, senior leaders of large, complex organizations should systemically examine change cynicism at their sites and study ways to proactively address or limit its negative effect on employees, including “managing employee perceptions of support and fairness and ensuring that employees are aware that change is possible (e.g., through improved communication about the intervention)” (Thundiyil et al., 2015, p. 443). Further, the knowledge

mobilization and solution generation facilitated by PLNs and consultative sessions for stakeholders that enhance human rights and anti-racism throughout the organization are not, as Whitby (2013) confirms, a “one-shot fix” (p. 2). He explains that the PLN is “a mindset”, and “not the outcome of a workshop or professional development offered annually” (Whitby, 2013, p. 2). As such, a leadership approach that is agile and adaptable, flexible and focused is required in order to enhance equity and inclusivity throughout the district (Buffone, 2021; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

Last, but certainly not least, the voices of individuals and groups who have traditionally been underrepresented or underserved may be genuinely engaged in the change process through their active participation and authentic involvement in the networks for professional learning. The voices of the marginalized may also be authentically acquired through thoughtfully-coordinated consultative sessions for stakeholders across the organization.

In these ways, the questions generated for the problem of practice may be addressed, and, the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity may be nurtured and sustained at VCDSB (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015; VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). Most specifically, quarterly meetings with staff assigned centrally to the portfolio of equity and anti-racism, as well as monthly meetings with the members of senior staff with duties that oversee the portfolio, along with consultative sessions planned one or twice each semester, will ensure the director’s monitoring of progress over time. Key metrics considered by VCDSB’s Director of Education, qualitative and quantitative in nature, include:

- periodic debriefs on the number of staff involved in professional learning sessions, as well as the key concepts covered in the sessions related to bias awareness, critical consciousness and culturally-relevant and responsive pedagogy;

- feedback and/or input collected from consultative sessions with stakeholders related to progress over time regarding the system’s enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity;
- regular updates on the progress of students in de-streamed classes at the secondary level, including credit accumulation data, progress report information, and trends of numbers of student by pathway; and,
- emerging trends regarding diversification of the workforce through competitions for positions of added responsibility as an integral part of the district’s leadership development and mentorship strategy (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The Director of Education will also benefit from one-to-one conversations with centrally-assigned staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB – the supervisory officer, system principal and instructional coaches and/or consultants involved – as key network “brokers” (Cross et al., 2007). The Director of Education will also consult with lead representatives of committees such as the Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee, and Special Education Advisory Committee, as well as the student trustee representatives who co-chair the Student Senate. In addition, the Director of Education will meet regularly with representatives of federation/union partners to elicit feedback and/or input on the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity from their perspective. These key stakeholders, in the relationships of the structures they represent, will provide invaluable assessments of gains to be celebrated, as well as resistance to be considered further, in the transition journey.

Communication of the Change Process

The need for change within VCDSB as an organization, along with the details of the change implementation plan itself, must be communicated adequately to stakeholders throughout the transition management process. As described by Malek and Yazdanifard (2012), communication

is a “crucial lever” of effective change management (p. 52). Communications, they explain, can serve many functions for an organization during a change initiative, including: information sharing, participation, vision and motivation, compliance, and feedback (Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012, pp. 54-55).

Importance of Building Awareness of the Need for Change

In particular, Malek and Yazdanifard (2012) claim that communication is key to the successful implementation of change because it is “a tool to build and establish awareness of the need for change, to generate desire to participate in the change, and support it” (p. 54). They also share that constructive communication helps manage employee expectations with respect to the change initiative (Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012, p. 56).

Johnson (2017) adds that during times of strategic change, successful leaders clearly and effectively signal the importance of the change process to their organizations. In fact, she stresses three important signals as advice for senior leaders in their communications to employees of their organizations, including: telling your organization what you want; personally living the change you’ve asked for; and, resourcing and measuring the change process you’ve initiated (pp. 2-6). She concludes that the signals of leaders matter to their followers, and as such, signaling must matter to leaders themselves (p. 7).

In terms of the enhancement of ethics and equity, diversity and social justice at VCDSB, the system is currently in the midst of a very insightful self-reflection related to anti-racism and human rights, as noted previously; and, as a result, this timely introspection provides an authentic incentive for the need for change across stakeholders and structures. The district’s foci on: professional learning for all staff related to bias awareness and critical consciousness, as well as culturally-relevant and

responsive pedagogy; de-streaming at the secondary level; and, coordination of a leadership development strategy for positions of added responsibility intended to diversify the workforce, will ensure relevance of the change management process initiated (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c). Moreover, these foci underscore the importance of the closure of gaps that exist for typically underrepresented and/or underserved populations of students, staff and school communities, and can be measured through ‘smart’ goals to ensure their execution. A stark example of the impetus for change is the disproportionately large number of students that have been streamed into applied classes in the transition from elementary to secondary schooling in the past, particularly students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as Black and Indigenous students. The streaming that has taken place historically, as mentioned earlier, has undoubtedly impacted equity of access to programs and/or services for students, system-wide (Pichette et al., 2020; VCDSB, 2021c). The ongoing monitoring of credit accumulation data, as well as progress report information, will ensure that the closure of gaps through the de-streaming initiative for students is tracked carefully.

To be sure, the perspectives of the multitude of stakeholders of VCDSB as an organization, through structures internal and external to the organization, have confirmed their awareness of the need for systemic change. The censuses, surveys and other data points described demonstrate stakeholder appreciation and understanding of organizational readiness for change (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d).

Summary of Strategic Communications Plan

Ricks (2020) reiterates that productive communication “plays a vital role in making organizational change possible” (p. 1). She highlights two important questions to be addressed by leaders of organizations when communicating change: “Do employees have the motivation to change?” and “Are employees equipped with the ability to change?” (Ricks, 2020, pp. 1-2). In her studies on the topic of why certain organizational change efforts fail while others succeed, Ricks

(2020) identifies four key aspects for leaders to consider in the creation of a winning change communication strategy: share a vision; tell a story; make those in the organization the heroes; and, chart the path (pp. 2-4).

More specifically, Ricks (2020) emphasizes that it is essential for organizational leaders to share a vision of how the organization will ultimately benefit from the transition. She also stresses the value of answering employee questions in terms of how the change will impact them as individuals, as well as the organization as a whole. She also notes, “telling a story enables everyone to envision” where the organization “needs to be, but also where it currently is and how to transition” (Ricks, 2020, p. 2). Further, by inspiring and enabling employees to be change agents – as opposed to telling members of the organization what to do and what they need to change – individuals in the organization may become active participants in the change effort (Ricks, 2020, p. 3). Lastly, in charting the path forward, she argues that organizational leaders must be prepared to communicate, again and again, throughout the change process.

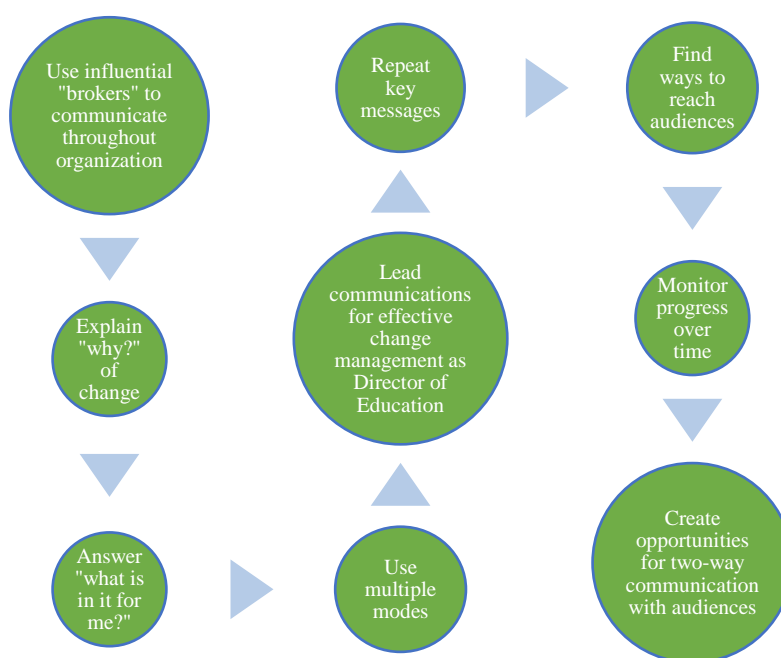
Ricks (2020) encourages leaders to “restate the vision, retell the story, enable your employees to act as heroes, and chart and re-chart the path when struggles arise” (p. 4). In this manner, she concludes, employees of the organization will be “more motivated and equipped to make the change effort” (Ricks, 2020, p. 4).

The plan to communicate clearly and persuasively to relevant audiences, including all stakeholders of VCDSB through structures internal and external to the organization, is detailed in Figure 6. The checklist established ensures that all stakeholders and structures of the organization are considered, and that communications are reasoned and respectful, as well as sensible and sophisticated. In addition to the utilization of influential “brokers” throughout the organization to communicate key messages, the checklist emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of the

organizational leader for initial communications of the change initiative, and allows for the two-way communication of feedback and/or input on the change management process over time.

Figure 6

Communications Checklist for Effective Change Management



Note: This checklist is adapted from the work of McAllister (2021). The checklist highlights elements of a sound strategy for successful communication. Importantly, the leader of the organization must address, explicitly and proactively, the reasons as to why the change is taking place as a “first communication” to all employees (McAllister, 2021, p. 2).

As seen in the centre of Figure 6, the checklist prioritizes the crucial duties of the Director of Education at VCDSB as a lead communicator for effective change management (Johnson, 2017; Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012; Ricks, 2020; Rotman School of Management, 2016). Further, as McAllister (2021) notes, leaders of organizations must continue to reinforce the “why?” throughout the entire change project, especially if there is a significant time lag between the first communication and the start of change implementation (p. 2). The Director of Education at

VCDSB must also respond to the query “what is in it for me?” from employees at the outset of the change project (McAllister, 2021, pp. 2-3). Very directly, McAllister (2021) states that “making a change is a personal choice, no matter what senior leaders believe” (p. 2). With respect to their initial interactions with employees regarding the transition, organizational leaders must connect with what employees care about and value, and, “provide a compelling case for how they will be better off or what they will get out of engaging in the change” (McAllister, 2021, pp. 2-3).

In addition, the first circle of the checklist identifies influential “brokers” as essential, additional communicators of key messages (Cross et al., 2007; McAllister, 2021). Most specifically as centrally-assigned staff who oversee the equity and anti-racism portfolio at VCDSB – the supervisory officer, system principal and instructional coaches and/or consultants involved – are critical as “preferred senders” of key messages, repeated often and using multiple modes of delivery, as they interact frequently with others (Cross et al., 2007; McAllister, 2021).

To add, the creation of opportunities for two-way communication with relevant audiences is also emphasized as an important element of a sound strategy for successful communication (Johnson, 2017; McAllister, 2021; Ricks, 2020; Rotman School of Management, 2016). The ability to utilize a number of channels to reach employees – including face-to-face meetings, electronic messages, one-on-one conversations, lunch and learns, workshop sessions, as well as social media – allow for creative and innovative interactions between the director and the stakeholders and structures of the organization. The two-way communication is essential not only to share key messages, but also to monitor progress over time (McAllister, 2021; Ricks, 2020).

Batti (2019) confirms that, when implementing change, organizations often focus too much on logistics and not enough on communication. Change, he claims, “has to be understood and supported in order for it to be successful – without great change management communication, the

change is destined to fail” (Batti, 2019, p. 1). He shares a number of best practices for change communication, including: be specific, early and often; communicate through the right people and through multiple channels; prepare for resistance; and, listen to feedback (Batti, 2019). He consolidates these best practices by stating that a communication plan for a change project must be “in place before rolling out any initiative” (Batti, 2019, p. 7).

Mento et al. (2002) also concur with the importance of solid communication from the very beginning of the change effort (p. 55). The goals of the communication, they claim, should be to: increase the organization’s understanding and commitment to change to the fullest extent possible; reduce confusion and resistance; and, prepare employees for both the positive and negative effects of the change (Mento et al, 2002, p. 55).

At VCDSB, the strategic communications plan specified in Figure 6 will facilitate the synergy of systemness sought, through the interconnectedness of stakeholders and structures of the organization, towards the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity. The compelling case for human rights and equity, well beyond the mandatory obligations set forth through the provincial ministry, will strive for equitable outcomes for all stakeholders and structures as a broader societal good. The strategic communications plan, moreover, will reinforce the careful creation of common vocabulary, including functional definitions of equity-related terms for daily use, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, that will support the development of coherence at the system level. In addition, the plan for strategic communications will promote the consistent application of district policies and administrative procedures, in the earnest effort to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments that will enable the implementation of alignment at the system level (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Mento et al., 2002; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015)

Articulation of Next Steps and Future Considerations

As next steps and future considerations in leading the change management process towards the cultivation of systemness at VCDSB, the Director of Education will capitalize on the organization's inherent readiness for change as clearly demonstrated by survey/census data from stakeholders. The Director of Education at VCDSB will also endeavour to address the gaps identified between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements of the empowering equity priority of the multi-year strategic plan, working collaboratively with stakeholders and structures, in order to mitigate the lack of coherence and alignment at the system level. Further, the Director of Education will seek to optimize promising aspects of organizational 'fit' for change, including the very timely and insightful self-reflection related to anti-racism and human rights, diversity and inclusivity across all aspects of the organization that VCDSB is currently immersed in. Key initiatives and/or projects that form integral components of the change process include: professional learning sessions for staff related to bias awareness and critical consciousness; de-streaming at the secondary level; and, coordination of a leadership development strategy for positions of added responsibility that diversifies the workforce (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

The director will endeavour to build momentum – through synergy of systemness – so that the commonly-held sense that individuals and/or groups have at all levels of the organization that they are indeed “the system” itself, as described by Fullan (2021), can be nurtured over time. The director will also work with senior staff and trustees alike to commit to engaging the entire system in professional collaboration related to equity and human rights, inclusivity and social justice well into the future. This commitment is critical, from the director's perspective as a scholar-practitioner, as equity-related matters have evolved so significantly and gained such worthy prominence across the province over time (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2017b, 2021).

Ultimately, as Director of Education at VCDSB, a dual-priority will be placed on developing greater “common ground” amongst stakeholders in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions that facilitate system coherence, and, implementing more consistently district policies and administrative procedures through decision-making processes of schools and central departments as structures that support system alignment. It is the Director of Education’s greatest desire and confidence that the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB, as described in the organizational improvement plan, will mobilize knowledge and generate solutions across the system, as well as eliminate all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learning, moving forward (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Third Chapter Summary

The third chapter of the OIP details key aspects of the change implementation plan for VCDSB as an organization, including a review of professional learning networks as the selected strategy for change, as well as details of the transition management plan (University of Western Ontario, 2021). The chapter consolidates the three key drivers of organizational improvement shared by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate – organizational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and leadership knowledge – from the perspective of VCDSB’s Director of Education as a scholar-practitioner (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020).

Moreover, the chapter provides a thorough overview of an evaluative framework based upon multiple factors – duration, integrity, commitment and effort – to assess and monitor the change management process. The third chapter also details a descriptive summary of the communications plan for the change initiative.

Overall Consolidation of Organizational Improvement Plan

As a culminating, capstone document submitted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Western Ontario, the OIP serves as a major persuasive research paper that provides an evidence-based pathway to address an organizational problem, and more broadly, serve the societal good (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2020; University of Western Ontario, 2021). The cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at a mid-sized district school board in the province of Ontario is a practical, yet theory- and research-informed plan that aims to mobilize knowledge and generate solutions through effective change management in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination and remove systemic barriers to learning throughout VCDSB as an organization, moving forward (VCDSB, 2021a, 2021c).

Through the establishment of networks for professional learning, the development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols (system alignment) is achieved. The careful creation of common vocabulary, including functional definitions of equity-related terms, as well as explicit examples shared as forms of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, facilitate the change process in the earnest effort to ameliorate fairness and impartiality in schools and central departments. Indeed, it is the day-to-day interactions of stakeholders in authentic relationships through structures of the organization, that cultivate the synergy of systemness sought (Fullan, 2015, 2021; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2015).

As a legitimate form of quality improvement, the OIP serves as a systemic approach to making meaningful change that has the potential to lead to stronger system performance, and thus, better outcomes for the organization. As described above, the improvement plan strives to eliminate all forms

of discrimination and remove systemic barriers to learning, along with ameliorated fairness and impartiality, for VCDSB as an organization (University of Western Ontario, 2021; VCDSB, 2021a).

Appendix A: A Summary of PESTEL Analysis for VCDSB as an Organization

PESTEL Analysis of Environmental Factors that Impact Valley County District School Board	
Factor	Description
Political	The board of trustees of VCDSB, as elected officials, serve as the legislated decision-making body of the district, with fiduciary and governance responsibilities for the organization. As a result, all major decisions of the district, including the approval of the annual budgetary process and the development of goals and policies with a strong equity lens, are made by the trustees and operationalized through the Director of Education.
Economic	As the district is funded directly by the provincial government, grants received are calculated on a per-pupil basis and/or provided through specific criteria established by the Ministry of Education Ontario. The only notable exceptions are monies generated through international education initiatives (such as fees for foreign students) and funds garnered through community use of schools. Differentiation of budgets for schools, in order to address disparities between school communities, is a key equity-related consideration for this factor.
Social	With four coterminous school boards in the county (English, French, Public and Catholic) there is a ‘market share’ aspect to the local environment, where districts vie for enrolment in order to augment their student population, and thus, offer a wider array of programs and/or services to their students through greater effectiveness and efficiencies of both cost and scale. As an organization, VCDSB is a Public, English-language school board.
Technological	The integration of emerging technologies into teaching and learning environments continues to grow steadily, including e-Learning and v-Learning options offered by a regional consortium of districts. The e-Learning option allows students to take a course entirely on-line. The v-Learning option has students from across the system join (virtually) a class that is taking place in-person at a site. Of note, the discrepancy in ease of connectivity – in various communities of the county – is an equity-related matter of consideration.
Environmental	There is a desire amongst stakeholders of the district, including both students and staff, for the organization to become more eco-friendly in its function. As such, a key aspect of the multi-year strategic plan is a focus on energy conservation and management for capital projects and the encouragement of occupant behavior (in schools and central departments) that reduces the carbon footprint, including a focus on reduce, reuse and recycle in classrooms.
Legal	As an institution of public education, the district is bound by legislation of the <i>Ontario Education Act</i> and its associated regulations, as well as policies established by the Ministry of Education Ontario. All stakeholders rely upon the legislation and regulations for guidance in addressing matters of interest, including the principles enshrined in the <i>Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms</i> , the <i>Constitution Act (1982)</i> , and the <i>Ontario Human Rights Code</i> from the perspective of the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity.
Note: The factors outlined in the PESTEL analysis are “big picture” in nature and may influence decision-making processes regarding an initiative and/or project of the organization.	

Appendix B: An Overview of SWOT Analysis for VCDSB as an Organization

SWOT Analysis to Assess the Position of Valley County District School Board	
Strengths	Weaknesses
As the Public, English-language school board, VCDSB has the most school properties and serves the majority of the county's students (approximately 60%) relative to all other coterminous options (English Catholic, French Public and French Catholic, as well as private schools). The schools of the district are also distanced somewhat evenly across the system, ensuring reasonable representation throughout the county. The district is the second largest employer in the county, and a source of tremendous local pride for its residents, especially as many of the district's employees were once students of its schools.	As an institution of public education, the market share for the district has decreased gradually over the past quarter-century (from approximately 67% to 60%), while the overall student enrolment across the county has also decreased over time. The board of trustees has identified a number of reasons for the slow and steady decrease in market share, including the lack of a strategic focus on program and/or service expansion (or rejuvenation), as well as an absence of proactive, strategic marketing (or rebranding) of the district's existing programs and/or services, relative to its coterminous competitors.
Opportunities	Threats
Through the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity, the district has an extraordinary opportunity to increase market share and ameliorate aspects of fairness and impartiality throughout the organization. The growth-oriented mindset of stakeholders, including staff, related to program and/or service expansion and the de-streaming initiative provide an impetus for positive change over time, as does the professional development related to bias awareness and critical consciousness and the coordination of a leadership development and mentorship strategy for the organization.	The aggressive advertisement of educational opportunities led by coterminous districts, as well as private school entities, provides a continual threat to market share. The current pandemic period and its priority emphasis on health and safety measures in schools and workplaces, as well as continuous operational contingency planning for 'pivots' to alternative modes of learning so as not to disrupt the continuity of learning for students, has understandably impacted the workload of staff, and subsequently, their readiness to engage in professional development for equity, diversity and inclusivity.
Note: The elements of the SWOT analysis are specific in nature and may impact decision-making processes related to the organization's competitive position and/or strategic planning.	

Appendix C: A Seven-step Model for Effective Change Management at VCDSB

Rotman Seven-step Model for Change Management at Valley County District School Board	
Step	Details
Diagnose	The Director of Education at VCDSB identifies the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements of the strategic priority for empowering equity of the multi-year strategic plan as the problem of practice. The Director of Education then initiates a multi-phased change management process as part of the organizational plan for improvement.
Enlist	A number of stakeholders are engaged in the change process by the Director of Education, including: students (through Student Senate); parents/guardians (via the Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, Parent Involvement Committee and Special Education Advisory Committee); staff (comprised of principals and vice-principals, senior managers and senior staff, as well as coaches and consultants as centrally-assigned staff); federation/union partners (as part of the nine collective bargaining units of VCDSB); community members (in school councils); and, members of the board of trustees. Stakeholder engagement is coordinated through networks for professional learning (PLN), as well as carefully-planned consultative sessions for stakeholders across the organization.
Envisage	The Director of Education must have a clear vision for the cultivation of systemness that includes the development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals for equity, diversity and inclusivity (as system coherence) and implementation of administrative processes such as policies and procedures, practices and protocols in a consistent manner (as system alignment) in striving to eliminate all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers throughout the organization.
Motivate	The vision for the cultivation of systemness must be leveraged to inspire and empower others, through genuine involvement of stakeholders in consultative sessions planned, so that there is ownership (buy-in) in the change process. In particular, the involvement of individuals and groups that are underrepresented or underserved will be an intentional aspect of the director's leadership approach, as their feedback/input will assuredly strengthen the system.
Communicate	Key updates on progress at each step of the change management process, as well as the outcomes of the entire endeavour, must be messaged frequently, system-wide. The multi-modal messaging will undoubtedly instil confidence in stakeholders that their voices have been heard, and that the change initiative is being managed competently by the director and senior staff, as well as overseen adequately by the trustees of VCDSB.
Act	Once the stakeholder consultative sessions are completed, the director must take concrete steps to implement the change initiative, based in large part on the feedback/input received. The actions taken are intended to ensure greater coherence and alignment between the goal statements for empowering equity of the multi-year strategic plan and the key categories of the annual action plan

	for equity and anti-racism in order to better serve the needs of students, staff and school communities of the organization.
Consolidate	In order to ensure that coherence and alignment with the new state is re-created at the system level, the Director of Education at VCDSB must continue to lead adaptively through the intentional engagement of stakeholders and structures in their day-to-day interactions, so that the envisioned future state is actualized. The consolidation of the cultivation of systemness as a change initiative includes the establishment of “common ground” in the use of language as words and behaviours as actions, system-wide, as well as greater consistency in the application of policies and procedures, practices and protocols throughout the organization.
Note: The seven-step model for effective change management is based upon the Rotman School of Management’s Executive Programs for ‘Leading Strategic Change’ initiative.	

Appendix D: Options Considered as Potential Solutions at VCDSB

Option Considered / Factors for Adjudication	First Option: Adherence to Ministerial Directives	Second Option: Procurement of Equity Consultants	Third Option: Establishment of Professional Learning Networks
Applicability for System Alignment	Medium – Adherence to the targets established for the BIEP will ensure that policies and procedures are created adequately at VCDSB, but may not ensure that practices and protocols for decision making by stakeholders are applied consistently in schools and central departments.	Medium – The procurement of third-party consultants will advance the consistent implementation of policies, procedures, practices and protocols throughout the system, as their knowledge and expertise may assist in the establishment of these structures for the organization.	High – The establishment of PLNs will ensure that stakeholders internal and external to the organization are able to engage in the consistent implementation of policies, procedures, practices and protocols – through a cycle of reflect, plan, act, and observe – on an ongoing basis so as to ensure consistency in implementation administrative processes over time.
Applicability for System Coherence	Low – The ‘target-setting’ nature of the BIEP, especially the emphasis on quantitative targets, will not likely lead to the development of shared mindsets amongst stakeholders of the organization.	Medium – As third-party consultants will be leveraged to facilitate professional learning opportunities with stakeholders across the system, their ability to develop shared mindsets throughout the organization is considerable, but not likely scalable across all schools and central departments.	High – The establishment of PLNs will ensure that stakeholders internal and external to the organization are able to develop shared mindsets regarding the enhancement of equity, diversity and inclusivity at VCDSB, including the use of common vocabulary and clearly-defined terminology and exemplars of discrimination and systemic barriers to learn from, and refine over time.
Allocation of Resources Required	Medium – As the completion of the BIEP is managed predominantly by centrally-assigned staff, the resources required to action this option are relatively low-cost, focusing mainly on the time and	High – The services for third-party consultants who are external to the organization will be costly, especially for extended periods of time, as will the release time required for staff to take part in the professional learning	Medium – The integration of PLNs as an integral part of board and school improvement planning processes will most certainly require an investment of funds for the procurement of equity consultants as well as the time and effort of centrally-assigned staff in the

	effort of staff in central departments.	opportunities across the system.	collaborative leadership of the networks. There will also be a significant investment of funds for release time on site in schools and central departments to engage in the networks.
Assessment of Risk for Effective Change Management	High – As it is a commonly-held expectation that districts adhere to the directives established by the Ministry of Education Ontario, the impetus and/or urgency for ownership in the process on the part of stakeholders would be very minimal, and as such, the risk related to effective change management would be high.	Medium – The knowledge and expertise of third-party consultants is solid, and as a result, their risk related to the effectiveness of the change management would be considered low. The one caution for this factor, however, is to ensure there isn't an over-reliance over time on expertise that is entirely external to the organization, placing this factor in the medium range.	Low – The thoughtful coordination of PLNs as a collaborative endeavour led by site-based staff, centrally-assigned staff, as well as third-party consultants will ensure that the assessment of risk to the change management process remains low. Further, the ability to coordinate multiple sessions in schools and central departments, potentially simultaneously, will ensure the possibility for widespread buy-in by stakeholders of the organization.
Note: Each factor is adjudicated for its viability as part of a potential solution as low, medium or high. The ideal solution would be relatively high in terms of applicability for coherence and alignment at the system level, and relatively low for resources required and assessment of risk for the change management process.			

Appendix E: Change Implementation Plan for Cultivation of Systemness at VCDSB

Selected Strategy for Change: Professional Learning Networks (and Associated Consultative Sessions for Stakeholders)					
Priority Steps for Change Initiative	Description of Implementation Task(s)	Responsibility Centre(s)	Timelines	Resources Required	Limitations of Implementation Task(s)
Step 1: Diagnose	Identification of the lack of coherence and alignment between the key categories of the annual action plan for equity and anti-racism and the goal statements of the strategic priority for empowering equity of the multi-year strategic plan	Director of Education	Two-week period	Multi-year strategic plan; annual action plan for equity and anti-racism	Outreach to all stakeholders, especially individuals and/or groups traditionally marginalized by the organization
Step 2: Enlist	Key stakeholders are enlisted in the change initiative, including: students, parents/guardians, staff, federation/union partners, trustees and community members	Director of Education, senior staff, trustees, specific centrally-assigned staff	Two-week period *	Presence on agenda of committee structures internal and external to the organization, including: Student Senate, IEAC, PIC and SEAC	There may be other, informal, less-well-known structures in school communities that might not be engaged in the enlist of stakeholders
Step 3: Envisage	Description of a clear, concise vision for the cultivation of systemness that eliminates all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers	Director of Education	Two-week period *	Internal communications (email system); print media (as a business case brief of the change initiative); social media (including creation of	Multi-modal forms of communicate for a diverse array of stakeholders, internal and external to the organization

	throughout the organization			video introduction to PLNs and consultative sessions for stakeholders)	
Step 4: Motivate	Involvement of representatives from all stakeholder groups, including individuals and/or groups traditionally marginalized by the system, to strengthen diversity of voices for change initiative	Director of Education, senior staff, trustees, specific centrally-assigned staff	Four-week period	Funds to release staff involved in PLNs during the work day, predominantly as occasional teacher coverage, in addition to participation during professional activity days and staff/managers meetings	Reasonable requirement for resources (human, material, fiscal) to complete PLNs and consultative sessions for stakeholders
Step 5: Communicate	Provision of key updates to stakeholders on progress-to-date, periodically throughout change initiative	Director of Education	Ongoing over course of semester/term	Internal communications (email system); print media (as a business case brief of the change initiative); social media (including creation of video introduction to PLNs and consultative sessions for stakeholders)	Multi-modal forms of communicate for a diverse array of stakeholders, internal and external to the organization
Step 6: Act	Coherence and alignment of execution of goals of the multi-year strategic plan and tasks of annual	Director of Education, senior staff, trustees, school-based and centrally-	Four-week period	Resources required (human, material and/or fiscal) to complete goals/tasks as	Confirmation of “common ground” in use of language as words and behaviours

	action plan for equity and anti-racism in order to better serve the needs of students, staff and school communities of the district	assigned staff of the district		delineated in multi-year strategic plan and annual action plan for equity and anti-racism	as actions, system-wide
Step 7: Consolidate	Establishment of cultivation of systemness that eliminates all forms of discrimination and systemic barriers throughout the organization as the new state	Director of Education, senior staff, trustees, school-based and centrally-assigned staff of the district	Ongoing, moving forward	Resources required (human, material and/or fiscal) to complete goals/tasks as delineated in multi-year strategic plan and annual action plan for equity and anti-racism	Supervision of staff and programs and/or services offered to ensure coherence and alignment at the system level, moving forward
* <i>delineates timelines that are simultaneous/synchronous in nature</i>					
Note: The change implementation plan is adapted from the 'Leading Strategic Change' Initiative of the Rotman School of Management (2016) and is to take place during the course of a semester/term (twelve-week period).					

Appendix F: Prompts and Scoring Guide for DICE Framework at VCDSB

Factors of the DICE Framework for Change Management (DICE Score for VCDSB in bold)	
Duration (D)	
Prompt(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do formal reviews of the change initiative occur regularly? ➤ What is the average time between formal reviews?
Score:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the time between reviews is less than two months, a score of 1 is given. ○ If the time between reviews is two to four months, a score of 2 is given. ○ If the time between reviews is four to eight months, a score of 3 is given. ○ If the time between reviews is more than eight months, a score of 4 is given.
Integrity of Performance (I)	
Prompt(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is the leader of the change initiative capable? ➤ How strong are enlisted team members' skills and motivations? ➤ Do they have sufficient time to spend on the change initiative?
Score	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the change initiative is led by a highly-capable leader who is respected by peers, if members of the team enlisted for the transition have the skills and motivation to complete the task in the stipulated time frame, and if the organization has assigned at least 50% of the team members' time to the initiative, a score of 1 is given. ○ If the change initiative is lacking a highly-capable leader, if members of the team enlisted to oversee the transition/task do not have the required skills and/or motivation, and if the organization has not provided at least 50% of the team members' time to the initiative, a score of 4 is given. ○ If the leader and team members' capabilities are somewhere in between, a score of 2 or 3 is given.
Senior Leader Commitment (C1)	
Prompt(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do senior leaders regularly communicate the reason for the change and the importance of its success? ➤ Is the message convincing? ➤ Is the message consistent from all levels of senior leadership (director, senior staff and trustees) over time? ➤ Have senior leaders devoted enough resources to the change initiative?
Score:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the senior leaders have, through words and actions, clearly communicated the need for change, a score of 1 is given. ○ If the senior leaders appear neutral, a score of 2 or 3 is given. ○ If the senior leaders appear reluctant to support the change, a score of 4 is given.

Other Key Stakeholder Commitment (C2)	
Prompt(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do the employees most affected by the change understand the reason for it and believe it is worthwhile? ➤ Are they enthusiastic and supportive or worried and obstructive?
Score:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If employees are eager to take on the change initiative, a score of 1 is given. ○ If employees appear just willing to take on the change initiative, a score of 2 is given. ○ If employees are reluctant or strongly reluctant to take on the change initiative, a score of 3 or 4 is given.
Effort (E)	
Prompt(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is the percentage of increased effort that employees must make to implement the change effort? ➤ Does the incremental effort come on top of a heavy workload? ➤ Have people strongly resisted the increased demands on them?
Score:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If the change initiative requires less than 10% extra work by employees, a score of 1 is given. ○ If the change initiative amounts to 10-20% extra work by employees, a score of 2 is given. ○ If the change initiative amounts to 20-40% extra work by employees, a score of 3 is given. ○ If the change initiative requires more than 40% extra work by employees, a score of 4 is given
DICE Score (Formula)	
<p>DICE Score Formula = $D + (2 \times I) + (2 \times C1) + C2 + E$</p> <p>DICE Score for VCDSB = $1 + (2 \times 2.5) + (2 \times 1) + 3 + 3 = 14$</p>	
<p>Note: The prompts and scoring guidelines are adapted from the DICE framework for change management of Sirkin et al. (2005).</p>	

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