

Community Building and Literacy- The Donald Cousens Experience Jeewan Chanicka

Donald Cousens P.S began in September 2008. While there were many challenges to starting a new school, there were equally as many opportunities. Immediately, the principal and lead team decided to do away with traditional divisional portfolios for members of the lead team. Instead, there was a desire to keep a whole school focus and so the lead portfolios were designed to focus on our core areas of focus: Literacy and Curriculum, Technology, Special Education and Community and Culture. The intention behind this was to embark on our journey keeping in mind that we teach all of the children in our school.

A focus on Community and Culture was intentional in order to develop the type of school culture that would engage teachers, students and community. There can be a tendency to perceive a dichotomy between Community and Literacy. Some may even argue that with all the work that Literacy entails there is no time to focus on building community. However, the focus on Donald Cousens P.S was both intentional and built upon the belief that community building was an integral component of increasing student literacy. By embedding it into the structure of the focus for leadership, it communicated clearly that this was an essential component to increasing student and arguably community Literacy. Structure drives practice.

As a team, the focus for Community building was based on the notion of engagement. If our students were engaged, it would facilitate learning. According to the Ministry of Education,

When students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to develop the skills and knowledge and grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their full potential, pursue lifelong learning, and contribute to a prosperous, cohesive society. As we move forward with our education agenda, we will bring new energy to our

efforts to foster student engagement, both academic and social. ” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 12)

The team decided early that our focus would be *to create a sustainable school culture that clearly reflects the values of the staff, students and community; is clearly aligned with our Network Focus and the BPCI; is informed by relevant data and will be used to continually shape our SPCI*. Additionally, this would include a focus on nurturing the whole child, shared governance, an engaged learning community and an emphasis on student success and achievement.

What was identified at Donald Cousens was that intentional work was being done towards **the optimal engagement of ALL stakeholders**. It was decided that this would be done through the use of strategies appropriate for each stakeholder group in order to facilitate greater staff buy in, increase community participation and therefore increased student literacy. The link between community and literacy was made explicit. The idea of building community was to create a sense of safety, belonging and happiness, as this would have a direct impact on student learning and achievement.

Starting without very much data was a huge challenge. However, EQAO data for students as well as report card data became a starting point. Additionally, we explored our student Demographic data. This revealed that 297 of our then 329 students were born in Canada. The other 32 students came from over 20 countries. Of those identified as ELL, the majority of students spoke either Mandarin/Cantonese and languages from the South Asian regions of the world. This data framed the beginning of the D.C.P.S. experience.

A decision was made to use our Network Focus to improve student reading comprehension through focused teacher training in assessment for learning. The students’ needs were to be

addressed through our case-management sessions with a specific focus on moving individuals and small groups to the next level. The staff focused on deconstructing expectations for students and providing descriptive feedback to further support student achievement in reading comprehension.

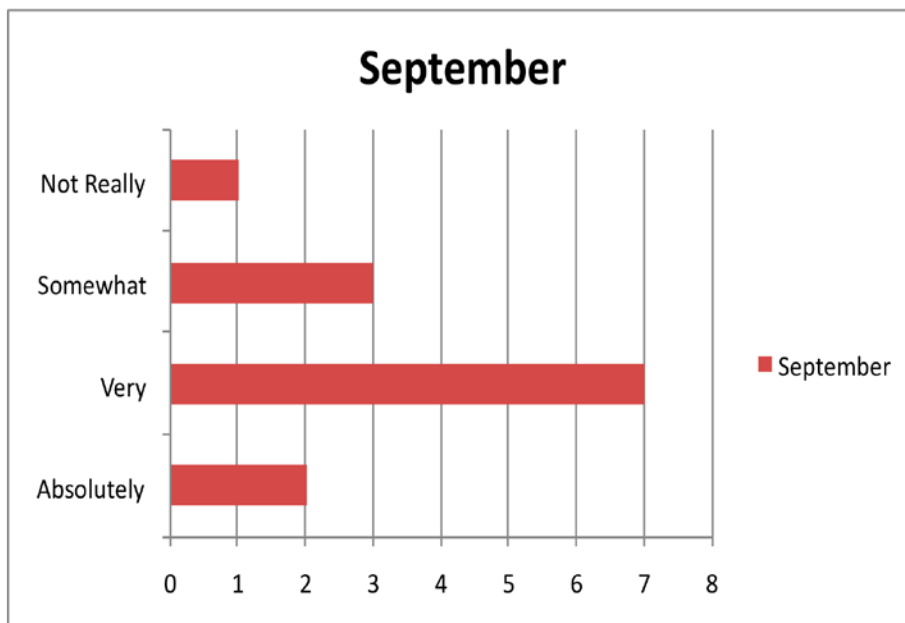
Starting with the staff

Building the culture of the school began before the school was physically built. Hiring was specific and intentional. Strong leaders, advocates and passionate educators from a range of diverse backgrounds and specialties were hired. At the first staff meeting, a decision was made that teacher philosophies would be done and placed strategically outside their classrooms for students and community members to see. The exercise engaged teachers in a process of articulating their moral purpose for teaching and being in a classroom. Placing it outside the classroom doors, created a layer of transparency and accountability. It also laid a foundation for a series of activities that would follow throughout the year.

A series of short and direct professional development activities were provided to the staff over the course of the first year. This included an activity in which staff were asked to work together to decide on the purpose of education followed by a short-clip that illustrated what the world will be like for our students when they graduated. Other activities included exploring the concept of Cognitive Dissonance, Creating a Cognitive Quilt to explore how our lenses influence the way we do business as a school, Marzano's research on effective teaching and most importantly the importance of using a Critical Friends model in thinking through the teaching and learning in our classrooms. This promoted a better understanding of the need for a shift from collegial relationships to collaborative practice. Several social activities were strategically embedded to ensure that relationships were being built and as much as she was able to, the

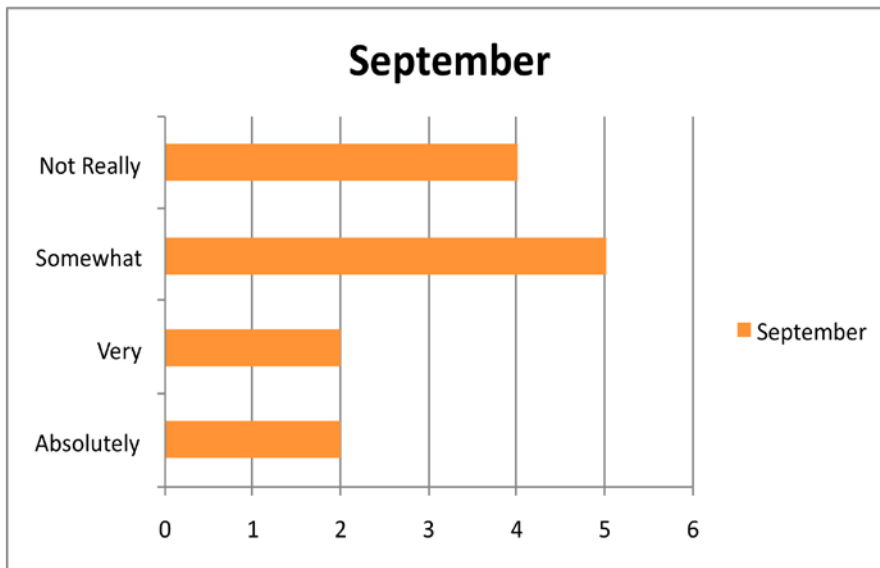
principal made it a point to have lunch with the staff.

Surveys were done three times a year to see how staff felt with regards to their ability to contribute, articulate their ideas and to gauge understanding of a vision for our students. Initially, it was expected that the latter would be unclear because the vision for student success had to be built and shaped collaboratively. Staff assets were focused upon and used to continue building and shaping what was happening in the school. People were naturally more passionate about areas they personally felt a commitment to and this was accessed to continue building a positive element to the school culture. With the understanding of second-order change, there was a purposeful commitment to sharing governance between administration and teachers. Instead of direction being focused as a “top-down” exercise, instead it became collaborative and a shared endeavour to do what was best for the students.



By June of 2009, 13 staff members were Absolutely or Very comfortable receiving feedback and 1 staff member was somewhat comfortable.

I am able to receive constructive feedback and questions about my classroom instruction



By June of 2009, 14 staff members were Absolutely or Very clear on what our vision for student success and 1 staff member was somewhat clear.

I can articulate our vision for student achievement at Donald Cousens.

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Student Engagement and Achievement

Improving the educational experiences and outcomes for young people in Canada requires a reorientation in thinking about student engagement that grounds it more intentionally in what we want to achieve for all students. We need to extend it's potential as a powerful construct for engaging both students and teachers in the transformation of classrooms into places of effective teaching and deep learning.” (Dunleavy and Milton, 2008, pg.2)

Early conversations with our staff and through a variety of the Professional Development activities allowed staff the opportunity to explore what they valued and what they felt was necessary to assist students in being successful in the changing world they were heading into. The importance of a model that was based on participatory democracy began to arise. The staff became committed to building sustainable leadership amongst the student body, engage and validate student voices and increase their capacity in governance. These became important discussions in classrooms and in the staffroom.

Staff felt that in order to prepare literate, compassionate citizens of the world, students needed to understand how they fit into wider mosaic of their community, country and world. This meant that the curriculum had to be inclusive. It required that assessment took into consideration the

variety of learning style present, it necessitated differentiation, books in the library to represent all of students, that parents and community members were welcome and were seen as integral partners in students' education and that students were exposed to a variety of leadership opportunities throughout their learning experiences. A variety of clubs such as the Eco-club which spearheaded the school's drive for eco-certification started from as young as grade 2. In 2008-2009, the club comprised of approximately 15-20 students who were able to work to have to school certified Gold in its first year of operation. In 2009-2010 year the club has more than 60 students.

Almost all clubs are open to students from early primary grades through to Grade 8. Student Council begins at Grade 5 and continues to Grade 8. Purposeful work with students has also seen special education students become members of the Student Council and actively participate in school activities.

The Role of TRIBES

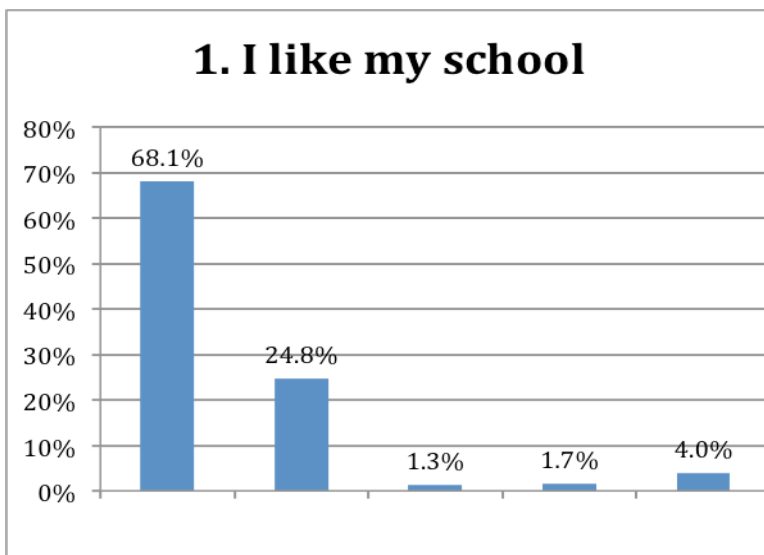
Tribes as a process of learning has been openly embraced throughout the school. In each classroom the agreements are up and teachers use it as a framework for dialogue inside and outside of the classroom. It fit nicely within the context of the Ministry of Education's Social Emotional Academic Literacy document released by York Region District School Board (2008) and helped the staff "work smarter" and remove the feeling that it was "one more thing to do" because it was layered well. Apart from what is happening in the classrooms, the entire school is set up into four key tribes and includes the caretaking staff, office staff and principal. Tribes are cross grade and begin from KG-Grade 8. The Grade 8's were set up as reading buddies with a KG partner from their TRIBE. On TRIBES days, the Grade 8's are responsible for looking after their reading buddy.

TRIBES days are set up on a monthly basis and last a total of two periods each time and one additional period is dedicated to a Character assembly in which student success in the areas of

both curriculum and character are shared and celebrated. When students get together in their TRIBES they do a variety of inclusion/influence and community building activities which are features of the TRIBES process. Curriculum pieces are embedded in the activities and support classroom instructional practice, while the students celebrate and have fun. Activities usually end with cheers and appreciations for what other TRIBES have achieved and collectively with the school song. Students usually can't wait for TRIBES days and talk about it for weeks after they have passed. It has helped to contribute to the sense of belonging and inclusion in the school.

Measuring Impact

By May 2009, in order to measure student engagement a series of surveys were administered school-wide from KG-Grade 8. KG Students were asked 4 questions, Primary students were asked 11 questions, Junior 22 questions and 4 qualitative questions and Intermediate 50 questions and 4 qualitative questions.



A total of 92 % of students answered that they strongly agreed/agreed that they liked school. This was equally represented at the Intermediate level where engagement can at times be a challenge.

A total of 88 % of students felt that the school had a “warm and friendly atmosphere”. While 90% of students believed that their teachers cared about them. Students in Grade 8 were invited

to go through the school and read teachers' philosophies and write feedback. Their comments spoke volumes about the impact of understanding how culture can impact literacy in schools,

"It helped me to notice that several teachers have many dreams, hopes, goals to move the students to a higher standard level and that they really care for us. I would really say this because some of the schools that I have been to, the teachers wouldn't really care."

"At DCPS, I feel good and comfortable around the teachers, because now I know that they care about us and they're doing all they can to see us succeed in our work."

"I thought differently about my perspectives after reading about others' beliefs. I feel more comfortable knowing that teachers don't just teach because it's their job."

"I feel comfortable knowing their philosophy so I can know how are they going to affect me as a learner and the expectations they want for their class so I am ready." - grade 8 students of Donald Cousens P.S. (personal communication, November 28, 2008)

Engaging Community

The formula would not be successful without specific strategies that were used to work directly with the community. From early on, it was clear that engagement could not only be measured by the involvement of parents as volunteers or their ability to come to school functions. The community was surveyed and invited to share with us what their notion of success for their children would be and what it would look like. The three question survey specifically asked how parents/guardians may be able to be involved even if it was by contributing ideas. This was then brought to the table as the Parent/Guardian Council was formed and used to engage Council inform the School Plan for Continuous Improvement. Survey comments included:

Making sure that all levels of staff are on the same page regarding the school's mission to foster independence while building self-esteem. The methodology involved should be universal across all levels of staff.

The future results will show us whether or not DCPS has been a successful school. DCPS needs to breed a successful environment, an environment where children do not fear going to school, but are happy and excited to attend.

I would like to see workshops for parents, especially for those with children new to the school board, to familiarize parents with the system as well as communication of expectations, and suggestions for ways in which support can be given at home – Parents at Donald Cousens Public School (personal communication, December 4, 2008).

Moving Forward

As Donald Cousens moves forward, two bi-annual town halls are being planned. The town halls will be student directed and used to engage students in another level of democratic governance. It will be used to help students to identify areas that they would like to see the school focus upon as well as celebrate what we have been doing.

The Critical Friends model of collaboration will be built upon to ensure that we move forward with a level of consistency, transparency and accountability. Over the summer, teachers from the entire primary division decided that they would use one framework for teaching to ensure some consistency in instructional focus and to allow time to move towards moderated assessment and evaluation.

A school wide literacy night was scheduled for January 2010. However, in response to parent requests and teacher observations, teachers mobilized in term one of the school year to offer parents three workshops on Oral Literacy and Questioning at home; Assessment and Evaluation and Technology and Literacy.

The focus of Community and Culture at Donald Cousens Public school has been intentionally set up with Literacy as its core and Student Achievement and Success as its focus.

It is apt, to conclude with the following quote from Barbara Harrell Carson:

Students learn what they care about . . .," Stanford Ericksen has said, but Goethe knew something else: "In all things we learn only from those we love." Add to that Emerson's declaration: "the secret of education lies in respecting the pupil." and we have a formula something like this: "Students learn what they care about, from people they care about and who, they know, care about them . . ." (The National Teaching and Learning Forum, n.d.)

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