



A Success Story

John F. Kennedy said, “A rising tide floats all boats.” At St. Joseph Catholic High School in south Ottawa, we certainly can relate to this idea. For the past three years, we have seen increasing success in two key areas of the curriculum, our EQAO results in both the Grade 9 Mathematics Assessment and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), and our credit accumulation statistics. These good news stories have buoyed the entire school and have played a role in other successes. Teacher collaboration is widely evident and there is a growing comfort with the term, professional learning community and all its possibilities.

I was elated when appointed to St. Joseph in January 2007. In its short history, St. Joseph had earned a reputation, of having had much success with literacy rates and pass-fail rates. I joined a community of enthusiastic educators who are open to learning new methods of teaching and happy to share what works. They inspire me daily and it is our students, who gain the most.

St. Joseph Catholic High school has a population of 1,450 students and 84 teachers. It is aligned from grades 7 to 12, with our grades 7 and 8 students on a five-day cycle of six 50-minute classes per day and our secondary students on a semester schedule with four 75-minute classes per day.

As administrators, we are all aware of the role that school data has played in the past few years in education. Extensive and detailed data on student achievement is provided to schools with the hope that school improvement plans will address the areas of concern where growth is required. This includes EQAO data or data that our boards are able to provide regarding credit accumulation, pass-fail rates in various subject areas and gender gap analysis. I

have seen how we can benefit greatly by embracing the story in the data.

EQAO Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

Our story at St. Joseph has been one of trying to reduce the anxiety that the data can conjure and attempting to play with strategies that will have a direct impact on our results. For example, in 2007 the data indicated that a significant number of our male students were struggling with portions of the OSSLT, namely the multiple choice questions and questions dealing with their ability to relate the text to themselves and the world. Through a concerted effort to address these and other gaps, our results have dramatically improved in these areas. As educators, we need to ask the question, “How do we know that what we have planned to improve student learning is actually working?” This important question forces professional dialogue. This dialogue is paramount as teachers look at student work and decide what is working and what is not working. Teacher intuition is nurtured and this is reflected in our results.

The literacy team at St. Joseph is an exceptional group of educators who have developed a number of effective strategies to enhance literacy rates among our learners. Friday homeroom literacy activity sheets, mandatory school-wide reading blocks, word walls, word of the day, skill of the week and other strategies have gone a long way to promoting student confidence and understanding, especially in testing situations. We have all heard it said before that schools that do well with EQAO testing are likely just “teaching to the test.” This is an interesting phrase, “teaching to the test.” When we talk about expectation-based learning, it seems clear and obvious. Tell them what you expect and show them exemplars, teach them what you want them to know and assess whether or not they have

learned what you expected they would learn. Teaching and testing are congruent with learning and giving students every opportunity to excel in a testing situation is clearly the goal. Our teachers have made full use of the EQAO website that offers resources including sample test questions and an excellent planning and preparation guide. Our results have convinced us that this is an effective strategy.

The following chart indicates the improved success rate among our Grade 10 population who successfully obtained their literacy requirement.

Year	OSSLT Success Rate %
2006 - 07	87.8
2007 - 08	90.3
2008 - 09	92.9

EQAO Grade 9 Mathematics

In the area of mathematics, we have recently enjoyed exceptional success. St. Joseph has been featured as a profiled school on the EQAO website. This has given us reason to celebrate and has encouraged us to stay the course. Parents, teachers, students, administrators and others, all feel part of this success story and contribute to the positive direction in which we are heading. An example of initiative and collaboration is the story of the Grade 8 math exam. Grade 8 students typically do not write exams in Ontario. When Ian Fischer, the grades 7 and 8 math curriculum leader, suggested they experience an exam, I was hesitant. His idea was to use the exam room that was set up for our high school exams, before it was dismantled. Accommodating 250 students in our gymnasium was the easy part; frightening our younger students was my worry. Ian and math teachers from both panels worked hard to develop a meaningful task that would provide them with a great deal of information concerning the Grade 8

math program and student learning. In addition, an exam experience was thought to help alleviate testing anxiety for future testing experiences, namely the Grade 9 EQAO Mathematics test. Furthermore, Ian and his department developed a series of questions the students would answer in SurveyMonkey immediately following the mock exam experience. Questions such as, "Do you like math?" and "How did you find the exam experience?" helped give the teachers anecdotal evidence of how the students were feeling and where student learning could be improved. Collectively the teachers have indicated that this feedback was very useful and will help shape future teaching. As Ian notes,

The information gathered from the exam is important as it influences how we teach the Grade 8 math course in the following year. For example, if we find that several students are not completing a particular question or topic correctly, we re-adjust our long range plans to allow for further development and detailed investigation into these missed concepts in the following year. We then look at the results in the following year to see if our changes have made an impact. This experience of working together to improve the way that the mathematics program is implemented has been a success not only for student learning but also for the professional development of the teachers.

Year	Gr. 9 Applied Math Levels 3 & 4	Gr. 9 Academic Math Levels 3 & 4
2004 - 05	17%	66%
2005 - 06	36%	70%
2006 - 07	13%	72%
2007 - 08	60%	76%
2008 - 09	49%	80%

The secondary teachers and most specifically the Grade 9 mathematics teachers, recognize the amount of effort that has gone into preparing the students for their Grade 9 experience well before they arrive in Grade 9. There is obvious evidence of the solid foundation the students have received in their previous math programs and therefore readiness for the curriculum covered by provincial testing is apparent. As I state in the featured EQAO article on St. Joseph,

Our efforts do not begin in Grade 9. The most important dynamic is the ongoing collaboration and communication among staff. By working together to develop and share strategies, we are experiencing ongoing success. Ours is truly a grades 7 to 12 success story.

Credit Accumulation

While our credit accumulation statistics reflect a demographic of strong parent involvement and successful pedagogy, it was still evident that there was opportunity for greater success among our student population. A significant indicator of student success lies in the number of credits a student has gained by the end of the second year in high school, Grade 10. With a mandatory eight credits per year, sixteen credits is the goal for all students by the end of year two. In 2007-08, our data showed that we had 84.8 per cent of Grade 10 students who had achieved sixteen credits. This statistic presented an opportunity for improved credit accumulation results and much dialogue ensued as to how we could best meet our new goal. The Credit Accumulation Team (CAT) was born with representation from the teaching staff, Student Services, including our student success teacher and resourceteachers, and administration. Collaboration, creative thinking and student advocacy are highly evident at these team meetings as individual students are discussed. Effective plans proposing credit recovery, credit rescue, tutoring and social supports have proven to be highly effective. Our 2008-09 data showed that we had closed the gap by 6.2 percentage points with a new credit accumulation rate of 91 per cent for our Grade 10 students!

As principal, I am continually learning about the importance of encouraging initiative and collaboration. The exam experience and the CAT team are examples of the many well thought out strategies that enhance student learning at St. Joseph. This school has developed a confidence in offering creative student opportunities for enhanced learning, even though at times delayed because of principal hesitation. Some of these include: focus programs giving students the opportunity to learn how to build a house or study broadcast media; dual-track credit programs with students gaining college credits; exciting cooperative education opportunities; and achievement centre success stories.

In our Catholic school there is a sincere attempt to elevate students to reach their God-given potential and celebrate when they do. JFK was indeed right about the rising tide!

For further information contact Steve McCabe at Stephen.McCabe@ottawacatholicschools.ca.

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