

CANADA'S OUTSTANDING PRINCIPALS

2009

By **Marisa Celenza**, Editor

Congratulations to this year's recipients of The Learning Partnership's Canada's Outstanding Principals award: Nancy Allaire, Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB; John Burroughs, Brant Haldimand Norfolk CDSB; Michael Courchesne, Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB; and Ted Laxton, Wellington CDSB. Their nominations attest to outstanding individuals who are committed to the students in their care. These individuals are excellent representatives of the Catholic principals and vice-principals of Ontario.

Nancy Allaire | Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB



Nancy McLeod Allaire obtained her Bachelor of Education degree in 1985 and began teaching for the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board that September. From 1985 to 1999, she worked as both a classroom teacher and resource teacher. In 1999 Nancy was appointed to the position of principal. She has obtained specialist qualifications in Special Education,

Computers in the Classroom and Religious Education.

Nancy is an Aboriginal elementary principal at Our Lady of Sorrows School in Sturgeon Falls, a kindergarten to Grade 8 school that serves seven outlying communities. There are 247 students, who are engaged in English, French and Native-as-a-Second Language programs. One hundred five students are identified with learning needs and there are two learning assistance classrooms. The school receives support from the mental health team, the behaviour management team and community resources that support improving student learning. Various programs such as *Rainbows for all God's Children*, *Roots of Empathy*, *Maamwi-Enchiyang (All of Us together)* and *Peace Makers* have been implemented in the school to reduce behavioural incidents and create a safe learning environment for the students. Nancy is instrumental in designing and implementing the *Maamwi-Enchiyang* program that serves both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who require support with strategies to be academically successful and opportunities to be leaders in the school and community.

Nancy Allaire has served on the Board's First Nation Advisory Committee, the Leading Student Achievement: Our Principal Purpose team, the School Effectiveness Framework team and is one of the leads in implementing the Aboriginal Education Framework Policy. She also was on the writing team that revised the Educational Assistants Handbook for the board.

Nancy is the recipient of the Commissioners Citation Award for the development of the *Walking the Path* program. This program focuses on educating both Native and non-Native students on the history, traditions, beliefs and cultures of First Nation people. It focuses on youth empowerment, promoting self-esteem concepts and respect for all, which improves relations among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. She also received the local CPCO Teacher award in the past. She presently volunteers for sacramental preparation for students who attend Holy Spirit Parish, and raises funds for church programs and resources. She is a reader at Mass and brings communion to shut-ins.

Nancy creates a culture of shared ownership in the school. She has developed class profiles for teachers and in-school teams to assist with decision-making. She implements and encourages the use of assistive-technology in the school to reach all learners. Nancy has involved community agencies to meet the goals to support students. She has created a shared responsibility for inclusive education. The school has student learning profiles, data walls, class tracking sheets, target setting, Smart Goals, surveys, portfolios for staff and students, and School Improvement Plans.

Data-based decision-making is evident in all school goals. Resources and supports are strategically placed and purchased to ensure that the school is a harbour of hope for all students. Nancy creates a culture that is sensitive to the needs of the students, respects cultural diversity and the multiple learning needs of individuals and families. She continually works on transforming the school into an effective centre of learning for all students. She is proud to say that she works with a staff that has a shared vision



and consensus about goals and priorities. She creates a productive environment by continually altering school structures to enhance participation of all staff in decision-making.

Nancy Allaire possesses strong interpersonal skills making her a very approachable, respected leader both in the school and in the community. Nancy can be described as a kind, compassionate leader who effectively listens to and responds to the needs of her school community. Her strengths in this area have gained her respect and have made it possible to achieve success at the school.

John Burroughs | Brant Haldimand Norfolk CDSB



John Burroughs has been an educator in Ontario for 34 years and is currently principal at Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Simcoe, Ontario for the Brant Haldimand Norfolk CDSB. John completed his Bachelor of Education program in 1975 at the University of Toronto and began teaching with the Brant County Roman Catholic Separate School Board that September.

He holds basic qualifications in primary, junior, intermediate and senior divisions. His additional qualifications include honour specialists in Political Science and Sociology, as well as principal's qualifications. John has been a principal since 1986, in both the elementary and secondary panels.

John's mantra is "Failure is not an option." John is principal and advisor to a high school of 1250 students and over 100 staff and support staff. John's vision is shared by the staff at Holy Trinity who willingly volunteer their time to help supervise students working to improve their levels of achievement outside of class time. John has set high standards for performance achievement and his staff and students are always motivated to not only reach the goals but to exceed them.

John is always out of his office because working with students and staff is his first priority. John is welcomed into classrooms. He

often engages in meaningful conversations about families, community events, achievement, visioning and resources. John takes time to listen to the needs of the community and he willingly gives of himself to ensure that others can be the very best they can be, thus dissipating behaviour and discipline problems before they arise. The staff, students, parents and the greater Simcoe community have both a high morale and a deep respect for John's leadership and accomplishments. The entire administrative team at Holy Trinity works so cohesively that it makes the job of teaching deeply and richly rewarding.

John emulates and encompasses all the qualities of a great leader. He has a keen eye and unique gift for seeing the best in his staff and continuously empowers them to take the lead on many Ministry directives and professional models of learning. John recognizes that the hallmark of a good educator is that they are continuously learning and they always have an instructional strategy upon which to improve.

John visioned and implemented the embedded professional development model that currently operates at Holy Trinity where staff members provide workshops to colleagues while students attend grade level assemblies, supervised by administrators. This model has been extended to encompass professional development for Grade 7 and Grade 8 colleagues of elementary feeder schools who are welcomed into the high



school environment to engage in professional learning while their students learn about high school culture.

John takes the time to communicate effectively with all community members. He is a brilliant and natural public speaker who is awe inspiring and energizing. He sets clear expectations and staff and students always have a definite understanding of their strengths, weaknesses and next steps for improvement in order to achieve the desired vision of the community.

John knows the families of all of the students at Holy Trinity. He works tirelessly to ensure that each student has had their needs met so that targeted goals of improvement can be achieved. From inviting parent volunteers to help with school events, to fixing

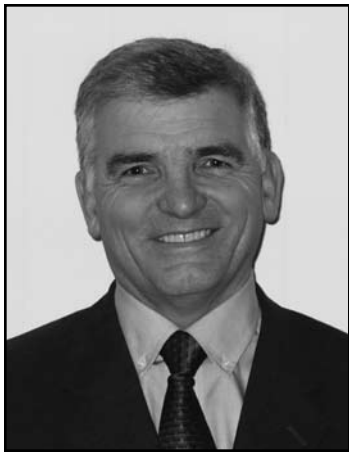
broken automobiles for free, to finding accommodations for homeless families, to establishing partnerships with community businesses, John ensures that supports are in place to meet the health and well-being of all community stakeholders.

John Burroughs improved learning and achievement at Holy Trinity with the implementation of a mandatory study hall to help students succeed. The success rates for the first term of semester one in 2007 and 2008 increased to over ninety-five per cent for grades nine through twelve.

John has received many awards and accolades over the years. He was recognized with a Champion of Inclusion Award in 2008. He is published as one of Canada's outstanding success stories in Wayne Hulley's *Harbours of Hope Canada* that was released in February 2009. John was internationally showcased in Toronto in February to coincide with the global release of this educational book.

John's tremendous success can be attributed to his statement, "It's not about you or me; it's about the kids and what's best for them."

Michael Courchesne | Nipissing-Parry Sound CDSB



Michael Courchesne completed his professional education program in 1970 at the North Bay Teachers' College, receiving basic qualifications to teach in the primary, junior and intermediate divisions. He also holds a Master of Arts degree from the University of Central Michigan, a specialist in Religious Education and Junior Education Part I. Michael has been an elementary school principal since 1994. During the 2003-04 school year, he held the position of principal-curriculum. His role included supporting the board improvement planning process, curriculum development and implementation. Michael currently sits on the board's negotiating committee - elementary, the Curriculum Team, the Aboriginal Committee, RiskWatch, and the IT Committee. He has been chair of the Catholic Principals' Council-Nipissing-Parry Sound since 1999. He is currently the principal at St. Gregory Catholic School. Michael was recognized by his peers when he received the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario Principal of the Year Award in 2007.

Michael feels that, "As the principal of the school, my primary task is to establish a collective vision of who we are and where we want to be in the future." St. Gregory is a relatively small rural community school situated in Powassan, Ontario. It serves several small villages around the town of Powassan and has a student population of 269 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. All students are bussed to school. Michael was assigned as principal of this school in September of 1999. The school was

characterized by a stable student population but had a high turnover of teaching staff. Teachers were assigned to Powassan due to surplus or redundancy issues in the board's main municipality of North Bay. As a result, teaching staff were not as invested in the school as they could have been. To address the issue of staff turnover, he encouraged and gave preference to local applicants where possible. This year, six of eleven regular classroom teachers live in Powassan and/or have children enrolled in the school. All five educational assistants are community members. For the last several years, transfer requests to leave St. Gregory have been rare. The staff is invested in the school and the community.



Michael Courchesne is very knowledgeable about curriculum and instructional practices. He stays abreast of current research and is always open to improving his practice. Michael was the first in the board to move to a Balanced Day with the goal of improving student achievement in the school. He is also adept at the integration of technology to improve learning. Michael is always the first to pilot innovative technologies at his school.

Mike understands the importance of relationship building as key to the principal's role. He values parents, students and staff and always treats them with respect. He is an open, articulate, respectful person who is highly valued by his colleagues, staff, students and parents. He is able to diffuse situations and reach compromises where all parties feel they have been heard and valued. Michael has a high degree of emotional intelligence. He is sought after by his colleagues for his wisdom and experience in dealing with school related matters. He is a leader among leaders.

Michael models excellent leadership skills. He also nurtures and develops the leadership of his staff. The staff at St. Gregory School plays a role in making key instructional decisions. Evidence of this is the process that Michael followed when deciding to adopt the Balanced Day model. Staff was consulted and actively participated in the decision and implementation of the Balanced Day framework.

Parental engagement at St. Gregory School is high. Michael has had up to 65 volunteers working in the school in a variety of capacities. Programs such as *Reading Partners* provide parents with opportunities to better understand how to help their child read. Michael also maintains a strong partnership with the parish.

Mike's nomination was strongly supported by letters from his superintendent, Joanne Benard, several teachers on his staff and several parents. Linda Gordon, a classroom resource teacher at St. Gregory wrote:

His philosophy in education and life is evident throughout everything he does and it is easy to see the amount of respect he has gained throughout our school and school board. His ability to promote change and instil confidence amongst his peers, whether they are principals, superintendents, teachers or directors of education is only one of his gifts. His ability to build on each person's individual strengths and to provide the mentorship that each one of us needs and deserves is unparalleled.

Ted Laxton | Wellington CDSB



Ted Laxton has been principal of Sacred Heart Catholic School in the Wellington Catholic District School Board since September 2006. Sacred Heart serves some of the neediest families in the Wellington CDSB. Many of the 240 pupils come from low-income households. Of these, 52 have been identified through the IPRC process. Many of the students who have language impair-

ments use physical behaviours to solve conflicts because they cannot use words. Ted has worked exceptionally hard at trying to limit the negative behaviours that accompany these disabilities.

Ted's personal philosophy on making cultural change is that it needs to be worked at cooperatively. He interviewed each teacher on staff to identify their strengths and seek their input on what was most needed at the school. He also spent a great deal of time observing and listening to teachers, students and parents. His open door policy with teachers, his ninety minutes of yard duty a day and his accessibility to parents in the parking lot both before and after school, established strong relationships of trust with students, parents, educational assistants and teachers.

An immediate area of concern was student safety. Intruders to the school and property, proximity of drug trafficking in the neighbourhood and drug paraphernalia, such as used needles in the schoolyard, caused Ted to develop close partnerships with the Guelph Police Services. His concern for student safety and monitoring led directly to the drug bust of a crack house across the street from the school.

Student behaviour was another area of concern. There was a disproportionate number of suspensions for students with identified learning needs. Ted works on his personal relationships with students who misbehave to try to come to terms with the *why* behind what they do, rather than just dealing with what they have done. Ted feels that suspension is a shared responsibility



and shows failure on the part of the student, parent and school. Ted uses suspension when student behaviour affects student safety; however he always considers mitigating factors and suspension as the last resort.

Ted worked to create more structure to unstructured times and to provide more opportunities for struggling students to be successful. Introducing lunch intramurals for students in grades three to eight drew many struggling students to get involved. Ted coordinated the Grade 8 students to organize the activities and he provided the supervision. He created immediate bonds and was clearly visible each lunch hour. Ted also saw the need for more structured activities in the schoolyard. Through financial support from the Catholic school council, he purchased equipment for the playground. Through Public Health's *Recess Revival* program and the YMCA's *DASH* program, older students were trained to work with younger students on teaching and monitoring interactive games and activities in the schoolyard. Ted also introduced a peer mentorship program, which provides leadership opportunities for struggling students as approximately one-third of the leaders had behavioural and social difficulties.

Ted is constantly seeking the involvement of local businesses and community agencies in the feedback-input loop and seeks their support for students. He has collaborated with Tytler Public School in Two Rivers to establish a homework club once a week after school in the Sacred Heart library. Players from the Guelph Storm hockey club run an anti-bullying program. Members of the Guelph Youth Music Centre teach percussion instruments to students in grades one to three and a community volunteer provides the grades three to eight students with recorder lessons. Ted welcomes student volunteers from the Family and Child Studies, Sociology and Psychology departments at the University of Guelph. The school also participates in the Strong Start Program where parent volunteers assist with struggling and non-readers in the primary classrooms. Such partnerships that run at no cost to the school help some of the academically and behaviourally at-risk students who receive little resource assistance throughout the day.

Ted goes above and beyond for his students, staff, parents and community because he believes that education is a vocation of Christian service.