

Awarding Achievement

"I have a confession to make." I stood at the podium at our recent Grade 8 Commencement Ceremony, preparing to announce the recipients of the Academic Achievement Award in Mathematics. "I've never won an award in my life." The reaction from both the students and the audience was mixed. Some smiled empathetically, others looked at each other, wondering where I might be going with my comments. I think I even heard a couple of gasps, but that may have been just my imagination.

I continued, "In fact, the real irony of this moment lies in the fact that I did very poorly in mathematics as a student." I went on to share that I had failed most of my high school math courses and didn't really develop an understanding of numbers and their relationships until I began teaching.

"Today, I love the study of mathematics. In fact, I am currently reading a book on the history of mathematics and another on the study of algebra." And with that personal introduction, I proceeded to announce the names of the student in each of the three Grade 8 classes who had achieved the highest academic standing.

Now, before you jump to conclusion that I'm pushing an anti-academic agenda, let me reassure you: I believe that success should be recognized and celebrated. I also believe, however, that we are at a point in our educational reform conversation where we are going to have to start taking a serious look at some of the practices and traditions that have been dragged down through the history of schooling – practices and traditions that have

been long accepted as a natural part of this place we call school but may, in fact, be working against what we want to be achieving and celebrating in the 21st century.

If we wish our schools to be places where civic literacy, creative collaboration, critical thinking, and a passion for learning are developed and nurtured, then one of the areas that might need our attention is the part of our system where awards, rewards, and incentives are introduced and framed.

Awards assemblies, honour rolls, and commencement exercises still have as their main focus academic achievement, with the most prestigious awards going to those students who score the highest, not necessarily to those who have developed the deepest understanding or those who have diligently struggled with concepts and ideas. I haven't been part of many awards ceremonies that have recognized risk-taking, mistake-making, or bright ideas. I haven't seen many students walk across the stage as teams of creative collaborators. And, although I am witnessing some promising practices in areas related to civic engagement and recognition of world issues, I think that more time will pass before serious awards for this type of awareness become part of mainstream graduation ceremonies.

So, in an effort to engage my own school community in a conversation about how we might begin to make some change in this area, I have been thinking about some new awards that reflect some of the things that we say are important to us as a system. There is room for fine-tuning, but these suggestions may get our conversation going:

1. The *Cutting Edge Award*: Presented to the student or group of students presenting the most innovative solution to a curriculum-based problem.
2. The *WOW Award*: Presented to the student(s) who consistently demonstrated and communicated a fascination with the wonder and beauty of the world around them.

3. The *Connections Award*: Presented to the student or team that was able to make deep connections between two or more concepts studied
4. The *Outreach Award*: Presented to the team of students responsible for independent design and implementation of an effective community service project.
5. The *DOT Award*: Inspired by Peter H. Reynolds picture book, by the same name, presented to the student(s) who have been successful in recognizing and nurturing potential and growth in another student.

A few challenges become apparent when you start to play with tradition. In looking back at my proposed list, the big questions that emerge have to do with the development and communication of suitable criteria, as well as the appropriate application of those criteria. Clearly, the list of awards described calls for some new thinking on the part of educators, parents, and students. Each of the suggested awards calls for approaches to teaching and learning that deeply embed and honour habits of mind, attitudes, and skills that have generally been given only superficial attention in our curriculum design. We will have to build plenty of opportunity for what we are honouring to become part of the day-to-day activities of our classrooms and our schools.

In the beginning, we will need to be very explicit about the new additions to the awards agenda and what really counts in each category. In the end, I'm hoping that innovation, collaboration, and a sense of awe will hold as much status and prestige as achievement in mathematics, science, and history. |

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