

# Re-imagining Professional Learning

By **Barbara McMorrow**, Professional Development Director

There has been a subtle but significant shift in the design, development and delivery of professional learning for school and system leaders in Ontario in the past year. It reflects a much deeper understanding of the demands and complexities involved in the art of teaching, learning and leading and their interconnectedness. The emphasis is on meeting the emerging and ongoing needs of principals, and at the same time acknowledging and harnessing the tremendous knowledge and expertise that they already have. It is also about building bridges and breaking down some of the barriers that can exist in school communities, districts and the province. It is an approach to professional learning that will more readily support principals in building and sustaining schools as learning communities. It bodes well for setting the optimum environment for students to meet the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectation of becoming life-long, self-directed learners. As leaders at all levels of the system move forward in truly modeling this expectation, the success of our students is more readily ensured.

The shift is in response to principals embracing more fully their role as instructional leaders. This inclination originated at the grassroots level, but has now been co-opted by the ministry. A major catalyst for this change has been the highly successful and innovative *Leading Student Achievement: Our Principal Purpose* (LSA) project that is entering its third year. The project began with a joint proposal from the three principals' associations to the newly formed Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to enter into a partnership that would move boards and schools forward in understanding and implementing the concept of professional learning communities. The purpose of these learning communities would be to maximize student achievement.

The strategy involved establishing principals' learning teams and creating a meaningful network of support. Lead superintendents and lead principals were identified from a select number of boards from across the province representing urban, rural, large

and small schools. The leads would be offered ongoing learning opportunities at the local and the provincial level. The learning teams would agree to a set of parameters that included regular meetings and participation in workshops/learning opportunities provided by the principals' associations. In the second year more learning teams and boards were included in the project. The original cohort took on the role of mentors while at the same time continuing with their own learning. At the end of this school year 17 Catholic school boards, 41 lead principals, 17 lead supervisory officers and over 450 principals were involved in the project. Plans to expand to include all Catholic school boards are underway for the coming year.

The opportunity to experience the benefits of a project that was sustained into a second and now third year has moved us all forward in linking more clearly theory to practice and research to action. We have witnessed the creation of a momentum in tri-level educational reform that reflects lateral and vertical capacity building that is sustainable. We have seen tremendous synergy that occurs when people are given opportunities to learn, grow and be inspired. The provincial symposia (to date there have been six) have moved toward a creative balance of knowledge building through renowned experts (Fullan, Crevola, Sagor, Katz and Earle) to knowledge sharing through focused conversation and inquiry.

The development of a common language, shared vision and passionate sense of moral purpose that has emerged across the province attests to the power of team mentoring and networking. Fullan states that "None of us is as competent as all of us." Rarely have school and district leaders been so clearly given the opportunity to focus on student achievement and the encouragement to break down some of the barriers that have traditionally kept us from working and learning together. Access to archived web casts of the symposia keynotes, accompanied by facilitators' guides helped to ensure that the learning can more easily be shared at the local level. This enhances the reality of substantive and sustainable change.

The emphasis on tri-level collaboration and the focus on student achievement have helped to pave the way for another first with the advent of a partnership between CPCO, the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSSOA), 6 pilot boards and the ministry in a mentoring and coaching pilot project. The model that has emerged from the LSA project influenced the design for the delivery of the project. Over six hundred vice-principals, principals and supervisory officers will be involved as mentors, coaches and mentees in local and provincial learning opportunities.

One of the ministry requirements is that this project uses their "Leadership Framework" as a basis for the learning opportunities. This framework consists of five pillars: leader competencies and practices; building relationships and developing people; developing the organization; leading instructional program; and securing accountability. One of the first tasks of the development team was to create a working draft of a Catholic Leadership Framework that captures the distinctive nature of our Catholic schools.

Also significant in changing the landscape of professional learning has been the creation of a resource and interactive workshop, *Engaging Parents: Improving Student Achievement*. This was developed through the collaborative efforts of parents, students, teachers, principals, supervisory officers, trustees and the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE). This project has continued to be as collaborative in the delivery as it was in the development phase. A group of thirty wonderful parents, teachers and principals from across the province were trained to facilitate the workshop in a triad team. The project has helped to strengthen ICE's *Our Catholic School's Discussion* initiative. It has also been purposeful in moving the concept of shared leadership beyond the theoretical and into the practical by building the skills necessary for genuine collaboration among parents, teachers and principals. In so doing, the project attempts to re-imagine the notion of parent "involvement" as a more powerful vehicle of parent "engagement". Dr. Debra Pushor's paper, *Parent Engagement and Student Success*, 2007 offers an in-depth analysis of the difference between parent involvement and engagement.

Recently I had the privilege of experiencing this kind of authentic parent engagement in action when I participated in *Parents Coming Together*, an event initiated, planned and coordinated by parents in two school communities. Malka Calderon, Manuela Pivetta and Mario Ricci, the organizing team of parents from St. Gerard Majella and St. Philip Neri Catholic schools (Toronto CDSB), in collaboration with their principals, Liliana Vani and Joanne Greco, created an opportunity that honoured the knowledge and expertise of their parents in a culturally responsive way.

Parents were immersed in activities involving high yield strategies for literacy and numeracy in workshops that are usually only the purview of educators. Teachers gave of their time to interact with students and their younger siblings in fun activities that involved games, face painting and a magic show so that parents from two ethnically diverse and challenging communities in north-west Toronto could meet one another, share their stories and learn together. It was a truly wonderful and inspiring evening that was

enjoyed by all. The interconnectivity between teaching, learning and leading was evident as the traditional silos came tumbling down and shared leadership became shared learning.

An essential aspect of this emerging dynamic in professional learning is a deep respect for all stakeholders in the educational arena. This means inviting all to the table. Margaret Wheatley in *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* maintains that living systems contain their own solutions:

*To find these solutions, the system needs to connect to more of itself. This means meeting with those we've excluded or avoided, those we never imagined could share similar interest. Deep inside a school, we often forget how many others care about what is going on in the classroom. When we invite these people in from the periphery, when we find ways to sit and listen to them, it is a wonderful surprise to discover our connections. We realize that we have common aspirations for our children, that we share many things in common despite our many differences.*

Catholic school and system leaders are now more than at any other time in our history, suitably poised to find the solutions that will mobilize all of us in truly becoming communities of practice and more fully realizing the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations.

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