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## ***A Broadly Shared Mission, Vision and Goals Founded on the Aspirational Images of the Educated Person***

### **Durham Catholic District School Board**

#### **Background**

The Durham Catholic District School Board is a vibrant school district situated in the Greater Toronto Area, and spanning the Cities of Oshawa and Pickering, Towns of Ajax and Whitby, and Townships of Brock, Scugog and Uxbridge. Home to 38 Elementary Schools, 7 Secondary Schools, and 6 Alternative and Continuing Education Sites; we serve 14,611 elementary and 7,749 secondary school students.

#### **A broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person**

During the 2013-2014 academic year, we experienced a cycle of renewal, with the appointment of a new Director of Education and a number of newly appointed Supervisory Officers. Under the leadership of the Director of Education, we engaged in a comprehensive system and community level review in order to develop the 2014-2019 strategic plan, entitled *Discovery 2020*.

The *Discovery 2020* strategic planning process was developed to help shape the vision of the Board for the next five years, and was built to align with the goals outlined in the Ministry of Education's *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*, as well as the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations. Following a year of comprehensive consultation, analysis, and review, working groups representing a cross-section of stakeholders, established 10 integrated themes to support what our students require to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Within each theme, there are three identified priorities and three broad goals. Through this planning process, more detailed plans with strategic actions, timelines and indicators of success have been developed. A new mission, vision and value statement for the Board has also emerged to help invigorate this new strategic direction.

The following reflection will highlight key components of this process as they relate to each “specific practice” outlined in the *Practices of Strong District Leaders*. A commentary on the impact of each practice will be noted as well.

At the onset of the year, the focus for *Discovery 2020* was established– a process of consultation aimed at developing our system direction. What did we hope for our Catholic Graduates just entering the system when they graduate leading into 2020? What will our students require as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners? How should our system respond to meet these needs? Through email communication to all employees of the Board, an online survey was launched along with an invitation to attend community consultation meetings, student voice forums held at the local high schools, and an open invitation to anyone interested in a face-to-face meeting with the Director of Education. There were over 1,100 respondents to the online survey, and good participation rates at the community consultation sessions and student voice forums. Our Director of Education was also host to a continuous stream of staff, from a variety of departments and members of the community, who were interested in sharing their personal insights through an informal, face-to-face conversation. From this discovery process, the guiding principles of the strategic plan were established, forming the foundation of the plan from which 10 key themes emerged:

1. Witnessing Faith
2. Teaching and Learning
3. Expanding Pathways
4. Inspiring Leadership
5. Celebrating Inclusion
6. Serving in Partnership

7. Emerging Technology
8. Advancing Communications
9. Managing Resources
10. Continuing Education

The consultation process would continue with the formation of the strategic planning committee and sub-committees for each of the ten themes. Committee members included a broad range of stakeholders including staff, students, parents, parish priests, trustees, community members, and union affiliates. The steering committee was facilitated by our head of planning and admissions, who was able to draw together data from multiple sources that would paint a picture of our system needs both today and for the future. Committee members considered the Discovery data alongside student achievement measures, demographic data, regional data on new housing starts and growth, statistics in relation to resource allocation, finances, and special education, and specific data related to Catholic school support, age, literacy and school completion. Sub-committees were led by Supervisory Officers who facilitated the development of strategic priorities, goals and actions for each theme, along with realistic timelines and indicators of success which can be used to assess progress through the Director of Education's annual report card to the community on the success of our strategic plan.

The impact of this collective work has been clear. We have noted that there is an increased sense of integration across the varied departments in our system. No one theme stands alone, for example, the work of Serving in Partnership will support Teaching and Learning. Links can be made across the themes, and the realization that we have a coherent and cohesive plan brings a renewed energy into the system. The fact that the plan was created through a collective and sometimes pain staking process has resulted in a strong sense of ownership and clear sense of direction. We believe that all of our actions, whether within departments of the Board, or at the school or classroom level, should reflect the system priorities. The strategic plan can now provide us with the basis from which to develop professional development

plans, departmental plans, and reconsider the relevancy of our board and school improvement plans. The extensive consultation process, together with transparent visioning and direction setting, we believe to be key to harnessing momentum and gaining traction as a system.

***Strong district leaders spend sufficient time to ensure that the mission, vision and goals (directions) of the system are widely known, understood and shared by all members of their organizations:***

The strategic planning process was propelled by three guiding principles:

- **Excellence:** Children and students of all ages will achieve high levels of academic performance, acquire valuable skills and demonstrate good citizenship. Educators will be supported in learning continuously and will be recognized among the best in the world.
- **Equity:** All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential, with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood.
- **New Evangelization:** Students will embrace the Catholic Church’s renewed efforts to meet the spiritual needs of today’s society, as witnesses to the Gospel values in their everyday lives.

*(Sources: Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education, Ontario Ministry of Education, and Religious Education, Ontario Catholic Elementary Curriculum Policy Document Grades 1-8)*

Our Director of Education continuously and consistently articulates these principles (the “3 Es”) when she addresses staff, students, parents, trustees, and community members, in all manner of meetings and learning sessions. Through the *Discovery 2020* process, these principles have taken root, particularly with all those stakeholders who participated in the development of our strategic plan, and also with our central staff and school administrators, who have engaged with the plan over the course of this year. The ten themes within our strategic plan are all rooted in these principles.

A concerted effort has been made to widely share the final product of the *Discovery 2020* plan. Supervisory Officers responsible for the strategic priority areas have made multiple presentations to various stakeholders including trustees, managers, principal and vice-principals, departments and committee members. Since the draft was completed, formal presentations of selected themes were made at each Board meeting, concluding with a final unleashing of the published document. The *Discovery 2020* plan was released to all employees through email link, and appears as a prominent link on our Board webpage.

Next steps will be to engage school level personnel in a deeper look at the plan and impact on the work at schools and in classrooms. A professional activity day module is being prepared to help launch the plan at school level with new mission, vision and values at the outset of the 2014-2015 school year. Our hope is that educators will see themselves in the plan, and that the strategic priorities will help shape decision-making and actions at the school and classroom level.

The impact of this very intentional approach to building a common understanding of our mission, vision and values, through the *Discovery 2020* plan along with the three guiding principles of Excellence, Equity and New Evangelization, is that we note people are using the same language and considering more carefully whether the work that they are performing, activities they are planning, or decisions they are making reflect the system direction. We are better equipped to create a greater sense of alignment, and future planning is much more focused in nature. When the priorities are well understood, the importance of the work ahead becomes clearer.

***Strong district leaders articulate, demonstrate and model the system's goals, priorities, and values to staff when visiting schools, and embed district directions in improvement plans, principal meetings and leader-initiated interactions:***

Moving forward into the new school year, we are considering the importance of how we will communicate our system priorities at the school level and through our

Director of Education's meetings with principals and learning sessions of the board. Within the theme of Advancing Communications, we are exploring strategic priorities such as the promotion of board key messages, and the means with which we can enhance these messages. We are in the process of reviewing the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement to ensure that it fully reflects the strategic priorities in Teaching and Learning. We will continue to embed the district directions in our principal's meetings through a series of slides that we will use at all sessions, that include the graphic representations of our ten themes. Any presentation will begin with its connection to the corresponding strategic priority area. The purpose of this is two-fold, first to ensure that what we spend our time and energy on relates to the strategic plan, and secondly, to continuously bring the language and understanding of the strategic plan to our administrators and staff. At the family of schools level, through our monitoring visits and discussion of school improvement plans, we will be asking school teams to articulate how their plans connect to system priorities.

The impact of this work, we believe, will create alignment across the system. In creating alignment, we can better allocate our time, energy and resources to the issues that matter most.

### ***A Comprehensive Approach to Leadership Development***

A review of our Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS) and programs, through focus group and discussion with school leaders, determined that as a system we needed to redevelop a program for Aspiring Leaders and re-envision our existing model for Principal/Vice-Principal Mentoring. Steering committees were established with committee leads for both initiatives. The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) would serve as the primary resource for the development of each of these programs, with the goal of making our new and aspiring leaders well aware of the 5 Core Leadership Capacities and Personal Leadership Resources, as they established their personal growth plans.

Like many districts, we experienced a higher than usual rate of retirement in June 2013, and as a result have a large number of new school administrators who require support. Succession planning continues to be a system priority.

The following reflection will highlight key components of our Board Leadership Development Strategy as it relates to each “specific practice” outlined in the *Practices of Strong District Leaders*. A commentary on the impact of each practice will be noted as well.

***Strong district leaders use the best available evidence about successful leadership (e.g. OLF) as a key source of criteria used for recruiting, selecting, developing and appraising school and system leaders:***

Based on the large number of participants in the Principal/Vice-Principal Mentoring Program, it was important to reassess the program delivery model for relevancy. A new and expanded steering committee was struck, allowing multiple voices and perspectives to add collective voice. Anecdotal data revealed that the Annual Growth Plan for school administrators was underutilized and not necessarily linked to the Ontario Leadership Framework. Principal/Vice-Principal Mentoring Sessions also did not necessarily link to the Mentoring Learning Plans. A decision was made to focus on less disparate resources, and more on in house support rooted in the Ontario Leadership Framework, as a primary resource to use and revisit throughout the sessions.

Through the use of the Ontario Leadership Framework Self-Assessment Tool, participants were able to engage in reflection on the practices of successful leaders and determine areas they wished to develop through their Mentoring Learning Plans and Annual Growth Plans. These areas of focus were carefully considered and formed the basis for all subsequent learning sessions in the program. The careful work and emphasis placed on the Ontario Leadership Framework was a benefit to both the mentees and mentors.

A new Aspiring Leaders Program was also launched in order to facilitate succession planning within the system. The Aspiring Leader program was designed to allow educators to discern whether or not administration (role of principal and Vice-principal) was a role they wished to pursue. Candidates were either self selected or encouraged by current administrators to enrol in the one-year course. The course was designed around the following components: self-reflection tool, job shadowing, book study (Shepherd Leadership), and sessions on effective leadership.

The leadership course was directed and implemented by a superintendent and a small group of principals and vice principals from both the elementary and secondary panels. At its foundation, the course was based on the Ontario Catholic Leadership Framework (OCLF). Through self-reflection, using a tool modeled after the OCLF, leadership candidates identified areas for growth, together with their administrator. Candidates were encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and explore areas that they (or their administrators) felt they could grow in (i.e., assisting with the ongoing faith formation of the staff or assist with school wide discipline-restorative practice). Once a goal was set, the candidate was responsible for its development, and shared insights gained with colleagues during the course. The self-reflection tool was referred to during the work and was used as a springboard for discussion. These tools were never collected by instructors, but rather used as a tool for the candidate to explore his or her leadership capacity. The self-reflection tool was divided into the same pillars as the OCLF and included some questions that the candidate might consider when completing it. It was also used during the job-shadowing component of the course. Many candidates reporting having seen the OCLF while taking courses such as PQP courses but never had an opportunity to explore and reflect on its meaning in their individual context. They mentioned that they appreciated the guidance.

With respect to recruitment, selection and appraisal of leaders, it is important to note that all Human Resources forms were updated to reflect the 5 Core Leadership Capacities. For example, the form that principals submit in support of potential



leadership candidates invites commentary (evidence) in each of the five areas, along with assessment of the personal leadership resources.

The impact of these initiatives and alignment of practice with the Ontario Leadership Framework has resulted in a more asset-oriented approach to leadership development within the system. It has been noted that the explicit listing of the specific practices of successful leaders, through the framework, has been most impactful. The framework has provided a great catalyst for planning and professional learning within the steering committees and at Family of Schools and system level as well. We are seeing that leadership candidates are well versed in the OCLF and demonstrate awareness of their own personal leadership resources, and existing school leaders find it equally beneficial.

***Strong district leaders provide prospective and existing leaders with extended opportunities to further develop their leadership capacities and develop realistic plans for leadership succession:***

In order to create a culture of mentoring within our system, all Principal/Vice-Principal Mentoring learning sessions were open to all school administrators (whether formally associated with the program or not). A concerted effort was also made to include members of the Aspiring Leaders Program in important system level professional development for school administrators. In response to the willingness of school leaders to participate in extended learning opportunities, a new leadership development series has been developed for the upcoming school year, to focus on areas of professional growth identified by school leaders. The Ontario Leadership Framework will continue to be used at the family of schools level to spark dialogue around best practice.

The impact of extending the invitation to leadership and learning has been to increase the sense of belonging and support amongst existing and prospective school administrators. Applicants to the Aspiring Leaders Program exceeded capacity and participation rates for mentors, and on the mentoring steering

committee were high. We feel that if you provide opportunities for leaders to identify themselves and learn from each other - they will come forward. Almost all of the inaugural group of Aspiring Leaders have moved on to leadership positions, and a full complement of prospective leaders have come forward to replace them. Feedback forms from learning sessions indicate that leaders enjoy the learning. It would appear that focusing on the OCLF and the specific leadership practices, as opposed to a plethora of resources, has resonated with the leadership group. Our leaders are becoming more familiar with the leadership practices and personal leadership resources within the OCLF, and as a result we are finding that we can plan more precise supports as we develop our professional development and succession plans.

### **Summary**

Both the *Discovery 2020* initiative and aspects of the Board Leadership Development Strategy, noted within these case studies, reveal features consistent with strong districts identified in the *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* research (2013). Upon further reflection, we can see that specific practices are not limited to the identified characteristics, but can be identified throughout the 9 characteristics in the research. Key themes that emerge across the contexts link back to the importance of the collectivity of the work, and the importance of remaining engaged with the priorities, for example, the priority areas in the strategic plan or the identified leadership practices in the Ontario Catholic Leadership Framework, and a tenacious persistence in sharing these key messages with your school system (at all levels). The District Effectiveness Framework identified in the *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* research provides an invaluable tool for self-reflection in planning for system level growth and improvement.