

In 1969 I was appointed to the position of Principal of Royal Arthur Elementary School in Montreal's Little Burgundy district which was considered, in the language of the day, to be an inner-city school. The area served by the school has since been razed and up-tempo condos have replaced the cold-water flats built in the early 1800's. Every year the reading and mathematics scores of the students at Royal Arthur School were published in the board-wide testing program of the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, and every year they were the lowest in a board of over 150 schools. To make a difference, we undertook a search of the educational research done on similar schools serving the children of urban poverty in North America. A study authored by Ken Weber proved of interest. Weber studied 2,300 inner-city elementary schools in the U.S. and found only four that were teaching students to read at grade level.

Meeting the Challenge of

Thirty years later, the thousands of research studies on school effectiveness come to the same conclusions as Weber did in the early 1970's. An effective school is a school with strong leadership, staff involvement in decision-making, parental involvement in the school's mission, and an emphasis on student learning and student academic success.

To help schools and school districts replicate these effective schools, many school improvement initiatives have been launched. Success for All under the direction of Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University and the Coalition of Essential Schools developed by Ted Sizer at Brown University, are examples of school improvement projects where universities and schools have networked for student success. The Manitoba School Improvement Program, developed with the support of the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation, is a Canadian example. The British Columbia Public School Accreditation Program and the excellent work of the Halton and Durham District School Boards in Ontario over the past ten years, also deserve mention. Our two Canadian experts, Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, are considered worldwide as leaders in the school improvement field.

The Canadian Education Association played an important part in helping Canadian educators understand the intricacies of school improvement by inviting Peter Mortimer to the CEA-sponsored Short Course in Banff during the 1980's. Peter Mortimer and Michael Rutter were part of the *Fifteen Thousand*

Hours study based on inner-city London schools which showed again that schools and their staffs do make a difference. Dr. Louise Stoll, one of Dr. Mortimer's associates from the University of London, was invited to a subsequent Short Course to share her research findings and to explain the work she had been doing with the Halton School Board in Ontario. I was fortunate to have taken part in both those sessions which kindled in me an interest in school improvement initiatives.

One of the school improvement measures that has emerged in Quebec is the Partnership on School Improvement and the Quebec School Improvement Network (QSIN). The Partnership is made up of representatives from the Ministry of Education, McGill University, the Quebec Association of School Boards, the Quebec Association of School Administrators, and the teachers' unions. By pooling development funds, the Partnership has created a model to help school improvement initiatives throughout the province. Dr. Ann Kilcher was hired to train a group of facilitators; under her guidance and direction facilitators have begun to work with school staffs to guide them through their school improvement initiatives.

As part of my own professional development, I requested and received the facilitators' training on Friday nights and Saturdays over a period of three years. I served as Dr. Kilcher's assistant while she presented workshops to Network schools. I found the experience to be extremely valuable — it enabled me to see the problems teachers were facing daily in their schools and gave me an

insight into the gap between school board policy and classroom delivery.

The initial workshops with school personnel explore group decision-making strategies to establish guiding principles, student-exit profiles, school visions and mission statements. Through the QSIN, the school staff and members of the newly formed Governing Boards' are eligible for a series of workshops that help the school establish its issues, choose its short- and long-term objectives and develop its educational project.

The aim of the QSIN is to help schools develop a process of continuous evaluation and improvement by offering annual workshops on professional days and networking sessions that allow school personnel to share their experiences with others to sustain the initial improvement strategies and momentum. Each year, summer institutes are planned to offer Network members professional development in areas of best practices such as behaviour management, co-operative learning, scheduling strategies that allow for shared decision-making, improved student learning and various other models of school improvement.

The educational reform taking place in Quebec has placed student success as the goal, arguing that to gain employment in the year 2010, a minimal requirement will be a high school diploma. At the present time, only 65% of Quebec high school students graduate. The target for the reform is 85%. To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education has engaged the whole community in the process. Powers previously held by school boards have

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School Improvement By Scott Conrod

been assigned to the schools where Governing Boards have been established. The revised *Education Act* has allowed for schools to be different and has challenged each school to focus on the success of all students. But effective schools cannot be legislated — it is now up to each school team to develop the skills and processes to meet the challenge. A project to train Governing Boards has been sent to all English school boards by the QSIN.

The Quebec School Improvement Network can help schools assess their needs, choose their critical issues and develop educational projects that lead to increased student success. The schools in the Network have developed many interesting strategies to meet individual student and teacher needs. Bancroft Elementary School, in the heart of Montreal, launched a project to identify troubled, acting-out, at-risk children and a plan to give these children the attention they seek. Each week, teachers were responsible for “catching” five of the identified children while they were acting appropriately. The targeted children were given a “Gotcha” when found doing something nice. They didn’t know what had hit them, and the results were positive. The students created their own “Gotcha” system and gave them to their teachers whenever they did something kind or helpful.

To give the teachers some planning opportunities, volunteer parents were asked to supervise the senior students for a few hours every second week to allow a group of grade 5 and 6 teachers to co-ordinate the next semester’s units in math, social studies and language arts. Another school in the Network chose to

explore a block scheduling model that would reduce the number of classes a student would take in a given day and thus increase the time a student could receive in supervised study and practice.

In phase one of the QSIN, two high schools and six elementary schools took part in the introductory workshops and continued the process. In phase two, six more elementary schools and one high school joined the Network. As of January 1999, we are in phase five and there are 14 schools in the program, three high schools and 11 elementary schools.

The following is a brief listing of school improvement goals developed by the staff in various schools: to improve student writing in French and English over the next two years; to improve staff communication; to implement a consistent code of behaviour; to reorganize the school to accommodate student learning styles; to co-ordinate and revise the science program; to implement Reading Recovery; to explore new teaching strategies recommended by recent research findings; to increase teamwork in the school; to co-ordinate the French program. All of these goals were not top-down ideas imposed on the school from the central office, they were decisions reached by consensus of the entire staff.

In 1997-98, Buckingham Elementary School established four goals and the following strategies to meet them. The first goal was to review and co-ordinate a coherent, continuous reading program by implementing the First Steps Program; organizing special reading events; organizing teacher-sharing opportunities and increasing literacy units. The second goal was to increase

technological skills and usage of staff and student skills by setting teacher technology goals; having each teacher learn two new pieces of software; developing a continuum of computer skills and tasks and tracking student computer projects by means of portfolios. Goal three was to increase student social skills and responsibility by focusing on kindness, caring and helpfulness; emphasizing positive recognition; maintaining a clean learning environment, and investigating the social skills programs available on the market. Goal four was to improve meetings and to increase shared decision-making in the school by implementing effective guidelines for all meetings; writing a bi-weekly information bulletin; learning a variety of shared decision-making strategies, and organizing a buddy system to improve communications.

At Chateauguay Valley Regional High School, one of the very first Quebec schools to be involved in the Network, staff meetings and professional development sessions are no longer imposed from above. Since the training sessions, they have been designed and run by members of the teaching staff and a significantly higher interest has been shown by all staff. The high school decided to explore block scheduling and semestering models and has willingly moved from its old scheduling model to a more flexible timetable that helps teachers to teach more co-operatively while giving the students the time they need to master their subjects.

Innovative ideas don’t, of course, only come from network schools. Five years ago at Massey-Vanier High

School, the philosophy of school improvement led the staff and administration to explore a discipline model where teachers could directly suspend students, by-passing the administration. What was thought to be a crazy idea in the beginning had some very positive benefits to the school. First, the teacher who suspended the student had to meet with the parent to discuss the situation, thus giving a first-hand account of the incident that originally caused the problem. Second, the administration was free to solve problems before they occurred instead of being bogged down with discipline all the time. The principal and vice-principal both reported a decrease in the number of suspensions and the administrators and teachers felt better about their roles in the school.

There are many other strategies being planned and implemented by Network schools that have come from shared decision-making sessions and taken forward by action groups. A quick review of the many goals that have emerged shows the ideas are not all extraordinary. They are very doable suggestions developed by teachers for implementation in the classroom.

To join the Quebec School Improvement Network, school staff must make a two- to three-year commitment in order to participate in a systemic change and improvement process. At least 75% of the school faculty must have voted, by secret ballot, in favour of working on school-wide improvements. School board and Governing Board support must be acquired and maintained. Three or four of the 15 pedagogical days per year must be devoted to school improvement. The annual fee of \$200 must be obtained or come from school-based resources. An annual school improvement plan and an annual review must be developed and submitted to the Network. Representatives of the school must participate in the networking sessions presented by QSIN.

By focusing on school success, investigating best practices proven by educational research, and establishing priorities in a shared decision-making

model, schools in the Quebec School Improvement Network will be able to meet the challenge. The graduating class of 2010 is currently in grade 1. If we are to achieve our goal and increase high school graduation by 20%, we have to begin now. ■

1 In Quebec, each school or vocational education centre has a Governing Board made up of an equal number of parents and school staff. Members of the community and students in the second cycle of secondary school may also attend, but do not have the right to vote. The Board, which is always presided over by a parent, is responsible for approving a number of issues including the development, implementation and evaluation of the school's educational project, the approach for the implementation of the basic school regulation, the time allocation for each subject, the student supervision policy, the school budget and the use of premises. The Governing Board is necessarily consulted on other issues, including the choice of school textbooks and instructional materials, school closings, selection criteria for the appointment of the principal and the school's confessional status.

Further information on the Quebec School Improvement Network can be obtained from Brenda Laow, QSIN Co-ordinator — phone/fax (514) 344-8249 brendal@sympatico.ca

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