

Can-do mindset

Banning the word 'can't' proves beneficial for academic achievement



St. Angela Catholic Elementary School principal Jeff Fairlie spends some time reading with Grade 3 student Donald Lauzon.

(Windsor, Ontario, Sept. 17, 2014) – It took a funeral to inject some life back into the academic assessment scores at St. Angela Catholic Elementary School.

After several years of disappointing results in the school’s Education Quality and Accountability Office assessment results, principal Jeff Fairlie knew his school needed a cultural shift that would get his students believing they were just as capable as anyone else in achieving academic success.

So they held a funeral for the word “can’t.”

“We had an assembly where we basically banned the use of the word,” he said. “We put it to rest for good.”

Located in downtown Windsor, many of the school's students come from homes where English is not the first language, said Fairlie, now in his third year there. The perplexing part for him was the static EQAO results his school was recording, despite a concerted effort to improve them.

"It was disappointing," he said. "We had been investing in quite a bit of professional development, but we weren't seeing the shift we should have been seeing. These kids were getting good solid programming, yet they still weren't performing."

Fairlie and his team of teachers started looking at it as an attitudinal issue.

"A lot of our kids just thought they couldn't do it," he said. "They had this fixed mindset. So we started implementing a growth mindset that focused on perseverance, seeing failure as an opportunity to learn, rather than a reflection of your intelligence. We began copying greatness, and promoted a willingness to think differently about not being perfect."

Besides the attitude adjustment, Fairlie's school was the target of a number of board-directed focused interventions aimed at improving the academic performance of schools that have typically underperformed on their EQAO results.

Those interventions included an Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry initiative focused on students from JK to Grade 3 and based on the premise that developing lesson plans that spoke to real student interests would promote increased comprehension. Students in one class, for instance, were interested in the movie *Frozen*, which led to a lesson on how certain shapes create sturdier snowmen.

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**- Jeff Fairlie, Principal
St. Angela Catholic
Elementary School**

A junior reading System Implementation and Monitoring (SIM) intervention, meanwhile, involved developing precision teaching plans directed at groups of students struggling with common literacy issues. A student work study meta-cognition initiative encouraged students to "think about their thinking," Fairlie said, in order to help them better understand their thought processes while solving math problems.

The results speak for themselves. The school saw increases this year in five of six categories, including a 32 per cent increase in Grade 6 reading, a 13 per cent increase in Grade 3 writing, and an 11 per cent increase in Grade 6 math.

"We really think this approach is going to pay dividends for our students," Fairlie said, "not just in the testing years, but over their entire lives."

Creating a cultural change had similar effects over at St. Bernard Catholic Elementary School. Located on Meldrum Avenue on Windsor's near east side, it struggled with a lot of the same challenges as St. Angela.

Principal Elise Daragon said one problem she encountered when she took over the school was "parent disengagement." When she started, less than 30 parents, on average, would come out to meet-the-teacher night after progress reports went out. Last year, after teachers extended personal invitations to those parents, more than 130 came.

Building on a lot of positive initiatives that were already underway when Brian Rivait was principal there, Daragon said she tapped into existing teacher leadership and encouraged more professional development and peer-to-peer learning.

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**-Anna Mancini, Principal,
Immaculate Conception
Catholic Elementary
School**

"There are a lot of lunchroom conversations here where teachers are continually sharing successful strategies," she said.

One program in particular that helped her students a great deal was the Peer Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS), Daragon said.

"It's had a direct impact on the early literacy learning of our students," she said. "The program is extremely beneficial in schools where students do not come with rich pre-school experiences. It's also a very effective early diagnostic tool for identifying students beginning elementary school so extra remedial support can be put in place to close the gap if necessary."

It's a strategy that paid off. EQAO results at St. Bernard increased in all six categories, ranging from a seven per cent increase in Grade 6 math to a 45 per cent increase in Grade 3 writing.

A lack of support from parents was also a problem at Immaculate Conception Catholic Elementary School, according to principal Anna Mancini.

"Not because they don't want to, but because they can't," explained Mancini, noting that between 60 to 70 per cent of the school's population is made up of new Canadians. "Many don't speak English, and they simply don't have the resources or the skills to help their children with their school work."

Mancini said the teachers in her school received a wealth of professional development, including using PALS, as well a student work study initiative which involved consultants observing student learning strategies and then developing differentiated teaching methods tailored for specific learning needs.

The school also made significant gains. EQAO results there improved in four of six categories, with the greatest increases in Grade 3: writing improved by 42 per cent, reading jumped by 39 per cent, and math went up by 27 per cent.

Much like St. Angela, ICS just needed a change in mindset, Mancini said.

“We created a culture where the students believe they can learn, and we didn’t lower our expectations,” she said. “We knew they could do it. They just needed the support to help them believe in themselves.”

Seeing such positive outcomes in students who were facing specific challenges provides the board with evidence that certain methods do improve results, according to WECDSB Associate Director of Education Cathy Geml.

“We’ve seen how these interventions can improve student achievement and can continue applying them in other schools facing similar difficulties,” she said. “We have great confidence in these programs, and in our teachers’ ability to successfully implement them.”