

By Paula Dunning

CASE STUDY

Overcoming the Odds: A Case Study in Success

Background

Driftwood Public School is a K-5 primary school, surrounded by tidy, middle-class bungalows on the north side of Toronto. But the ambiance of its immediate location is deceptive. Near the centre of the Jane-Finch community, the school draws its student population almost entirely from the nearby highrises and townhouses which have become home to many of Canada's newest immigrant and refugee families. The area is one of the most densely populated and lowest income areas in Metropolitan Toronto.

Sixty percent of the school's 700 students speak a language other than English as a first language, and one in five have been in Canada less than five years; 30 language groups are represented among the students and families at Driftwood, with the majority speaking Tamil, Vietnamese, or Somali. Many parents speak no English, and some are illiterate in their own first language. A large number of parents and children come from countries that are experiencing, or have recently experienced, war, social chaos or social conflict. Many of them are unfamiliar with Canadian methods for access to regular facilities and services.

This is not the usual profile of a high-performance school — a fact which has not escaped the attention of Toronto educators.

The Issue

As part of the former North York Board of Education, Driftwood Public School has been participating in system-wide assessments since the early 1990s. In 1994-95, its grade 3 students scored 18 percentile points below the system average in reading comprehension; its grade 5 students scored 13 percentile points below the system average. In 1996-97, only 59% of Driftwood's grade 3 students ranked in the top three levels of the provincial reading test, 17% below the system average; and only 54% ranked in the top three levels of the provincial math test, 21% below the system average.

These are the results which many would expect from a school population with a high percentage of "at-risk" students, but they were not good enough for Mac Hunter, who became principal of Driftwood Public School in 1995. He brought with him a passion for school improvement, and committed himself and his staff of 35 teachers and eight teaching assistants to a plan of action.

He immediately put his philosophy into action — a philosophy which he says is based on his feelings about urban, refugee, and immigrant children and their families. "We all know that individual economic success and education are closely linked. These children will need to be able to compete with the larger population of children in both Ontario or Canada. Success at each level of education provides extended opportunity for further and future success. I have to do whatever I can to help them be successful, and the best way to do that is to start them with success and high expectations for success early in their school lives."

Hunter's convictions resonated immediately with most of the staff, who shared his belief in children and the community. Together, they have created

a school with a single-minded focus on student success, and an enviable track record in achieving it.

The Project

The paradigm shift at Driftwood Public School has touched every area of its operation, and reflects a firm belief that student success in academic and social achievement occurs in "highly ordered schools that have high levels of expectations of student performance."¹ Hunter has identified three key areas in which that belief has taken shape.

GRADE TEAMS

The teaching staff of Driftwood Public School is organized into grade teams which meet regularly to plan learning activities for the students in their grade group. The result is a highly structured, highly unified learning environment where expectations and criteria are standardized, and where materials and resources are identical. "In this school," says Hunter, "teachers do not go off and do their own thing. Grade teams function together, even to the point of determining the same vocabulary for assessment and reporting."

Grade teams are also the key decision-making units in the school. As professional educators working together, they plan curriculum, establish performance expectations, and set expectations for social behaviour. They meet daily to share both preparation and teaching tasks. By supporting each other in their commitment to high-performance levels, and by sharing information and successful strategies, these teams have become the foundation upon which the success of the school rests.

Grade teams work as a unit, but they also interface regularly with the teams above and below them, ensuring that transitions between grade levels take place without content gaps or abrupt changes in expectations for students.

Asked to identify the single most important factor in the school's success, Hunter doesn't hesitate: "The grade teams."

TEACHING TO STANDARDS

The expectations for both academic achievement and social functioning at Driftwood are high, and the staff is generally supportive of Ontario's new curriculum which is both demanding and structured. When the first provincial Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results in 1997 revealed that Driftwood's grade three students had scored well below the provincial and board-wide average in reading, writing, and math, the response of the administration and the grade teams was swift and dramatic.

Grade teams mobilized to concentrate their efforts on the new curriculum, with special attention to the EQAO test results to prepare new tactics to teach students the concepts and skills they need to be successful. After reviewing the specific areas of weakness in the 1997 test results, the school staff developed a number of strategies for success in literacy, math, and classroom procedures. In particular, they concentrated on reading comprehension skills, the use of a literacy-based mathematics program, *Quest 2000*, to promote the link between literacy and math, and classroom routines which encourage students to develop independence and responsibility for listening carefully, explaining clearly, and completing tasks within a set period of time.

Like the staff at other schools, Driftwood teachers used the 1997 EQAO test results to prepare students for the 1998 test. Does possible criticism for "teaching to the test" bother Mac Hunter? Not a bit. Knowing how to approach tests is an important life skill, and can have a profound effect on future success. Because the EQAO assessment now fits very neatly with the new Ontario curriculum, it tests the range of knowledge which has been taught, and provides clear and valuable feedback to teachers on the progress of students and how they are learning.



Photo courtesy of Driftwood Public School, Toronto District School Board

The school's grade three teachers have generally welcomed the province's more directive curriculum, saying that the students' disappointing performance on the first test was due in part to the fact that the new curriculum had not yet been completed. They do, however, express concern that the test continues to be a particular challenge for English as a second language (ESL) students, and so an important part of their strategy is to give ESL students as many alternate strategies as possible — to teach them to look for cues to augment their growing ability to read and comprehend English.

Although the grade three team was the immediate focus after the first EQAO results, the school's plan of action involved the entire primary division, junior division, and all support programs.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Many of Driftwood's parents come from cultures where schools discourage community participation, and many speak no English. Recognizing that parental support is one of the strongest indicators of student success, Hunter set about to bring parents into the school as partners in their children's education. In the first year alone, 19 parents became classroom volunteers — "a raving success," according to Hunter.

Every morning at Driftwood School, a teaching assistant commits 90 minutes to parental outreach. She is out on the school yard meeting parents as they walk with their children to school, talking with them about how they can help their own children and the school as a whole. She arranges for translators to help with communication, and particularly encourages those who can speak English to become involved and bring along others of their first-language group.

In a tiny "parent room", the coffee is always on, resource books are displayed in many languages, listening tapes are available, and a toy corner has been set up for preschoolers to amuse themselves while mothers (and sometimes fathers) are meeting with each other, the teaching assistant, or the classroom teacher. Groups of mothers congregate in this room to prepare "literacy packets" for parents to take home to work with their children. These learning packets are made up for individual students, in co-operation with classroom teachers, to supplement and support learning activities. In the front foyer of the school, pictures of parent volunteers are displayed with their comments about what working in the school has meant to them.

Results

The school's quick and determined response to the first round of EQAO tests — along with its culture of high expectations, teamwork, and parental involvement — has paid measurable dividends. In the spring of 1998, Driftwood students exceeded both provincial and board averages in reading, writing and math. In reading, 68% met or exceeded the provincial standard; in writing, 55%; and in math, an astounding 88%.

These results are more than a blip on the screen for the children in this school. They are the result of an intensive, school-wide effort, which began several years ago to guarantee success to students who enter school with the odds stacked against them, and which was able to mobilize in response to a perceived emergency when initial test results fell short of expectations.

The school's own success mirrors its expectations for students. The most important thing students can learn at Driftwood — or anywhere — is the habit of success, says Hunter. Once you've formed that habit, you don't forget it, and you keep the doors open.■

1 MacArthur Hunter, *Performance Objectives and Appraisal* (Draft), November, 1998.

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