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Identifying Opportunities

DURING TIMES OF CHANGE





Change as Opportunity

By Teresa Di Ninno, CAPE Public Charter School

The 2020-21 academic year is going to be memorable in ways we could never have imagined. Education partners at all levels have been challenged to respond to the many changes that have taken place within the K-12 education system in Alberta, all while dealing with the uncertainties of a pandemic.

The collaborative governance and administrative model of our schools has assisted us in responding to the many changes and challenges the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) has faced over the years. The events of the previous school year reaffirmed the effectiveness of this model. Our Board's student-centred focus and the belief in principles of inclusiveness, fairness, diversity, respect, and excellence are foundational to their culture of collaborative decision-making and problem-solving. The engagement of parents, students, staff, and

other key stakeholders on board matters and plans contribute not only to shared governance, but also to shared responsibility as they adhere to our charter's vision, mission, and beliefs. This time has confirmed our dedication to *what* we do, while adapting *how* we do this work.

COVID-19 thrust the world into a new reality early 2020. It pushed us towards in-school, at-home, and blended learning options as we supported each of our students and their families. In spite of the fact that we have had one-on-one computing for Grades 4 to 9 students, and staff has utilized technology as a teaching tool for many years, quickly adapting to online options during the pandemic has been a huge learning curve for everyone.

Online learning increased teacher stress and significantly stretched administration capacity to support teachers and also build staff capacity in the use of a variety of

online tools. Different platforms for meeting, teaching, and collecting proved difficult for parents and students between the months of March and June. As a result, we have decided to use Zoom for online meetings and Google Classroom for assignment tracking and collection. This called for the downloading of the Google suite on all school devices, and extra time allotted to educate teachers on how to use these tools, so they could assist students and parents.

As we pushed through the days and months, we realized that the mental health of our staff, our parents, our students, and our community had to be our priority. We called on our community resources to assist and the response was overwhelming. We learned, we shared, we commiserated, we laughed, we inspired, we cried, we brainstormed, and we questioned. We will continue along this path as we are stronger together.

During this unprecedented time, Alberta released two significant educational documents: the *Ministerial Order on Student Learning* and the *Assurance Model*. These documents link, guide, and support educators as we strive to build relationships, engage with education partners, and create and sustain a culture of continuous improvement and collective responsibility leading to “success for every child in school.” They present us with an opportunity for reflection and introspection, for review of policies and procedures, and for refining budget allocations and everyday practices with the goal of improving our system and its structures to positively impact student learning through the provision of a more effective and efficient personalized integrated program.

A review of CAPE’s charter found alignment with these documents. For example, our personalized program promotes and supports success for every child and our community partnerships parallel the community engagement described within the *Order*. Whether it was the necessity of the pandemic or the governing documents, our stakeholders have all experienced in real time “the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that support ethical world citizenry, life-long learning, and the pursuit of personal excellence within a community of learners.”

These lived principles guided us during the school closure. We discovered Zoom. Our principal organized staff meetings to brainstorm individual student programs

and family supports, but also to just see each other, bad hair days and all. We met with students in large groups, small groups, and individually. In response to a student’s need for social connections, one of our staff members facilitated virtual recesses. What a simple, brilliant idea! The superintendent sent birthday cards to each student and staff member celebrating a birthday and to each individual needing a bit of a boost.

We took notes on what worked, could work, and did not work, and adopted uniform practices across all grades and all subjects to facilitate learning. Feedback and support from parents and students, our Board of Directors, our site administrators, our School Council, and our staff were absolutely essential in this process.

Facility challenges forced even more transformations. The Board functioned as always by addressing the failure of our mechanical system. The response of the many people working on replacing that system was awe-inspiring as we worked together to bring back our students in a safe, face-to-face environment. The rapid supportive response from the ministry and the Minister also needs to be acknowledged.

Cohorting is forcing a change to how we deliver our literacy and numeracy programs, as well as our integration projects. It prevents homogenous cross-grade grouping, thereby increasing teacher workload to offer mixed levels within a time block. We are testing literacy/numeracy instruction by specialist

teachers. Capitalizing on the strengths, interests, and experience of our staff, we have restructured a literacy team, introduced a numeracy team, and are working on a First Nations Awareness team.

These teams will guide the work within the programs and support those teachers who deliver them. Cohorting also prevents individual student choice in cross-grade projects and thus the school developed another way to achieve student (and parental) voice. Community involvement remains a strong part of our program. It will come into the classroom much more often, while trips into our community will decrease significantly. The principal works with staff to ensure that our integrated program is delivered effectively and efficiently and does not suffer from the negative effects of COVID-19, distancing, and cohorting. Data, teacher observations, and parent/student input will inform our decisions as we move forward.

Change is inevitable. It can scare us into inaction or it can present us with opportunities to reflect, re-envision, and re-think. CAPE chooses to do the latter in an effort to improve our system and its structures with the ultimate goal to positively impact student learning. ■

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