

« Tech Tuesdays, continued

ment Allocation grant). Issues arose around accessibility and reliability of AT currently in the schools. In summary, attitudes towards AT were positive and there appeared to be a general thirst for more information about using AT to help students be successful.

Students embraced the use of AT and had very few concerns about using AT at school. Indeed, they wanted access at home. They reported that they were generally well supported at school and that they felt they could get help with AT if they needed. Interestingly, teachers were more likely than students to suggest that students would feel singled out or different if they were using AT. The majority of students using AT did not report feeling self-conscious about using AT at school. There was a similar discrepancy between teacher and student perceptions when it came to reports on the benefits of AT. Teachers were more likely than students to report that AT improved the quality of student work and helped to support understanding. Students seemed to see AT more as a tool to help them get their work done faster, but issues relating to understanding and organization were less likely to be influenced by the use of AT.

The CODE Year 3: Tech Tuesday project provided insight into the use of AT in the intermediate and secondary panels. It appears that attitudes and knowledge regarding the use of AT are further ahead of the some of the technical and practical issues. For example, teachers and students are more than willing to use AT, but having only one electrical outlet in the classroom limits the application of AT. Similarly, teachers indicated a willingness to integrate AT into their regular practice, but need time to do so. Assessment practices appear to be another barrier to regular integration of AT in the classroom. There appears to be no doubt, however, that Ottawa Catholic School Board is on the right track when it comes to using AT as a means of helping students with special needs to gain independence, opportunity, a sense of accomplishment, and academic success. Further, AT's usefulness and the imperative need for AT to support students can be summed up in the words of one AT student user who said,

"Even kids with no problems can use it!" ●

Comments about this article? Email simone.oliver@ottawacatholicschools.ca

Making a Difference by Making It Different

Rainy River District School Board



For the CODE Special Education Project, Making a Difference by Making It Different, all Rainy River District School Board schools were involved, although the main focus for the project was in the primary and junior divisions of all elementary schools. Approximately 115 teachers, including elementary and secondary Special Education Resource Teachers, benefited from the improved professional practice through the support of professional learning communities, professional development in differentiated instruction and in assistive

technology, and resources, which in turn improved the achievement of approximately 789 primary students and 515 junior students throughout the Board.

The CODE project focused on improving professional learning. All primary, junior, and Special Education Resource teachers participated in school and system professional learning communities. Differentiated instruction training was provided to new teachers through the New Teacher Induction Program, and it was also a focus of all primary and junior professional learning communities. In addition to this training, teachers across the system benefited from the monthly Differentiated Instruction newsletter and evening professional learning sessions held by the Board Literacy Coordinator.

Role Development and Best Practices

The Student Achievement Teacher (SAT), a leadership role within each elementary school, was expanded within all schools to assist with peer coaching/co-teaching within both the primary and junior panels. This role also facilitated school-based professional learning communities and was further supported by the system consultants and by central meetings of the Student Achievement Teachers who explored ways to expand the coaching model at the school level. Facilitating moderated marking sessions and leading school team EQAO training, the Student Achievement Teacher was a key person in ensuring alignment of Ministry and system initiatives within the school.

The role of the Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) moved to a more inclusive role in the school through the professional learning communities. The SAT worked closely with the SERT in providing supports for students with special education needs. Students considered at-risk were tracked at each professional learning community, creating a shared responsibility for closing the gap for these students and aligning with the Student Success Initiative's principles.

Another focus of the CODE project was a deepening of best practices and resources through the development of the Board Assessment Plan. The Rainy River District School Board's extensive Assessment Plan outlines the system's assessments, such as the Developmental Reading Assessments (for students in Kindergarten to Grade 3), CASI Reading Assessment (for students in Grades 4 to 8), and writing exemplar tasks, with clear guidelines for the administration, timing, frequency, and collection of data of all assessments. These assessments are used to inform our efforts by focusing and refining instruction and monitoring student progress. Professional learning communities within the primary, junior, and intermediate divisions focused their decision making on the collection and analysis of such data. For instance, all students in the primary division are tracked on a literacy

spreadsheet. An area for development is a system-wide tracking mechanism for junior at-risk students. Overall, the system for collecting data and its analysis alongside EQAO data were instrumental in the implementation of the School Effectiveness Framework last year and have laid the groundwork for the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways.

The Impact of Assistive Technology

A lesson learned from the CODE project was in the area of assistive technology. The *Education for All* report states that "Assistive technology is a powerful tool. It is any technology that allows one to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of an individual



with special learning needs. Its applications and adaptations can help open doors to previously inaccessible learning opportunities for many children with special needs." The Board's Special Education Services department has provided assistive technology such as FM systems and sound amplification, print enlargers, a Braille embosser that prints any scanned text, voice-to-text and text-to-speech software, and communication aids (speech synthesizers and touchscreens) for students requiring such support.

In the spring of 2008, Special Education Services conducted a data-driven study of approximately 20 identified students in Grades 4 to 6 to show how assistive technology impacts student achievement in spelling, reading comprehension and written expression. The results were compelling, especially in the area of written language. With the assistance of SpeakQ software, 100% of students that were tested increased spelling achievement by more than four grades. Eighty-five percent of students demonstrated increased achievement in reading using Kurzweil software. Seventy percent of students had an increase of at least four grade levels in written language achievement using WordQ software.

Staff Reorganization and Training

Despite these promising results, assistive technology is an area for further development for the Board. A survey of primary and junior teachers, as well as SERTs, indicated that staff were still in the initiation stage. Early in the project, SERTs were provided with intensive training in assistive technology alongside the Information/Communication Technology (ICT) Leads for each school. ICT Leads are teachers who are provided with ongoing professional development and support in the area of information/communication technology and, in turn, share this knowledge with school staff. While this early model seemed a logical path for implementing assistive technology, the Board encountered some obstacles. First, both roles seemed to change frequently over the years without the knowledge transfer. Secondly, assistive technology is a quickly changing field; professional development could not keep up with the changes. Also, teachers' expertise in information technology varied greatly, and as a result, so did the use and integration of the assistive technology in the district's classrooms. And there were still teachers who did not see the value of assistive technology or its role as a "cognitive prosthesis" (Cavalier, Ferretti, & Okolo, 1994).

To overcome these obstacles, Special Education staffing was reorganized to allow for a System Special Education Resource Teacher who would specialize in assistive technology and would work with elementary schools across the district. As the secondary panel has provided release time for ICT Leads, the focus for this upcoming year is to provide further training for this role at the secondary level. The secondary ICT Leads would then take the lead for training but would work closely with the SERTs, who would be responsible for developing a school plan for ongoing training.

With respect to training, best practices across the system highlighted the importance of personalizing training for each student's support network. An important recipient of training was the school's Education Support Personnel (ESP), ensuring that all ESP knew how to use the technology and to support all students within the school. One school trained the students, providing a one-hour tutorial for each student about the basic functions of the laptop and the prescribed software, with parents encouraged to attend these tutorials. Teachers also were provided with training and ongoing support, such as noon-hour tutorials demonstrating how to get the most of the technology and promoting its use within the classroom. Another best practice was providing training exclusively for parents through an evening session. Parents need to support student learning and promote the use of this technology with their children. During this evening session, parents were also given a tutorial on how to use assistive technology such as Kurzweil and ReadPlease.

Next Steps

Additional barriers existed within the school infrastructure. Print material (textbooks, assignments, tests) needed to be made available for the students and therefore, network scanners were relocated in student-accessible areas. While Education Support Personnel were initially trained in scanning print material, the goal is to enable greater student independence. As well, the Board established a central library of scanned material and has since promoted the importance of purchasing digital textbooks whenever schools purchase resources. The final step to increase accessibility of assistive technology and to remove the stigmas that may be attached to its use will be the installation of wireless access in all schools, thereby allowing all students to use laptops in the classrooms.

The successes of Making a Difference by Making It Different came largely through narrowing and deepening our Board's focus and its system plan, building capacity through professional learning communities, promoting coaching/co-teaching models, creating a framework in which to consistently analyze data to inform decision making, and carefully considering feedback at all levels to improve practice. The CODE project was the "tipping point" in respect to making a difference for all students, but especially in regard to closing the gap for students with special education needs. ●

Comments about this article? Email hcampbell@mail.rdsb.com