



## **When Your Heart is in Your Dreams (The Register Vol.3 No.3)**

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### **When Your Heart is in Your Dreams One Story of Establishing a New School Culture** Susan Stephenson

A friend recently asked me, 'Why in the world did you think the second year would be easier than the first?' That was a very pointed question for a principal who had just opened a new elementary school in the same year in which six former boards in the Toronto area amalgamated. I had always dreamed of the adventure of being a principal, but these past two years have turned out to be the ultimate survival test of my career.

I had just been promoted to principal and had also journeyed to the 'elementary side of life' after five years as a secondary vice-principal. My learning curve was approaching vertical.

While this may sound somewhat unique, I am confident these thoughts will be worthwhile for any administrator who is a pioneer venturing into uncharted territory, no matter where you are. Whether you are implementing a new school culture like I did or re-energizing an existing one, I believe we all face similar challenges.

#### **THE SCHOOL**

North Kipling Junior Middle School opened in September 1999 in northwest Toronto. We had over 850 students, JK to grade 8, and 45 teaching staff. My transition from elementary to secondary was difficult; however, my fellow administrators helped to make it easier in so many ways. They were gracious and professional, and all the while I suspect they may have been wondering, 'Who is this secondary interloper?'

The strategies I had learned as a staff developer immediately became functional. There were three areas to consider: the needs of the classroom teacher, the growth of the students and the culture of the school.

At our first staff dinner, we dealt with nitty-gritty issues such as moving everyone's belongings and ordering supplies. However, our first pivotal step in building the dream was made when we decided to organize an overnight staff retreat. Our school planning team, which included the vice-principal and curriculum chairs, was facilitated by Jan Nobuto, coordinator of staff development. Jan introduced us to the work of Margaret Wheatley and her critical factors for school success—relationships, vision/identity and information. These have remained vivid in my memory.

#### **CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS**

Human relationships are critical in new schools where team members share valuable information and work together to address responsibilities and issues. Relationships need to become pathways on which information can flow. We

need to explore how we connect with each other and how we can support and draw from each other's strengths. This kind of unity becomes a primary element of the school identity.

If we want members of the school to use their relationships with others to make decisions and take actions that are consistent with what the school intends, then everyone must share the same sense of values. There must be trust and loyalty, common purpose and goals. In a learning organization, the identity becomes an energy field that surrounds, supports and influences the actions of each member. We demonstrate our identity in everything we do as individuals, teams and as a school.

Information is one of our greatest tools. When information flows fluidly and abundantly throughout the school, it becomes energy and a source of self-renewal. How this information flows will depend on the relationships we have developed.

### **Learning Partners**

As an administrative team, we wanted a learning-enriched culture where leadership was an activity, not a position. Some examples of how this worked in practice are:

- Inviting the expertise of all staff to generate solutions to problems that had been raised (informal leaders quickly emerged)
- Establishing strong staff committees (e.g., student behaviour, budget, social and staffing)
- Appointing mentors to support and reduce isolation for new teachers on staff
- Providing common grade planning time for grade teams during the day
- Inviting parents, teachers and students to join the school council

We did not need nor want formal elections to encourage participation. Community members did not want to compete for positions; they simply wanted to volunteer

### **Teamwork Skills**

Building both grade and division teams as well as a whole school team helped us to develop a sense of camaraderie and spirit. We included a teambuilding activity at each staff gathering. In addition to the well-known strategies such as carousel brainstorming and establishing staff meeting ground rules, here are a few unique ideas that also worked for us:

- Shoebox - At both of the retreats we asked each member to bring a personalized shoebox containing items that represent their life, what they learned that year and goals for next year. The sharing of these shoeboxes led to valuable stories that won't soon be forgotten.
- Two Truths and a Lie - Each staff member was asked to submit a form with two truths and a lie about themselves. These were posted without staff names and everyone had to guess to whom each set belonged. We learned a lot about each other that we would not have otherwise known .
- Belief Wall - A document with individual beliefs depicted as bricks. This has since been revisited several times and serves as a reminder of our bedrock convictions.

- Student's Words - Students were asked to submit words that were of great significance to them and the school. We then whittled the list down to about 20 words and each student and staff stenciled these by hand onto poster boards that are now mounted on the gymnasium walls.

### **The Issue of Trust**

An essential aspect of group effectiveness is developing and maintaining a high level of trust among group members. The more members that trust each other, the more effectively they will work together.

Trust is the principle foundation that holds all relationships together. It is like a game of Snakes and Ladders, only I'd prefer a few more ladders than snakes in this game of school. I soon realized and accepted the fact that I would never get 100 per cent of my staff on board and learned to be comfortable with a majority.

- Being trustworthy is the single most important element of building trust. Stephen Covey reminds us that trust grows out of trustworthiness. It stems from the character to make and keep commitments, to share resources, to be caring and responsible, to belong and to love unconditionally. Beware of actions that make you look untrustworthy or untrusting.

- Create opportunities for true dialogue and deep listening where assumptions are challenged and views temporarily suspended. Spend time on critical issues to address as collaborative decision making for true common ground. Significant discussions should take place at meetings rather than in the parking lot following the meeting.

### **Creativity and Innovation**

This quote from Somerset Maugham has always inspired me: 'It's a funny thing about life-if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it.' As this was a new school entering a new millennium, the latest technology helped establish the culture in a shorter time frame.

- Our small television studio is used for our daily announcements with student announcers and camera people. Televisions and VCRs in each classroom helped to build a strong school network. There was immediate recognition, as students saw staff regularly on the television instead of just hearing their voices over the public announcement system. Teachers also used this technology to videotape themselves for self-coaching.

- To assist in the sharing of information and also to reduce paper, we use First Class, an inter-school e-mail system. Everyone logs on a few times each day to read or add messages. It has improved the communication in a school of this size and has also been a major factor in building our identity and culture.

I have learned many lessons opening a new school. It's similar to the experiences we have all had redecorating or renovating a home or cottage. We start with a glorious plan and then see it take longer, cost more and strain some relationships before we reach a finished project. Here are three lessons I can share.

1. Be objective and try not to take things personally. Each person is responsible for his or her own delight - not you. I have learned to admit imperfection. No one is perfect and all people make mistakes. Don Miguel Ruiz puts it this way in his recent book *The Four Agreements*:

'Nothing other people do is because of you. It is because of themselves. When we take something personally, we make an assumption that they know what is in our world, and we try to impose our world on their world. Taking things personally makes you easy prey. You eat all their emotional garbage and now it becomes your garbage. But if you do not take it personally, you are immune.'

2. Have patience because everything takes much longer than you'd expect. Every worthwhile plan gets messy and has many winding turns in its implementation.

3. Be ready for and expect surprises every day. I've heard it called the 'Oops Factor.' Rather than be thrown off track by the unexpected, I now see each day more like a biologist involved in an experiment and try to sit back and observe the results with wonder.

It was only through the hard work of our entire team that I was able to make this dream a reality. I would like to thank all the people, especially my vice-principal and curriculum chairs, who reached out and helped me with honest advice, ideas and experiences.

All principals need to dig deep to keep their passion alive as advocates for kids. This courage and persistence is what keeps us going during our hardest moments. Remembering that we are surrounded by many talented staff and colleagues makes this huge task a little more possible. Collectively using all the resources we can find helps us to better meet the needs of our students .

#### Sources

- Susan Stephenson, School-Based Planning: talking and growing together. School Success Consulting/1994.

-Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements. A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom. Amber-Allen Publishing, California/1997.

Susan Stephenson is a principal with the Toronto District School Board.

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#### **Ontario Principals' Council**

180 Dundas Street West 25th Floor, Toronto ON M5G 1Z8  
Tel (416)-322-6600 Fax (416)-322-6618 Toll-Free 1-800-701-2362  
<http://www.principals.on.ca>

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