

Part 2.2 Practice in K-12

This section features case studies from schools' systems covering kindergarten to high school. In Toronto, Canada, students from 115 schools created a vision of their preferred educational future and the actions plans to make their vision a reality. Headmaster Glyn Willoughby gives AI Practitioner readers an update on AI at Heathside, a large community school just outside London in the U.K. He describes the progress and projects that Heathside is using for collaborative change and positive improvements.



Sue Anderson and Mo McKenna

clockwork_communications@sympatico.ca and maureenmckenna@sympatico.ca

Toronto District School Board engages the voices of students to create a vision of their preferred educational future and create action plans to achieve it.

“Imagine being part of a secondary school where every student feels successful; where positive student-teacher relationships flourish; where flexible timetables respond to the many and varied needs of our students; where students and trustees enjoy an ongoing dialogue on the things that matter to them most; where teachers consistently create the learning environments in which students are successful; and the student voice is built into everything we do...” Melanie Parrack, Executive Superintendent, Student Success, Toronto District School Board

How it all started

As the fourth largest school board in North America, Toronto District School Board, (TDSB) has over 550 schools, 270,000 students and 16,000 teachers. Over 80 languages are spoken in the system.

Not surprisingly, our involvement with the watershed initiative known as Imagine Student Success started with a simple “conversation for possibility” between two people in the spring of 2004. The System Superintendent of Leadership and Development for TDSB was eager to explore “beginning to shift the conversation” in the system using Appreciative Inquiry. She just needed a place to start. The catalyst for moving forward was a mandate from the Province of Ontario Ministry of Education to each school board to identify strategies focused on student success that would prepare students not only for college and university, but also for apprenticeships and the workplace.

By September that year after careful planning with a small core team, Imagine Student

Success was born. TDSB embarked on this exciting project with the specific intent to:

- Identify student success from a student perspective;
- Broaden understanding of what constitutes student success; and
- Support the student success advisory committee in its overall development of a tdsb vision.

After a successful pilot with seven schools, groups of students in grades 7, 8, 9 and 10, representing 115 schools, were trained as “appreciative interviewers”. They worked with their Imagine Student Success teacher/coach to conduct interviews with a selection of other students, parents, school staff and members of the working community on what success meant to them. The foundational question of the interview was “tell me a story about a time when you felt successful”. Over 1300 interviews (at least half with students) were documented. Each school team “made meaning” of their interviews and came up with a set of common themes. iCohere supported the capture and reporting of stories and themes.

2005 - Year of the Summit

Imagine Student Success phase one was complete when close to 1,000 students, teachers and guests from both the system and the community participated in an Appreciative Inquiry Summit on May 3, 2005.

Student participants further refined their definitions of success by interviewing each other and creating images of their desired future for education in TDSB. The Provincial Minister of Education was on hand to hear their hopes and dreams. It was an energizing and meaningful day for everyone. Within three weeks of the summit, a small group of students was invited to present specific recommendations to the Board and to the Ministry about changes to education to ensure student success.

2006 and Beyond: Committees Poised to Sustain the Momentum

The Board took the student recommendations seriously and crafted five Student Success Mandates. They also endorsed an advisory group composed of students, teachers, principals, staff and a couple of trustees and appointed a full-time TDSB staff member to lead the initiative. Throughout 2006 five Imagine Student Success committees have focused on their assigned mandate:

- Student advisory process to Trustees, and co-curricular activities
- Positive teacher-student relationships
- Pilot programs around flexible timetables
- Professional development for teachers
- Student voice / student surveys

The scope of this initiative is so large the system realizes the need to build internal capacity around Appreciative Inquiry. As a result the Board engaged us to conduct customized AI foundations workshops, develop communication strategies and conduct think tanks on topics that will ultimately contribute to student success. The seeds of change have now even spread to the Parent Involvement Advisory Council where AI is being applied to engage with parents and community.

The goal in the 2006/2007 school year is to implement the communication strategy around student success and integrate all the work of the committees with the ongoing operation of the system.

Stories of Success

It is exciting to see a whole system begin to embrace the AI philosophy and approach, as well as begin to seize the opportunities that emerge. The greatest gift for us has been getting to work directly with students and teachers. We have been fortunate to develop close relationships with some of them and we can see the direct impact of Imagine Student Success and of Appreciative Inquiry on their lives. Here is one such story:

Karen Leckie, a young teacher from A.Y.Jackson Secondary School and part of our initial core group, had a dream: to teach in a school where students would have the freedom and opportunity to be the best they could be through self-directed learning. In December 2004, after being a pivotal part of the Imagine Student Success pilot, Karen and her principal, Nancy Nightingale, responded to the invitation from the Ministry of Education for proposals on dealing with “Students at Risk”. Their proposal was grounded on four key planks:

- The theme of ‘freedom and independence’ from Karen’s students’ Imagine Student Success interviews;
- Themes from their Imagine A.Y. Jackson parent event, where parents were invited to explore their ideal vision for future education through an AI process
- Appreciative Inquiry as a foundation for inquiry in the classroom;
- The Sudbury Valley School Model – adopted in other parts of Canada and the world, and operating under the premise that all students can determine their individual learning path. In less than six weeks from proposal submission, they received funding from the Ministry of Education and began immediately to invite students to participate in a program they called “jPod” – a distinct program for students at AYJ based on the following principles:
 - Curriculum designed by students for students
 - Democratic decision-making
 - Rule book developed and monitored by a student-run judicial committee
 - Timelines and curriculum in sync with individual learning goals.

The jPod has blossomed from 5 students to 102 students as of June 2006 – clearly an example of “change at the speed of imagination”!

Randy Yeboah, a grade 12 student, was one of the original 5 students in jPod. When Karen and Nancy were invited to showcase jPod as a successful pilot for reaching ‘at-risk’ students, Randy found himself front and centre, invited to share his views of this new way of teaching and learning to the Ontario Minister of Education. Following is an excerpt from the moving speech he made.

A year ago, if someone had told me that I would be standing here today talking to this audience, I would have had strong feelings of anger and resentment. Anger for an education system in which I and so many others felt discriminated against, our opinions unheard. Anger for an education system that fails to treat its students as human beings vs. numbers. Anger in particular for an education system that has failed to recognize and meet the needs of a new and increasingly common breed of

student - the student who works 28 hours a week or holds two jobs to support himself; the student who must stay awake until 3:00, 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning just to complete his homework, while, on top of all this, troubles at home plague and bewilder him. The solution... Quit. Dropout. After all, it's so much easier to make money at a young age in fields such as construction or, if your conscience isn't holding you back, to sell drugs and join a gang.

These are situations many of our young people struggle with today, including myself. We are stressed, we are exhausted, and as much as we may not want to admit it, at times we are yearning for your help. We are the students who have the ability to achieve a 90 yet settle for a 60... We are not asking for lenient treatment or an easy way out. We are asking for alternative programs to be developed and funded that let students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Imagine a program where students are engaged in learning and are provided more choice: flexibility in their timetables to address their needs; more experiential learning opportunities such as co-ops field trips and co-curricular activities; and flexibility for teaching and learning strategies that address different learning styles. Imagine a program that builds on positive relationship; where students, teachers and administrators are making connections; where teachers have the time to get to know their students on a personal level and develop relationships; where schools function like caring communities

Now imagine that such a program exists, because it does and it's called jPod. An alternative to the traditional classroom, it's the program that gave me the opportunity to reconnect with the education system. It's an opportunity that many dropouts and those deemed to be 'at-risk' do not have.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is one thing to "imagine student success" and another to ensure it. jPod and other Learning to 18 programs are a step towards ensuring student success and investing in the future of tomorrow.

Before Randy prepared and delivered that speech he attended our four day AI Foundations workshop. He still loves to recount how he was successfully using 'stealth AI' throughout!

Randy's story continues to be a wonderful example of what happens when we see the possibilities in our youth and shine the light on them. In January 2006, in response to increased gun violence in Toronto, Randy and some other Toronto youths started an on-line dialogue on how they could help young children to avoid guns and gangs. Randy introduced them to Appreciative Inquiry and as a result of inviting them to dream, they have formed a not-for-profit organization called iDREAM: Individuals Driven to Respect, Educate, Achieve and Motivate. iDREAM's mission is threefold:

- To strive to reduce violence in the Greater Toronto Area
- To secure a promising future for today's youth
- To aid youth in realizing their potential, in the arts, music and athletics

Taking action while building a strategy, they have already formed a partnership with the Toronto Public Library and are working with a principal in an 'at-risk' neighbourhood to provide mentoring to youth ages 6 to 10, beginning January 2007.

Randy completed jPod and has just entered his first year at York University in Toronto, studying Public Administration.

To learn more about the ripple effect of Imagine Student Success, visit our website www.thesumoexperience.com