



The Learning Partnership Experience

By **Tom D'Amico**, Principal
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Wow! What a wonderful way to spend five days - going to school instead of leading a school. I was truly honoured and humbled to have been named as one of the recipients of this year's The Learning Partnership awards. I'm sure if you ask any of the 32 recipients or past award winners, they would all agree that whenever a principal is recognized, it is the community of talented staff members at the school and board level that really make the difference in the lives of the students - where it really counts.

Over the five days we had an opportunity to network and share success stories and discuss common challenges. Considering the diversity of our nation it was amazing to see how similar our issues are regardless of geographic location.

Here is a snapshot highlighting some of my many learning experiences from the week:

Dr. Avis E. Glaze, CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat defined principals as leaders who are "taking people to places that they would not have gone without you." She left us with the dream of a just and harmonized Canadian society with starting points in each classroom across Canada. She reminded us that we must never stop learning and that we are first and foremost teachers.

Tim Broadhead, CEO of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, challenged principals to create an environment where everyone can contribute. "We must have a society where everyone is expected and allowed to contribute by being engaged in their learning."

Veronica Lacey, CEO of The Learning Partnership and former deputy minister of education, focused on the diversity of students across Canada. Principals were asked "If we want to maintain our competitive advantage, how do we deal with our at-risk students?" She stressed the importance of values, culture and language in education.

Alan MacGibbon, managing partner and chief executive of Deloitte & Touche outlined the importance of "connecting with our people - it is the most important thing." His message for leaders was to have aggressive goals but be patient in achieving

them. He specified a need to be realistic optimists while being continuous learners. Finally, he stated the necessity of finding personal balance in our roles as leaders.

Michael Fullan, professor and author on educational reform, warned of the risks of rank-ordering schools based on data. He outlined the need to compare schools to other similar schools (statistical neighbours), using a standard or benchmark, not a single test score from one particular year. Having said this he also warned principals to get used to transparency and using data to show school results.

Gerald T. McCaughey, president and CEO of CIBC, outlined the high failure rates on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in Ontario last year. He mentioned that "the desire to learn in order to improve must be strong" in order for Canadians to compete in a global economy.

Ben Levin, deputy minister of education, discussed leadership in a political world. "We have a huge privilege in our profession." He mentioned the need for us to have relentless optimism and to keep the focus on what matters most for children. He also reminded us that we cannot do it all on our own, we must create an environment that builds support.

Great speakers and insightful dialogue were the norm for these five days. The speakers were interspersed by challenging activities at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management under the direction of Dr. Joseph D'Cruz, the academic director. The five CPCO recipients had the opportunity to discuss faith-based leadership and the privilege we have to call ourselves Catholic principals.

I thank my colleagues for giving me the opportunity to participate and rejuvenate with principals from across Canada. I encourage you to nominate a fellow principal next year so that they too can experience the rewards of The Learning Partnership program.

Sketch by Mary-Jane S. Jones, Principal, Regina Mundi, Toronto CDSB