

LEADING LEARNING TO 18

The Principal's Role in Student Success

Creating and sustaining schools that are authentic learning communities rooted in our Catholic faith, celebrating the worth and dignity of each student, and focusing on working collaboratively with colleagues, parents and the parish to maximize the achievements of all students, are integral aspects of Catholic school leadership. As a result the core components of the *Student Success/Learning to 18* initiative and the goal to “reach every student” clearly resonate with Catholic principals. The Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations, which have been embraced for over a decade by Catholic educators, challenge us as leaders to continue to learn, to question and to innovate. They challenge us to be self-directed, responsible, lifelong learners.

In January and February 2008 CPCO, in partnership with the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and the Ministry of Education, hosted a series of symposia throughout the province. The purpose of the symposia was to acknowledge the critical role that principals play in putting policy into practice and to support principals in understanding and effectively implementing the key concepts of the *Student Success/Learning to 18* initiatives. Each symposium consisted of two sessions led by the Ministry and two by CPCO and OPC members from the local region. The regional setting for each event was an integral part of the delivery and development strategy. Appreciating more deeply the community and context in which the initiatives are to be implemented is crucial. The location played a role in shaping some of the specific topics that the facilitators addressed. However, each symposium had a similar framework:

- a comprehensive overview of the various initiatives by the ministry staff;
- a presentation of the data the Ministry had gathered;
- a focus on the sharing of promising practices;

- providing an opportunity for dialogue and collaboration; and
- gathering meaningful feedback from principals on the successes and challenges involved in implementing the key elements of the student success initiative.

Over 50 secondary school principals and vice-principals took on the role of facilitating the learning of their colleagues. Topics ranged from Bill 52 to managing effective student success teams to timetabling to Aboriginal issues. The principal facilitators also led the discussion on case studies that highlighted specific implementation challenges of the many initiatives.

Results from the evaluations indicated 83 per cent of participants found the symposia to be above average/excellent. The evaluation forms indicated an overwhelming agreement that these sessions are the type of professional learning that is needed. A consensus suggests the symposia provided valuable opportunities to collaborate, network and dialogue with colleagues. However, there was an overwhelming request for more dialogue time. Principals repeatedly noted the time spent talking with colleagues, both from similar and dissimilar schools and boards was vital to their learning. Overall the professional learning from the symposia was described as “meaningful, extremely thoughtful and provoking.”

The feedback from principals across the province emphasized the need for ongoing support that provides an opportunity for principals to share the experiences and dialogue with one another in a focused manner on a specific topic that embodies many of the challenges inherent in *actioning* the initiatives. This led to the development of a series of web conferences *From Vision to Practice* that explored the critical role timetabling plays in structuring student success.

The web conference allowed for principals, vice-principals and their school teams to connect with colleagues from across the province in a highly interactive learning session from the comfort of their own offices. The opportunity to stretch their learning using technology met with a very positive response. Curriculum Services Canada provided one-on-one training and support to all the participants before, during and after the web conference. The web conference put the principal development team and principal facilitators at the frontier of their own learning. The participants' experience, knowledge, desire for practical and relevant learning, along with their passion for student success, was well complimented by the skill and technical ability of the Curriculum Services Canada team. The web conference principal team members were Helen Beck - OPC, Jan Coomber - Peel DSB, Ron Crocco - York CDSB, Frank Kewin - Simcoe Muskoka CDSB, Keith Knapp - Peel DSC and Barbara McMorrow - CPCO. The Curriculum Services Canada team members were Amy Coupal, Jennifer Coens and Michelle Lemieux.

The immediate and overwhelming response to a new and innovative mode of professional learning clearly demonstrates the keen commitment that principals have to staying leading edge and ensuring the optimum opportunities for their students. The first web conference filled up within twenty-four hours of being posted. Two more were added and a fourth is planned for

September. Other topics for web conferences are also being considered for the coming school year. Some suggestions from the participants include alternative timetabling, attendance issues and credit intervention models. Every single person involved in the web conferences, expressed interest in participating in future ones. Feedback from the participants highlighted the web conference as an excellent vehicle for professional learning and for being a convenient and effective way to share promising practices, communicate challenges and build a network.

There is a definite commitment on the part of the associations and the Ministry to continue to build on the momentum established by both the winter regional symposia and the spring web conferences. The critical leadership role that principals play in ensuring Catholic faith, community and culture, in setting directions, in building relationships and developing people, in developing the organization, in leading the instructional program and in securing accountability is being more fully appreciated by the policy makers.

Visit the CPCO website on Professional Learning for further information on Student Success/Learning to 18 at <http://www.cpco.on.ca/Learningto18/introduction.html>



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