

August 17, 2007

## Back to School

A new school year begins and we have that “new year optimism” that this will be a great year of learning. But as we prepare for school opening, we are also nagged by the same questions. What class organization and re-organization needs to take place? What new programs or policies do I need to be aware of? Are there staff changes? What about enrolment shifts over the summer? Are the texts, supplies and other resources appropriate? And the list goes on.

Another main focus at start-up is on the adult relationships within the school. Relationships are at the core of successful learning communities. Indeed, Fullan (1991) suggests relations between the principal and teaching staff determines a teachers willingness to undertake reform. If you are to be successful in focussing your schools energy and effort on student success, you know you need to build those relationships with staff. To begin that relationship, it seems to me that there is the need to reaffirm the focus of the school on student success. What does that mean in your school and with your staff? If staff is committed to this vision of student achievement, you have the basics of building a culture of support; a culture of progress and optimism. We know every school has its own culture. In some schools there is a culture of blame or hopelessness. The blame is on the parents, the resources or some other external force. Many of these cultures are intended to shift accountability away from school professionals to some outside condition. Professionals that work within a culture of support and optimism can achieve amazing results for all students. But the culture of optimism must be more than generalized hopes for the future. They should focus on Dufour’s (2002) statements:

- What is it we expect our children to learn? Do we have a clear definition of success?
- How will we know if they are learning it? What assessment for learning is built into your plans?
- What will we do when they don’t?

If staff are prepared to allow these questions to guide them, then you need to find ways to ensure that professional growth activities for the year are focussed on supporting staff to meet these student achievement goals. What resources of money, time or other help can you in consultation with staff deploy to ensure success on these efforts?

The difference in those schools that are really focussed on student achievement is that now teaching and learning become the focus of all conversations; how it can be improved; where it can be changed to meet the needs of individual children and also the sharing of what has been learned with others. This sharing and collaboration is crucial and needs to be nurtured and built on, from individual conversations, to staff meetings and to all professional development days and activities.

No school can operate effectively in isolation from its community. Parents can bring a fresh perspective to the school. Parents, through the PAC and School Planning Councils can support the learning activities of the schools. But these support systems do not develop without your assistance. It’s important for you to invite the parent leaders to the school. Establish opportunities for the SPC to get organized and feel they can effectively contribute to the learning process that the school is committed to developing. Parents need to understand the ways they can support their children’s learning and the instructional goals of the school.

It will be an eventful year. New programs and initiatives are to be implemented and the daily challenges placed on all school leaders will be as demanding as always. But we have one of the greatest educational systems in the world. I'm confident you are up to the challenges. Let us expand the life chances of every child.

Have a great new school year!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed D', with a stylized flourish extending to the left.

Emery Dosdall, Ed D  
Deputy Minister of Education