SONIA ELLISON (Curriculum Coordinator, Halton CDSB): Last year, when I started in the role of supporting blended learning in our Board, we recognized that teachers needed more time. We know that just by having one session where you come and learn the basics of using the virtual learning environment, it was insufficient. And so this year, what we recognized in our professional learning model, this time around, was that the time needed to be built in but it also needed to come with a little bit of commitment on the part of the teacher. So when they signed up to take part in our professional learning this year, it was included that they would have a half-day of self-directed time, where they could focus in on a particular tool or a function of the virtual learning environment and then they would have to come back and share that learning. So in order to ensure that the learning was happening, we had tracking mechanisms put in place. But the feedback that we're getting at this point, we will do a formal survey later, but the feedback we're currently getting is that teachers appreciated having the time to direct their own learning. They recognized that that launch session at the beginning was useful in sort of establishing what they might want to learn and then having the time to go out and follow their own path and then come back and share their learning with others, became really important in that consolidation activity because other groups had gone off and learned other things and so by virtue of that, we've all learned a lot of things together.

Like we are very fortunate to have a dedicated research department. They are small but they're mighty. They help us by creating surveys that really get at what teachers have learned and what teachers still want to learn and then we take that and that helps us formulate what next year’s learning cycle will look like. So this year, there was a lot of focus on technology and teachers wanting to use technology in their classrooms. We saw that as an opportunity to support the blended learning approaches in the classrooms and so because teachers were asking for it, we know that that often helps secure funds for that kind of learning. We're hoping that from the surveys that this group answers, we'll also get that kind of request for more learning and for more support and hopefully more funds will be allocated that way. In terms of where we go next year, I think this model has proven to be one that's really beneficial. We see that having that self-directed time for teachers has become really the avenue for them growing what blended learning looks like in their schools because they're doing that self-directed learning in their schools, other teachers are walking past the room saying, hey, what's going on in there? We're curious. So that natural curiosity gets piqued and then hopefully we get those folks on board for next year and we can continue to grow it through what the teachers are currently doing and then their word of mouth.