

**Exploring Innovative Models of Alternative Education
Report to the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE)**

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Respectfully submitted by
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Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board



*Huron-Superior Catholic
District School Board* 

Come Learn, Explore and Grow in Catholic Education

Background and Rationale

Early in the 2015-16 school year, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) generously provided funding to all school boards to allow members of senior administration to explore innovation in jurisdictions outside of Ontario. I elected to explore alternative education in British Columbia for several reasons, as outlined in what follows.

- **Connection to the Board's Multi-Year Strategic Plan** – The Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board (HSCDSB) has five strategic directions, as outlined below.



Strategic Directions

Huron-Superior Catholic School Board

CATHOLICITY	 <p>We are called and committed to make our schools and worksites places where our Catholic faith is planted, nurtured, and shared, and where our students are supported in achieving Catholic Graduate Expectations.</p> <p><i>If we implement the new Religious Education curriculum, encourage everyone to model their faith openly, and continue to support faith development activities, then by 2020, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board will be more connected as part of our communities.</i></p>
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND WELL-BEING	 <p>We are called and committed to being people of hope and celebration, ensuring environments are positive and supportive in educating the whole child. We will work together to make our schools and worksites safe and welcoming places of equity, inclusion, and diversity.</p> <p><i>If we make stronger connections to community agencies and demonstrate a welcoming attitude to all we serve, then by 2020, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board will significantly improve student and staff well-being.</i></p>
RELATIONSHIPS	 <p>We are called and committed to strengthening relationships with parents; Catholic School Councils (CSCs); parishes; staff; employee groups; agencies; and First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities to better serve our students.</p> <p><i>If we consistently engage in respectful dialogue, work collaboratively with one another, and demonstrate mercy, then by 2020, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board will be known for its positive relationships, both internally and externally.</i></p>
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	 <p>We are called and committed to ensuring high levels of student achievement for all students, in alignment with Ministry goals.</p> <p><i>If we intentionally plan effective and differentiated instruction based on student needs and the curriculum, and become more precise in our assessment of student work, then by 2020, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board will improve student engagement and achievement.</i></p>
GOVERNANCE	 <p>We are called and committed to ensuring effective policy governance in alignment with our board's mission and strategic plan.</p> <p><i>If we improve the monitoring, communication, and alignment of our board's fiscal, capital and procedural priorities, then by 2020, the Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board will have a balanced budget, resources aligned to strategic and operating plans, and renewed facilities conducive to learning.</i></p>

Initially, I anticipated my exploration of alternative education would support the board's efforts in meeting goals in Student Achievement (closing the gap), Relationships (engagement), and Governance (capital plan). However, as my exploration deepened, clear connections emerged between my area of exploration and the board's other two strategic directions – Catholicity (outreach) and Supportive Environments and Well-Being (climate and mental health).

- **Connection to Board's Current Alternative Learning Model** – Partly as a result of its capital plan, the board is currently examining and re-visioning its alternative education program at Holy Angels Learning Centre (HALC). HALC has successfully served a wide variety of youth and adults in risk, largely through self-paced booklet courses and Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR). More recently, HALC has also become the home of the board's REACH Program, which targets crown wards, youth in care, and youth receiving services from the Children's Aid Society (CAS). The board's administration felt it was an opportune time not only to determine a new location for HALC but also an improved model of program delivery.
- **Connection to Professional Portfolio** – As a relatively new Superintendent of Education with HSCDSB, my current responsibilities include, but are not limited to, adult, continuing, and alternative education; experiential learning and outdoor education; secondary programming; e-learning and blended learning; technological education; children and youth in care; and student success, which includes but is not limited to career pathways and planning, student voice, transitions, Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL), and re-engagement. I am also involved with the Focus on Faith and Centre for Social Justice and Good Works Committees, which often discuss issues related to poverty. Since I began this position, I recognized the complexity of my portfolio, the many connections between its various areas, and the need to continue learning about each of them.
- **Connection to Previous Learning** - Despite having previously learned about some interesting models of alternative programs in Ontario, I suspected other jurisdictions offered programs that were equally or more innovative. My initial search led me to Winnipeg's Seven Oaks School, which is one of several Met or Big Picture Learning schools operating in North America. A teleconference with the principal of that school, however, revealed that that model might not meet the needs of our most hesitant or vulnerable learners; students had to apply to get into the program and then had to find their own mentors. Further research led me to British Columbia, where I discovered both the British Columbia Alternative Education Association (BCAEA) Conference¹ and the Vancouver School Board (VSB)'s numerous alternative education programs². As a starting point, I registered for the full conference and made contact with the VSB to ask for more information.

Researching Alternative Education in British Columbia

As part of my research, I spent three full days in Vancouver. Two of those days were spent attending four half-day sessions at the BCAEA Conference; the other day was spent touring various alternative education sites and programs with VSB's District Principal, Andrea Davidson. I owe VSB, Andrea, and the staff and students at those sites a tremendous debt of gratitude for their hospitality and willingness to share. I learned more about alternative education in my time in Vancouver than I had in my previous decades in education!

¹ For more detail, see the BCAEA's conference agenda at http://www.bcaea.com/Conference/2016_BCAEA_Conference_Brochure.pdf.

² For more detail, see the VSB's handbook at <https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publication-files/Alt-Program-sept2015.pdf>.

The following charts summarize the programs and topics I learned about during my time out west. I started my learning by visiting five different alternative education programs in Vancouver.

VSB Program Visited	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Foundations	This program serves junior students (i.e., Grade 8 - 10) with behavioural issues. The program serves a maximum of 22 students and is supported by a teacher, youth and family worker, and support worker.	Might there be wisdom to starting an alternative education program in HSCDSB for Grade 7 – 8 students in particularly high risk? Such a program might operate centrally and provide in-risk students with the social and academic skills they need to be successful in high school.
Outreach	This program specializes in serving First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students. The program is perhaps best known for involving its students in sports tournaments and art shows. The program is situated above a public library and is surrounded by community resources, including a community centre and senior centre.	This program’s strong cultural component is worth replicating. Students can earn certifications and credits, receive counselling, and obtain assistance with gaining employment, all while being exposed to traditional FNMI teachings. See the photo of the nearby community carving centre. In the future, it may be wise to involve our alternative education students in the certification programs we offer our SHSM students at SMC, if we don’t already.
Pinnacle	In addition to providing education and counselling to students, this program also provides medical, legal, and employment services. The program is located in a building occupied by another government ministry; this ministry pays the rent for the school and its workers visit the students regularly during school hours.	As with many of the programs I visited or heard about on my visit, this one underscored the importance of building community and inter-ministerial partnerships. Of particular note were the apparently seamless connections between education, health, welfare, and justice ³ . I would be very interested in knowing how we could strengthen HSCDSB’s existing connections to other ministries or outside agencies and develop new ones.



³ For a full report on Pinnacle that outlines the value of providing health care services within a school environment, please visit <http://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/files/2014/11/Pinnacle-Program-Evaluation-Report-Nov-18-WEB.pdf>.

VSB Program Visited	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Spectrum	<p>What impressed me the most about this site was its outdoor component. Students can not only take traditional courses in a block-style timetable, but they can also be involved in tending outdoor gardens and chickens in a coop. The gardens grow such things as garlic year round. See the photos below.</p>	<p>There are strong connections between the work done at Spectrum and possible programs at HSCDSB's St. Kateri Outdoor Learning Centre or even HALC. Given that nature is known to have healing effects on those who have suffered trauma (see conference insights below), exposing our alternative students to animals and/or gardening might have many positive effects.</p>
West	<p>Another program targeting junior students, West engages two student nurses on their practicum throughout the school year, who help vaccinate students and provide lessons on common health matters (e.g., drug abuse). Teaching students life skills is a main focus of this program.</p>	<p>Could HSCDSB form or strengthen partnerships with Sault College, Algoma University, and/or other post-secondary institutions, so HALC becomes a practicum placement for future nurses, social workers, child and youth workers, FNMI student support workers, police officers, ECEs, and other community helpers? These students could develop or hone their skills while helping our students.</p>



In addition to touring these five alternative education sites in Vancouver, I also spoke to staff from, and/or attended presentations related to, the following programs operating elsewhere in British Columbia.

Other Programs of Potential Interest	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Camp Fircom, Surrey	This camp provides outdoor, experiential learning opportunities for students in high risk. All opportunities take place outside of school (i.e., weekends, March Break, summer holidays). Of particular note is the camp's Windspeaker program, which takes adolescent FNMI students in very high risk on extended wilderness excursions.	Might HSCDSB be able to offer a similar program to in-risk youth or adults, and/or could we perhaps link the excursion to earning a secondary credit (e.g., science, physical education) or a package of credits? Might we perhaps link this opportunity to ministry funding for experiential learning projects?
Girls Advocacy for Education Centre, Vancouver	This centre is in the process of being envisioned. Ideally, it will become a transition-free place for females aged 12 – 24 who are homeless, exploited, abused, impoverished, vulnerable, and/or otherwise disadvantaged by their life situation and experiences.	I see parallels between what this centre is trying to do and what Sault Ste. Marie's Centre for Social Justice and Good Works (CSJGW) might ultimately accomplish. Although the audiences and aims of the two organizations are different, they might learn something from each other.
Horizons, Richmond	This program serves those who are emotionally fragile and mentally ill. Instruction is very flexible, and community partnerships are integral. Among other things, the program hosts visiting artists, taps into the city's recreation programs, offers a writing and cooking group in conjunction with the local senior's centre, and collaborates with a local FNMI organization to offer a carving program.	HSCDSB can learn much from this program in terms of accessing community resources and developing mutually beneficial partnerships with outside agencies and organizations. The staff members I spoke with also mentioned partnerships with the Canadian Diabetes Association, the Rotary Club, local businesses, the community centre, and an addictions centre. We may wish to examine these possibilities.
Mountainside Secondary School, North Vancouver	What struck me most about this alternative program were its "value-added" activities, which are offered over the lunch hour as a means of getting or keeping students engaged in school and improving their social skills. These include yoga, cooking, art therapy, and hockey.	On my school visits to HALC, staff members have often mentioned starting up extracurricular activities and/or offering non-credit sessions on social skills, yoga, or spirituality. This program offers us a model that we can possibly emulate in the future.
Skyline Off-Site, Williams Lake	This alternative program combines learning skills for the outdoors with learning traditional FNMI ways. Students spend the morning in conventional study with a teacher and spend the afternoon learning such things as hunting and fishing techniques, wilderness safety, and food / herb gathering from elders and guests.	I appreciate this program's combined focus on FNMI teachings, outdoor education, and experiential learning. A more integrated approach to instruction might also be explored, so that FNMI and western traditions might be taught more in tandem. St. Kateri would be an ideal location for such a program.

Other Programs of Potential Interest	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Streetfront ⁴ , Vancouver	This alternative program focuses on building students' physical health and self-esteem. Training for and running in marathons is a key component of the program. The program tends to attract highly active, FNMI males, though some females also enrol. The program is also well known for involving students in challenging international trips as well, such as climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.	This program alerted me to the importance of physical conditioning in alternative education. Typically, physical education at HALC is offered through booklet courses; this model, which bears similarities to Outward Bound in many respects, suggests that physical education credits might be earned in a more active, non-traditional manner that ultimately benefits students' physical, mental, and emotional health.
Vast, Port Alberni	Two aspects of this alternative program are noteworthy. First, every year, the school hosts a forum in which students are asked what they like about the school, what they wish the school could do differently, and what field trips they would like to participate in. Vast also has an innovative trades program in which students build small structures which are later sold to buyers and/or raffled off for charity. ⁵	Although I have long considered the idea of combining alternative and technological education, I have struggled to envision what kind of model might work. This school provides one. Similarly, although our board held some think tanks with HALC students and staff last year, it was interesting to hear of a model in which this kind of student voice and input are collected on an annual basis.

At the BCAEA Conference, I attended the following sessions. Note that some of the programs mentioned in the previous chart were highlighted in a few of the sessions.

BCAEA Conference Session Attended	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Building Healthier Brains: The Neurology of Trauma and Attachment	This session focused on the connections between trauma, attachment disorders, and brain development. Trauma can include such things as witnessing a frightening or violent incident, being left alone for extended periods of time, being abused, moving frequently, being separated from loved ones, and so on. Those who have suffered trauma often need additional time and preparation for major changes, such as a school closure.	Many of HALC's students may be survivors of trauma, and so strategies that address this may prove helpful. These strategies may include adding musical, natural, or sensory components to the environment (e.g., live plants, essential oils, soft background music in the office, natural sunlight, or animals). Transitioning these students to new programs or locations needs to be done very carefully and compassionately.

⁴ An inspirational video about this alternative program may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti8uPNckZPg>.

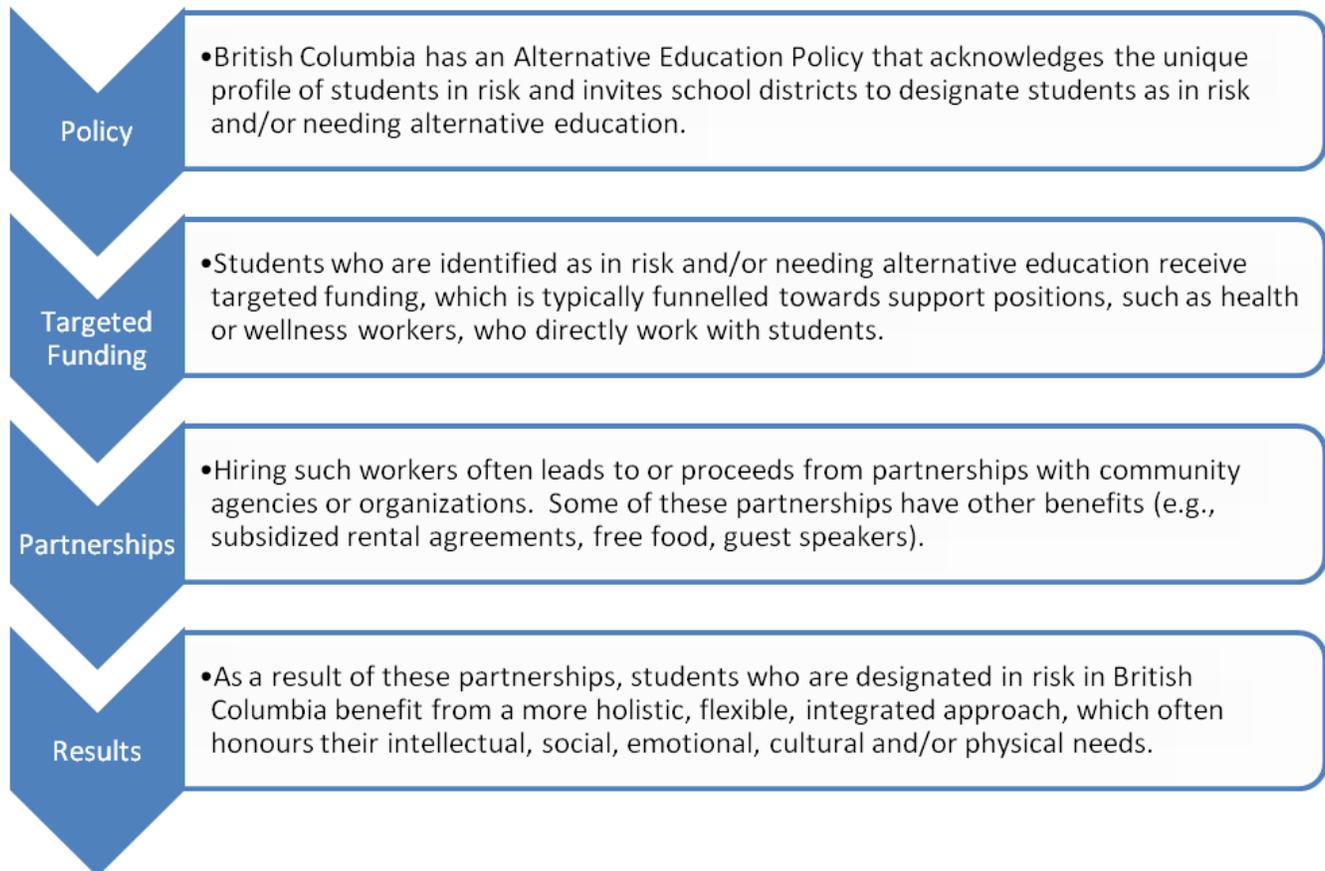
⁵ See the video related to this program's trades component at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2qCJDcS67w>.

BCAEA Conference Session Attended	Innovative Components	Key Insights / Questions
Alt Ed: The Nuts and Bolts	Among this session's features was a very helpful overview from B.C.'s Ministry of Education. The education officer who presented highlighted the province's Alternative Education Policy ⁶ , the necessary components of an alternative education program, and the targeted funding that accompanies alternative programs. This funding is over and above what is provided for FNMI, ELL, and special needs students, and is different from funding for care and treatment type programs.	This session made me wonder if Ontario had a similar policy or targeted funding of alternative programs of which I was unaware. The extra funding that each B.C. alternative program receives often funds nurses, Aboriginal support workers, educational assistants, youth and family counsellors, career counsellors, and even cooks. B.C.'s policy and funding seem to reflect a holistic approach to alternative education, and the recognition that ensuring student employability and success has positive, long-term effects for society.
Introduction to Social and Emotional Learning	This session exposed me to a variety of group activities that might be useful in the alternative education classroom. The consensus among participants was that many students in alternative education do not lack intelligence; rather, as a result of their life experience and/or other conditions (e.g., learning disabilities), they may lack the ability to regulate their emotions and communicate with others in an appropriate manner.	This session has implications well beyond alternative education. Many of our elementary and secondary students struggle with self-regulation, social skills, and healthy risk-taking, and so these activities may be helpful to them as well. Should the staff of HALC ever wish to teach their students social skills in a more formalized, systematic way, these exercises might be a useful starting point for them.
Successful Alternative Program Examples	This session highlighted the Camp Fircom, Girls Advocacy for Education Centre, Mountainside Secondary School, and Streetfront alternative programs. See the previous chart for more detail about each program.	This session confirmed for me the need to have the right team in place in alternative education programs. Each of these programs had dedicated champions who made strong personal connections with the students.

⁶ This policy can be found at http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/policy/policies/alt_education_school_program.htm.

Lessons Ontario Can Learn from British Columbia

Although it may be inappropriate or even dangerous to make recommendations for alternative education in this province based on what I saw in another, particularly given the brief period of time that I was in British Columbia and given my own limited knowledge of this topic, I have made the assumption that CODE provided this funding to boards so that Ontario's educational system could grow and improve in innovative ways. With this in mind, I respectfully offer the following observations, which are summarized in the graphic below.



- **Alternative Education Policy** – British Columbia has an Alternative Education Policy, which recognizes that, “Students who attend alternate education programs are often the most vulnerable population in the school system. Alternate education programs have disproportionate numbers of children and youth in care, Aboriginal students, children and youth living in poverty or the street, gifted children who have difficulty in social situations, children and youth involved in drugs, alcohol and the sex trade, and youth with mental health concerns. Alternate education programs offer an opportunity for these vulnerable and at-risk students to experience success.” Although Ontario has several strategies associated with students in risk, including, but not limited to, student success, children and youth in care, Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL), FNMI students, and special education, to my knowledge, there is no general alternative education policy in this province.

- Targeted Funding** – Once students in British Columbia are deemed at-risk by their school districts, they become eligible to receive targeted funding so long as they receive additional support from outside agencies. One source I spoke to in British Columbia indicated that this targeted funding amounted to an additional \$9,000 - \$10,000 per student. This amount is over and above what the student would normally generate as a “regular”, ELL, FNMI, adult, or special needs student. While the regular funding permits the schools to offer combinations of face-to-face, online, and blended instruction, depending on the needs of the students, the additional funding that permits individual schools to hire of one or more support staff. Every program I visited or heard about in British Columbia had funding not only for one or more teachers, but also one or more of the following: nurses, nurse practitioners, cooks, student and family counsellors, Aboriginal support workers, and/or student support workers. Note: British Columbia also has care and treatment-type programs which also receive a different level of funding.
- Partnerships** – Every alternative education program I heard about and/or visited mentioned the importance of partnerships, not only among the teams working directly with the students, but also with various agencies, community organizations, and/or ministries. For example, one of the programs I visited was located in a building largely occupied by another government agency or ministry. When I asked how the school board could possibly afford to rent a good portion of the upper floor of this building, located in Vancouver, well known for its expensive real estate values, I was told that the other ministry paid for it. Similarly, another program I visited was located above a public library; I learned that the library paid the rent for the program’s use of the upper floor. But partnerships did not stop there – they appeared to be the very lifeblood of all the alternative programs I heard about, whether they were with B.C. Hydro, the local First Nation, the Rotary Club, a local church, and/or another organization.
- Results** – The various partnerships forged in each alternative program are a direct result of the needs identified for each student. If students are identified as requiring medical and legal attention, then partnerships might be forged with the workers from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice. If students are identified as benefiting from cultural, social, and recreational intervention, then partnerships might be forged with the local Indigenous Friendship Centre and the city’s community centres. In all the programs I learned about, the result was a more holistic, integrated approach to working with students in risk. This approach honoured students’ intellectual, social, emotional, cultural, and/or physical needs. It is doubtful whether these same results could have been achieved without the related policy, targeted funding, and partnerships.

Lessons HSCDSB Can Learn from Districts in British Columbia

Although, once again, it may be ill-advised for any district to generalize what it learns from another, I believe that the object of the funding from CODE may be for us to examine what we are currently doing and see how we might be able to do it better. Sometimes, we must look beyond our own jurisdictions and glean ideas from elsewhere in order to serve our students more effectively. It is in this spirit that I offer the following lessons.

One colleague I met through Andrea maintained that effective alternative education programs had three components: a safe environment, food, and healthy risk-taking. While I agree with the wisdom she offered, I changed it slightly to suit HSCDSB’s context.



Before focusing on each of these components, I wish to affirm the staff of HALC for all they have done to date to serve some of the most vulnerable students in HSCDSB. The administration, teachers, and clerical staff of the school do an exceptional job of helping both adolescent and adult students feel supported in their personal and academic lives. This is evidenced both in the increase in the number of graduation diplomas and credits earned, and in the comments that students make about the program⁷. To a large degree, HALC's program already has all the necessary components of an effective alternative education program in place. That said, there is room for improvement in each of these core areas, as outlined below.

- **Nurturing Environment** – Every alternative education program I visited or heard about emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining a nurturing environment. In some programs, stability and predictability were emphasized; in others, safety from harm or failure was a focus. Every program seemed to involve food, and in fact, some programs either had a full-time cook or a staff member on site who looked after food preparation and/or distribution, or involved students in preparing both breakfast and lunch. All of the programs I visited had their own kitchens. Two are shown below.



In many cases, meals were very elaborate (e.g., Thai chicken with rice, multiple food groups); staff members recognized that for some students, the meals prepared at school might be the only ones students would eat on any given day. This is not unlike HALC, which currently has a kitchen, daily snack program, eating area, and feasts for special occasions (e.g., Thanksgiving, Christmas). The REACH program currently operating at HALC, with its emphasis on learning life skills such as cooking, also contributes to HALC's students' daily nutrition.

The programs I viewed out west also had some impressive classroom and/or outdoor spaces as well, as evidenced in the photographs that follow. Depending on the set-up of the individual program, classroom

⁷ Members of the HSCDSB community may wish to refer to the document presented in the closed session of the board on February 17, 2016 for more details about HALC's rates of success.

spaces were either configured to accommodate congregated and/or self-paced classes. Student lockers were also available at many of the sites, which seemed to assist with the security of valuables.

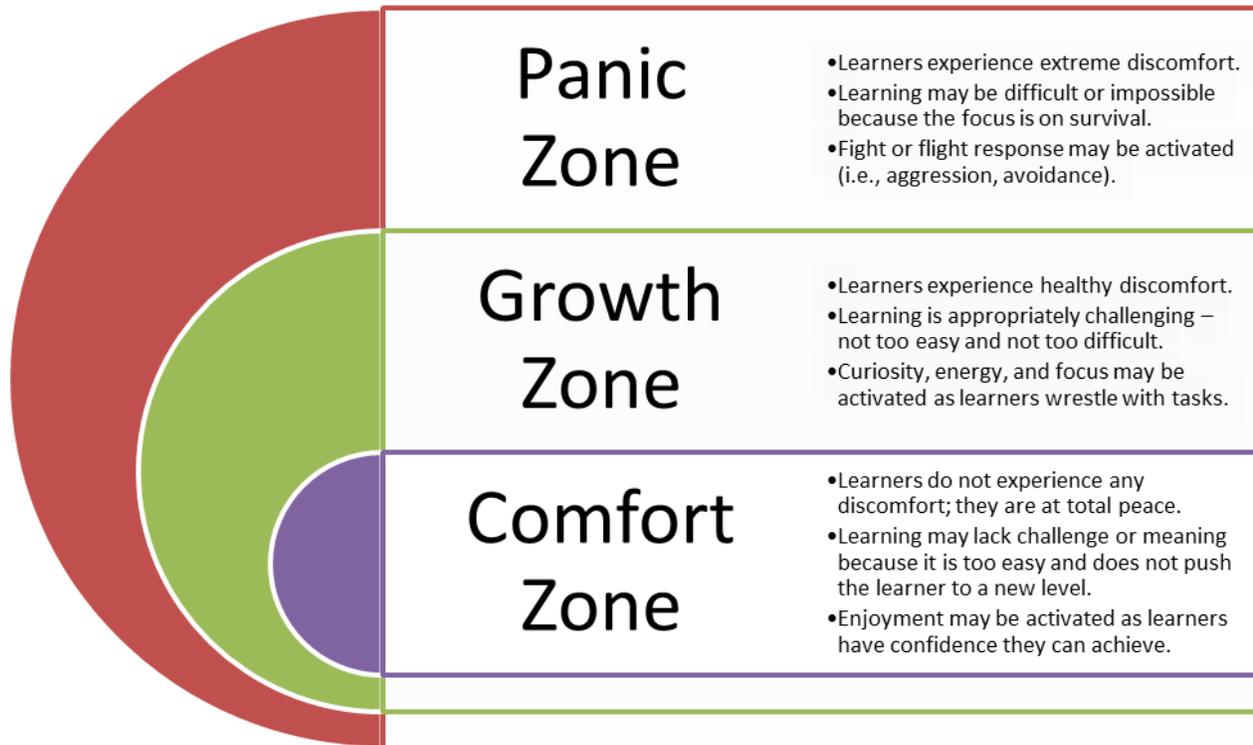


Seeing these facilities in B.C.'s alternative schools confirmed for me that HALC's new location must contain not only a flexible area for instruction, complete with tables / desks, chairs, and computers, but also a kitchen and eating area. Ideally, this area will include a refrigerator, microwave, stove, and cupboards large enough to store dry goods and dishes. Lockers, background music, and natural elements (e.g., plants, natural light) would also be ideal additions (see conference notes on trauma). Additionally, our new location will need easy access to washrooms, a non-threatening outside entrances, and private office space, not only to accommodate our administration and clerical team, but also any visiting agencies or staff members from other educational institutions.

- **Strong Relationships** – All of the alternative programs I visited emphasized the importance of strong relationships between students and staff members. Some, though not all, also emphasized the importance of student-to-student relationships and/or student-to-community relationships. Again, relationship building is something the staff of HALC does quite well. Students are treated with respect, firmness, good humour, and compassion. The staff knows the students' names and often their personal stories, and students receive a delicate balance of pressure and support throughout their time at the school. Successes – such as the completion of courses or graduation requirements – are genuinely celebrated, and misdemeanours are dealt with directly, with student well-being in mind.

That said, the relationships that HALC staff members build with students could possibly be deepened if additional “value-added” activities were introduced. These activities might take the form of extracurricular activities (e.g., yoga classes one day a week, music club at lunchtime, morning running club); monthly field trips to relevant locations (e.g., Employment Solutions, Sault College, YMCA, Algoma Public Health, Indian Friendship Centre, St. Kateri Outdoor Learning Centre); and/or regularly-scheduled special interest sessions (e.g., communication skills, personality types, financial literacy, gardening, healthy eating, safe food handling certification, First Aid training, starting your own business). Offering such activities might strengthen relationships on many levels and encourage some of the more disconnected or transient students to stay in the building longer than they currently do. Offering such activities might become increasingly important, given that HALC is registering more and more 16 – 18 year olds.

- **Healthy Risk-Taking** – All of the alternative education programs I visited or heard about included some element of healthy risk-taking; that is, the programs pushed students outside of their comfort zones and allowed them to achieve something they did not think they could otherwise accomplish. As I learned in one of the conference sessions I attended, and as the following graphic illustrates, however, there is a fine line between pushing people outside of their comfort zones and into their panic zones.



To date, HALC has done an admirable job of taking students from a place of hopelessness, fear, and brokenness (i.e., the panic zone) to a place of success and pride. But, like the young students from Vancouver’s Streetfront program who run marathons and climb mountains, could some HALC students be achieving even more than finishing booklet courses this if they were pushed to do so?

As the board revisions its alternative education program, it might be wise for the school to be more on the alert for students who may be gravitating away from healthy risk-taking (i.e., the growth zone) by selecting courses or course types that are easy for them but not necessarily completely beneficial (i.e., the comfort zone). For example, once students have learned that they can indeed be successful in school, and perhaps once they have succeeded at several booklet courses, students can be encouraged to attempt a co-operative education course, a Specialist High Skills Major designation, an online course, or a dual credit at the local college. Depending on where the school ends up being located, such healthy risk-taking may be less threatening to students (e.g., the school may be relocated to a spot closer to the college or high school), and the staff could make connections with other organizations more easily.

Another thing HALC might consider is offering one or more synchronous (i.e., real time) courses during the school day. For example, a face-to-face physical education or art course taught three times a week for a semester might appeal to some students, encourage them to come to school more regularly, and/or allow them to earn compulsory credits in a different way, while increasing their physical health and social skills. Such an opportunity might ease some students back into the mainstream and/or into the post-secondary environment more gently.

- **Community Connections** – All of the alternative education programs I visited benefited greatly from the many partnerships they had forged with various community or ministry organizations. In fact, many of the staff in alternative programs confessed that their programs could not function without the generosity of these outside agencies. These partners served various functions, including but not limited to:
 - Paying the rent for space used in buildings not owned by the school district.
 - Providing free food for students to consume directly or for students to prepare themselves.
 - Regularly loaning staff members with specific expertise (e.g., nurses, counsellors, cooks).
 - Making it easy for students to access the services they required or could benefit from (e.g., legal, medical, mental health, library on site).
 - Providing free services students might not otherwise be able to afford (e.g., counselling).
 - Connecting or re-connecting students with their culture (e.g., FNMI artists and writers).
 - Connecting students with mentors or adult role models (e.g., seniors, employers).
 - Connecting students with the wider community and allowing them to contribute meaningfully to it (e.g., charity raffles, volunteer opportunities).
 - Offering free recreational activities or materials (e.g., gym time and space, sports equipment).
 - Developing students’ skills in a specific area (e.g., employment, social skills, cooking, art, gardening).
 - Accessing funds for special projects.

The importance of developing community partnerships was perhaps the greatest insight that I gained from this learning experience. Although HALC has already forged some wonderful community partnerships (e.g., Ontario Works, Sault Ste. Marie Police, Children’s Aid Society, Algoma Public Health), there is room for the school to create even more and/or to deepen the ones already in place. Those who operated the alternative schools in British Columbia were quick to note that many people in the community are willing to help; however, they often need to be approached with a specific request and to understand the value of what they are contributing.

Recommendations and Next Steps

I remain very grateful to have received the CODE funding to explore innovation in other jurisdictions. The opportunity to see another jurisdiction’s programs up close and in person was both energizing and transformative. I leave this experience having learned some key lessons:

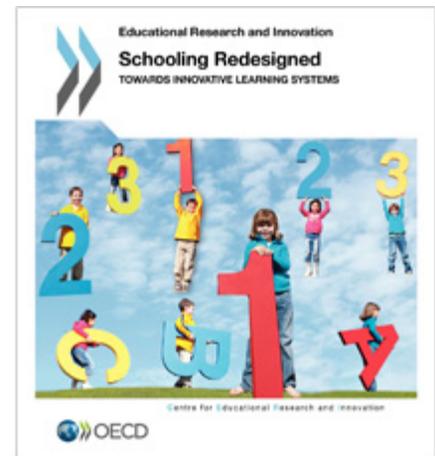
- **Continue the Work Begun** – Much of what our board is doing in its alternative program at HALC is effective and should continue. Our program has the hallmarks of many of the excellent programs operating elsewhere: a nurturing environment, strong relationships, healthy risk-taking, and community connections. Our current program already does a fine job of helping to address HSCDSB’s strategic goals in Catholicity (outreach), Supportive Environments and Well-Being (climate and mental health), Student Achievement (closing the gap), Relationships (engagement), and Governance (capital plan).

- ***Take the Work to the Next Level*** – Our successes acknowledged, our board cannot afford to leave the program at HALC simply as it currently is. There is tremendous room for growth and improvement in our ability to establish nurturing environments, forge strong relationships, encourage healthy risk-taking, and strengthen community connections. With our capital plan requiring the board to dispose of the current HALC building, now is an optimal time for us to enact such changes. Specifically, I would advocate that:
 - The board find a new location for the school that provides HALC staff and students with a pleasant, spacious environment, complete with classrooms, offices, washrooms, and food preparation facilities.
 - The school introduce a menu of “value-added” activities that students can access throughout the school year, as a means of deepening relationships and attracting students to the building.
 - The board examine the staffing model of the school to see if additional teachers and/or support workers might be added to augment the services provided to the students.
 - The school encourage its students to try at least one different type of course (other than booklets) well before graduation (e.g., dual credit, outdoor education, co-operative education).
 - The school build new partnerships with community agencies and other ministries as a means of better serving its vulnerable population.

In following these recommendations, the school will only benefit the adults and adolescents it already serves so well.

Overall Learning

- Technology enabled teaching and learning initiatives need to be precise and focused with a determined set of measurable outcomes.
- Districts will need to identify how to grow, scale and sustain innovative teaching practices move from individual cases to board wide; 'scaling up' and 'systematizing transformations' in teaching and learning. The growth must begin with leadership at the district and school levels.
 - o "Leadership is critical. This means learning leadership based on deep knowledge of the nature of teachings and learning, and a readiness to innovate and to take calculated risks. It means having the leadership capacity to take staffs, parents and communities forward even on long-term change journeys. It means being able to manage the complex organizational environment of creating visibility and breaking down high boundaries that divide each classrooms, schools and communities from each other. All these capacities need to be actively developed and maintained." (OECD, Schooling Redesigned, 2015).



Ministry Address

Catherine Montreuil, Assistant Deputy Minister, Learning and Curriculum Division

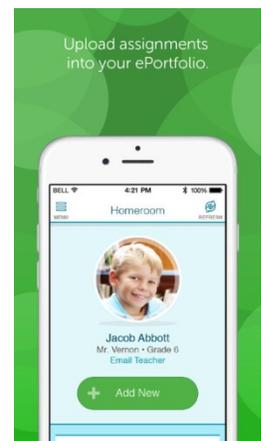
- Ontario will continue to be leaders in technology in education. The ministry has outlined the following in Achieving Excellence; what the Ministry will continue to do:
 - Invest in innovative teaching practices and instructional methods enabled by technology to more precisely engage and address needs of all students
 - Invest in the technology, design and infrastructure required for the classroom of the future to serve the needs of all communities.
 - Work with teachers, principals and supervisory officials and their professional associations to identify and share effective and innovative teaching practices that include the use of technology.
 - Define and develop measures for higher order skills, such as critical thinking, communication collaboration and entrepreneurship
- The Ministry is in the process of developing a list of 21st Century competencies. These are similar to the competencies listed by Michael Fullan. In total, there will be six "buckets" where each will have sub-skills/competencies and examples associated.
- Much reference was placed on 'Global Competencies', which are those that are trans-disciplinary. Through the Technology and Learning Fund, four domains were identified as areas that will allow us to transform education for the 21st Century:
 - **Teacher-Student** learning partnerships through real-world, authentic learning tasks enabled by technology.
 - Opportunities for **peer-to-peer** learning enabled by technology.
 - Provide **professional learning** about new assessment practices that reflect deep learning pedagogy.
 - Develop new **partnerships** among educators.
- Co-leadership and focused innovation will allow us to move in the right direction. As a province we need to:
 - Embrace Change
 - Scale and systematize our learning
 - Provide leadership opportunities at every level

- Advance our efforts in achieving excellence at all levels
 - Maintain our focus on student learning
 - Be optimistic, confident and innovative
 - Collaborate and co-learn
- At the district level we need to make decisions that are:
 - Evidence based/informed
 - Focused on student learning and outcomes, rather than other influences (e.g. finances).

District Sharing

Dr. Jordan Tinney, Superintendent of Education, Surrey District School Board

- Surrey DSB has moved to a 'Learning by Design' system of teaching and learning. This is the result of societal changes, where traditional authorities are being questioned, such as:
 - Access to information is making people more aware.
 - Tough questions are being asked.
 - People are demanding more than just the status quo.
- The Learning by Design system includes three pillars:
 - Learning – inspired by individual passions and interests. Connected to real-world experiences and challenges. Demonstrated in powerful ways both individually and in groups. Supported by all who work with and for our students.
 - Structure – Time, physical space, access to information and connection to the community should provide the flexibility to support the vision for powerful learning.
 - Tools – The tools that enable access to information, demonstrations of learning.
 - Learning by Design provides the learners with; effective curriculum design, quality assessment, differentiated instructional strategies and social-emotional learning.
 - Learning by Design provides the teachers with the opportunities to lead in the teaching and learning. There is no mandate from the board. Teachers are running away with leadership and exploration.
- Surrey District school board has implemented the use of online digital portfolios to demonstrate and share student learning. The tool used, FreshGrade has replaced traditional report cards, where students and teachers can capture their learning in real-time. Student learning portfolios are shared with parents, where parents can review items and comment. It has provided an authentic and meaning way to communicate student assessment. The implementation included a learning plan that is founded through collaborative inquiry. No purchase of technology is approved without the submission of a learning plan which outlines how it will improve student learning. The online digital portfolios have provided more powerful connections with parents – it brings them into the classroom. Parents are beginning to understand the complexity of learning and where their child is in their learning.



Help Me Tell My Story, Government of Saskatchewan

<https://holisticassessment.gov.sk.ca/> and <http://www.bv02.com/case-study/aha-ipad-app/>

- The Government of Saskatchewan has invested in some new assessment methods that use a holistic approach to assessment. This specific project is being used to assess and evaluate oral language development for prekindergarten and kindergarten children. The model was also developed to increase student engagement in language/literacy skills.
- In order to provide a holistic view of each child's learning, the assessment collects data from the child, their caregiver(s), teachers and Elders in their community.

Model of Assessment and Engagement

- The initiative includes a puppet of a turtle (Aski) who is seen as being the informal individual conducting the assessment. iPads which provide the assessment tools which engage the students; data is maintained online.

- Online portal tracks the student learning which is shared to parents/guardians and elders. Community member can comment on student learning.
- The initiative was a direct response to the Canadian Council on Learning, which stated that conventional assessment methods/techniques have limitations for First Nation, Inuit and Metis students.



Resources and Supports – Provided by The Ministry of Education, Province of Saskatchewan

Aski Puppet

- Each classroom is provided with one Aski turtle puppet to use in their classroom.
- Each school division or First Nation Regional Education Organization also receives a set of ‘conductive’ puppets that have conductive material attached to Aski’s nose so it can be used with the iPad during the assessment.

Storybooks

- Each class is provided with a set of four digital storybooks that tell the story of Aski and his friends from the pond.
- Each of the books tells a story using First Nation and Métis content and ideas in an easy-to-understand way. They are designed for children between the ages of 3 and 5. •
- Each child gets their own “Aski and Turtle Island” book that they can take home.
- All four books have been translated into e-books by the digital creative agency BV02, and can be downloaded through iTunes and heard in English, Cree, Dene and Michif.



iPad and cases

- Each classroom is provided with one iPad and a handheld case to be used in their classroom. Each school division or First Nation Regional Education Organization also receives two additional iPads and cases to be shared across schools during the assessment window.

Help Me Tell My Story app

- Each assessor and educator is provided with a distinct password for an iPad app that includes the child assessment, and three additional surveys for the caregiver, teacher and Elder.
- The app collects the data locally and immediately sends the information to the central database when a WiFi connection is established.

Training

- Each school division and First Nation Regional Education Organization is provided two training sessions for all their identified trainers on how to deliver the assessment and how to use the data feedback tools.

Web-based portals

- Educators, administrators, and caregivers are provided with personalized access to web-based portals to support the delivery of the assessment, access to information, and analysis of results.

Libraries to Learning Commons

A Journey into a New Dimension of Learning

Submitted by: Maria Esposito
Superintendent of Education

June 2016



Learning
COMMONS

Lessons Learned from Ottawa Catholic District School Board (OCDSB)

A Journey into a New Dimension of Learning

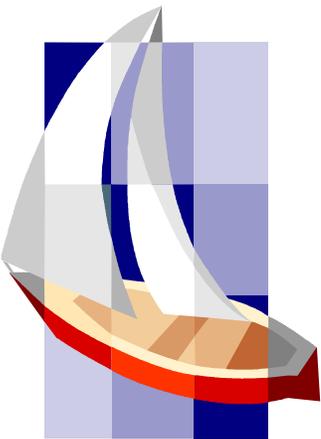
Computers, tablets, smartphones, the Internet – we're surrounded by technology, and with it, new forms of literacy and learning. Technology has changed what it means to be literate and pushed the definition far past just being able to read words on a page. Today students must also possess digital skills and literacies to navigate words and ideas on many different platforms while being aware of the context, audience, and ramifications of each text.

Schools are being challenged to harness the unfamiliar yet incredibly fascinating opportunities presented by this transformation, all while ensuring students emerge with the skills they need to be literate and responsible citizens in this digital world.

Transforming Libraries into Learning Commons helps address this challenge because it leverages technology and the way people work, play and learn to bring engagement strategies to students.

The Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board (HSCDSB) in the last few years started revitalizing the school libraries with the expert guidance of the System Teacher Librarian.

Our next step is to increase student use of the libraries by creating the conditions needed for the space to be used as an extension of the learning in the classroom. We want to see students work on



projects, make use of interactive technologies, film and edit videos, and yes, check out books.

With the goal of journeying into new spaces and new pedagogies for deep learning, I visited the Ottawa Catholic Schools with the Board's Teacher Librarian to learn about their three-phase project which started in 2011.

Our journey began with our excellent guide and instructional leader, Brenda Wilson, Superintendent of the Ottawa Catholic District School Board, taking me and our Board's Teacher Librarian on a whirlwind tour of 6 schools with major physical and technology changes to their previous library spaces. The OCDSB began in 2011 with a 3 year plan to move from Libraries to Learning Commons.

What we saw... Robotics, tied to curriculum...

- Students working in collaborative pods
- Student Engagement
- Student Voice
- Curriculum Connections
- Smaller areas distinct but not separate
- Moveable, flexible furniture
- Smartboards, data projectors
- Maker spaces with Legos, building blocks, robotics
- Computers
- Books, e-books, comfy furniture
- Chromebooks
- Digital cameras
- Wall-mounted TVs that can be hooked up to laptops and used as monitors
- Coding and computing tools
- 3-D printers where students can see their creations come to life



What is a Learning Commons?



A Learning Commons is the 21st Century Library redeveloped to incorporate flexible physical and virtual learning spaces, combining books and technology. In these learning environments, students and staff can work, learn, develop and grow together through project or inquiry-based learning to enhance the classroom lessons by putting their skills into practice. It is a cultural shift from a space that once was the repository of information that only allowed for quiet, individual work, to one where learning happens in a socially constructed atmosphere. Conversation, teamwork, and problem-solving are just some of the 21st Century skills that can be developed in a comfortable, adjustable space that encourages student engagement. Students can have a voice, take ownership of their learning and teachers can engage in and co-construct the learning.

In Preparation for the Learning Commons

Over the past years HSCDSB Library Staff has been gradually moving towards making the library the heartbeat of the school as shelves were moved against the walls to create an open, flexible area. Some comfortable furniture such as couches and chairs were added in many of our schools to help make the spaces more welcoming.

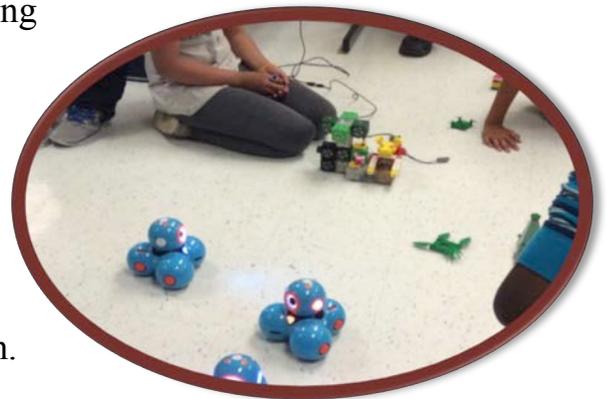


Just as we were ready to move onto the next phase in creating a Learning Commons, we were fortunate to visit the Ottawa Catholic District School Board to learn from their experience.

We Learned

A well-articulated vision, strong, shared leadership, an interdepartmental approach, collaboration, an open to learning stance and willingness to change practices are key ingredients to transform Libraries into Learning Commons.

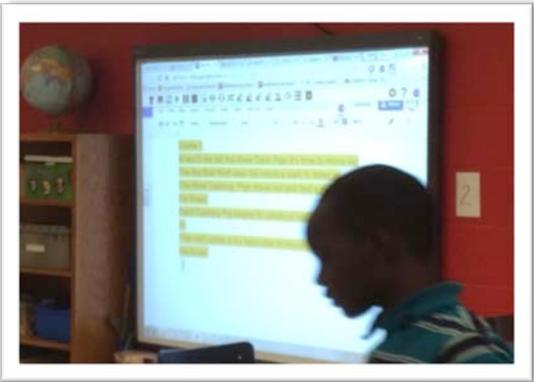
Ottawa Catholic District School Board had invested heavily in transitioning Libraries to the Learning Commons. Their 3-year plan resulted in creating open, flexible spaces (in some cases making physical changes) with welcoming, comfortable, practical, multipurpose furniture, and included makerspaces to extend student learning. As a part of their Learning Commons shift they also invested in Robotics. We attended a Session lead by the Learning Tech Consultants about connecting Robotics to the curriculum.



Both Teachers and Library Technicians were brought together to discuss how the learning happening in their schools relates to the curriculum. Great learning was shared by all participants connecting the Learning Commons and classroom learning experiences.

Gathering Information From School Visits

While at Thomas D’Arcy McGee School we discovered that their Learning Commons had just been closed for renovations. They were developing a plan for the new layout with shelving around the outside walls of the room thus freeing up the centre area for flexible, moveable furniture and a makerspace. At this school we had the privilege of discussing the development of the Learning Commons with the Principal, Deborah Langdon. She shared her vision of the new Learning Commons and some of the growth her staff and students experienced on this journey. One of Ms. Langdon’s staff members had recently moved to a more open, exploratory, student-driven format for his lessons by including makerspace concepts.



Next we visited Prince of Peace Catholic School where the principal and coach focused on a pilot project for students with special education needs using the Learning Commons . They were working with the 6 Cs of Education for the 21st Century: Think Critically,

Communicate Clearly, Work Collaboratively, Embrace Culture, Develop Creativity, and Utilize Connectivity. We observed students working in purposeful groups to create a movie using robotics and Lego backdrops to retell the story of the “Three Little Pigs” in their own way. Very exciting use of literacy, math, and the arts!

An excellent example of innovative and integrative thinking!



At George Vanier Catholic School, Principal Heather MacPhee, shared with us the changes to the physical layout of the Learning Commons which included a Makerspace, the vision of the Library Technician and the staff. They are also working on further developing the space in the future. A green screen for a variety of presentation effects, creation of an outdoor learning space off the library and a Lego Wall as an introduction

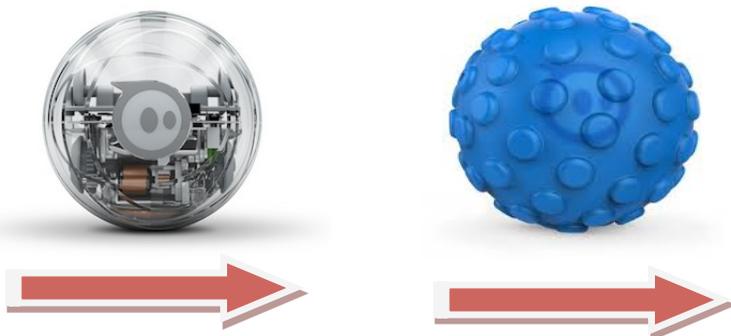


to the Makerspace are some of the changes that have both students and staff excited about learning. Plans are moving to open the middle space up more and adding more pieces of comfortable furniture.



One of the teachers here began as a reluctant teacher not interested in the use of technology but is now leading the way to incorporate robotics, technology and assessment into the curriculum. He is inspiring other teachers to join in.

This lead teacher also paired his Grade 5 class with a Kindergarten class to use the robot "Sphero" to create art. The literacy that evolved from the completed artwork, initiated from the students, surprised the staff and went far beyond expectations.



We also had the opportunity to view two Secondary Schools which use the Learning Commons in a variety of ways incorporating classroom activities, lunch, spare hangout and a homework centre where students meet in a social, academic, and cooperative way. At one of the High Schools the Teacher Librarian was initially reluctant to have food in the Learning Commons but with diligence and guidance, the students now clean their tables without being asked. The whole space works smoothly, efficiently and effectively. Students use the Learning Commons daily and take pride in this learning space.



Overall it was very beneficial to have the opportunity to visit the Ottawa Catholic District School Board Schools as our host, Brenda Wilson, provided us with an extensive view of many diverse learning environments. We also met principals and

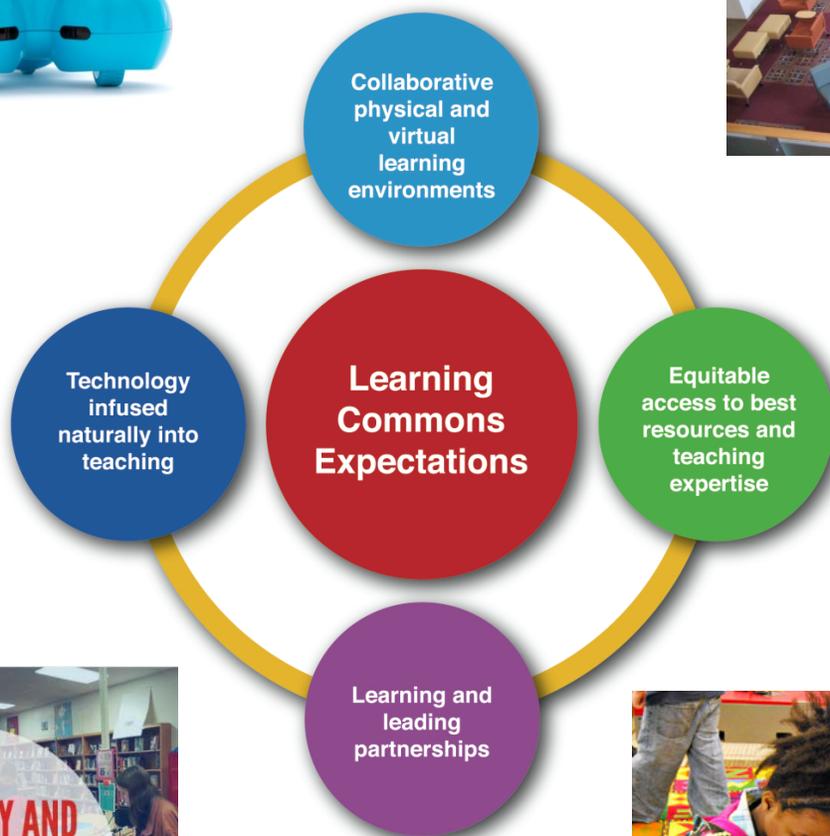
staff who were instrumental in creating and making the Learning Commons a vibrant centre for their students' learning. The conversations and the learning gave us the renewed passion to continue the work we had already started to revitalize our libraries.

Our Own Pilot Project (2016-2017)

Now we are in a position to move to the next level and develop the Learning Commons beginning with St. Paul School as our pilot project. After careful discussion and consideration, it was decided that it would be beneficial to focus on one school as a pilot project instead of spreading our resources thinly across all schools. In this way the students, staff and community partners could be supported in growing into a Learning Commons mindset. At this point the Principal and Vice-principal were contacted to see if there was interest in this important move and both enthusiastically came on board but wanted more information.

We met with the Principal and Vice-principal to share our learning from the Ottawa Catholic Schools. We explained our vision of a Learning Commons and how it could benefit their students, staff and the whole school community. Once they added their ideas it was decided that the information be shared with the staff and the School Council to elicit their input and help to get buy-in for the project. There were some questions, which is always a good sign of interest and curiosity. Most seemed to be interested and willing, which is good so that meaningful discussions can be made as the process continues.

The school has already purchased a limited amount of furniture, area learning carpets, and robotics to begin the process. In the coming year we are looking to engage students, staff and parents. The goal is to have the new space well used, multifunctional, where learning not only happens but expands and grows into critical thinking, creative expression, strong team working skills, creativity and innovation.





Conclusion:

We are delighted to partner with the St. Paul School staff, students and parents to implement the learnings from our visit to the Ottawa Catholic Schools.

The school team will share their learning journey the Spring of 2017 at a Board Meeting and a Principal meeting.

We are most grateful to Superintendent Brenda Wilson and the staffs of the schools visited for their warm welcome and their generous sharing of their experiences and expertise. They truly inspired us to transform our Libraries into Learning Commons starting immediately with one school – St. Paul Catholic School.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support of our Director John Stadnyk and CODE's Special Innovation Development Funding. Thank you , Frank Kelly!

Respectfully Submitted by:

Maria Esposito
Superintendent of Education
Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board

