

Retiring UGDSB director reflects on five-year tenure as successor takes over

Written By SAM ODROWSKI

Upper Grand District School Board director of education and CEO Peter Sovran will retire at the end of September after more than 30 years in public education, capping a five-year tenure leading the board.

Associate director and chief operating officer Brent McDonald will succeed him, effective Oct. 1.

Sovran said the change in leadership has been years in the making, pointing to McDonald's role as his second-in-command since Sovran's 2021 appointment.

'I'll say the transition probably started five years ago, because Brent and I have been working together from actually even longer than five years ago,' Sovran said in an interview. 'Over the years he's taken on different roles, different titles, and currently associate director and chief operating officer.'

Sovran said that the close working relationship extended beyond meetings. Shortly after starting the job on Sept. 1, 2021, he had an adjoining boardroom space converted into an office for McDonald, so the two could work side by side.

'I am so pleased that he is going to be the next CEO of the organization, because he has been part of every decision and every move that we've made over the last five-plus years,' Sovran said.

Board of trustees chair Ralf Mesenbrink thanked Sovran for his service in a statement announcing the retirement.

'Peter has led with integrity, vision and a deep commitment to improvement,' Mesenbrink said. 'His leadership has helped position the UGDSB for continued success.'

Asked what advice he has passed on to McDonald, Sovran pointed to staying grounded.

'Always, always, always keep being the person that you are,' he said. 'Ground your decisions in your core values and your beliefs.'

Sovran credited the board's 'let's go' methodology 'a framework built around goals and responding quickly when students need support' along with heavy post-pandemic investment in staff and student supports for driving gains in student achievement. He pointed to more than 97 per cent of high school students earning their credits as evidence of that progress.

'We wanted it to be 100 per cent,' he said, adding the board's live performance dashboards now let educators track student progress in real time. 'We've established this data-informed culture. We know where students are at any point in time.'

Among the initiatives Sovran said he's proudest of is Project SEARCH, a partnership with the YMCA of Three Rivers, the University of Guelph and the March of Dimes that provides workplace internships for students with significant special needs.

'To go to those graduation ceremonies and hear that these young people now actually have employment coming out of that is just amazing and super gratifying,' he said. 'There's really no other important metric than students being successful.'

Sovran said continuing work from the board's independent human rights review, launched in April 2025, will remain a priority under McDonald.

'Each and every student in the district really needs to feel that they belong, that they have an opportunity to be successful,' he said. 'That is the critical work.'

The independent review, completed in March this year, documented serious concerns about discrimination and anti-Black racism in UGDSB schools and made 14 recommendations for change, including clearer complaint processes and better accountability.

Sovran said that work will continue to be a priority as McDonald takes over.

He said artificial intelligence will also remain a major focus, with the board framing its approach around an AI literacy framework grounded in strong reading and math skills, along with a sustainability component built into the district's multi-year plan.

'Having a firm grounding in human rights is absolutely essential when it comes to dealing with the disruption ? and it will continue to be a disruption ? that AI brings to a learning organization like ours,' he said.

For his part, McDonald said he's looking forward to building on that work.

'I look forward to strengthening relationships with all stakeholders across the system, supporting innovation including the responsible use of AI, and continuing to advance our student achievement progress in literacy and numeracy,' McDonald said.

'Most importantly, I am excited to work alongside our students, staff, families, trustees and community partners as we continue to implement recommendations from the independent human rights review and harness the incredible talent and potential that exists throughout the Upper Grand DSB.'

Sovran, whose role oversees schools across Wellington County, Guelph and Dufferin County, said he made a point of spending every Friday at the Grant Evans Education Centre in Orangeville.

'There's nothing like actually being situated in the space and spending time in the space,' he said, adding that the practice helped him watch the district's identity shift over five years.

'I've really started to see that shift from, 'That's Guelph,' or 'That's North Wellington,' or 'That's Dufferin,' to, 'That's the Upper Grand,' while at the same time not losing the uniqueness of Dufferin County.'

He said he has completed well over 300 school visits during his time with the board.

'It has been an absolute privilege,' he said.

McDonald, who began his career in 1995 as a teacher at Arthur Public School before serving as a vice-principal, principal and executive superintendent within the board, said he's grateful for the opportunity ahead.

'Having spent over 30 years in a variety of roles across the organization, I am grateful for the opportunity to build on the outstanding achievements of our students, staff and school communities,' McDonald said.