

Schools Attuned® in Grand Erie

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I used to think... students should work quietly at their desks. All students should do the same amount of work. Hard work will make all things right with the world.

Now I think... all students have different ways of learning, processing information etc. and there is a need for multiple strategies and teamwork in teaching children.

Background

When the funding announcement for the CODE Special Education Project was made in September, 2005, it was viewed as a promising way of moving forward system projects that had already been initiated to align and improve special education services. Amalgamation of three predecessor boards to create the Grand Erie District School Board had revealed significant differences in the values, beliefs and practices affecting special education students. Developing a shared vision was imperative. *Guiding Principles in Special Education* (GEDSB Policy Number 27) were developed, and awareness of the importance of alignment between organizational portfolios, data-driven decision making, and evidence-based practice began to influence system planning. The release of *Education for All* (2005) galvanized the direction of special education in Grand Erie.

Professional Learning

"The preparation of the regular classroom teachers... is of critical importance for the application of inclusionary service models for children with learning disorders. To place such children in regular classrooms with teachers who lack preparation to understand and manage them effectively is unfair to the students and to the teachers themselves" (M. Levine, 2001 p. 307). Schools Attuned® is a student-focused professional development program and service delivery model designed to equip educators with the knowledge, skills and tools to make sound, defensible professional judgments about instructional and assessment practices that affect all types of learners (www.allkindsofminds.org). Training involves 35 hours of core course instruction with 10 hours of follow-up learning. This is a substantial commitment to professional development. Anchored in brain research, the program focuses on student strengths, neurodevelopmental profiles, instructional decisions based on evidence of student learning, professional collaboration, differentiated instruction, and helping students learn about learning. Because it accomplishes key professional learning goals outlined in *Education for All*, Schools Attuned® became the focus of the CODE Special Education Project in Grand Erie. Offering the course during the school year built on the momentum created by summer institute training in the previous two years.

The Peel District School Board generously shared a pre-/post-program capacity-building survey they had developed to assess the impact of this professional development program on teacher practices. Table 1 summarizes the data from the GEDSB 2006 cohort.

Table 1: Summary of Results for Participants Who Completed Both Pre- and Post-Program Surveys (GEDSB 2006 cohort)

Item	Pre-program (n = 47)		Post-program (n = 47)		Mean Difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1. I use neurodevelopmental terminology to describe observations of students.	1.94	0.82	3.47	0.55	1.53***
2. I use profiles of students in planning accommodations and strategies in teaching.	3.09	0.97	3.62	0.49	0.53***
3. I select/adapt accommodations and interventions for students based on an understanding of a neurodevelopmental framework.	2.25	1.03	3.72	0.45	1.47***
4. I have collaborative conversations with other teachers about students' profiles.	3.43	0.83	3.62	0.49	0.19
5. I make changes to instructional decision making based on student profiles.	3.23	0.79	3.55	0.54	0.32**
6. I am confident in my abilities to recognize differences in student learning.	3.28	0.77	3.72	0.45	0.45***
7. I am confident in my abilities to manage differences in student learning.	3.15	0.72	3.55	0.50	0.40***
8. I plan lessons in ways that have incorporated aspects of the neurodevelopmental framework.	2.34	0.92	3.74	0.44	1.40***
9. I plan lessons in ways that leverage student strengths.	3.36	0.61	3.77	0.43	0.40***
10. I am able to speak clearly with parents regarding their child's strengths and weaknesses.	3.53	0.58	3.83	0.38	0.30**
TOTAL	29.59	5.32	36.59	2.40	7.0***

p<.01; *p<.001 [Data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests.]

Appreciation is extended to Dr. A. Sidiq Ali for his generous sharing of the survey as well as Shari Nickle, Donna Zuccato and Shirley-Anne Teal of the Peel District School Board for their help along the way.

Apart from significant improvements in all but one area of professional practice, there was a significant decrease in standard deviation or variability within the group in relation to how individual teachers reported on their practice. This means that Schools Attuned® training built not only teacher capacity, but also consistency with respect to key indicators.

Over the three years of the CODE project, significant professional learning opportunities were offered through other portfolios. In order to determine whether the baseline level of teacher knowledge had changed over time, pre-course surveys from the 2006 (n = 75) and 2008 (n = 25) cohorts were compared. ANOVA revealed no significant difference between groups, supporting a conclusion that Schools Attuned® training makes a unique contribution to teacher learning ($F(2, 24) = 0.749, p < 0.70$).

Instructional Leadership

In the first year of the project, expressions of interest were accepted from across the district with the recommendation that staff attend in school groups of 3–5. Administrator participation was encouraged but not required. The response from front-line staff was overwhelmingly positive and approximately half of interested teachers could be accommodated. In spite of this favourable response to training, questions emerged about implementation of what was learned. Discussions with Schools Attuned® alumni and administrators revealed two key strategies to support knowledge mobilization: administrator participation in the training, and the presence of a strong teacher leader on staff.

Lessons learned from year one prompted the development of a proposal submission format in subsequent years to position the involvement of principals as instructional leaders. Expressions of interest were solicited from school teams that included the administrator and addressed the implementation of this training in the school plan. Building this stronger foundation for implementation came at a cost of significantly reduced interest in the CODE project. The principal's involvement had become a (temporary) bottleneck for school involvement. In the third year of the project, however, a similar proposal format was used and interest again exceeded available spaces. Taken together, these trends underscore the role of principals in modelling professional learning behaviour and the importance of insisting on their participation in professional development—after all, what gets supervised gets done (M. Schmoker, 2006). Interestingly, summer institute sessions have not attracted administrator involvement even though large groups from schools have organized themselves to engage in this opportunity.

Principals who completed training with their staff have systematically embedded implementation of what was learned into school plans and also into performance review processes. These are key strategies to mobilize knowledge. CODE schools have reported outcomes such as fewer Individual Education Plans for non-identified students because "we're teaching to the student now"; improved receptivity to maintaining regular class placements for students with special education needs; increased use of assistive technology; targeted use of strategies to support specific students; and better evidence-based judgment to access out-of-school resources such as psycho-educational assessment. Daily modelling of the application of training by principals, in conjunction with the Learning Resource Teacher, has been identified as the key strategy to mobilize knowledge within a school.

While the leadership role played by administrators is imperative to support implementation of professional learning, front-line staff without positional power can also play a determining role in the success of any venture. In the third year of the project, an opportunity was offered to aspiring leaders to develop projects through Grand Erie's internal leadership development program. Two teachers became involved through this process and made significant contributions to embedding Schools Attuned® practices in various work settings. This also helped support the efforts of in-house teacher leaders who emerged as champions of the project. These staff members play pivotal roles by taking actions such as designing bulletin boards to inform the school community about student learning, supporting other teachers in demystifying learning, sharing resources, and actively engaging colleagues in focused professional conversation.

Assessment

The explicit goal of using student achievement data to show improvements in learning for students with special education needs was viewed as an ideal opportunity to align with literacy/numeracy initiatives. This portfolio was developing system standards for Developmental Reading Assessment/ Comprehension, Attitudes, Strategies and Interests (DRA/CASI) assessment, data recording and analysis. Inclusion of special needs students in regular education processes has helped to "push the envelope" in terms of education-for-all thinking. One seasoned special education teacher reflecting on changes in the school over the years of involvement with the CODE project commented that "overall, there has been a real shift in collaboration and the shared understanding that we all teach every kid." Apart from more consistently valuing the role that common assessments can have in program planning, staff report planning for multiple means of expression for assessment of learning and reconsidering the value of student work to inform instructional decision making. These shifts in focus have helped entrench differentiated instruction. On a parallel note, while administrators observe differences in the habits of mind of Schools Attuned®-trained staff and those not yet trained, the general observation is also that having some staff modelling the willingness and confidence to try alternative practices benefits everyone.

Schools and System Organization

Rethinking school and system organization has been initiated in Grand Erie. Undertakings like the CODE Special Education Project, Literacy/Numeracy Secretariat initiatives, and Learn to 18/Student Success collectively draw attention to outdated organizational structures. The process of developing and implementing a system plan models a recursive process for school planning which, in turn, drives decisions about timetable, staffing, and resource allocation. Our CODE schools report planned changes in all of these areas to support professional conversations among staff, further implementation of training, and a foundational shift in embedded professional learning.

« Schools Attuned, continued »

Communication

System structures/processes to roll out practical details of an undertaking are well established in Grand Erie, but authentic communication about how things are really going is an area under development. Creating an atmosphere that supports and encourages the sharing of professional practice is challenging. An email-based conference internal to the board to facilitate ongoing sharing of success, challenges, and questions by Schools Attuned® alumni is showing good promise as one sustainable strategy to mobilize knowledge. At the level of individual students and schools, staff involved with the project report that a focus on student strengths is an irresistible foundation for collaborative management of learning differences with most parents. Furthermore, a focus on monitoring is a key part of the board improvement plan.

Next Steps

The immediate challenge to knowledge mobilization based on lessons learned from the CODE project is to find ways of supporting trained staff to consistently implement what they have learned, as well as offering continued training opportunities, in the absence of external funds to accomplish these goals. This approach includes taking a critical look at ways of building capacity with staff who have not yet been trained. ●

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All Kinds of Minds Web Site. Available from <<http://www.allkindsofminds.org>>

Grand Erie District School Board Web Site. Available from <<http://www.granderie.ca>>

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Bâtir la capacité du personnel pour assurer la réussite de tous les élèves

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L'amélioration du rendement des élèves demeure le point de mire de l'ensemble du personnel du Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario.

On invite donc chaque année, le personnel à effectuer une analyse des items des tests de l'OQRE afin de déterminer et d'établir la liste des forces ainsi que des points à améliorer. De plus, on établit une comparaison avec les résultats des bulletins de chaque élève afin de voir si

les faiblesses relevées lors des tests se retrouvaient également dans les autres évaluations scolaires. L'année durant, les élèves pratiquent à répondre à des questions explicites, implicites et de liens, et cetera, dans toutes les matières. De plus, un plan d'action est dressé pour préparer et assurer la réussite des élèves aux tests de l'OQRE pour l'année en cours.

Les consultations fréquentes entre collègues (enseignantes et enseignants, enseignantes et enseignants ressources, éducateurs spécialisés) et avec les membres à la direction enrichissent le processus pédagogique. La clé de la réussite réside dans l'ouverture et la confiance entre tous les membres du personnel.

De plus en plus, le personnel enseignant est d'avis qu'il est primordial pour la réussite des élèves de faire en sorte que l'enseignement des processus soit le même d'année en année. Ainsi, plusieurs initiatives ont été mises en œuvre afin d'assurer cette harmonisation au niveau des processus d'écriture, de lecture, de résolution de problèmes et du projet de recherche. À titre d'exemple, les enseignantes et les enseignants aux cycles primaire et moyen se rendent disponibles pour faire du modelage dans les salles de classe afin d'assurer que les processus soient enseignés selon les paramètres établis. Cette constance et cette cohérence favorisent la réussite de tous, surtout les élèves ayant des besoins particuliers.

Les écoles misent surtout la réussite en lecture, sachant que ceci est la clé de la réussite scolaire. Plusieurs initiatives ont été mises en place pour atteindre les objectifs de compréhension en lecture. Dans quelques écoles les classes du cycle moyen ont participé au projet « Collaborer pour assurer la réussite des élèves ayant des besoins particuliers » subventionné par le ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario et élaboré par CODE. Ce projet vise le partage de stratégies en lecture ainsi que la formation et l'accompagnement des enseignantes et des enseignants pour répondre plus adéquatement aux besoins spécifiques des élèves avec des besoins particuliers dans les salles de classe. Au cycle primaire et au cycle moyen, on prévoit l'utilisation adéquate des trousseaux GB+ et DRA ; des outils

diagnostiques dont les livres nivelés favorisent l'enseignement guidé auprès de petits groupes d'élèves d'un même niveau d'apprentissage.



Aussi, la culture des communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles et de rencontres par niveaux permet de revoir et d'harmoniser les pratiques d'enseignement et d'améliorer le processus d'évaluation. Les écoles adoptent les principes de la table ronde des experts tels que stipulé dans le document.

« L'éducation pour tous ». Les enseignantes et les enseignants différencient les contenus, les processus et les productions. Dans le but de donner à l'élève avec des besoins particuliers le maximum de chances de réussite, un choix de questions traitant d'une même habileté lui est offert au cours de son évaluation. En plus de ce choix, l'entrevue peut remplacer l'évaluation traditionnelle écrite si l'élève le veut. Celle-ci permet les sous-questions, la rétroaction immédiate et la possibilité de réponses plus élaborées. Ces stratégies contribuent à rendre

l'élève plus actif et plus responsable dans le cadre du processus de son apprentissage.

Finalement, les écoles sont de vraies communautés d'apprentissage professionnelles où règnent la collaboration et la volonté de trouver des stratégies et des techniques efficaces pour assurer la réussite de tous les élèves. ●

✉ Comments about this article? Email lise.chretiengardner@nouvelon.ca

Assistive Technology: Tech Tuesdays

Ottawa Catholic School Board

Background

Over the past three years, the Ministry of Education has made funding available through the Council of Directors of Education (CODE) to school boards for projects related to the Education For All expert panel report. During the 2007–2008 school year, CODE funding was directed at supporting intermediate and secondary students through the use of assistive technology (AT). AT is promoted as a means of helping students gain independence, opportunity, a sense of accomplishment and academic success.

Methods

A total of 106 teachers and administrators from 18 schools were invited to participate in a series of professional development (PD) activities. The PD model employed for this project was based on the positive results generated from the previous CODE projects. The PD allowed for the introduction of the topic using an expert in the field, an opportunity for participants to gather some practical experience and to practise the strategy in a neutral setting, and finally, the opportunity for participants to use the strategy back at their school site. Opportunities for professional dialogue and collaboration throughout each phase of the project were viewed as key to the success of the project.

Teachers were asked to complete a survey prior to the first PD session and again on the final PD day. The purpose of the survey was to get information about their understanding of AT and of Differentiated Instruction (DI).

The AT part of the questionnaire asked them about their:

- Knowledge of various assistive technologies
- Personal use of assistive technology, and
- Integration of AT into everyday planning

The part of the questionnaire that explored differentiated instruction asked them about their:

- Confidence in selecting the best assistive technology for students with specific learning needs
- Confidence in using various differentiating strategies in the classrooms, and
- The Ministry of Education's Readiness to use AT in the school checklist.

Students

A student survey was sent to 91 students currently using AT. The resource or guidance teacher facilitated the use of assistive technology to aid in survey completion if appropriate.

The survey asked students to identify the types of AT they were using and how they were using them, to rate the degree of difficulty that using AT presented, to describe the benefits of using AT, and to make recommendations about AT use for other students and the system.

Results

In order to assess whether or not there was a change in teachers' a) knowledge of various assistive technologies, b) personal use of assistive technology, or c) the integration of AT into everyday planning, a multivariate analysis of variance on **Knowledge, Use and Integration** was performed using pre- and post-survey data, with **Time** as the repeated, dependent variable. There was an overall significant effect of **Time**, with $F(3, 21) = 10.4$; $p < .01$. Univariate analyses of each survey component revealed a significant change in teacher practice across time in each of the areas measured. The means for each survey component displaying change over time are presented in **Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c**. (Note: The maximum score for Knowledge was 11, for Use was 44, and for Integration was 33.