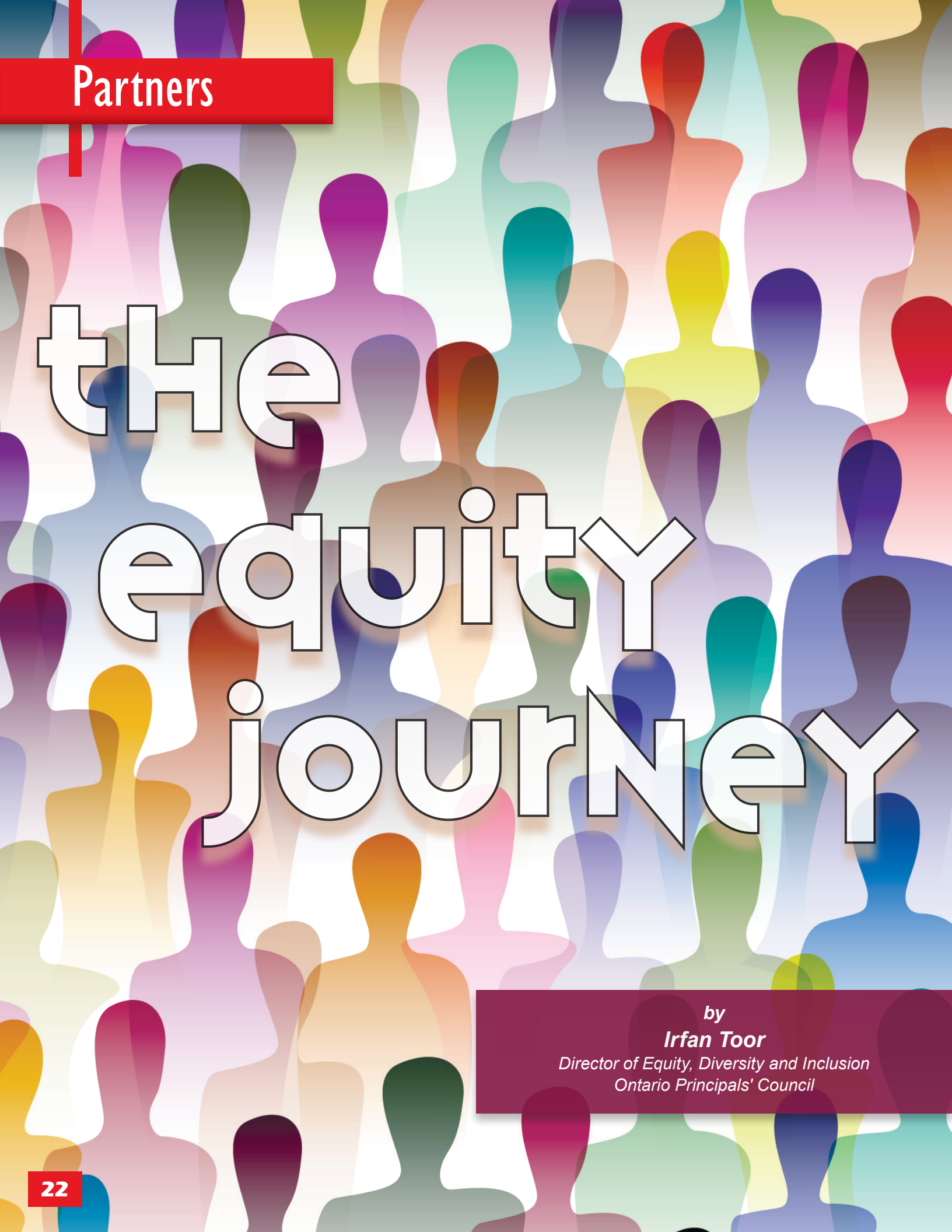




Partners

the equity journey

by

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*The BCPVPA is engaged in the critical process of deepening our focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion in our programming, and embracing and embedding these principles in all of the work that we do as an Association. We are in the early days of our own equity journey, and to bolster our learning we looked to the important work being done by our colleagues at the **Ontario Principals' Council**. We are grateful to **Irfan Toor** for sharing the OPC's story, and tracing the path they have traveled so far.*

The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) is a voluntary professional association that provides professional services and supports to practicing principals and vice-principals in English public schools across Ontario. These supports include professional learning and accreditation, protective services, and bargaining, to ensure our Members can provide exemplary leadership in public schools. The organization was founded after principals and vice-principals were removed from the bargaining groups that were representing teaching staff in 1998. Our governance structure includes a Provincial Council (Board of Directors) made up of practicing school leaders from every English public district school board in the province, and a Provincial Executive elected from within that group. We also have about 30 organizational staff who keep the operations going and provide support to our 5,400 Members through extensive professional learning opportunities, protective services, advocacy, communications, and membership services.

I have the great fortune – and also the significant responsibility – to guide the organization in my role as Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, as the OPC endeavours to foster not just exemplary corporate leadership, but also promote equitable and anti-oppressive leadership in our Members.

So where do you start?

A few years ago, conversations around equity and inclusion were occurring at our Provincial Council meetings to help increase the knowledge and understanding of equitable practices. These included conversations around supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students. We discussed things like pronouns, gender identity, and the practices that were being implemented in different schools and school boards. Given the size of Ontario, and the range in size of communities within Ontario, there were a lot of differences in knowledge, understanding, and response. On another occasion, we did some learning as a group on unconscious bias and how it shows up in educational practices, and how it fosters systemic oppression such as anti-Black or anti-Indigenous racism. Again, there was a large range in the prior knowledge and experiences of the participants. It was evident that many of our Councillors had not been exposed to these conversations within the context of their own professional learning, or system or school experiences.

We did what many organizations do when they realize they have work to do – we set up a committee. The leadership, including the elected Presidents, Executive, and the Senior Staff, recognized that there was work to be done and there were some gaps in the knowledge of the Members and in the practices of the organization. Committees are great, because they bring some issues out into the open and create opportunities for different voices to be heard. But we all know that many committees struggle in defining their actions and in the resistance they receive from the structures and power embedded in the organization. As products of a colonial system, we are also all influenced by our own experiences as students, and now as school leaders; we unintentionally reinforce some of those inequitable practices.

We also conducted a Census to collect demographic data on our Members, as we needed to know who we serve. As much as the Census confirmed our observations (we know that there is a relative overrepresentation of white, male identities – especially in leadership positions – as compared to

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overall representation in the education sector, and a corresponding underrepresentation of Indigenous, female, queer, and racialized identities), it serves to provide a baseline to see what kinds of changes we might observe when we repeat the Census over the next few years. The consultant who managed the data and results also provided some recommendations. These included targeted efforts for representation of different identities; reviewing all policies, procedures, and professional learning; and influencing Members and school districts to create equitable and inclusive environments. The recommendations reinforced what the committee members had been thinking, and also helped us define some of our strategic priorities.

We started to embed some practices, such as encouraging pronoun use in email signatures and on Zoom calls, and regular and consistent use of land

acknowledgements. Did we do some things right? Yes. We consulted with community and Indigenous elders to try and honour the correct people, land, and treaties. We accessed the diversity of our membership to provide some learning for colleagues based on different lived experiences. But we also received some feedback and were even called out by some Members who felt our actions were superficial and tokenistic, or even oppressive. Recognizing that this is an ongoing journey, we've been trying to approach each challenge as an opportunity for more learning, continuous review and reflection, and regular revision.

The real changes, though, started to occur when we reflected on some of those practices and asked ourselves whether they were good enough. And we rarely used the work we were doing as examples or justification that we were far along the journey of equity and anti-oppression. I'm proud of the fact that we approached the work with humility and an authentic interest in improvement.

For a while, we were trying to add, change, and adjust our practices from many different directions. This can be a good thing, but I also describe it as 'leapfrogging over ourselves'. Somewhere in this web of competing actions, it was identified that there needed to be a person who had the dedicated time, knowledge, and experiences to coordinate and guide this process. There was some conversation as to whether this should be an elected or a staff position with 'both' as a potential result.

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to them," so many members of the organization never challenge their own thinking or reflect on their divisional practices. One of our key actions has been to build the foundation of knowledge throughout the organization so that we can access the strengths of our diverse staff and truly effect organizational change. I feel confident and proud that the staff and the OPC Executive are all able to notice and name inequities and are willing to engage in the reflection and actions it takes to address them.

Another tension is balancing the need to do something now (given the context of COVID-19, the murder of George Floyd, the discovery of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children), with making sure you are being authentic and responsive, rather than just reactive. Your actions and decisions must be rooted in some consistency that is reflected in your values. That is why the foundational work is so important.

Since we've started on this journey, here are some of things that are visible in what we've done:

New structures:

- creation of the senior staff position of the Director of EDI
- elected representatives within each district executive (District EDI reps)
- staff focus groups to provide feedback with an equitable lens regarding all graphics and publications

- focus and feedback groups within the Professional Learning department to influence and review all courses and learning opportunities
- committees and sub-committees to create action plans related to the recommendations from our Census report (EDI Advisory Committee)

New practices:

- regular and ongoing review accessing diverse perspective of all professional learning opportunities
- regular and ongoing opportunities to engage with community to listen and learn from their feedback
- identity-based affinity groups for Members to provide spaces for healing and belonging
- a commitment to regular implementation of the Member Census
- intentional advocacy within the greater educational community (post-secondary, Ministry, research, etc.) to increase our scope of influence

New learning:

- equity, anti-oppression, and Indigenous rights learning sessions to increase the individual and collective capacity of Members
- regular learning sessions for OPC staff
- learning sessions during Council and Executive meetings to increase the individual and collective capacities with respect to equity, anti-oppression, and Indigenous rights

The invisible aspects of our growth are evident in our attitudes and approach. Many people don't see the behind-the-scenes efforts to examine, discuss, and dismantle processes. And, often, changes to process aren't really recognized for the long-term impact that they may have. Attitudinal shifts are important for this work to be successful. Unconscious bias is



at the root of the maintenance of many inequitable practices, so to be able to shift that thinking can also have exponential impact. Building the foundation and maintaining it is crucial.

Some of the steps:

- **Acknowledge that there is a problem** and a need for improvement. Some people are looking for justification, evidence, or data. The research has been done, and has existed for more than 50 years. If you are having trouble accepting that a problem exists, then you probably need to be reflecting on your own privilege and lack of awareness of the experiences of others.
- **Be willing to engage as a collective.** Yes, many organizations have a designated person, whether that is a system principal or a director, but one of the keys to our progress so far is the collective responsibility taken by all areas of the organization – the staff, the elected representatives, and the local leaders.
- **Build your foundation** by engaging in personal and collective reflection and learning. It's not just about organizing a workshop and a guest speaker. The learning and the conversations need to be ongoing and reflective. As Glenn Singleton (*Courageous Conversations about Race*) says, "prepare for discomfort."
- **Bring in more voices.** Some people have been actively engaged in the internal and external operations of the OPC for years. But many different voices and identities have not seen a place for their voices. Many of our structural

changes have created those opportunities and spaces for more voices to be heard. As well, we are working to become very intentional about decentering dominant identities and accessing diverse identities in the external resources we access.

- **Be vulnerable.** One of the hardest parts of leadership is acknowledging that there are more voices and perspectives than just your own. As well, we have all participated in practices – knowingly or unknowingly – that have reinforced systemic oppression. Be prepared, and accept that along your journey you will be reminded of those practices, and that some of your efforts will be criticized and doubted. It will take time to build trust and demonstrate your commitment. Social injustice has been occurring for centuries. It won't get fixed overnight.

It's always messy. You can't wait until you're 'ready' – who even knows what that looks like? And every day that education systems delay the reduction of oppression is another day students, staff, and communities will experience harm.

To follow the OPC's journey
or to connect with Irfan, visit
principals.ca/en/who-we-are/EDI.aspx

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