

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Em Del Sordo – A Common Vision

EM: You know what? I was one of those kids that really liked school. For many reasons, one of which I really enjoyed being the funny guy. And I really enjoyed also being the guy that connected with the teachers so I could make them laugh. So I was one of those kids, I suspect, the teachers loved and hated at the same time. Loved because I was academic; hated because, you know, I was a little loud. And so I was that type of kid. Plus socially, I loved my high school experience and my friends. It was depressing when I left to go to a university because I really enjoyed my high school experience. And then of course when I got to a university, I forgot about my high school experience, so that, "Hm, I'm really liking this too." So I was one of those kids that always liked playing school.

I always try to put a little bit of who I am, which I try to connect to something good, and I try to build on that. Because I think if it was good for me, it might be good for others, or good for all. Because it just stems on really one of the universal principles of really, How do you put kindness and goodness out there? And think of something bigger than who we are and what we are? And that's what I think led us to creating the vision of this new school. Really, How do we take something that is as important, and a big idea like human rights, and connect it to curriculum? And this is where I really need to thank my teachers. And the deal with the Vision Committee where they actually sat down and they thought of, "What is it that the kids want?" So we surveyed student boys. And we're not talking about just the kids in our school. We're talking about the kids in the whole community. We went to every theatre school from Grades 5 all the way to Grade 8. This is their future home; what do they want to say about their future home? So that their voice is already heard. Our parents, our school council folks, the community, we invited everyone to just say, What is it that you want your town school to be?

And then the Vision Committee group, they whittled away at it and really looked at, Well, what is it that they're saying? What are the patterns? What are the similarities? And this is where they really looked at research. They looked at the needs of what they see the kids wanting and what the kids say they want. And what the parent and the community wants. And that's where they landed on words such as, you know, "empathetic." Like, really, how do you teach empathy to someone? But how do we create a culture of empathy? And then connect that to, How do we teach kids and staff to develop a culture of respect in learning? And how do we do all three? With that empathy, that respect, that learning? And we do it through a lens of human rights. And it was fantastic where they really -- And they really word-smithed it and chipped away. And we talked about our aboriginal history and bringing in reconciliation. And it was really a phenomenal two-

year process. And where the committee landed on were these U.N. goals. And we called the U.N. and we said, "Can we use your goals for our vision statement? And can we replicate them?" And of course the U.N., being the U.N., was more than grateful to give us permission to do it. And what we thought of is, If we can take all our learning --? So the idea is it's a big idea. The big idea of, How do we get our kids to gradually, with a lens and a voice, to fight for the rights of everybody? And I mean everybody. So that when we have politicians who think that they have the audacity to say that they're going to put up walls and to say that they're going to have others pay for it, we're going to have our students say, "Not on my watch." That we are really going to go right down to the fundamentals and the universal principles of human decency.

And so when we look at these here, what I love about these global goals is that we can connect curriculum from every faculty to every goal. And I think the fun part for me is how we're going to do that. And that's where I fundamentally believe in teacher autonomy. Having a teaching staff that really is aligned with the vision, they put their heart and soul and their sweat into the school -- The best way to do it is, What does this mean to you? And what does it mean with the curriculum expectations that you're evaluating? And then what does it mean to the kids? Because they came up with this direction. So how does this all look? And for me, as the principal, just to stand back and say, "Have fun." And I'll pick them up when I need to pick them up. And if I need to do something else, I'll do something else. I'm really that type of person that says, "I have to serve my teachers so that they have the freedom and the autonomy to actually play and take risks." And if they fail, it's my job to go there and just pick them up and brush it up. Because the failure is -- Well, what's the lesson here? Okay, so what's our next step? Not all the steps; what's just the next step? And we take it from there.

I have teachers who will take pictures of students' exams and text it to me and say, "Isn't it amazing when kids are actually quoting the expectation that we are teaching them in a final exam?" And they made a connection to one of our goals and their life or a reading or a question on the exam. So for me, I love seeing the journey that the teacher follows with the student, and that they share with me because that's what actually fuels the teacher. So it's really the students are using the thinking, the language, the creative thinking, and the critical thinking. And they're -- And that's the best part. It's not that they're just thinking about it critically and looking at bias and looking at, you know, values and which values seem to be trumping other values. But what they're doing is they're actually being creative to say how they're going to go about by doing this.