**Case Study: Curriculum Revision and Reorientation at the Toronto Board of Education**

*By Charles A. Hopkins,* the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair at York University in Toronto, Canada

In 1993, the Canadian Province of Ontario mandated that local school boards create outcomes-based curriculum. The first phase was to create a new curriculum for students from Junior Kindergarten (4 year olds) to Grade 9 (15 year olds). The provincial government gave broad guidelines; however, each community was to develop locally relevant curriculum to achieve provincial goals. The mandate was to consult with the community, build a new vision of an appropriate education for the twenty-first century, review the existing program, and then discard, reorient, or build anew. Sweeping changes were in order.

Knowing that a massive rewriting of the curriculum was necessary, the administration of the Toronto Board of Education undertook a large-scale community consultation. In preparation for the community consultation, the central office trained 200 people to lead focus groups. Any teacher could volunteer to become a focus group leader. The prospective leaders worked with staff developing the facilitation techniques and processes for use in the consultation. Notices went out to the three major newspapers and the more than 70 ethnic newspapers of Toronto. Efforts were made to contact the corporate sector, and speakers from the corporate world were invited to specifically address community groups during the consultations. All the schools announced the consultation process to their parents and most schools ran their own community-based meetings.

In addition, three consultation sessions were held across the city. Participants were requested to stay for the entire day, rather than making a statement and then leaving. The focus of the daylong inquiry was the simple question:

"What should students know, do, and value by the time they graduate from school?"

This straightforward question was posed to all sectors of Toronto society from corporate leaders to the students themselves.

To start the three daylong sessions, four keynote speakers representing Toronto's large business, arts, small and self-employed business, and labor sectors gave their answer to the question and the rationale for their perspective. These four keynote speakers were different for each of the three citywide sessions, and the 12 presentations were video recorded and sent to each school for use in the local community-based discussions. The comments were insightful for parents because many stereotypes of these sectors' requirements were identified as no longer relevant. For example, the representative of large businesses claimed that a focus solely upon math, science, and technology was not the answer for Canadian industry. He pointed out that due to the lack of investment capital in Canada, any successful business would eventually be purchased by a foreign firm and moved out of the country. He stated that for ongoing Canadian success, math, science, and technology should be taught in conjunction with the arts to stimulate the creativity that would be necessary to recover from the loss of industry. The representative of labor surmised that the world of work for many people in the twenty-first century would be one of part-time employment in mundane service-sector roles. He spoke of the need for broad-based learning that involved lifelong learning. Labor's vision included the arts, parenting, and social skills that embraced a world beyond employment.

After nearly six months of consultation, more than 7,000 parents, students, staff, and members of the public had contributed to focus groups, school meetings, and public forums aimed at exploring how education should respond to the demands of a changing world. In addition, many other citizens submitted their thoughts in writing. The enormous number of comments generated by the consultation were recorded, entered into a computer, and analyzed by the research department of the Toronto Board of Education.

To answer the question - What should students know, do, and value by the time they graduate from school? - the Board had looked to the past to revisit the fundamental and recurrent questions people have always asked about life and education in general, and individual subjects in particular. They considered the challenges and opportunities of the world in which their children would grow and live: a world with not only great potential for advances in quality of life, knowledge, mutual respect, and peaceful cooperation, but also a world overwhelmed by technological and social change; beset by conflicts, injustice, and inequities; and faced with dwindling and threatened natural resources.

Analysis of the participants' comments revealed six overarching graduation requirements. These requirements were then translated into curriculum. In spite of the gravity of the issues facing them, the education that parents and the community wanted for their children was in many respects hardly revolutionary or even surprising. The six graduation outcomes specified were: literacy; aesthetic appreciation and creativity; communication and collaboration; information management; responsible citizenship; and personal life skills, values and actions. These differ from most traditional curricular objectives crafted solely by professional academics in that they are broader and more closely related to the needs and organization of life than to the requirements and structures of schooling. They were truly the vision of the community - Toronto is recognized by the United Nations as the most culturally diverse community in the world.

Although the notion of "sustainability" was not imposed, it emerged as an essential value and perspective during the course of the consultation. When you look at the following one- or two-sentence descriptors of the six graduation outcomes, you see the essence of sustainability reflected in the wishes of the community at large as well as the parents, students, and educators.

**Literacy**

*Our students will acquire knowledge and skills in all areas of the curriculum including skills in questioning, investigating, critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. They will be able to apply what they have learned to further studies, work, leisure, daily living and a lifetime of learning.*

**Aesthetic Appreciation and Creativity**

*Our students will be sensitive to the aesthetic dimension of the natural and human world, develop flexible, imaginative ways of thinking, and participate in creative activity and expression.*

**Communication and Collaboration**

*Our students will express themselves clearly, listen to others responsively, and communicate effectively using a variety of technologies. They will work cooperatively with others to achieve mutual understanding of common goals.*

**Information Management**

*Our students will be able to find meaning in our world's vast information resources. They will identify needs, conduct research and seek solutions using a variety of sources, strategies and technologies. They will evaluate and apply their findings to make sound decisions and to take responsible actions.*

**Responsible Citizenship**

*Our students will value the diversity of the world's people, cultures, and ecosystems. They will understand and actively promote equity, justice, peace, the democratic process, and the protection of the environment in their own community, Canada, and the world.*

**Personal Life Skills, Values and Actions**

*Our students will care about the physical, emotional and spiritual health of themselves and others. They will pursue healthy, hopeful, purposeful lives and meaningful relationships. They will possess basic skills and good work habits, deal effectively with stress and change, and make wise choices for a sustainable future (both personal and global).*

Together, the six graduation outcomes encompass the knowledge, skills, values, and perspectives of the environmental, social, and economic aspects that comprise sustainability. The desire to infuse the essence of sustainable development into the curriculum came from the community.

The development of the graduation outcomes took from September to March. The next step was to review the existing curriculum using the lens of the new graduation outcomes. Each subject coordinator organized a reflective process that involved their consultants, department heads, and all interested subject teachers. They reviewed what their discipline contributed and what it could contribute. The process of review, revision, and reorientation began immediately. By June, the revision work was well in place; during the summer holidays of July and August, teams of Toronto's finest teachers wrote the first draft curriculum to be field tested in the schools in September.

|  |
| --- |
| The essence of the Toronto reform is that the curriculum is no longer focused exclusively on the traditional core subjects of language, mathematics, history, etc. Informed by the new vision of what the community felt tomorrow's students would need to know and be able to do, these disciplines underwent major revision. Mathematics, for example, now includes the skill of comprehending extremely large and extremely small numbers -e.g., ppm and ppb - which are essential to environmental literacy and understanding relative risk factors, both in personal life and at work. Health now includes environmental issues such as cancer, allergies, and food additives as well as 'consumerism.' |
| UNESCO, 1997, p. 25. |

Every facet of the curriculum that was in place at the beginning of the consultation process was reaffirmed, reoriented, or altered. The essence of sustainability became infused as the graduation outcomes were addressed subject by subject and grade by grade.

It also became apparent that the curriculum included not only what was taught but also how it was taught. The Board's practices were re-examined. For example, The Board examined its own purchasing policies to ensure that guidelines and practices were consistent with those same graduation outcomes. Energy, water, and waste management practices were altered, and the social concerns of equity and racism were addressed. For example, immigrant parents' worldviews were acknowledged and respected.

Building a new curriculum does not ensure its implementation. Several efforts were coordinated. Teachers who had written the new curricular material led inservice training. Teams of senior officials met with schools to search for even more refinements and suggestions. Finally, the Toronto Board revised report cards to reflect the changes. Again, parents were deeply involved in developing a new report card. The new card was very detailed, and teaching the new material was essential to calculating marks for new subject areas.

|  |
| --- |
| Much of the success of the Toronto reform is due to the fact that it was not and was not seen to be an effort to change education to meet goals set by an elite group or unduly influenced by outside pressures. The impetus to change came from within. The new curriculum had equal or greater academic rigor, but far greater relevance to life outside school walls. In its implementation, respect for teachers, parents, and students was a key ingredient. The Board tried to model the changes they wanted in the system. What it demonstrates is that education for sustainable development is simply good education, and good education makes children aware of the growing interdependence of life on Earth, interdependence among peoples and among natural systems in order to prepare them for the future. |
| UNESCO, 1997, p. 26. |

This experience showed that reorienting education to address sustainability can be based on a community's desires and strengths. The traditional approach was to have experts develop new materials and then perceive the teaching staff as in "need" of such expertise and training. The Toronto Board experience is a case of identifying a commonly developed community-based vision and then working on the strengths that lay within the existing personnel to achieve the communal goals. This was an early example of what is now being seen as working from a "strengths model" as opposed to trying to reorient based on a "needs model" where outside expertise is seen as necessary for local growth. Undoubtedly there is need for some outside help; however, once the community agrees upon a common vision, which includes respect for the best of the past and present, it can make tremendous strides by orchestrating existing academic strengths in a democratic fashion.