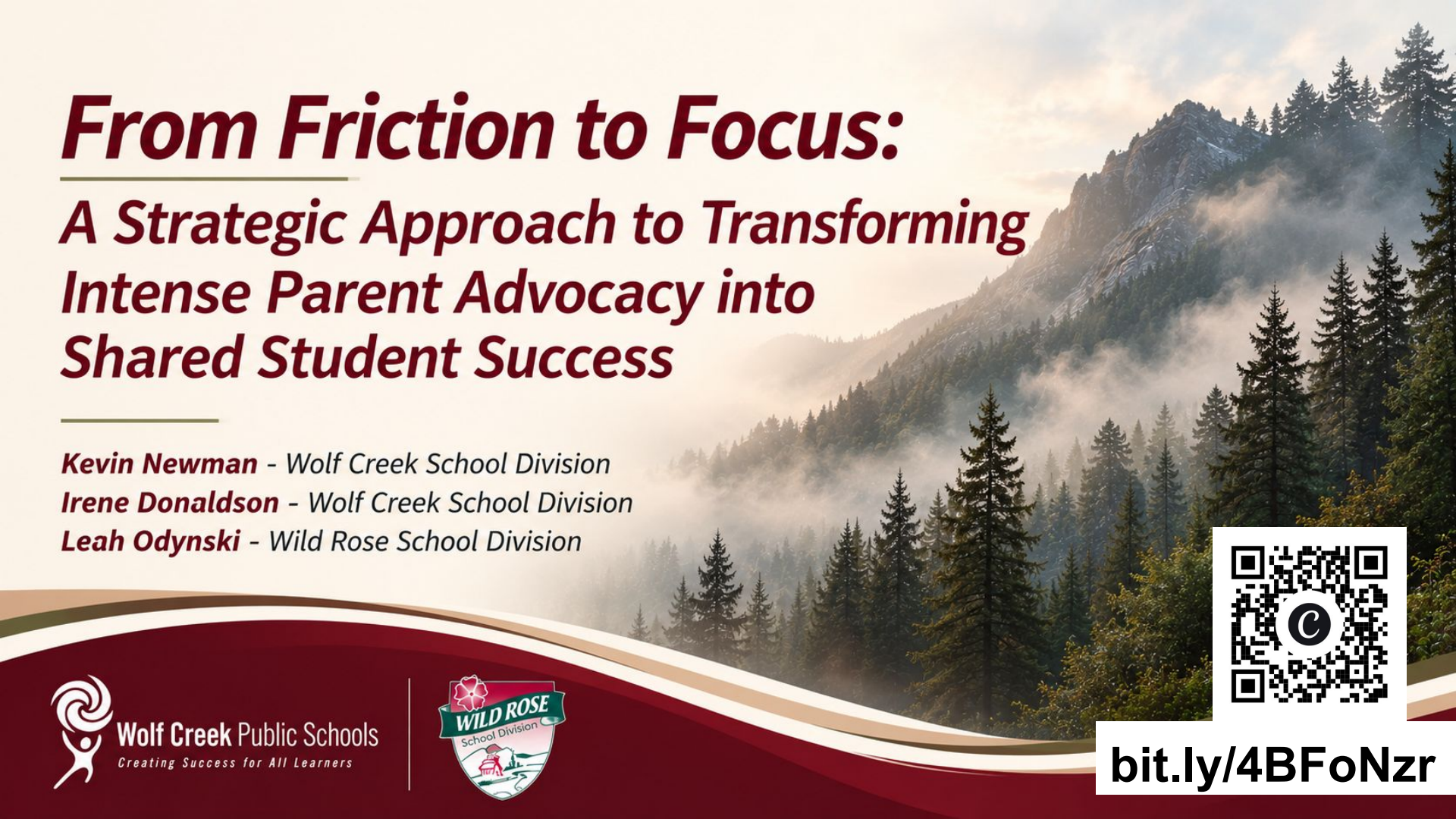
# From Friction to Focus:

## A Strategic Approach to Transforming Intense Parent Advocacy into Shared Student Success


**Kevin Newman** - *Wolf Creek School Division*
**Irene Donaldson** - *Wolf Creek School Division*
**Leah Odynski** - *Wild Rose School Division*

Wolf Creek Public Schools
Creating Success for All Learners

WILD ROSE School Division

bit.ly/4BFoNzr

# Land Acknowledgement




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Creating Success For All Learners

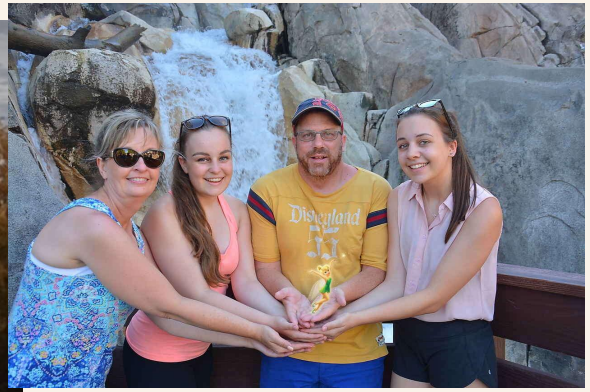
# About Me ~ Kevin Newman





BLACKFALDS BULLDOGS
PONOKA BRONCS
PONOKA SECONDARY CAMPUS






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Wolf Creek Public Schools
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Creating Success For All Learners

# About Me ~ Irene Donaldson



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# About Me ~ Leah Odynski














# Goals for the Session:

- **Sharing of Experiences, Ideas, Strategies**
- **Walk away with at least one new strategy added to your toolbox.**




In a few minutes we are going to ask you to think about an anchor situation:

- Strongly advocating parent
- Challenging inclusion situation

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## The Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent's ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority.

Alberta Education February 2018

WELLNESS




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## The Leadership Quality Standard

Quality leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students. Alberta Education MINISTERIAL ORDER #002/2020

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# Setting the Stage






- Origins of this presentation
- We are not experts, but hope to share some of our knowledge
- Terminology Caveat
- Confidentiality

# Why is this an Important Topic?

- Increasing Complexity
- Leadership Influence and Development
- Well-being and Sustainability
- Positive Outcomes and Relationships
- Mentorship and Leadership Growth



** Anchor Situation

Self Reflection Time
3 Minutes





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Briefly share the ‘Anchor Situation’ and why it is important and relevant.

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# Providing Consistency, Predictability, and Structure for Parents



# Safety is a Felt Experience



## Weight of the System

- Exhausted from constant advocacy and red tape.
- Expecting empty placation or automatic refusal.
- Outnumbered and intimidated by specialist titles.
- Parents may carry negative childhood or past school experiences or trauma

## The Weight of Unspoken Grief

- Struggling with the loss of an imagined future.
- Parents and educators are often at different stages of acceptance.

# Safety is a Felt Experience



*"Parents discussed advocacy as an essential part of their role and often described it as a heavy responsibility. However, participants identified strong home-school partnerships as a critical factor that mitigated burdens."*

Katharine Elliott (2025)

# Safety is a Felt Experience



| What We Might See | What the Parent Is Feeling |
|---|---|
| **Hostility or Guardedness** | Hyper-vigilance from fighting the system alone |
| **Skepticism / Pushback** | Fear of empty reassurance or automatic "no"s |
| **Defensiveness** | Intimidation from professional jargon and room numbers |
| **Resistance to Adaptations** | Grieving the loss of their child's expected trajectory |

# Increasing the Feeling of Safety

1. Predictable Intake
2. Low-Threat Space
3. Centralized Documentation
4. Relationship Building



# Increasing the Feeling of Safety Predictable Intake

*Eliminating phone-tag anxiety and signaling immediate priority.*

- **Timely Response:** Have an Administrative Assistant promptly return the parent's call and schedule a dedicated calendar appointment.
- **Anticipatory Anxiety:** Parents are not left checking their phone in limbo, wondering when or if someone will reach out.
- **Priority:** Giving the parent an immediate calendar commitment reassures them that their child matters.
- **Predictability**:Sending a formal calendar invite with an email confirmation allows both the parent and school team to arrive grounded and prepared.



# Increasing the Feeling of Safety
# Low-Threat Space

*Removing institutional intimidation and flattening power dynamics.*

- **Neutral Ground:** Host meetings in open, welcoming areas (e.g., library or conference nook) rather than the principal's office.
- **Seating:** Arrange chairs in an open circle instead of speaking across an authoritative desk or long conference table.
- **Attendee Lists:** Limit participants strictly to essential voices based on the meeting's purpose to avoid overwhelming parents with a large panel of specialists.



# Increasing the Feeling of Safety Relationship Building

*Strengthening trust and connecting with the parent as a human being*

**Lead from Behind:** When parents are bonded to school administration, have the District Office staff support quietly from behind the scenes, reinforcing trust in local leadership.

**Authentic Curiosity:** Show genuine interest in the parent's world beyond their child's school challenges.

**Remember Personal Details:** Note and intentionally revisit personal touchstones in future conversations (e.g., family goals, summer plans, pets) to build lasting relational currency.



# Increasing the Feeling of Safety

*Building transparent, predictable, and shared accountability*

**Documentation** Create a single, shared Google Doc that houses agendas, meeting minutes, agreements, and next steps.

**Conflicting Narratives** Eliminates paper trails,  lost emails, and conflicting recollections across multiple meetings.

**Schedule Follow Up:** Never conclude a meeting without scheduling the next check-in directly on the calendar before anyone leaves the room.



"Thank you for focusing on my child's abilities and potential rather than defining him by his challenges."

*"You created a sense of safety and trust in every conversation we had. That made an enormous difference to me!"*




**"Your compassion, reassurance, and ability to genuinely listen helped me feel heard in a way that eased so much anxiety and fear."**

***"Being recognized as an "expert" in my child was key! With you, I knew my expertise mattered."***

"I felt treated like an equal and never judged for advocating for my child. This made a tremendous difference in my ability to feel regulated, supported, and able to participate collaboratively."

LO



What can we do to make the parent feel safe/heard in your anchor situation. What did you/could you do in your situation?





# What strategies would you use to help parents feel psychological safety?



# The Soft Skills

- Thinking Brain Strategies
- The Parent’s Perspective
- Ensuring Parents Feel Heard

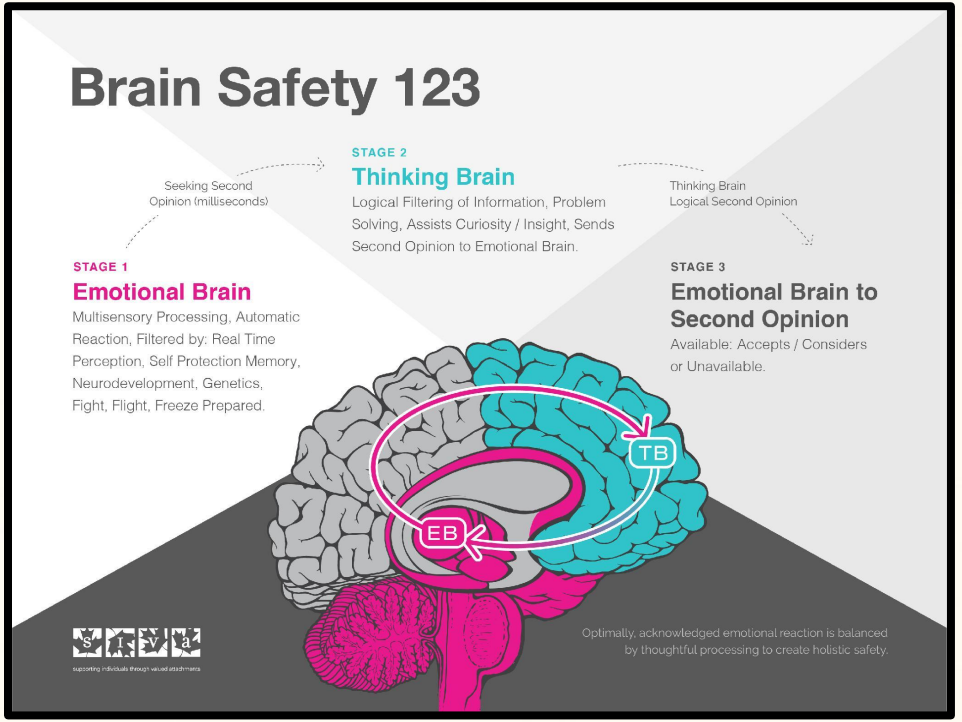


# Be in your 'thinking brain' rather than your 'emotional brain'.



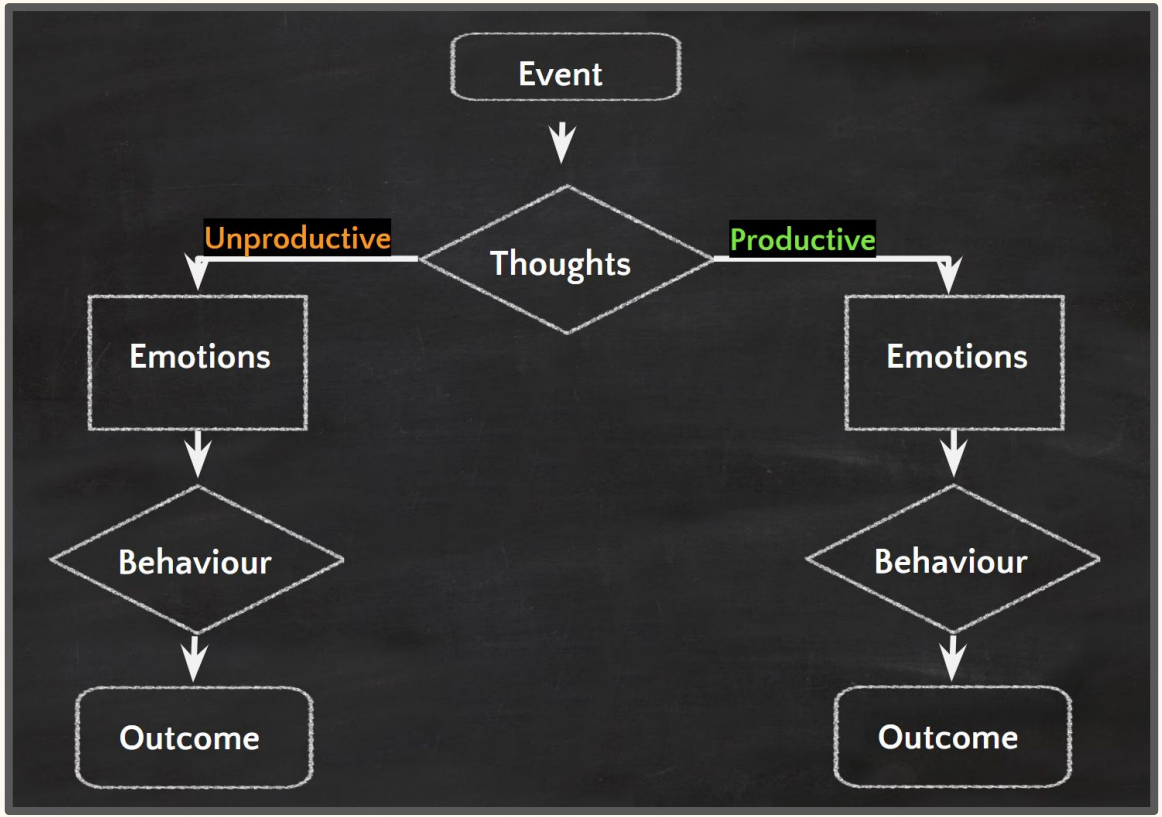
# Negative Impacts of Emotional Brain

- logical thinking
- accurate hearing
- effective processing
- memory
- executive functioning
- authentic connections



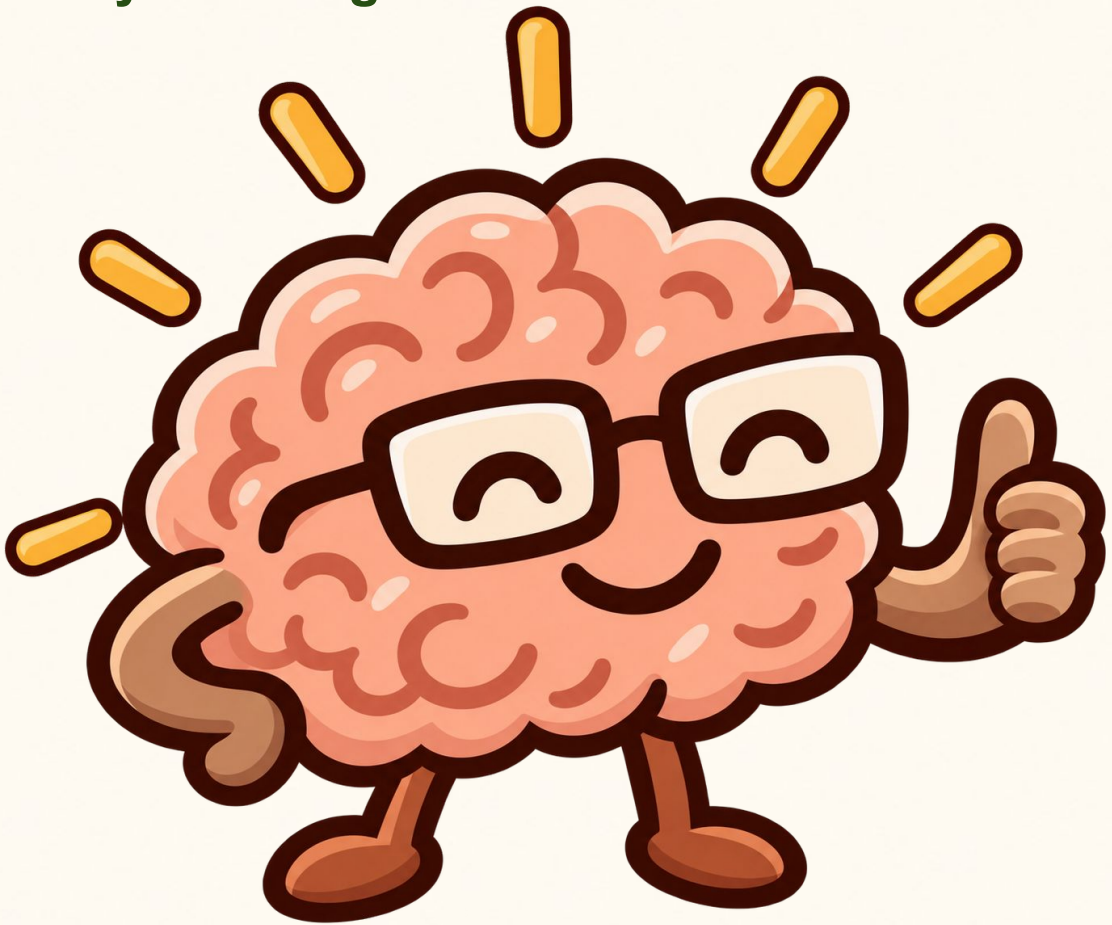
*"Existing practices place enormous burden on parents and require them to fight for both their child's services and their own place on the special education team... Although schools report that they desire the involvement of parents in special education, parents overwhelmingly report negative experiences, often feeling excluded and powerless on school teams."* Gaspar & Sahay (2025)

# Perspectives from our emotional brain have a significant impact on our reactions and how we come across to others.




*Safe Management Group, Crisis Intervention Training - Children*

# How I Stay in My Thinking Brain






**Don’t go in with an answer…go in with a willingness to listen and partner with parents.**




**Focus on the parent's intent rather than their execution of their intent.**

*"Parents advocate for their kids the best way they know how with the skills they have in the moment, and while I may not always appreciate their execution of this, I choose instead to honour their intent."*

## Recognize our Goal and the Constraints.




*”We strive to do what is best for kids within our current resources”*

## Acknowledge that not everything needs to be or can be solved immediately.




*“We are on a 12-15 year journey.”*

# Find and Acknowledge the Good:

## Celebrate Progress, Growth & Achievement




“We have too many students without anyone in their corner. You are advocating for your child and that is your job!”

"Parents frequently reported feeling excluded from meaningful decision-making and that their insights regarding their child's unique presentation were dismissed by educators... When school teams genuinely listened and treated parental input as credible expertise, relational friction decreased and mutual trust was established."

Starr, E. M., & Foy, J. B. (2012). In parents' voices: The education of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Remedial and Special Education*, *33*(4), 207–216

# Try and see things from the Parent Perspective



# The Parent Perspective



*“Every student is someone’s baby.  All the hopes and dreams the parents had for the child the moment they were born are still present within the child and their parents.”*

# Look for clues from the parent




- Past experiences with school
- Best hopes and worst fears for their child's future
- Stage of acceptance and grief with their child's diagnosis or needs

# Hear and Acknowledge Parent Feelings




*“It is like your child is your heart. Every day you rip your heart out and send it to school, where you are not sure it is safe.  You wait for your heart to come home and be safe.”*

*“It must be exhausting to be so worried.*




- Take notes and email them to the parent
- Ask clarifying questions
- Paraphrase to ensure understanding

# Navigate differences of opinion while maintaining focus.

- **Take parents back to their intent and what they want (ie. their child to be ok, cared for, safe, etc.)**

"We are all standing around the child.  We all want the best for the child. Based on where we are standing, we all have a slightly different perspective on what is needed and the best solutions. But, we are all still standing in support around the child."



## Parents must know their child is a priority with an understanding they are not the only priority.

- Book a follow-up conversation/meeting.
- Include parent in calendar invite
- Be clear that "I need more time" may be my response
- Repeat this process as many times as needed
- Continue to check in after situation is resolved
- Give parents permission to check-in with you






- Provide the same level of grace and understanding you want parents to give to staff
- Be open to the need for relationship repair
- Model admitting misunderstandings and mistakes




"Thank you for focusing on my child's abilities and potential rather than defining him by his challenges."

"Your compassion, reassurance, and ability to genuinely listen helped me feel heard in a way that eased so much anxiety and fear."

"You created a sense of safety and trust in every conversation we had. That made an enormous difference to me! "

"Being recognized as an "expert" in my child was key! With you, I knew my expertise mattered."

"I felt treated like an equal and never judged for advocating for my child. This made a tremendous difference in my ability to feel regulated, supported, and able to participate collaboratively."



Identify soft skills you used or could use in your anchor situation.

Are there any soft skills you could add to your approach?  What impact might this have?





# What soft skills do you find have the most impact in complex situations?



# The Hard Skills



# INSERT Structure

- Leverage Secretary/Executive Assistants



# Before the Meeting

- Staff Support
- Meeting Agenda
- Meeting Time
- Physical Space




*Consistency, structure, and predictability enhance the feeling of safety.*

# Staff Support

- Meet with the staff to prepare them
- Review student programming plans and data to help staff reframe subjective impressions
- Set explicit ground rules with staff on how disruptive behavior will be handled



# Meeting Agenda

- Clearly Identify Purpose of the Meeting
- Shared Understanding of Purpose
- Ensure collaboration with Parents on meeting items
- Pre-populate list of attendees and roles
- Clarify Meeting Roles
- Consider scheduling meetings in the afternoon



# Physical Space - Room Set Up

- Sightlines and Eye Contact
- Proximity of participants
- Eliminate the "Inquisition" Seating
- Consider supportive seating
- Hospitality (drinks, snacks)
- Kleenex, pens, & printout of agenda



# During the Meeting

- Build Authentic Connections
- Recognize and Celebrate Success
- Establish Clear Time Boundaries
- Create an Exit Plan
- Recognize and Respond to Escalation
- Set Expectations in Advance
- Ensure parents understand this i a process, not one-shot!




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# During the Meeting




- Document Constructively
- Identify Action Items
- Ensure Accountability
- Schedule Follow-Up
- Parent reach out

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# After the Meeting

- Document missed meetings in your calendar

- Document missed meetings in your calendar
- Follow-up meeting
  - Always book next meeting/call
  - Include parents in calendar invitation with date, time, location
  - Also include purpose and reminder of action items
- Include view-only link to ongoing agenda & notes document



# After the Meeting

Notes:

- Ensure notes are accurate, neutral, and non-judgemental
- Email summary notes to meeting participants in a timely manner
- Encourage participants to respond if any edits or clarifications are needed




Be clear that notes will be considered correct if participants do not reach out.

# After the Meeting




Check in with parents

- Did they have any reflections or questions after the meeting
- Assurance of continued efforts
- Maintain and deepen connection



**What did you/could you do in your situation?**

**How do you attend to your self-care & mental well-being?**

- **Identify hard skills you used or could use in your anchor situation.**
- **Are there any hard skills you could add to your approach?  What impact might this have?**





# ?????


Table
Talk

# Remember to ASK for HELP!



# Shift the Culture: "Call Sooner, Call Up"

## Culture of Asking for Help

- We constantly coach classroom teachers and educational assistants to reach out to school-based leadership before a situation hits a crisis point. We must model that exact behavior by "calling up" to senior leadership and district teams without hesitation.
- Asking for district-level guidance is not an admission of localized failure or a lack of administrative competence; it is proactive system management and protective practice for the school team, the family, and the student.

# What Division Office Staff Can Offer

## Behind-the-Scenes Consultative Coaching

- Making sure our plans follow federal law, provincial legislation (Education Act) and divisional APs.
- Sorting out tricky student or family situations, catching things we might miss, and finding ways to calm things down.
- Helping write careful emails, set meeting agendas, and put together official notes so messages sound calm and clear.
- Connecting with cultural advisors, community guides, and translators when a family needs them.

## Meeting Facilitation

- Attend meetings as an neutral support to sit alongside administrators.
- Stepping in to lead tense or volatile conversations

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# When Admin Should Call for Help ASAP

1. When staff are overwhelmed due to physical, or mental demands, school complexity, unreasonable parental expectations
2. Involvement of outside advocates or community agencies
3. Staff or Student Injuries
4. Potential for formal complaints, legal action, etc
5. Occupational Health and Safety implications





When should you ask for help?

What help would you ask for?

Who would you ask for help?






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# What structures do you have in place to ensure school leaders know when to call for help?



"Thank you for always having an agenda and letting me add to it. It helped me feel like a part of the team and I always knew what to expect."

***"Asking open-ended questions and allowing us to speak freely and at our pace is so helpful."***

"You communicated clearly, prepared me for meetings, explained options, gathered resources, and reduced uncertainty. This created greater trust and hope."

*"Sending me the notes from meetings and calls was HUGE help when I am holding so many things in my brain and heart."*






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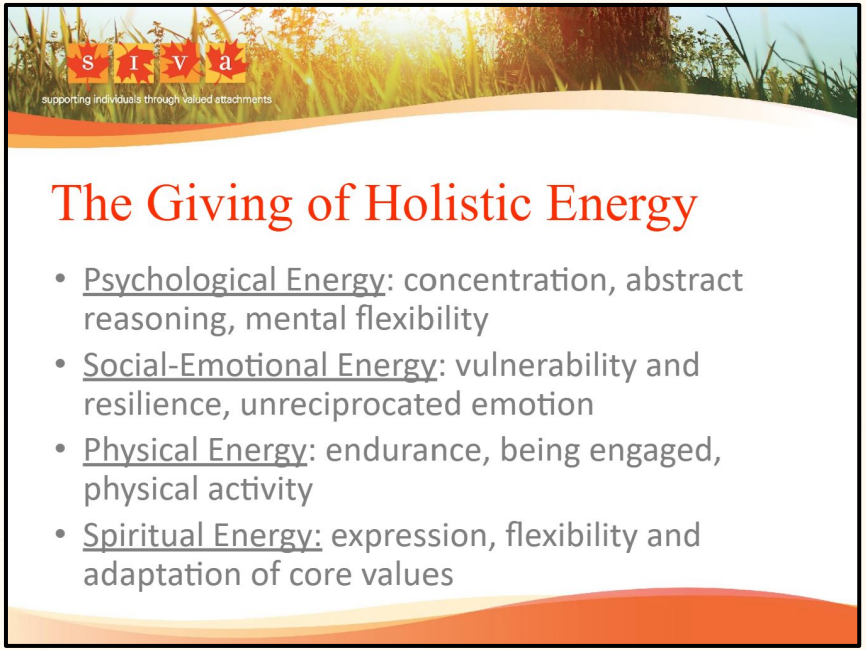
# The Basics

- Sleep
- Hydration
- Nutrition
- Not OVER caffeinated
- Physical activity
- Support system






- SIVA's Self Care based on holistic energy
  - Identify area of depleted energy
  - Finding self care strategy to replenish that specific area



# Self Awareness

- Be self-aware and monitor your mental health
  - Opportunities for emotional release
  - Who are you talking to
  - Do you need support
  - Do you need to tap someone else in
  - Check your self-expectations
  - Prioritization and de-implementation






"You made more of a difference than I can express."

"I want to personally thank you for the role you played in helping me feel supported through a very difficult time."

"I would have been lost without you."

"I appreciated the collaborative problem-solving rather than just being presented with a final decision."

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**What did you/could you do in your situation?**

**How do you attend to your self-care & mental well-being?**






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# ?????


Table
Talk




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Leah

- Stop…
- Drop…
- Roll…

Kevin

- Sometimes…
- Never…
- Always…

Irene

- Observe…
- Find…
- Mentor…

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## Directions:




Go to each topic area and add your thoughts to the two key questions:

1. What strategy stood out for you or what additional strategies would you suggest?

2. What questions might you still have about this area?

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# Thank you!


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