

Change for the better

A recently retired principal reflects on how to implement a successful change process.

by Mary Laudien

Public schools in British Columbia are under incredible stress as they come to terms with the forced reality of re-inventing themselves. It is a time of unprecedented budgetary pinching, declining enrollment in public schools with lack of confidence in the quality of education being delivered, parental aspirations for increased “Schools of Choice” and heightened expectations that schools must successfully meet the needs of the inclusive and diverse classroom organizations in schools. Everyone is challenged with how to do more in our public school system with so much less.

Change is in the air and with it, its attendant concerns, anxiety and stress. As such, schools and school districts need an innovative “change process” with proven success to frame the change required and move schools even closer to their full potential.

In 2005, West Bay Elementary, a public school in West Vancouver was dying a slow death. Demographics projected that the school could expect that families moving into the catchment would continue to bypass their local public school and choose to enroll in the private school options on the North Shore instead. It was a given that the school was moving towards closure if something wasn't done to alter the perception of the school. The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program was investigated, considered and chosen as a way to attract the catchment clientele to its home

school. Today, West Bay is oversubscribed and families are buying and renting in the catchment area to secure placement for their children. The school has an impeccable reputation — it is a school with a unified community that meets the needs of its individual learners. Parents are clamoring to provide their children with the opportunity to attend this “Choice School” and feel confident that their children will receive a “world class” education.

Every child in British Columbia deserves to have this kind of positive response and growth that demonstrates public schools can be schools of excellence where “best practice” for students is at the core of all decisions. “We do what is best for kids,” is a consistent message, but do we really? It loses in the translation when we aren't giving a clear message to the school district managers, the trustees and the Ministry, what

truly is working at the grassroots level in the education of our children. As the instructional leaders, we need to be visionary. We have to know what are the best conditions and learning communities that can provide our “future citizens” with the strongest educational background possible. Leaders with vision know what they want the end result to look like and help their stakeholders to envision this as well. Thus, being an effective communicator and promoter of this vision is key to the work to be done. As leader of the innovative change process you choose to undergo, a leader must be willing to share this leadership amongst key stakeholders, such as district office managers (superintendents and trustees), teachers, parents and the students themselves. You become the gatekeeper and everything that the school is immersed in must be planned through the lens of one's change initiative (e.g., the annual SPC action plan created through the staff and parents, resource allocations, staff development and professional development opportunities, fundraising efforts, fine arts programs, sports program, etc.). There isn't the opportunity to “jump on board” with every ministry initiative, unless it aligns with your change process. And most of all, as leaders, one has to have genuine respect for all stakeholders immersed

in the change process and to support their concerns, confidence levels and abilities. This is where The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) fits. As one embarks in re-framing how one educates students, one must anticipate the process.

As the concept of *change* is approached in a learning community, you can feel the stress level rise with the unknown and everyone's initial negative response due to uncertainty. Your first task as the leader is to educate everyone about the needs and the reasons for the change. You might be leading a school in West Vancouver that is losing students to the private system. You may be leading an inner city school that does not fare well on the FSAs or a school that loses students because your school doesn't have a strong sense of community and belonging. No matter how wonderful one's staff may be, if trust is lacking, the school will not make inroads. Families seek out schools that they believe embrace the development of the whole child, that understand how to manage diversity, that engage the students through the inter-relatedness of curriculum and the skills of inquiry and prepare their children for the role of global citizens.

Karel Holloway wrote in a National Staff Development Council article (February/March, 2003) that researchers have found that helping educators work through concerns related to innovative change is crucial to the success of the process. CBAM is a framework available to understand and address educators' common understandings about change. CBAM originated in the 1970s through Shirley Hord, program manager with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. It is based upon understanding and listening to the stages that each pro-

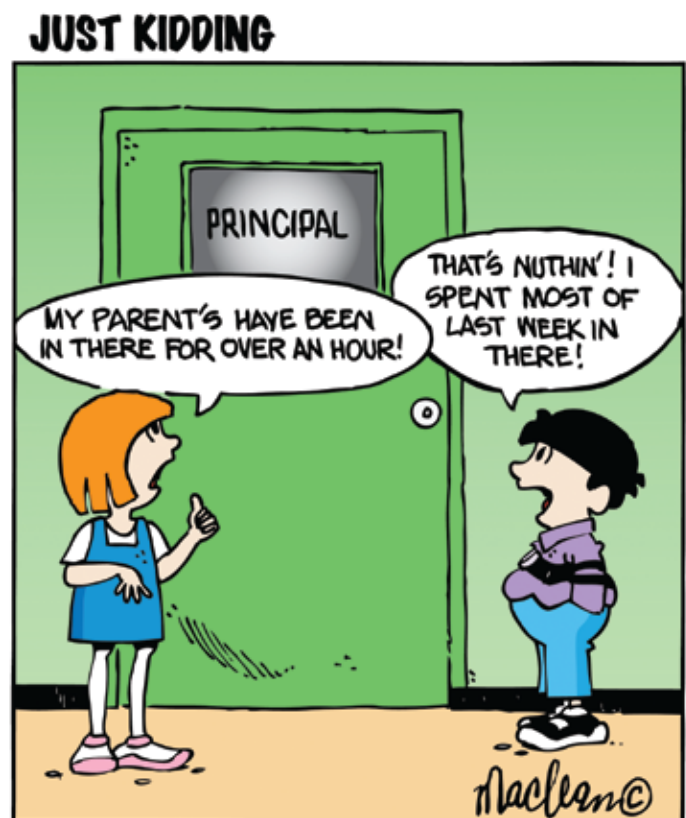
fessional in your building is moving through as they progress through the change process. By framing change in this way, the leadership team can support staff through the process, which will immerse educators in the change and make them feel less "put upon and stressed." Some staff will move through each stage progressively, while others will skip around and have several concerns simultaneously. As a leader, it is important to have a survey prepared where staff can pinpoint the stage that they have reached. It is worthwhile to monitor evaluations of progress every five months or so, so that staff can see their personal growth, change with the initiative and track progress. Resistance to change is natural and during these unsettled times, it will take an effective leader to ensure that what is being proposed has merit and will make a positive difference. It is my experience, that even the most resistant of teachers can be motivated towards making the right choices for their students when they feel heard, supported and acknowledged. Getting the entire learning community behind the change allows the staff the opportunity to feel respected and recognized for "going the extra mile" to assure excellence for their students. Parents who are well-informed throughout the process can't say enough about their admiration for the

teachers and quality of education their children are receiving as a result of staff taking on the innovation to improve.

CBAM's seven stages of concern

Stage 0 Awareness: *Aware that an innovation is being introduced but not really interested or concerned with it.* Stakeholders need to be made aware and in agreement that the change is necessary and what the end will look like. Everyone must come to the realization that they can make a difference by getting involved and moving forward.

Stage 1 Informational: *Interested in some information about the change.* The leadership team must provide training and time for professional conversations where staff can begin to develop an understanding of what the change initiative entails. This may mean bringing in resource people to help with laying the philosophical underpinnings of the pur-



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pose and rewards to be gained for one's students.

Stage 2 Personal: *Wants to know the personal impact of the change.* In the early days of the change process, stakeholders, not just educators, will want to be assured that it is doable for them or that they can develop the skills required to make the change. This is a time when the leader must be receptive to meeting individually with staff members and taking the time to encourage staff and help them understand *your* confidence in *their* professional ability to manage and perfect the change. Teachers are so conscientious that they constantly demonstrate self-doubt. They require the reassurance that you can provide to them.

This is also a time when communication is key with students and parents, so that they develop a strong desire for the changes being recommended and implemented. Students will have doubts and concerns, just as staff.

Parents require extensive communication through meetings, guest speakers, open houses, newsletters, etc. to ensure they are also committed to the proposed changes. Parents need an understanding that what is being proposed is the right fit for the school and the new skills, attitudes and knowledge will better prepare their children for the future.

Stage 3 Management: *Concerned about how the change will be managed in practice.* Time is always the hurdle that creates negativity. Staff members *always* believe that they are overburdened and that by taking on "change," it will cause even more work. They are not wrong about that, but professional teachers also know that their job entails before school, after school, some weekend and vacation time. This is a given in education, it isn't a regular hours job.

However, districts could support the collaboration time required for sustaining the change by ensuring that time is allocated for this purpose. Parents want reassurance that teachers have the time to collaborate and share the implementation in a way that is not burdensome to already fully committed classroom teachers.

Stage 4 Consequence: *Interested in the impact on students or the school.* At this stage, teachers must be assured that the positive effect of the change will outweigh the uncomfortable feelings that one may experience during implementation. This is a time when the leader must continue to reassure stakeholders of the vision behind this change. If you can back-up the vision with research and data, stakeholders will be assured that the innovation is worthwhile. This is a time when people question whether they have the skill, training and confidence to move forward with the change in their pedagogy to make a difference. It is a pivotal stage in the process. As a leader, you have to convince your staff that as professionals they need to get "messy and dirty" with the innovation. You will find that the resourcefulness and inspiration of some will carry the resistant staff towards "jumping in" and becoming engaged.

Stage 5 Collaboration: *Interested in working with colleagues to make the change effective.* It is crucial that the staff members implementing the change are provided with time

to spend with whole school professional development. This may require negotiating with unions and the school district. Everyone knows that this is a key piece to implementing change. It is imperative that the staff create an *Essential Agreement* about how they will frame and make the most of collaborative time. The key to making this work is getting involved with your staff in the planning and the training yourself with a leadership team. Administrators and teacher leaders can help to structure the collaboration and gauge the success of the implementation. Recognizing the efforts of the professionals involved and sharing continuously help to develop the commitment to change. As the leader, it is your role to communicate to your learning community how the staff commitment to the change process makes a difference for the students.

Stage 6 Refocusing: *Begins refining the innovation to improve student learning results.* When staff members reach this stage, they are well on their way. They are the staff members who initially emerge as leaders and take responsibility for the change process. They are actively engaged in working through the innovation with their students and become excited and energized to move forward. This stage allows them to share with other staff, lead the way and begin to adapt the change to one's unique site. Their level of professionalism drives them

Change References

The seven stages of concerns and how to address them are available in *Taking Charge of Change*, by Shirley Hord, William Rutherford, Leslie Huling-Austin, and Gene Hall, ASCD, 1987.


Another worthwhile source is, Shhh, the Dragon Is Asleep and Its Name is Resistance, by Monica Janas, *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer, 1998 (Vol.19, No.3, which is available online at www.nsdcd.org/library/jsd/janas193.html)

forward and helps to move their peers through to this stage, as well, because of their enthusiasm and personal successes. The professional conversations in the staff room are daily events as teacher innovators begin to experience the exhilaration from successful lessons.

Something to keep in mind during the change process is that the principal is engaged and immersed in their change initiative. This means that he/she is anxious to visit classrooms during lessons that demonstrate the initiative and that he/she will be communicating their successes through newsletters, parent informational meetings and emails to district management. The staff's professionalism will be acknowledged and celebrated. Once teachers are confident enough with the change implemented they will be encouraged to invite the learning community in for celebrations of

learning and parent workshops. You will find at this stage, the parents are so grateful for the opportunity for their children to be a part of such a professional and highly functioning learning community, that they take on the role of demonstrating their appreciation. They can't say enough, become fully engaged in the school and will whole-heartedly support their children's teachers.

Change is hard, but not impossible. Public schools across the province are feeling compelling reasons for making changes. Leaders in schools have the responsibility to make this happen. We take on leadership roles because we believe that we can be change agents for

the betterment of our students. The message one must glean from this is that change is possible and by having a framework for change, one has a better understanding of the factors that cause resistance: integrity, fear, communication, pace, history and stress and how to work towards alleviating these (*Motivational interviewing: preparing people for change*. William R. Miller, Stephen Rollick and Kelly Conforti). You can work with teacher unions, district management, trustees and parents to make the right changes to your programs that will better educate your students and increase confidence in the Public School System. Don't be afraid. Dive in and do it. 

Mary Laudien retired at the beginning of 2010. She spent 10 years as a principal and two years as a vice-principal in the West Vancouver School District. During that time she re-opened Cypress Park Primary (now a Candidate IB PYP School) and brought about West Bay's change to an authorized International Baccalaureate World School, the first public school in Western Canada. This is her first article for *Adminfo*. She can be reached at mlaudien@telus.net or call (home) 604-926-8905 or (cell) 604-764-8220.



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