



Move over **Three-R's!**

Welcome the **Three-F's:**

**Fun, Fast and Fabulous!**

### *Staging Priorities in our Modern-age Educational Institutions*

By Cindy Matthews

*Recently students at a program I supervise participated in a dramatization in the Victorian classroom at Suddaby School in Kitchener, Ontario. Their experiences prompted me to reflect on education then and now.*

*In many ways, education has changed significantly since its development when literacy, numeracy and positive contributions to society were the major thrusts. Tight-knit communities, the local church and small school boards were the foundation that supported the teacher's efforts to teach until students were mature enough to join the work force. Firm discipline and corporal punishment were prevalent and expected. The educational system was in many ways streamlined and focused on its simple mandates.*

*In contrast, the current school system is complex and school leaders are influenced by multiple stakeholders, from the ministry of education to boards of education to parents to students to community members. Within the confines of their buildings, school administrators, though, still have 'some' say.*

*Never could the teachers and school superintendents of yesteryear have anticipated the issues of present-day schools: mental health issues, electronic technology, English language learners, global impacts, unionized employees, significant special needs, poverty, self-identification, drug use, equity and inclusion, safety in schools, gangs, criminality, to name a few, and oh, yes, what about student learning. The challenge for school leaders is to sift through the myriad of priorities and steer a path of focused energy in their school community.*

*In this article we attempt to hone in on three crucial areas in modern age educational institutions in Ontario: Fun (engagement and relevance), Fast (technology), and Fabulous (brain-based learning).*

**School needs to regain the fun. Exploring engagement and relevance:**

*Students in Ontario must remain in school until age 18. The premise is that students need a solid educational foundation in order to compete in the global market. However, in my role as a vice-principal working with students who have become disengaged by school, generalized support among students and staff for this mandate is challenging to find. Why? Traditional schools, while great for many students, do not invite all students to feel connected.*

*When I asked, Cassandra, a student who experiences success in an alternative setting why she buys into that program, she was very clear, "The days are shorter here and there are more activities to do in an alternative setting." Translation: It's just different.*

*Cassandra went on to say that a few months ago she would not have supported students having to remain in school past age 16. Since gaining positive experiences in an alternative program, she thinks students should remain*

in school until at least age 18 and maybe even longer. She knows many older people who want to catch up in school and regret leaving when they were younger. But, she says, high schools that run a traditional approach must change.

For schools to be engaging to more students, they'll need to be more flexible. For instance, these schools might offer more accommodating timetables and class sizes, combinations of school and work, as well as embedding student choice in programming options and decisions. Students' opinions would be considered and honoured.

RP, a student whose identity must be concealed because he is a student in a secure custody facility, says he likes going to school in 'jail' because they offer a balance of applied technology and theory. He also enjoys working on one credit at a time because he can see his progress so much faster.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services report on Roots of Youth Violence says that many youth feel cut off from society including schools. Youth feel they lack a voice and note that often guidance counsellors lack training and understanding of the factors affecting the ethno-racial youth. (<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/youthandthelaw/roots/what.aspx>)

Maedith Radlein, a principal of an elementary school in Waterloo, supports reflection on teaching practices.

***“Lack of student success would bring about teacher reflection, not blame. Parents would feel welcome and their input valued.”***

Dr. Jocelyn Schaffenberg, a family physician based in Waterloo, says that education would be more engaging if learning styles were assessed early and those styles incorporated in all lessons. The need for kinaesthetic learning is often ignored. Kids learn better after exercising. Breaks with brain gym incorporated can help. Improved emphasis on hands-on learning is recommended as early as Grade 7. Experiential teaching is paramount.

These approaches, though, are challenged by limited dollars and educational agendas that are dictated by government. And to add insult to injury, when governments change, educational agendas do, too. Governments often make policy decisions for votes and then give limited budgets and time to institute change properly. School boards then tend to be reactive rather than proactive. David Cornwall, a retired educator, consultant and principal, adds that what is required is clear agreement on what a student should be able to do upon completion of their education and how schools can

collectively and creatively create circumstances for that to occur.

Modern schools see parents as quite involved, especially in an advisory capacity and parent engagement is encouraged. However, many parent groups, such as those representing new Canadians, are under-involved in schools. Cornwall, who now volunteers as a historical interpreter at the Victorian Classroom at Suddaby School sees that the role of parent has morphed over time. In the early schools, parents were expected to support the efforts of the teacher. Now, 'parents expect to be consulted on what children are taught, how it is taught and how it is evaluated. Parents have become de factor educational experts without the training.'

Ontario wants to increase public confidence and one way to succeed in that domain is to invite parents to be involved. But are we missing some parents, asks Radlein. What about those on shift work? What about those who are too timid and intimidated to enter a school building? What about parents who live in severe poverty? Where are the new Canadian parents?

School administrators need to ask themselves what they can do to open the doors to ALL parents and students.

### ***Fast, Faster, Fastest! Activating technology in modern schools:***

Recently Premier McGuinty stated to Ontario citizens that cell phones could play an effective role in the classrooms across the province. This is but one example of technology that teachers could use in the modern classroom. Yet teachers are really not sure how to incorporate technology into lessons. Many are actually more afraid of the negative impacts of using cell phones and social media and are unable to see benefits to learning and student engagement.



Radlein says schools could benefit from being reconfigured physically. The old-fashioned physical layout is not always conducive to teachers using technology effectively. Radlein reminds us that 'we aren't going anywhere with technology if teachers are not trained in it and required to use it.' Run-down computer resources

and irrelevant software have hindered the effective roll out of technology instruction.

Technology for students with special needs has evolved since I began my career. I recall tape recording stories onto cassette tape in order for students to access text they could not read independently. Now, with the click of a mouse, a computer can read text to a student unable to decipher it independently. Accessible technology allows a student to access curriculum and can also increase student engagement. Schaffenberg agrees, "I use dictating software at work that costs \$120.00. Would this help some of the kids get thoughts on paper when writing is so hard for them?" Yet, many students often must prove 'need' for specialized software beyond learning preference.

Educational consultants with Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region, Elke Mayer and John Spinak believe it is impossible for schools to realistically keep up with the technology demands in schools. Instead, they suggest instead that schools find ways to integrate social media tools that students already use in their homes and bring to school. These can become learning devices.

One barrier to education is schools maintaining the status quo. Currently, student exposure to texting and social media is simply not being tapped into by school personnel. Many teachers shudder in fear instead of learning to embrace the capabilities and exciting potential of technology in the classroom.

We've all gazed in wonder at teenagers with cell phones and other e-technology. They are engaged. They are motivated. They are energized.



Now anticipate with excitement how you as the school administrator might encourage school personnel to embed its usage in student learning. Referencing a resource like Kathy Paterson's book *Text Me a Strategy: How to Encourage Students to Develop the Skills They Need to Become Independent Learners* might empower teachers to think beyond their own technology fears and use cell phones as a way to boost student performance.

It's time to switch the adults' attitudes about cell phones from toy to tool. Homework reminders can be texted to

students. Students use their cell phones as communication tools, watches, and alarm clocks. Chances are an alert from a teacher about an assignment would be paid attention to. As a form of pedagogy a foreign language teacher could text an instruction to the class to find three things that are red and to text a response within five minutes in the foreign language being studied. Further, a teacher could use a cell phone as a survey tool.

Social media forums like Facebook have vast and relevant applications. For instance, a teacher could set up a professional account for him/herself and each student. Students could follow subject specific news feeds on topics designated by the teacher. Those students who might hesitate to offer an opinion in class may actually participate more willingly using social media than face-to-face discussion. Brainstorming ideas and offering opinions on books and articles read can be shared with peers and teachers via social media. Polls could be conducted in class as well as beyond the school day. Photos, pictures, diagrams, videos and essays on specified topics could be shared with classmates through Facebook. Social media responsibility could be taught as a matter of course. Groups of students could meet electronically within and outside the school day to offer each other study tips and strategies. Calendars with relevant information could be accessible through Facebook. Outdated school planners could be replaced by social media because this is what students are using!

Teachers, like students, should establish and follow boundaries as applied to education usage. No stalking should occur and teachers should keep personal Facebook pages inaccessible to their students. To befriend a student is inappropriate but to use this very popular medium to increase student engagement in learning is something that should not be overlooked.

One goal of all administrators should be to challenge themselves, their staff and central support at board offices to find creative ways to incorporate cell phones and social media usage into teacher instruction and assessment.

***The fabulous brain knows best!***

One area of improvement over the teaching of yesteryear is in the area of understanding how the brain works. For example, we now know that the teenage brain is 'under construction' during adolescence and it's primed for learning. (Strauch) We understand better, too, that there are different types of learners and that pedagogy and

assessment needs to vary in order to get the 'best' out of learners. Mayer and Spinak state that use of research has positive effect on student attainment. Further, students learn about so many more issues previously untouched: environmental education, diversity, and inclusion.

Cornwall reminds us that teaching techniques specific to the learning needs of the learning disabled are well documented but teachers generally do not have the knowledge, skills, time, and resources to address the needs. Radlein would agree. In her experience, special education is poorly done. Many of its practitioners might have gone to a workshop or taken a course but are not really highly qualified at effective lesson delivery. Getting a good special educator is the luck of the draw.

Different too from schools of the past is the inclusion model in which students with various needs are included in 'regular' classes and in school communities. Effective classrooms have teachers who build a community of learners in which EVERYONE in that classroom is included. Class meetings are held in which discussions are held and democracy is the norm. Student opinions are shared, valued, and considered.

Student learning is why we are in the business of schools. Selecting staff that is engaged in learning how to be exemplary teachers is critical. Further, school administrators are responsible for school culture and through setting tone with a core group of teachers, parents and students, an inviting, inclusive school can evolve. Safety issues are not ignored and discipline is progressive and learning focused. Methods like restorative justice and class meetings allow students to work through issues rather than getting punished for infractions. Every student has minimally one caring adult contact.

Mayer and Spinak say that in Ontario Bill 82 and the collective recognition of our need to offer worthy education to the neediest is prevalent in education now. However, we need to pay attention to the impact of the amalgamation of regular education with special education.

Cornwall says that 'schools tend to lack focus. Schools need to narrow their focus to student learning in age groups that make child-brain development sense. Including four and five year olds in the same setting as eleven to fourteen-year-olds--the learning needs are too complex to be handled effectively in one education setting.' Similarly, some teachers still focus on teaching a subject rather than teaching the whole child. Universal design for learning where teachers carefully craft activities and assessment with the various individuals in the class in mind will help student learning.

Alas, not all brains are created equally and not all learning is academic in nature. Some students contend with mental health issues, severe special education needs, and / or exposure to trauma so severe that learning to self-regulate their behaviour is significantly compromised. School administrators need to reflect on the learning capabilities of students whose resulting behaviour is often impacted by mitigating circumstances. The 'one size fits all' approach to student discipline is not advised. The Ontario government has produced supportive resources and training to provide examples of what else can be substituted in lieu of a more traditional punitive approach. (Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario)

Finally, all administrators must focus on student learning, both in the academic and social domains. Relevant, carefully collected and scrutinized data can inform teaching teams on the necessary next steps with one goal in mind: student learning.

Modern schools are complex structures where a diverse community of learners presents with intriguing issues and challenges. The earlier versions of schools in Canada would not be able to meet the needs of today's learner and yet a walk through some of today's schools can sometimes remind us of yesteryear. We, as school administrators, need to seek out the staff, tools and creative means to construct relevant and engaging, nurturing and contemporary places of learning in which students and parents find voices in the future of education.

Resources:

E-Interviews with:

David Cornwall, retired principal, WRDSB  
Maedith Radlein, elementary principal, WRDSB  
Cassandra, student, Section 23 program, Waterloo Region  
RP, a student in a secure custody facility, Waterloo Region  
Dr. Jocelyn Schaffenberg, Family Physician, Waterloo

Region

John Spinak and Elke Mayer, Educational Consultants with Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region. Both are former principals with WRDSB.

Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario: Supporting Students with Special Education needs, through progressive discipline, Kindergarten to Grade 12. Ontario. Ministry of Education. 2010.

Text Me a Strategy: How to Encourage Students to Develop the Skills They Need to Become Independent Learners. Kathy Paterson, Pembroke Publishers, Markham, 2009.

The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain tell us about our kids. Barbara Strauch, Anchor Books, NY, 2003.

Integrated Education: A Resource Guide for including Students with Special Needs in the Regular Classroom. Paula Stanovich and Anne Jordan, FWTAO, 1995.

Step by Step to a Safer School. Michael G. Hill, LexisNexis Canada Inc., 2010.

Ontario. Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Roots of Youth Violence. (2010)

<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/youthandthelaw/roots/what.asp>