

Ethical Leadership in Public Education Living an Ethic of Criticality

Located in north Winnipeg, the Seven Oaks School Division serves a diverse community of Canadians of Aboriginal, Indian, Filipino, Ukrainian, Jewish, Northern European, and other backgrounds in 21 schools. Winnipeg's historic 'North End' has always been an area of cultural and socio-economic diversity and progressive politics. These realities continue to influence the culture of the Division.

We take 'ethical leadership' to be to about the task of trying to "build and sustain an environment in which the work of education can take place ethically"¹ and we describe here some elements of one Manitoba school division's ongoing efforts to create and sustain such an environment. In addition to a clear vision of the purposes of public education grounded in social justice, we inherited a culture in Seven Oaks in which three principles have for some time been central:

1. *A culture of criticality* – the building of an environment of continuous inquiry, where questioning and educational debate are an expected part of school life;
2. *An optimistic culture of action* – the expectation that inquiry and debate will be followed by action; that substantial and sustained positive change is possible; and that the effects of these actions need to be evaluated against the educational and social justice ends they were designed to support; and, stemming from both (1) and (2);
3. *A culture of shared leadership* – where, while the school board and the superintendent's office play a vital role in setting a tone and nurturing the culture, it is principals, teachers, students, parents, and support staff across the division who sustain the culture and bring action to life.

These principles are always close to the surface, acting as a divisional 'conscience'. While they took root through a number of developments during the 1990s, including the forging of a somewhat unique mission statement that we

hope informs all that we do,² an important refocusing occurred over the past few years with the question: "Is our work making any difference in the lives of our children in poverty?" That discussion has led us to eliminate most school fees, to make changes to our high schools to ensure that struggling students get the support they need to achieve, to extend the day and year, and to work to give all students the rich learning opportunities that are too frequently reserved for 'gifted and talented' students.

This discussion led, for example, to the development of the *Bright Futures* program, fashioned after the San Francisco-based *826 Valencia* and *Pathways To Education*, the program serving Toronto's Regent Park. Within 12 months *Bright Futures* has grown to over 100 volunteers tutoring 50 Grade 9 students in a storefront facility in one of the toughest neighbourhoods in Winnipeg. Last year every one of these students stayed in school and gained credits; we hope that this program will boost the divisional graduation rate to 90 percent. It also led to the BEEP (*Balanced Experiential Education Program*) at Elwick Community School, serving approximately 400 K-6 students. To assist students to maintain their progress throughout the year and provide them with the rich social experiences that the middle class take for granted, the program provides literacy and numeracy learning with trips to museums, farms, and arts events in the summer months, at no cost to the parents.

In Seven Oaks our commitment to social justice is more about stance than particular initiatives, and this might be most obvious in our position on the inclusion of special needs students. Although we have, over the years, found ways of talking about inclusion that makes it seem like the happy natural state of affairs, in fact it is a constant struggle to fight the orthodox and more commonly held view that segregation is the natural way of things. We have struggled with those who argue for designated special education classes, with parents who don't want a special needs child taking time from their child, and with those who feel that, if only we had programs for the gifted and talented, we wouldn't lose 'bright' kids to private schools. We have also struggled to provide

support to teachers to ensure that inclusion means far more than 'just being in the room'.

In Seven Oaks, we see ethical leadership as working to make sure that Starratt's ethic of criticality will remain alive and well in our effort to continually tear away at the systemic inequalities embedded in our communities. We recognize that thinking and practice need to be continually revisited and open to challenge. We acknowledge that, on many occasions, we miss the mark, and actions are not aligned with mission. Ethical leadership is above all a long term and fragile business. But as superintendents, we are convinced that we are called to live an aggressive activism that in the words of William Foster is opposed to "a sanitized and supposedly de-politicized approach to governing schools . . . [and is instead, one] . . . in which our work is to develop, challenge, and liberate human souls"³ |

BRIAN O'LEARY has been Superintendent of the Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg for eight years and DUANE BROTHERS became an Assistant Superintendent over a year ago. Both were members of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents Ethical Leadership cohort that worked with Robert Starratt and others over the past year (see Starratt's column in the last issue of Education Canada).

Notes

- 1 R. J. Starratt, "Administering an Ethical School System," *Education Canada* 49, no. 4 (2009): 23.
- 2 "The Seven Oaks School Division is a Community of Learners, every one of whom shares the responsibility to assist children in acquiring an education which will enable them to lead fulfilling lives within the world as moral people and contributing members of society."
- 3 J. C. Lindle, "William Foster's Promises for Educational Leadership: Critical Idealism in an Applied Field," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2004): 167-175.