

Embracing a Mentoring Culture

Powerful Job-embedded Professional Learning and a Way Forward

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The mentoring and coaching pilot project that the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA) and six Catholic school boards in partnership with the Ministry of Education launched in March 2007 paved the way and set the standards for a province-wide mentoring initiative. The CPCO-led pilot project received excellent, positive feedback from all participants. It also was lauded in the independent evaluation performed by PMC Inc. The very successful pilot project involved Algonquin-Lakeshore, Halton, Hamilton-Wentworth, Huron-Perth, Northeastern, Toronto and the Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association. In all there were 625 participants. The inclusion of supervisory officers created the opportunity to move systems thinking and shared leadership from theory into practice.

School and system leaders learned together the skills necessary for successful mentoring and coaching. For successful leaders, skills such as setting learning goals, building trust, listening deeply, asking powerful questions and providing meaningful feedback are often intuitive. However we discovered that explicit instruction in these areas helped us to improve not only our own skills but also those of others. We came to realize in a profound way that the fundamental skills of mentoring and coaching are critical to assisting educational leaders in embracing more fully the role of instructional leader. The feedback from the participants demonstrated that building capacity in these areas resonates deeply with directors, supervisory officers, principals and vice-principals. They greatly appreciate the transferable nature of the foundational skills and their application to all areas of their leadership and their personal growth.

The many benefits to the mentor, the mentee and the system in defining mentoring as "facilitating learning relationships" were evident throughout the project. Repeatedly participants articulated that their sense of efficacy and confidence grew as they entered into a mentoring relationship focused on learning. Participants

involved in the training noted that adopting an approach of inquiry rather than telling helped to clarify in a deeper way their own actions and beliefs. The PMC Inc. report cited the following as benefits for individuals:

support in learning the day-to-day skills involved in leading a school or district increased confidence; better understanding of the role of school/system leader; opportunities for professional reflection; and a reduced sense of isolation.

The PMC Inc. report recorded that system benefits included: *improved performance of new administrators; capacity building; support of system priorities; and access to external ideas and support. In the longer term participants anticipated the raising of the quality of instructional leadership across the system and increasing the pool of aspiring leaders.*

The CPCO/OCSOA pilot project served to strengthen both the lateral and vertical capacity of the Catholic school system. Our collaborative, innovative and tri-level approach helped to lay the groundwork for creating mentoring cultures that clearly facilitated learning relationships that went far beyond the notion of the "old folks teaching the new folks." It also moved us forward in breaking down some of the barriers that limit our ability to engage fully in meeting the complex challenges of educational leadership in our time.

Deputy Minister Steve Marshall highlights in the first issue of *In Conversation* "that the learning is the work." Embracing a mentoring culture that is grounded in the belief that our core business is learning, ironically, is not an approach that comes as easily as one might think in the educational arena. The bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of our educational system often mitigates against a genuine openness to learning. Rigid timetables, collective agreements, the physical architecture of our buildings and the sheer business of the demands of administration all distract us from actually being leaders who are learners and who are focused on the learning of others. Too often the learning

has been relegated to professional development that is often disconnected, marginalized and left in the hands of a few. Facilitating the learning of educators in a manner that will actually transform thinking and practice requires purposeful planning, practical application and inspiration.

The series of symposia offered last year through the pilot project featured such renowned scholars as Margaret Wheatley (*Leadership for Uncertain Time*), Mark Gerzon (*Leading Through Conflict*) and Patrick Duignan (*Educational Leadership: Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions*). The symposia helped to keep the momentum of the project going and kept the focus on learning. They provided an excellent opportunity to hear from researchers and experts and to be inspired by their lived passion for learning. Equally as valuable, the symposia allowed for meaningful dialogue, focused conversations and the sharing of experiences between leaders from Catholic boards across the province who were all engaged in implementing a formal system-wide mentoring initiative.

The first CPCO/OCSOA summer institute featuring Gary Bloom (*Blended Coaching*) saw eighty Catholic directors, supervisory officers, principals and vice-principals come together for three days of intense and highly rewarding learning. There was also a return visit of Patrick Duignan in October 2008.

These excellent networking and shared learning opportunities have deepened the sense of connection and helped to create a more tangible community of practice among Catholic school and system leaders. CPCO will continue to build on this sense of being a community of practice with a winter institute with Bloom in January 2009 and the introduction of Dr. Robert Kegan at the *Immunity to Change* workshop in April 2009.

CPCO's approach to creating and sustaining a formal, sustainable mentoring initiative reflects integrative thinking in embracing the notion of a blended approach to mentoring and coaching and combining the knowledge, skills and practices of both strategies. Our emphasis is on the mindsets and skills that promote successful mentoring and coaching because of their tremendous relevance and applicability to Catholic school and system leaders striving to action genuine learning communities. The experience of the pilot project confirmed our belief that mentoring focused on learning with the goal of maximizing the achievements of *all* students can move us far beyond a buddy system that may tend more towards survivorship than leadership. A vision that challenges us to be transformational in our leadership is eloquently articulated in *Building Bethlehem Everywhere*: "We are called not to be technicians of survivorship but guardians of life at the gates of wonder."

The challenge to build Bethlehem everywhere and the depth and breadth of the complexities involved in this adaptive challenge, are captured in the Catholic Leadership Framework for principals and vice-principals and for supervisory officers that emerged as a result of the pilot project. The Institute for Education Leadership was in

the process of endorsing the Ontario Leadership Framework, when the ministry requested that it be a foundational component of the mentoring and coaching pilot project. This became a wonderful opportunity for us as a Catholic community to make the Framework our own by infusing it with a distinct vision of Catholic leadership rooted in the Gospel and our faith. We sought input from all our Catholic partners as well as practicing principals, vice-principals, supervisory officers and directors.

The emergence of a distinctly Catholic Leadership Framework is another tremendously positive outcome of the pilot project of which we are especially proud. The articulation of a distinctly Catholic frame of reference in a public document is important. It has the potential for Catholic school and system leaders to forge a path forward that builds on the proud history and tradition of Catholic education in Ontario. It recognizes with more openness and less fear the realities of a changing demographic and an evolving society. It offers new insights into leadership and learning.

It challenges us in a new way and in an open forum to be, in word and deed, who we say we are.

The ministry's *Mentoring for Newly Appointed School Leaders* initiative now being offered to all boards is an integral part of the *Ontario Leadership Strategy*. Announced

officially by Deputy Minister Steve Marshall on October 3, 2008 the *Ontario Leadership Strategy* is an ambitious and comprehensive action plan that will be phased in over a period of three years. Critical components of the strategy include Principal Performance Appraisal, the Leadership Framework, Terms and Conditions, the Principals' Congress, the Premier's Leaders to Leaders initiative, Succession Planning and ongoing support for the Institute for Education Leadership. The emphasis on the leadership of the principal reflects an international focus on a growing body of research that indicates that the principal is a key factor in improving student achievement and in increasing confidence in publicly-funded education.

The work that CPCO has done in shifting thinking and practice in the design and delivery of job-embedded professional learning, will ensure us a strong voice in shaping these critical components. The tremendous success of the CPCO/OCSOA mentoring and coaching pilot project and the promising results of the evolving and highly praised *Leading Student Achievement* project, provide a solid body of evidence and data for the kind of impact that we can have when we choose to embrace our potential as a learning organization and a community of practice. If we are to guarantee our members that we are not only relevant, timely and responsive to emerging needs, but are in a position to influence and shape policy, then perhaps it is time to re-imagine some of our current processes. We should consistently reflect what it means to be an organization of Catholic education leaders motivated by a deep and abiding love for Christ, a passion for learning and a belief in the power of education to transform individuals and communities.

For information and resources on mentoring visit the CPCO Mentoring and Coaching web page: www.cpco.on.ca/MentoringandCoaching/intro.html.