



From Good to GREAT

Recalculating the route to career readiness through a pathways lens

Gale Harild and Lyn Sharratt

There are concrete actions we can take as school leaders when viewing student achievement through a lens of career readiness. Career readiness can be defined as possession of the skills, knowledge, and abilities to engage in the community and global world, establish meaningful relationships, and pursue interests and passions regardless of one's postsecondary destination. But there must be an investment in time and training to ensure that skilled teachers can effectively leverage a robust and relevant curriculum to empower each student in his or her own learning. We must ensure that our teachers have a clear understanding of what it takes for each student to become a literate, 21st-century graduate; that they have upshifted their own perception of multiple pathways; and that they are keenly aware of the opportunities each postsecondary opportunity provides.

There are five guiding principles when applying a pathway career readiness lens:

1. An inclusive, equitable learning community
2. A robust, relevant K–12 curriculum
3. A broad base of community partners
4. Skilled teachers
5. Innovation leadership

At both system and school levels, this requires a structured, collaboratively planned approach with a broad base of community partners supported by a comprehensive communication plan. This work must be intentional. Teachers, students, and community partners must actively step into each other's worlds, early and often; the additional pathway data that they gather is then interwoven with previously massed data to inform instructional and program planning. Perception data is continuously monitored to improve the program. To personalize learning, students' voices and choices are captured as well.

Apprenticeship Opportunities

The Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) was launched as part of the education reform that began in 1999 to address an anticipated skilled trade shortage. Students who are 16 years old are now eligible to pursue an apprenticeship while attending high school. Through cooperative education programming, students train alongside qualified journey persons in the industry, earning credit hours and learning skill competencies of their chosen profession while completing high school credits.

As an incentive, government tool and training subsidies ensure that there's no cost to the student or to the placement partner. Upon high school completion, students have the option of continuing with their placement partner or enrolling in an apprenticeship program at a community college in order to complete all outstanding levels of the apprenticeship. This is, by all accounts, an amazing opportunity for students. Still, by 2002, it was very much unrecognized by the parent, student, and teacher population.

Regardless of the benefits and value-added attributes of the OYAP program, adoption across the province was slow. The rate of uptake in the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) (comprised of 31 high schools, 170 elementary schools, a student population of over 120,000, and over 10,000 teachers) was no different in this respect. In 2000, only five students were enrolled in the OYAP program, with only two of a possible 29 high schools participating. By 2010, over 700 students were enrolled with all 31 high schools offering the program. In addition, the program has expanded to offer

dual-credit technical training. OYAP students complete their Level 1 skilled apprenticeship training and earn high school and college credits simultaneously. Schools in the district also expanded their pathway programming to include the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program, with the district reporting program completion rates of 57 percent compared to a provincial average of 36 percent, and credit attainment rates of 98 percent—an outstanding achievement that the district continues to improve upon.

How did a growing district with such a diverse and growing population accomplish such successful program adoption and expansion while at the same time attaining high standards for student achievement? They did it by adopting a pathways lens to student success and career readiness. They focused and aligned the work by:

- **Setting the course.** As a system, YRDSB strategically decided to reexamine what they meant by “student success,” resulting in a personalized definition for the system with a shared understanding among all stakeholders. Based upon that common understanding, they laid out an implementation road map. The program’s overarching mission is to put a face to each student’s name as they evolve from K–12 grade students into literate, 21st-century graduates. Moving beyond the use of measured achievement scores, the system and schools broadened their perspective to include pathway data.

- **Using data.** With a working definition and strategy in place, the district used data to set goals and targets and ensure that their work was making a difference. Perception data from students,

teachers, and the community was gathered through district surveys. The questions and data informed the process and shed light on the resources that needed to be applied to the next level of work. A comprehensive district-improvement plan was developed with specific targets set. Individual schools were then required to develop their own school improvement plans based upon the priorities outlined in the district plan. In essence, participants were taking responsibility for moving from goodness to greatness through the alignment and coherence of their improvement work.

- **Following the “build it, and they will come” model.** Based on the belief that all parents/guardians want the best outcome for their children, and that all teachers can teach given the right support and resources (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012), YRDSB committed to building equitable access to all programs. Schools and departments were asked to consider what a school-to-work transition plan would look like for students in their subject areas. Would a student transitioning to the workplace through apprenticeship have the requisite skills and abilities? What opportunities are students in their schools being afforded, and how are these opportunities scaffolded across the K–12 curriculum?

Schools used pathway indicators to consider how to respond. They reflected on whether:

- Authentic and experiential learning were incorporated into all subject areas and programs
- School programming and career planning met the

learning needs and interests of each student

- ❑ Students aligned in-school and out-of-school experiences with their personal interests, abilities, and career options
- ❑ Students, parents, and teachers were informed of the full range of pathways, options, programs, and supports available, overturning systemic and personal prejudices as well as historic or traditional values assigned to create work or professional social classes

As sources of pathway indicator evidence, students then charter examples of:

- ❑ Additional activities (internally or externally) offered
- ❑ Instructional strategies used by teachers
- ❑ Programs offered within divisions and across panels

Charting these three elements enabled schools to zero in on their data to determine whether their methods were making a difference. In the case of OYAP, schools tracked program enrollment and completion data, student and teacher participation in multiple skilled trades and technologies, and related pathway opportunities.

- **Upshifting thinking and values.** Data highlighted a disconnection between the opportunities afforded and the perceptions of skilled trades. In an economy where blue-collar trades were quickly becoming gold-collar trades because of supply and demand, perception data indicated a stereotyping stigmatization. Despite the fact that the technical skills in these traditionally hands-on trades were becoming more digitized and demanding, they were still viewed as an inferior option

for postsecondary training. It became evident that the range and diversity of opportunities for postsecondary training pertaining to apprenticeship and skilled trades were not clearly understood: The pathways were not visible. Resisters and doubters did not know what they did not know. The challenge quickly became how to help students, teachers, parents, and the community overcome their ignorance of these new opportunities so that perceptions could be changed and they could support all students. The district provided:

- ❑ **Mystery bus tours.** System leaders, including the chief superintendent, participated in half-day mystery bus tours where they experienced the realities of life in certain trades, as well as firsthand reflections from students, parents, teachers, and placement supervisors.
- ❑ **Promoting Skilled Trades and Technologies (PSTT) sessions.** To expose students to other career possibilities, integrated curriculum units for elementary students highlighted specific trades and technologies and introduced students to the skills and abilities required for each. Students engaged in PSTT sessions such as game challenges, technology days at local colleges, hands-on workshops conducted by community partners (such as Home Depot), and skill competitions.
- ❑ **Industry tours.** Teachers attended industry trade tours where they gained insight into the skills and abilities required for, as well as the

opportunities afforded by, each type of industry and profession. They engaged in professional dialogue and used planning time to align these skills and abilities with course expectations and learning skills.

- ❑ **The power of language posters.** Past practices revealed—sometimes in very subtle ways—that what was being expressed through words and actions in the schools and classrooms was contrary to the definition of a more inclusive school. Posters were created to promote the power of language and guidance, and career centers ensured that resources were representative of all postsecondary destinations. Graduation ceremonies and scholarships were broadened to honor all destinations—including apprenticeships, college technical training, universities, and workplaces. Elementary and high school panels participated in conversations where students shared their voices by telling stories based on a wide range of postsecondary and pregraduate experiences.

- ❑ **Equitable access to apprenticeships.** Through a government-funded pilot, skilled teachers explored the best ways to engage the most marginalized students and how to develop a sustainable program plan.

- **Opening doors to a broad base of community partners.** Provincial mandates created strong foundations for robust and rigorous credit-earning cooperative education and OYAP programs. Work experience, job

Change takes time, focus, commitment, strategic thinking, and a balance of pressure and support.

shadowing, and job twinning served as opportunities to gain awareness of the workplace as part of subject-based curricula. Outreach to community partners and sector representatives framed conversations and supports, better enabling teachers to bridge connections for the students to the workplace. It is important to note that this work was an essential part of the process in supporting schools and systems.

■ **Supporting foundational work.**

Recognizing that successful pathways to career readiness require the right balance of student skills, interests, and aptitudes, skilled teachers had to select the correct starting point on the curriculum continuum and enact strategies to support the student opportunities to experience and to recalculate their routes after reflecting on that learning. Thus, the district invested time to ensure:

- A whole-child approach in which the academic achievement and social/emotional well-being of each student matters
- That teachers were supported in their own skill development to encourage delivery of a rich curriculum based upon high-impact critical thinking skills
- That solid foundations were in place for robust experiential learning programs

■ **Ongoing professional learning.**

The district was committed to providing high-quality academic and experiential

learning opportunities for staff. It provided support in the forms of daytime release, afterschool sessions, lunch-n-learns, online resources, and in-school consultants. Teachers applied for financial support to take university-offered qualification courses in areas such as cooperative education and technology. Community partners came on board to offer teacher training in new technologies.

Lessons Learned

The OYAP journey has been a long one, taking place over a span of 10 years and continuing today. It highlights the fact that change takes time, focus, commitment, strategic thinking, and a balance of pressure and support to bring about desired outcomes for all students.

The changes highlighted in this pathways career readiness story would not have occurred without collaborative partnerships with and between teachers, ministry and the government, board leadership, teacher federations, and community partners, including corporations, small businesses, and local unions. Representative groups had their own specific challenges, needs, and perceptions of the other groups engaged in the program.

To mitigate these challenges, the provincial government worked to build bridges and eliminate stumbling blocks between representative groups. Planning tables with industry sectors, postsecondary institutions, and professional training program representatives were positioned to support the work that was happening within school communities. A core district-level curriculum pathway team worked as integrators to align the government, postsecondary institutions, and the

industry/business sectors' work with that of the schools, teachers, and principals.

As their ignorance of each others' abilities to contribute diminished through collaborative discussions, participants recognized the importance of getting the operational and program pieces right in a timely fashion. By actively stepping into each other's worlds, early and often, stakeholders removed roadblocks to become interconnected through the common goal of improving outcomes for all students. **PL**

REFERENCES

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013b). *Secondary: Specialist high skills major (SHSM)*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/SHSM.asp>
- Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (2014). OYAP. Retrieved from <http://www.oyap.com>
- Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Putting FACES on the data: What great leaders do*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Sharratt, L., & Harild, G. (2015). *Good to great to innovate: Recalculating the route to career readiness K-12+*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Gale Harild (@GaleHarild) is an educational practitioner who supports the Faculty of Education: Professional Development program at York University. Gale served as curriculum administrator for the York Region District School Board in Ontario for over 12 years. Gale is co-author of *Good to Great to Innovate: Recalculating the Route to Career Readiness K-12+* (Corwin, 2015).

Lyn Sharratt (@LynSharratt) coordinates the doctoral internship program for the Educational Administration Department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Lyn is lead author of *Realization* (Corwin, 2009) and *FACES* (Corwin, 2012), and co-author of *Good to Great to Innovate: Recalculating the Route to Career Readiness K-12+* (Corwin, 2015).