

Serving on the Student Success Commission



Twelve people began a journey twenty-four months ago to be guiding forces to bring about change. The then Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy called them together at Queen's Park to be debriefed on their mandate. The government's mission was to improve student success and to increase graduation rates. In an unprecedented move, the government established the *Student Success Commission* (SSC) to help make this happen. Hence, a new and exciting process began for policy development where management and teacher federations came together to provide input and direction to the Minister of Education before a policy was announced. The SSC would serve as the central mechanism to advise the Minister on implementation strategies for student success initiatives.

The *Terms of Reference* were soon developed to provide the working guidelines for the Commission, to identify the items to address and the time lines. Once these were established, the real work of the commissioners began – the discussions and debate on the initiatives that hoped to improve success for students at risk. The SSC sought consensus, but given the diversity of the commissioners and the constituent groups they represented, a provision was made for a member to dissent from a majority opinion.

The initial focus of the SSC was on the effective deployment of the phase 1 and phase 2 teacher roll out of resources for student success. Models needed to be in place. An inconsistency in the deployment of these teachers was identified in boards of education. What were these teachers supposed to do? The SSC immediately began the

many long hours of weekly meetings to draft the guidelines for the role of the Student Success Teachers in schools and the requirements of the Credit Recovery program (CR).

During these discussions there were times when we did reach consensus and times when we struggled, but no one gave up, as everyone kept focused on the vision of our role to serve students at risk. We were problem solvers and we knew there was a solution. How to do this, working within the confines of collective agreements, within a board's budget constraints, within the student grants and within the secondary school culture of resistance to change, seemed at times impossible. With perseverance and a dedication among the commissioners to make it happen, the Credit Recovery program recommendations evolved.

The role of the Student Success Teacher needed to be defined. I was very fortunate to be in a situation where the former superintendent for Student Success with the London District Catholic School Board, Wilma de Rond, chose St. Mary's High School, as a pilot site for a Student Success Teacher. This allowed us to explore the concept of developing a *Student Success Team*, whose goal was to begin to shift the culture of the school to where every teacher would focus on success for all students. It was crucial for the vision to be shared by all before the Credit Recovery initiative was launched. A team composed of representatives from a number of departments, the Student Success teacher and I was formed. Over time, change happened. The experience of the St. Mary's High School Student Success Team was shared with the Commission. The commissioners

The Student Success Commission was composed of representatives from six management groups and four federations

- **English Language Catholic Board** - Jamie McCracken, director, Ottawa Catholic District School Board (OCDSB)
- **English Language Public Board** - Martha Rogers, director, Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB)
- **French Language Board** - Louise d'Amour, director, Conseil scolaire de district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario (CSPGNO)
- **English Language Public Board** - Ken Thurston, superintendent, York District School Board (YDSB)
- **English Language Public Board** - Randy Palermo, principal, Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
- **English Language Catholic Board** - Helen Reid, principal, London District Catholic School Board (LDCSB)
- **Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)** - Ruth Dawson, executive assistant
- **Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)** - Jeff Heximer, department head Collective Bargaining and Susan Perry, department head Professional Development
- **Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)** - Dale Leckie, director Protective Services Department and Bill Reith, director Educational Services Department
- **Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)** - Pierre Léonard, directeur général adjoint

agreed that for student success initiatives to work, a team was essential to the process. The SSC focused on defining the roles of the Student Success Teacher and the Student Success Team. As a result the second critical memorandum was developed.

In four months two operation policies emerged and memorandums to school boards on Student Success Teachers and Credit Recovery were issued. With two major items completed, the attention of the Commission focused its remaining tenure on providing input on other student success initiatives: dual credits, high skills major, external credits, provincial skills certificate, transitions and equity. To fully discuss these complex issues there was a constant interplay between the Learning to 18 Working Table, the Partnership Table, the SSC and the minister's office. Tough issues were tackled, always within the spirit of collegiality and respect. In two very busy years much was accomplished. The success of the Commission was due to the unique skills and gifts brought to the table by each commissioner. A synergy was present and it was evident that the whole was, indeed, greater than the sum of the parts.

Serving on the Commission was an invaluable experience for me. I gained three insights. First, management and unions can sit down and develop policy when they share the same vision. Second, dissension allows all input to inform a resolution that is for the good of all. Third, management and unions working on initiatives in the very early stages facilitates a greater possibility for successful implementation

During my tenure on the Commission, I provided on-going updates to the CPCO executive council and sought their input. As well, I was invited to the monthly meetings of the regional Student Success Leaders to give a report. To be involved directly with policy making at the ministry level and at the same time to implement these initiatives at the school level was truly a rewarding experience.

Serving on the Student Success Commission was, most certainly, a highlight in my career and it was a pleasure to work with all the members of the Commission. Time and commitment given to this organization was most worthwhile. I am appreciative of

former Minister Gerard Kennedy, for appointing the Commission, and for the continuation of its tenure under Minister Kathleen Wynne. This innovative move of creating the Student Success Commission where management and federations worked together to provide input at the policy-making stage did indeed facilitate change. It was an honour and privilege to serve.

Contact Helen Reid at h.reid@ldcsb.on.ca for further information.



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