

Cultures of Learning



In this issue:

The School Improvement Plan:
An Interactive Road Map
by Jaimie Perry

School Improvement Planning:
Called to Think and Dream
by Deborah Robinson

Conference Review:
Schooling by Design
by: H el ene Coulombe

Checking for Understanding:
A Book Review
by Dr. Peter Orange

Ontario ASCD
Professional Learning
with Jay McTighe
April 21, 2008



Upcoming Issues of
the *Trillium*

Spring - Educating for All
Summer - Practice into Action

Cultivating a Culture of Learning

by Deanna Perry

What is a learning culture? Is it an atmosphere of inquiry within a classroom? Is it the energy evident in teacher collaboration focused on student achievement? Is it a palpable feeling upon entering a school where the success of each and every student comes first and foremost?

Education is an important form of currency. This is particularly evident in our era of knowledge where success is often determined by the ability to learn, to relearn and to think critically. The incredible task of harnessing the natural human desire to learn and channeling that into the development of lifelong learners is the privileged task of educators. Literature abounds with strategies, resources, frameworks, and suggestions as to how to cultivate this culture of learning within our classrooms and within our schools. There is no magic formula. The uniqueness of every school, every classroom and every student makes it impossible to create a one-size-fits all model of student success. One factor, however, that repeatedly is associated with student success and with engagement in a learning culture is the effectiveness of the classroom teacher. "Teachers increase their effectiveness when they collectively identify and work toward the results they desire, develop collaborative strategies to achieve their goals, and create systems to access student learning" (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). This process must be cyclical and embedded into the routine practice of the school, engaging all stakeholders in the improvement process. It must be based on a clear understanding of the needs of the school, based on information collected and analysed at the school level. It must be founded within a professional community of adult learners with a common vision for school improvement. There must be a continuous cycle of professional inquiry and professional learning to develop strategies, to act upon, monitor the progress of and to adjust those strategies in relation to school improvement goals.

We have evidence from research and practice. We understand what needs to be done. "It is time to close the gap between what we know and what we do to promote learning" (Schmoker, 2003). How do we respond to the challenge of creating a sustainable culture of learning for all within our schools?

Ontario ASCD, a diverse learning community that promotes excellence in education, is dedicated to supporting the growth and success of each learner.

The School Improvement Plan: An Interactive Road Map

by Jaimie Perry

Does your school have an “improvement plan” and if so what does it look like? Is it a dust-covered binder in the principal’s office or is it more of a road-map that’s been taken out of the glove compartment so many times the folds in fact tell their own story. More importantly perhaps than what “the plan” looks like is how it was drawn up and who was involved.

In my mind there are two central questions when thinking about “school improvement”. First, where do we *want* to go next? Secondly, where do we *need* to go? It is my experience that the former question usually leads to animated and enthusiastic conversation. The second question, somewhat like a flu shot, creates some mild discomfort in the interests of long-term gain.

To address both questions in our school community, we find time and space for all school staff, both instructional and support, to engage in dialogue. Teachers are fundamental to the success of school planning, of course, and it is important that we emphasize those things we do well while working on what we want to do better. Carl Glickman suggests that “A professional field, as opposed to a technical one, is one that prizes constant dissatisfaction with one’s own practice (Source: Glickman, Carl D. *Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed*. ASCD, 2002, p.6) In other words, in a collaborative, student success focused culture, our own professional learning is always incomplete.

School improvement is not just the responsibility of school staff. Our School Council, representing parents and the broader community, undertakes a priority-setting session as well. This year we also asked our Student Council to synthesize what they view to be important and we build these syntheses into our planning.

The role of the “instructional leader” is crucial. The plan must be derived from evidence such as school-based data, district and provincial priorities. Fullan, among others, would argue that it is important that the province, district and school are all traveling in the same direction. It is the role of the school leader to ensure that all staff understand the priorities and from where they are derived. It is the role of the school leader to work with staff to develop a vision to

address the priorities for school improvement. The discomfort occurs when we raise the question about where we *need* to go. Discomfort needs to be viewed as healthy. The conversation is particularly exciting when where we *want* to go does not mesh necessarily with where we *need* to go. Staff, parents, or other stakeholders might wish to pursue one course of action when the evidence (data collected at the school, board or provincial level) indicates a very different direction. The question must always come back to how the suggested focus for improvement enhances the learning environment for students, whether it is based on good data and whether it suggests ways of measuring our effectiveness in reaching our goal.

The culminating activity for our school improvement team is not simply the articulation of a course of action and the construction of the map with appropriate sign-posts that address the question “Are we there yet?” It also means ensuring that the plan is active, referred to often and subject to change. The plan should not gather dust nor should it create

a sense that we need to be constantly adopting every “new thing” that comes along. If the plan and the process address key questions that we have agreed that *want* to address and *need* to address, we are well on the way to improving our school.

Jaimie Perry is currently principal of St. Joseph High School in Renfrew, Ontario. He will soon be assuming a new role in the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board as Superintendent of Schools. He may be contacted at:

jperry@rccdsb.edu.on.ca

*“the plan is active
and referred to
often and indeed
subject to
change.”*

Look for information about

Eastern Regional of Ontario ASCD’s
Spring Event

in the next issue of the

Trillium

View this and archived issues of *The Trillium* online at www.ascd.ca/ascd/on.

School Improvement Planning: Called to Think and Dream

by Deborah Robinson

As I continue to learn about the school improvement planning process, I am reminded of an experience I had as a child. The parallel between that experience and improvement planning has called me to realize that the process is not just “work of the mind” but more importantly “work of the heart.”

I was raised in the War Veteran’s Project in Ottawa, in a house that, like every other in the neighbourhood, resembled a matchbox neatly sided with white clapboard. My father, born of Italian immigrants, longed for the day that he might transform our home to better reflect the Roman culture that he loved and knew so well.

On warm summer evenings, Dad would place two lawn chairs between the rows of Bonnie Best tomato plants in our backyard. Together, in the midst of the earthy aroma of damp soil and the sweetness of a White Owl cigar, we would look up at the stars and dream. One evening, Dad described, with precision, the house of his dreams – the yellow brick arches, a contoured flagstone path to the front door and a majestic lamppost. Often, he would pause to ask me what I thought about his ideas. I can remember thinking how important I felt that he would ask me and as the musings continued I noticed that he had embraced my ideas and had included them in his mental “blueprint”. I became more confident about expressing my ideas and it was not long before his dream became “our dream”.

In the days that followed our endless musings, Dad went about itemizing his checklist and taking action. He assembled a team: a bricklayer, a stonemason and a carpenter. He sat them down at the dining room table. Over pasta and homemade wine he shared our vision of the “mini-mansion” on Harrold Place. The excitement mounted among the tradesmen as this was a chance to create a home away from their homes in Calabria!

Crisp fall evenings held a whisper that winter was coming, so the men practiced their trades with a sense of urgency. They would sometimes work in unison—one straightening a brick on the thick mortar and one levelling sand and concrete so that the flagstone pieces settled in like the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. They would collaborate, debate, take measure and stand back to view their accomplishments. They reminded me of how an artist stands away from her painting to adjust even the slightest hue to achieve the desired effect. Dad was always present. He would monitor the progress of his *compares* (*colleagues*), ask tough questions of them and debate their responses. He would offer praise, start a shouting match or crack a joke. He would lend a hand – and he would serve beverages and salami sandwiches when the day was done. I, often with spade in hand, would marvel at what I was seeing.

As the days passed, our tiny white house was transformed. It had become as Dad and I had envisioned—a small mansion with four perfect brick archways flanked by wrought iron railings. Winding to the door, was the warm, gray flagstone walkway. The yellow brick lamppost stood tall in the foreground—lit to say: “You are Welcome.” An indescribable feeling poured over me as I witnessed a dream turned to reality. I was proud of the tradesmen and their work and of my Dad who was a true inspiration to us all.

And so, on the evening that the “mini-mansion” was complete, Dad and I moved our lawn chairs to the front lawn. Bundled up in Hudson Bay blankets, Dad lit his cigar—a signal to look to the stars. And then he said, “Have I told you about the large stone fireplace I have planned for the backyard?”

As leaders in our schools, we know that effective school improvement planning is “mindful” work. Our plans must reflect the use of research-based, high-yield strategies. We need to have the “end in mind, asking: Where are we now?, Where do we want to be?, How do we get there? and How do we know we have arrived?” (Wiggins and McTighe, 2007). Plans must promote critical

thinking and a culture of inquiry where practice is scrutinized and results can be measured. Without constant monitoring and review, “school improvement plans are little better than wishes upon stars” (Reeves 2006).

Effective school improvement planning needs to be “mindful” AND “inspired” work. As principal-leaders in this process, we need to be the “dreamer and architect of improvement” (Douglas Reeves 2006). We need to make connections, for others, to show them that our efforts make a difference and that our work truly matters. We need to build deep and meaningful relationships around shared work by bringing integrity and trust into the process. We need to actively listen to others and provide very specific feedback. When students don’t learn, we must be courageous and confident enough to ask difficult questions and avoid the paralysis that can accompany conflict avoidance.

“People are energized by the call for school reform when it is presented and understood as a moral journey. The change process begins in the heart, moves to the head, and finally settles in the hands”(Lezotte and McKee, 2006). Lead with passion, inspire and be the change you want others to be. Share “lawn chair” time with your colleagues and look to the stars. Plan for excellence and equity in learning for all students and share the dream!

Deb Robinson is Principal of Leadership Development in the Ottawa Catholic School Board and can be contacted at: Deborah.Robinson@ottawacatholicschools.ca.

Effective school
improvement planning
needs to be “mindful”
AND “inspired” work

Conference Review: Schooling by Design

by Hélène Coulombe

This summer well known authors Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins released their newest book in the Understanding by Design series. On October 2nd, to an audience of 300 educators from across Ontario, Jay McTighe presented the “big ideas” from their new book *Schooling by Design*. Jay began the day by challenging educators to think of the *design* of their best learning experiences. Then he asked participants to compare the desired results – the conditions of powerful learning - to the present reality in our schools. If these two scenarios did not align then McTighe suggested we needed to analyze the gap and make needed adjustments. McTighe used the analogy of an architect building a solid structure and compared this to renovating our homes. Sometimes there is a bit of discomfort in the renovation phase but in the long run the results are well worth the effort.

The first step in laying the foundation of educational reform at the school or district level is to articulate a vision and a mission. McTighe made it very clear that this process was different from the previous generation of mission statements that were created to gather dust. To ‘lead by design’ means to ask the tough questions: What is the mission of schooling? What should curriculum accomplish and how should we appropriately depersonalize teaching to make the process based on data-driven decision making? Reflection on these questions then leads to applying the UbD principles and strategies while planning for a specific initiative or improvement goal:

- Stage 1: What are the desired results of reform?
- Stage 2: What evidence should we collect and on what feedback should we act?
- Stage 3: What actions should we plan?

This interactive session explored the essential questions from the book and examined a variety of practical strategies, processes, tools and examples to support central staff, administrators and teachers in leading effective change in schools and districts.

Hélène Coulombe is an educational consultant in the Student Success Department of the Ottawa Catholic School Board. She can be contacted at:
helene.coulombe@ottawacatholicschools.ca.

Read David Jones’ conference review on the Ontario ASCD website.

Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom : A Book Review

By Dr. Peter Orange

It is apt that the Foreword for this book was written by Jay McTighe. The book takes much of its impetus from McTighe and Wiggins’ theories of UbD. It looks at assessment from the point of view of *what-do-you-want-the-student-to-learn* first, then, how do we teach, assess and evaluate the process for getting there?

It is one of the few texts that focuses on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of formative assessment simultaneously. Teachers need that format of information to be effective in the classroom. Theories, too often, take on intellectual characteristics that are not translated clearly enough into the day-to-day work in the classroom. The first chapter of the text lays out the underpinning theory in a convincing and teacher-friendly manner. It is aptly the shortest chapter in the text.

Each successive chapter deals with several viable assessment processes leading to exemplary practices of dealing with such meat-and-potatoes issues as: oral language, Socratic questioning, writing, projects, and performance tasks and tests. The final chapter brings all the issues together and demonstrates the use of common assessments and consensus scoring – a boon for the time-strapped teacher. The final chapter helps to reinforce the much-touted but rarely shown process of how to give students greater control and a greater sense of empowerment in their own and others’ learning. A community of learners is born.

Each chapter is filled with immediately useful graphs, tools, checklists, rubrics and concrete suggestions for teachers. It could easily form the basis for professional learning within a department, a division, a panel or whole school. I strongly recommend this text for those who have little time to read and need reinforcement and eminently useful suggestions for ‘tomorrow’s lesson’ and this week’s study unit.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2007). *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom*
ASCD Publication 2007
Product #107023

Web Sites

Ontario ASCD: www.ascd.ca
ASCD Worldwide: www.ascd.org

ASCD Professional Learning Opportunity

Ontario ASCD and the Ontario Principals' Council
are pleased to present

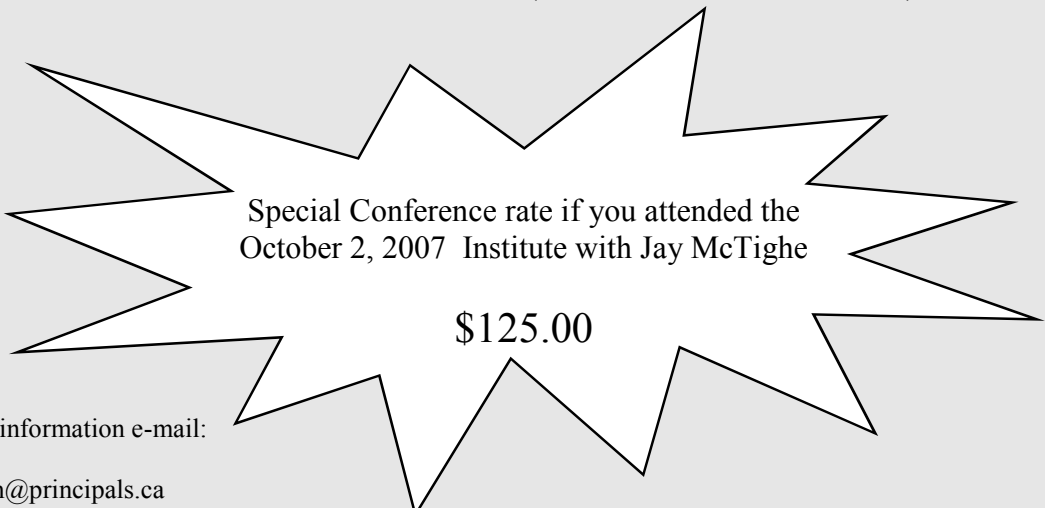
Using Backward Design In School Improvement Planning

With Jay McTighe

April 21, 2008

Mississauga Convention Centre

Conference Fee: \$210 (includes lunch and resources)



Special Conference rate if you attended the
October 2, 2007 Institute with Jay McTighe

\$125.00

For more information e-mail:

lhoran@principals.ca

Join Ontario ASCD

Visit <http://www.ascd.ca/ascd/on/> and click on membership. Then follow the links to the membership level that you wish to have.

For further information, contact:

David Bird
David.Bird@ascd.ca

The Trillium Editorial Staff

Dr. Peter Orange, editor-in-chief
William Kelly, editor
Deanna Perry, editor and layout design

If you wish to comment or write an article or notice, based on one of the themes, for consideration in an upcoming *Trillium*, contact Dr. Peter Orange at:

Peter.Orange@ascd.ca

President's Message

by Sharon Wright-Evans

Over the last few months the Ontario ASCD Board of Directors has had the privilege of welcoming two new members; David Jones and Christine Shain. They have each brought a unique set of skills, interests and talents to the board and have quickly become involved in the working groups of the Board. David has assumed responsibility for the management and improvement of our website and Christine has become an integral member of the Changing Perspectives editorial team.

The Ontario ASCD board represents many geographical areas of the province, the southwest, the north, Ottawa, the Niagara region and the GTA. In our daily lives we work for District School Boards – public and Catholic – and for different independent schools. We are classroom teachers, guidance counselors, student success leaders, vice-principals and principals with a passion for learning and a willingness to share our time and expertise with other across the province. We are truly a professional learning team!

At the time of writing, it is mid-November in Ontario schools. At the secondary level, semestered high schools are completing mid-term reporting and are beginning to plan for exams and second semester. Football and volleyball are finished and teachers and students are getting ready for winter sports and school productions. At the elementary level, teachers are writing report cards for first term and are preparing for parent/teacher interviews. Extra curricular activities are going full force and Grade 8 students are beginning the official preparation for transitioning to secondary school.

In the midst of all of this, life goes on. While completing report cards, assessment for learning continues daily. Teachers continue to focus on differentiated instruction, using a variety of instructional strategies that take into account individual learners' styles and needs. Breakfast programs and supervision schedules are in place ensuring a healthy and safe school community. Do not forget about student success, Bill 212, parent engagement, character education, new teacher appraisal, experienced teacher appraisal, literacy and numeracy, the leading student achievement initiative and the brand new School Effectiveness Framework.

How do we manage all of this? As Deanna Perry states, there is no magic formula. Every student and every school is unique. A first step is to collect and analyze school-based data. Once this is completed, learning teams form with the end goal being improved student learning. In my school, three learning teams have formed on divisional lines. In primary, the focus for the first six-week period is reading strategies. Writing is the focus for the junior division and the intermediate teachers have chosen an emphasis on numeracy. At monthly staff meetings, we share strategies and results, creating rich professional conversation and learning.

In her article, Perry questions, "How do we respond to the challenge of creating a sustainable culture of learning for all within our schools?". At Ontario ASCD, we would like to hear from individuals who are actively involved in professional learning teams in their schools or districts. By sharing our stories of challenges and successes, we enhance our own learning and that of others across the province. Anyone who is interested in telling us about their professional learning team or who is interested in learning more about Ontario ASCD may contact any one of our directors via the website or by e-mailing our president at the following address: sharon.wright-evans@ascd.ca.

Ontario ASCD Board of Directors

President	Sharon Wright-Evans London Catholic DSB
Secretary	Rosemary Sutton Peel DSB
Treasurer	Dave Bird Pinehurst School
Director	David Jones Toronto DSB
Director	Dr. Peter Orange Ottawa Catholic School Board
Director	Christine Shain Havergal College, Toronto
Ex-officio	Bev Inglis Mary Nanavati

Each director can be contacted directly via e-mail using this format:

firstname.lastname@ascd.ca.

Meet One of Ontario ASCD's Newest Directors

by David Jones

I'm a Curriculum Leader (the Toronto District School Board's fancy replacement for Department Heads...and I *am* a fancy guy) responsible for literacy, numeracy and technology in the Edvance program (an program for at-risk students between the ages of 17 and 20 who have been out of school for a semester) at City Adult Learning Centre on the corner of the Bloor Viaduct in sunny downtown Toronto. My current focus is on developing hybrid, on-line/in-person material that helps at-risk students "get there" while also allowing them to manage the myriad other day-to-day issues they face. My checkered past in education has been spent entirely in the trenches teaching English and a variety of different types of technology (both the involves-machines-you-can-get-hurt-with kind and computers). My interest with the OASCD is focused on developing on-line interactive professional learning material that helps teachers in Ontario deal with Ontario-specific issues (specifically, to begin with, Assessment and Evaluation). If you're interested in contributing to projects of this type please contact me at:

david.jones@ascd.ca.