



Feature School Stories

The Flood -

By Ben Galeski, Principal - St. Joseph's Collegiate, Brooks

Who We Were

During the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, a flood occurred in the city of Brooks. This was not the kind of flood my colleagues faced in High River in June of 2013. That could never happen in the cactus and rattlesnake country that is Brooks! No, it was a flood of new students that significantly altered the way we approached teaching and learning at St. Joseph's Collegiate. Prior to the 2011-2012 school year, SJC looked pretty much like any other 7-12 school in a small Southern Alberta town or city. We had about 320 students, a handful of English Language Learners and we were able to meet the learning needs of our students through a straightforward approach. Grade 10 students did grade 10 level courses, grade 11 kids did grade 11 level courses and grade 12s graduated at the end of their third year of high school. We had credit minimums at each grade level, ensuring that each and every student earned at least 115 credits by graduation. The education machine ran smoothly here at St. Joe's and our annual CEU average was awesome.

Then Came the Flood.

If you've ever travelled on the Trans-Canada highway past Brooks, you've probably noticed the smell. It isn't pretty, but it does indicate prosperity and opportunity. Lakeside Meat Packers attracts hard-working individuals from all over the world for jobs, and in the 2011-2012 school year, these workers began bringing their families to Brooks. By September 30 of 2012, SJC had grown from the previous year's September 30th student count by 30%, essentially all ELL.

This Flood was a Blessing

To play a part in the story of new Canadian families as they begin in a new country is a privilege. But the flood also led to some challenges. Our student population no longer fit into the nice little programming boxes we were used to. Our new students needed time to learn English in a reception program before transitioning into regular academic classes. Students coming to SJC from another country would now need 4 rather than 3 years to finish high school, and more often than not, the make-up of a class at SJC would span all three high school grade levels. For most in the Moving Forward with High School Redesign project, a commitment to personalization and flexibility in teaching and learning is chosen as a new direction. For us, this new direction was thrust upon us! It was either adopt flexibility and personalization, or drown in the flood. We committed to working with each and every student, personally, ELL and non-ELL, to ensure their learning needs were being met. We found life preservers in the vision of our then Principal, Bonnie Annicchiarico, in the support from our division, CTR Catholic, and from the experience of a newly retired ELL specialist named Fran Minty. We overcame the flood, and like the Nile River Valley, were enriched by it.

Who we are Now: Many and ONE!

As we dive deeper into redesigning our high school experience based on the 9 pillars, it's fun to reflect on how SJC essentially began this process, without even knowing it, several years ago. What's even more excellent is that we now have the funding stability and creative inspiration to continue moving our community towards a 21st paradigm of education. No longer having to worry about annual credit averages, especially when students need more than three years to travel through high school, is a relief of immense proportions. It allows us to ensure each student's learning reflects their needs, without the old consideration of CEUs and credit counts.

The flood waters have receded and our school is a place to behold. We are diversity and creativity housed in a cinderblock building. And I wouldn't have it any other way!

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Have a SUCCESS Story to Share About Your School?

One of the most powerful ways of creating knowledge is to share examples of classroom and school practices with others. As you move forward at your school site with the implementation of the Foundational Principles, perhaps you have a story to share or would be willing to tell your school story in digital form. Please contact your consultants supporting Moving Forward with High School Redesign, Debbie Rowley (drowley@carcpd.ab.ca) or Myranda Shepherd (mshepherd@carcpd.ab.ca) for details.

