

Student Success/Learning to 18

An Interview with George Zegarac and Grant Clarke

Interviewed by Nelly Kelders, Program and PQP Coordinator

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PCO recently interviewed George Zegarac, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Planning & Elementary/Secondary Programs Division and Grant Clarke, Director, Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategic Policy Branch to learn about the recent Ministry of Education initiative, Student Success/Learning to 18.

A key goal in the Student Success agenda is respect for every student by recognizing that each student deserves a good outcome supported by a better learning environment for all students. There are three phases in the Student Success/Learning to 18 initiative. Phase 1 was introduced in 2003 and included:

- a Student Success Leader in every board and resources to deliver local action plans for students in grades 7-12
- funding for 105 Lighthouse Projects aimed at increasing credit accumulation and student retention
- additional investments for technological education equipment and programs
- additional locally developed compulsory credit courses and revised Grades 9, 10 applied math.

Phase 2 was introduced in May 2005 and included continued investments in Lighthouse Projects, 1300 additional high school teachers and introduction of class size limits in key courses.

Phase 3 of this program was introduced in December 2005. The intent is to support student success by changing pedagogy and culture within schools and boards; connecting with students through new and relevant learning opportunities that build on their interests and strengths; engaging the community to support student success; and ensuring effective transitions between elementary and secondary and from secondary to postsecondary, including the workplace and apprenticeship. The Ministry's goal is to raise the secondary school graduation rate in Ontario from 71 per cent (2003-04) to 85 per cent by 2010. This will effectively reduce the dropout rate by half.

Phase 3 of the Student Success Strategy represents a major shift in the direction of secondary education:

- Students will be able to acquire a Specialist High-Skills Major as part of the regular high school diploma by completing courses in specific areas such as arts, business, information technology, construction and manufacturing;
- Co-operative education choices will be expanded by building partnerships with business and community organizations;
- New dual-credit programs will be available to students so they can earn several credits towards their diplomas through college, apprenticeships and university courses;

- The introduction of a Provincial Skills Certificate that focuses on students' positive acquisition of skills rather than lack of credits;
- Additional investments in rural high schools to put them on equal footing with their urban counterparts;
- Introduction of legislation that, if passed, will raise the school leaving age in Ontario to 18 or until graduation.

A major financial commitment has been made to this initiative. The McGuinty government's Student Success Strategy is based on the belief that every student deserves a good outcome from his or her education and that the outcome should:

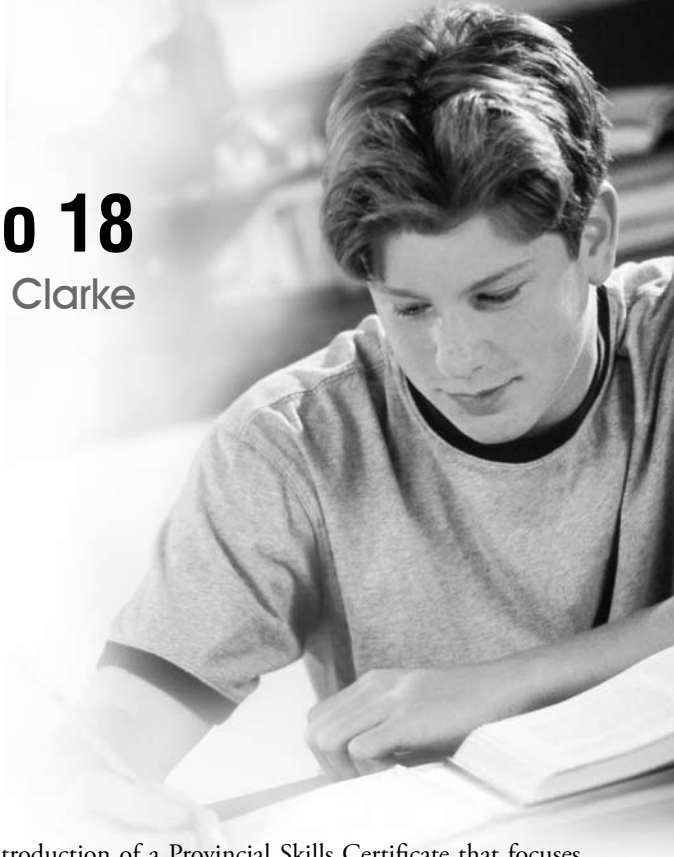
- Be the best fit possible with each student's potential.
- Instill willingness and capacity for further learning.
- Have a core of common knowledge, skills and values.

Assistant Deputy Minister George Zegarac and his team have created a number of sub-groups associated with the Working Table on Learning to 18. They want to learn how best to implement these programs across the province. The assistant deputy minister and his team are flexible in approach and open to suggestions.

"This is a change in culture and practice," Zegarac said, while pointing out that the environment in education is relatively stable at the moment and conducive to such changes.

There are, admittedly, many challenges and obstacles to overcome. Building capacity is a major challenge. Student success in both urban and rural settings is important. Equity of opportunity is a concept that is easier said than implemented. E-learning may be helpful for all students but particularly for those in more isolated areas.

Another challenge is to engage industry and business in order to make these programs successful. The ministry will be seeking more active engagement of a variety of sectors and the community to ensure viable programs that meet the needs of students and employers.



Coordination of implementation is another major challenge. Because there is so much going on in schools today implementation will be phased in - but with urgency - in order to maximize opportunities for students.

Dialoguing with the various unions in the workplace around access for students in apprenticeship or cooperative education programs is important. There is a major shift in thinking around the issue of dual credits for secondary school graduation – some from secondary school, some from community colleges or universities. There needs to be a great deal of teamwork to make this happen successfully. But the touchstone in these discussions is: What is good for students? The “big picture” must be kept in mind.

Some of these courses will not take place in academic settings but in workplace training venues. Some are concerned that it will be difficult to control the quality. George Zegarac assures us that the program must be well-structured and have quality controls. There must be a degree of rigour to ensure that these opportunities meet provincial standards.

Duty of care remains with the schools, even when students are in the workplace, as is currently the case when students go on cooperative education placements.

While the proposed legislation links student drivers licences to attendance in school or a suitable work program, this is meant as a “back stop” measure and will not be likely until the rest of the program supports are in place.

Of particular importance to the success of these initiatives is the role parents play. Roughly 80 per cent of Canadian parents expect their children are headed for university. In fact, only 33 per cent of Ontario high school students go directly to university. There is insufficient appreciation for the skills and earning capacity of those who work in trades and other occupations. Grant Clarke indicated there have to be concrete strategies that reinforce the value of the trades as honourable and lucrative work. “We have to change the dynamics of student and parent engagement,” he said.

When asked about the implications for grade 7 and 8 students it was emphasized that Student Success leaders are engaged in Grade 7 through Grade 12. The issue at this level is ensuring students’ readiness for a successful transition to high school with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy.

The Ministry of Education also understands there has been a lost capacity around technical programs in the schools. They recognize the problem and have made significant investments to rebuild this capacity. Another challenge is the cultural gap between elementary and secondary panels. Elementary principals are asking to be part of the board teams to meet with the student success leaders to ensure all levels are included. Through professional development opportunities bridges of positive relationship and communication are being built between the elementary and secondary panels.

Rural schools represent 25 per cent of all Ontario schools and serve approximately 15 per cent – or 300,000 students. The Rural Student

Success program outlines more options for rural student, such as:

- A new farming and rural “major” as part of the Specialist High Skills major will be introduced. Students will have the option to bundle six to 12 farming courses to receive the specialist designation on their diploma.
- New rural and agricultural-related cooperative courses will be developed.
- The Ministry will recognize external programs to be eligible (provided certain requirements are met) such as the 4H program.

In every case – elementary, secondary, urban and rural - the principal sets the tone and culture to embrace the agenda on behalf of students.

“Principals,” says Zegarac “are the key to the success of the program and the changing culture.” Therefore professional development for principals and vice-principals, not only in the secondary panel but also in the elementary panel, is essential to success.

Notes:


George Zegarac was appointed ADM, Strategic Planning and Elementary/Secondary Programs Division in October 2005. He has previously held numerous executive positions in a number of ministries such as Municipal Affairs and Housing, Environment, Health and Long Term Care and agencies such as Treasury and Economics. He has run some of the largest policy and operational divisions in the Ontario government. Most recently he has been leading the operational transformation of the community health sector. These skills are well suited to his new portfolio with the Ministry of Education.

Dr. Grant Clarke is the Director of Secondary Policy and Programs Branch of the Ministry of Education where he has extensive experience in leading numerous initiatives.

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