



Beyond Expectations

**Everyday Stories of Innovation and Creativity in
Calgary Public Schools**

Beyond Expectations

Calgary teachers do amazing work with students every day. Andy Hargreaves, a passionate educator and professor at Boston College, has challenged teachers across the continent to uplift their performance, and school districts to uplift their people.

In a symposium held on February 12, 2014, more than one hundred Calgary educators attended a workshop with Andy to discuss uplifting leadership – four principles that are key to successful transformation:

- Having an inspiring destination/dream
- Forging a distinctive path
- Promoting sustainable growth
- Creating shared targets and thoughtful metrics

Taken collectively, Hargreaves maps out a process whereby school systems can work collaboratively, building trust by uplifting everyone involved, and creating positive, sustainable change together.

Calgary's teachers have been involved in international change initiatives for many years now. As discussion ensued, we discovered that, in many ways, teachers are already performing *beyond expectations*.

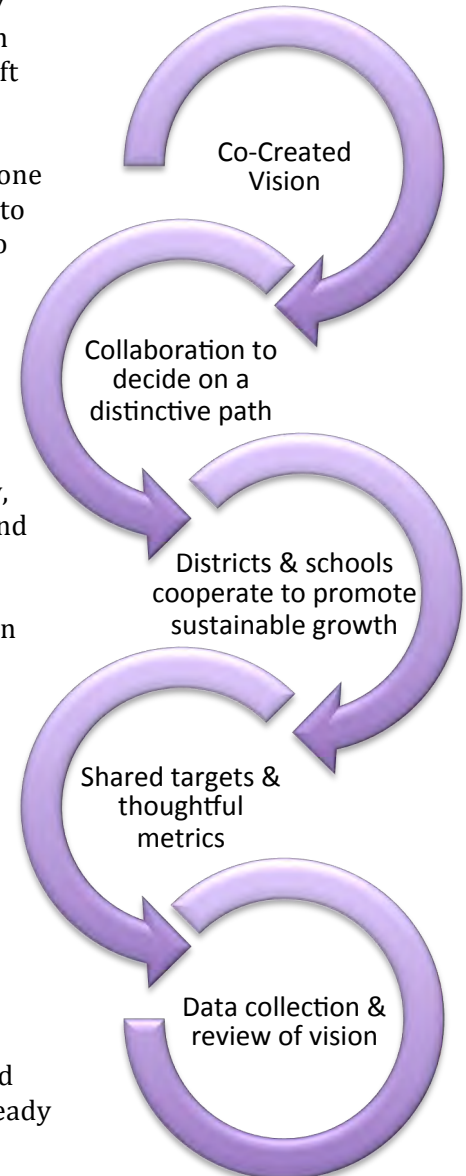
This publication chronicles some of the uplifting success stories already present in Calgary public schools. As our student populations rise, this work becomes even more important. Imagine what might be possible if government, school districts, and teachers across the province joined together to expand on the work already happening in classrooms!

We hope you enjoy reading these success stories!



– Andy Hargreaves, co-author of “Uplifting Leadership”

Andy's Plan For Uplifting Leadership



I work in a specialized setting for children with severe social/emotional behaviour difficulties. Over the years, we have consistently expanded our recycling program to include paper, plastic, beverage containers, and composting. Several students set a goal for us to become one of the showcase schools at the Mayor's Environmental Expo. We worked on a project involving repurposing jeans and achieved our goal. Student engagement was extremely high!



Trevor displayed severe developmental and behavioural delays and poor social skills when we met him. Building from the work of Dr. Bruce Perry, a specialist in child trauma and how it affects child development, we have been better able to make connections with at-risk students. Today, Trevor is thriving in a regular grade two placement. He is learning to make friends, learning expressive language skills and is more able to cope with frustration in appropriate ways. He likes school and is an important member of our community.

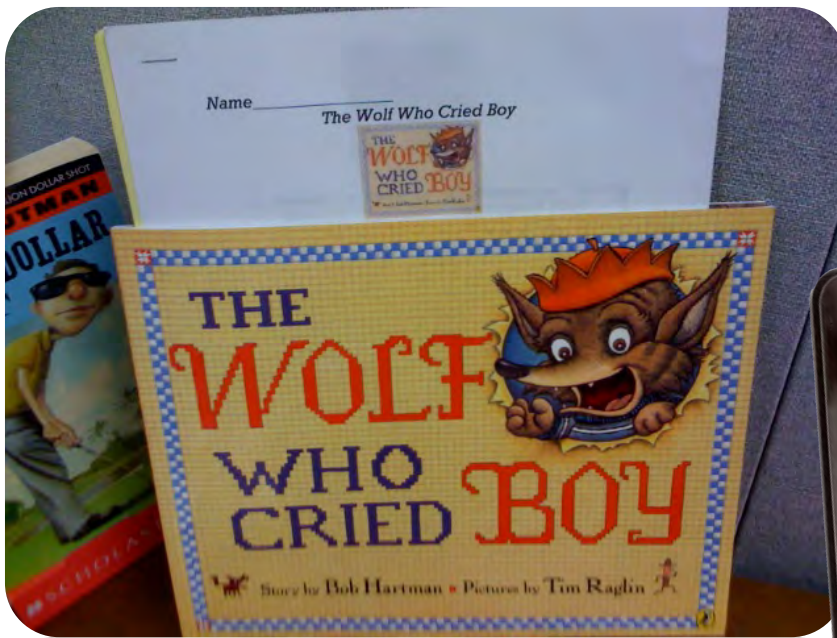




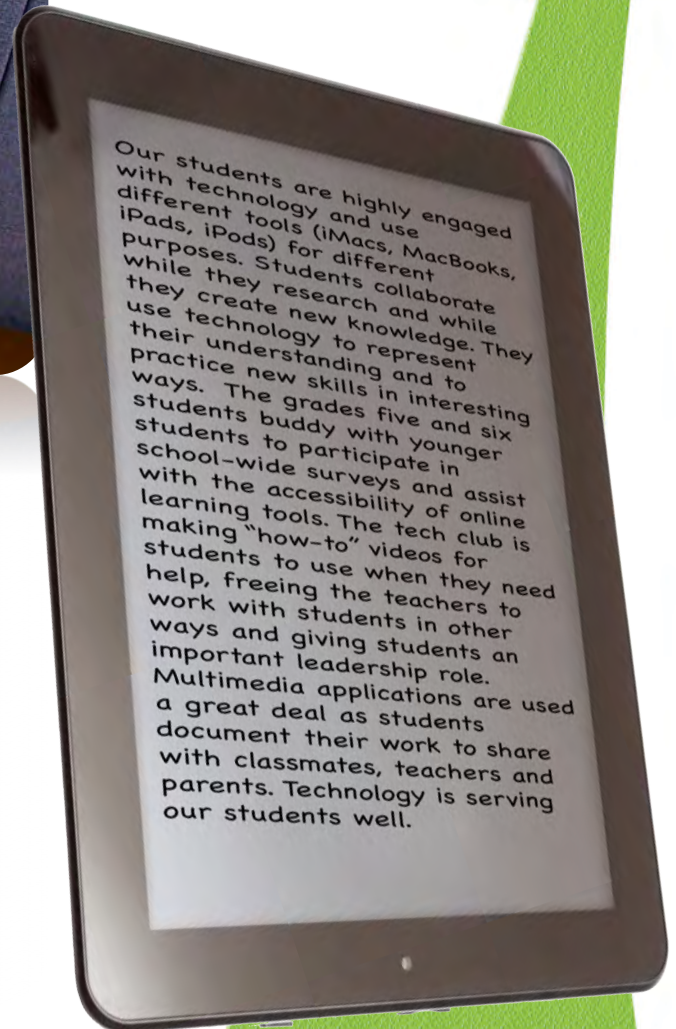
Our K-4 school has a strong philosophical grounding in peace education. Using a variety of integrated approaches, we have established a strong culture of service, respect, and caring for each other, the school, our community, and our planet. These approaches include holding monthly peace assemblies, developing a Peace Ambassador Program for our Grade 4 students who take leadership in the playground and in assemblies, and supporting our 'adopted' school in Tanga, Tanzania. We have raised over \$15,000 in our annual student-produced art sales and auctions to support Tanga's school.



A strong administrative team supports teacher innovation in instruction, student engagement and assessment. I developed a detailed rubric to assess my CTS students during a practical exam. Modeled after a Food Network Challenge show, students who struggled to communicate accurately were able to demonstrate what they know without the obstruction of language during this assignment. Students became more engaged and are better able to show what they know. Other teachers in the school are invited to be a guest adjudicator for students' practical exams!



Recently a student came to our school who had been homeschooled for the previous couple of years and was experiencing a host of behavioural issues. I was apprehensive, but I wanted to make this a positive experience for him, one that would change his attitude toward school and learning. We went through several trials and tribulations: refusal to do work, outbursts, tears, and aggression towards others. We set aside intensive one-on-one time with this student and eventually started to see positive changes. After a few weeks of him being at our school, his mother related: "The fact that he is even happy about coming to school and doesn't fight me on it is good enough for me. If he learns something, then that is a bonus." He went from not reading to reading picture books independently; he is kind to others, he smiles regularly, is eager about coming to school, and is excited about learning. I have learned that even when it seems impossible, if you take the right approach, anything is possible.



Our school library had, for years, been the “quiet zone.” The space wasn’t effective or inviting for children and parents, and was very difficult to teach in; our library and the resources within did not meaningfully support student learning.

Two years ago we started to ask ourselves questions about how our Library could be used differently. After researching Learning

Commons, we struck a

formal committee, submitted a proposal for funding, and received some support from system personnel. Our collaborative efforts paid off – now this space is much more inviting and is used more meaningfully by staff and students.




When I started at this school, I saw much teacher time spent on administrative tasks such as organizing parent conferences. I presented an online option to staff, despite their initial “what we do works ok” reaction. They unanimously agreed to try it. After two conferences, four hours of each individual teacher’s time has been saved, and countless pieces of paper. Communication is much easier! We also assigned a resource person to provide release time for every teacher so that two hours of common planning time with a grade partner could be scheduled weekly to focus on formative assessment and planning engaging tasks.

We began an inquiry-based exploration of community in my grade one classroom. We asked the question, “Could you live alone?” and began constructing a miniature town. We created houses, community buildings, people, roads. One morning the students arrived to find that a flood had destroyed part of the town. We connected this “disaster” to the one that occurred in Calgary last June. Students came up with ideas on how to repair the town and how to prevent a future disaster. Students realized that they do need each other in order to survive and live in this world. It is exciting to see this learning unfold in such an organic way!




As a Traditional Learning Centre (TLC), we are endeavoring to move ourselves (as teachers & parents) our students and especially our foreign-born parents, forward into more authentic, child-centered learning with a focus on critical and higher-order thinking skills. We are being successful in our goals thus far. We are shifting our focus to more modern, tried and true teaching and learning methods with a focus on technology, inquiry and inquisitive thinking and learning.





This year, staff at our school decided to focus on creating a community where everyone feels connected. This reduces bullying and increases self-affirming behaviour. We realized that students also need to feel connected to the teachers and staff at the school. Staff created a plan to facilitate the conditions for connection. The result was a team-building approach where students were given opportunities to partner with students in different grades. Activities ranged from trust exercises to problem-solving. This strategy, accompanied by anti-bullying days, is already starting to create a shift in students' thinking. We are experiencing a more welcoming school community that intentionally invites students to open up and get to know each other.



We try to bring our "world community" into the classroom and engage students through the arts. Opportunities were offered through various residencies including African drumming, a full-year dance residency, mask-making, technology, set design, as well as a vibrant music program. Students may access multiple methods to show their learning. Through personalization, students were able to explore their interests and celebrate their strengths.



I changed the word “recess” to “exploring” and gave no other instructions to my students. “Do what you always do, just do it as an explorer.” The children spill in after recess with all sorts of rich reflections from their time outside. Many of the lessons taught indoors were lived outdoors!

A unique instructional technique used by the Grade 2 team at my school is “How Many Ways”. This is a quick activity at the beginning of a math lesson where students can be thoughtful, creative and evaluative. A student provides a number and the class then generates how many ways they can represent that number. We examine some of the common and unique ways that students have generated. It can be adapted to multiple areas of study, and is motivating for kids as they like to challenge themselves to come up with creative ways to represent things like numbers.





High school completion is extremely low for pregnant and parenting teens. Two fundamental barriers are access to safe and affordable childcare, and financial stability. While these structural changes seem to fall outside the scope of schoolwork, school leadership is often essential in reducing institutional barriers. Through collaborative work with three government departments, we now have a specialized Learner's Bursary. Through collaboration with community partners, we have increased childcare space by 33%. In the end, we have record school enrolment!



As a school, we recognized a need to move our students' understanding of mathematics forward. David DeCoste, a former professor at the University of Calgary, helped us identify ways that we could support our students develop mathematics strategies. I have been using the information that he shared to build on my students' natural inquisitiveness by providing them with opportunities to explore concepts through problems. An effective mathematical learning environment helps the students to "see, hear and feel mathematics", and I am enjoying the challenge of providing the students with positive mathematical experiences.

Four years ago, many teachers were worried when administrators came into their classrooms. They often thought they were in trouble and it caused a great deal of stress. I wonder what the students thought if this is what teachers felt? Working together to collaboratively co-create an atmosphere of trust and support has produced an environment where sustainable transformation can occur! When I walk into classrooms now, I usually head straight to the students. The teachers know I have some expectations, and that I may ask the student some hard questions, but everyone recognizes that we are a community of learners working towards a common goal.



Our teachers critically examined the efficacy of our professional learning communities [PLCs], which resulted in an overhaul of how PLCs were organized in the school. Using the Effective Teaching Practices Rubric, the Discipline-based Inquiry Framework, and the Alberta Education Framework for Student Learning documents as a frame for our school's PLCs, change has started to occur. Teachers look forward to their PLC time, actively seek out members of their PLC group to help them with a problem in their practice, and feel as if they are true designers of both their learning and the learning of their students.



We changed our Friday schedule such that students now sign up for an activity that is curriculum-based.

One group has done marketing where they have come forward to the student body to present possible school team names.

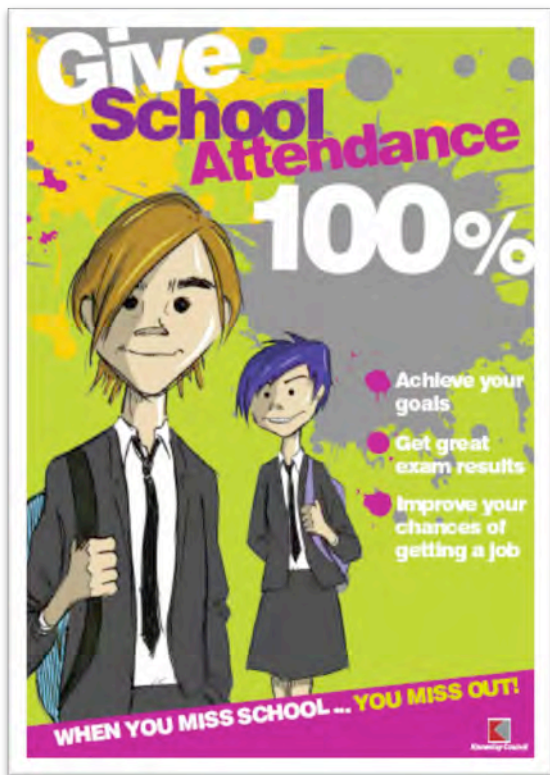
They researched, marketed and the student body voted. They are now working through school colours. Other groups are doing musical theatre,

school democracy meetings, yoga, bio labs, pottery, and more! Some students need time to catch up and get individual support. Some sessions go on for a number of weeks, others are one period. The intent is to broaden and explore interests/passions.



Our reading scores were below the provincial average. Only 50% of our grade 6 students were reading at grade level. Our goal was to up that to 70% for the PATs. We exceeded that goal and achieved 91.7% acceptable standard on the June exams! We did this by instituting guided reading groups from grade one to six. Teachers built flexible groupings within their grade teams. Education assistants trained in Calgary Reads worked one-on-one with struggling readers. We used the 'fab four' reading comprehension strategies as our focus for reading with understanding. Students had some sort of reading instruction every day.





This year we have intentionally focused on student attendance as being a strong indicator of engagement. With regular analysis of our attendance data, we have compiled lists of those that have missed more than 10% of school days. We have purposely engaged each of these students (in a safe and caring community approach) to ascertain if there are any issues prevalent in our school culture or community in which students would be hesitant to attend school. We also invited feedback about what would better support them to attend. This initiative has also allowed for us to engage proactively with students to ensure a safe and caring school, and has helped to increase achievement.

Each month, students and staff are recognized publicly for demonstrating the most important values we are attempting to achieve at the school. Stories of these achievements are shared with the entire school, and pictures are taken of the recipients and displayed. A foundation of care, empathy and excellence has begun to grow. We also facilitate writing days each month in which the whole school is writing significant pieces (appropriate to level). Emphasis is placed on writing, and development is tracked and seen by students. Work is used as part of our PD/discussions/analysis.



Our school joined forces this year with three other middle/junior high schools to share resources and expertise as we all strive to implement a response to intervention model. We have pooled our resources, dedicated time to the project, and applied for (and received) support from the Alberta Teachers' Association to bring in Austin Buffam for a full day of professional development on the topic in January. Teachers have learned a great deal from one another. Our school has learned about and implemented an online reading program to support our struggling readers and our grade seven humanities team has implemented a new inquiry project for grade seven social studies. Student feedback on the new RTI period (dubbed Re-Teach It by our students) has been very positive with many students requesting increased RTI time to be implemented in next year's timetable.



Who will teach Alberta's new students?

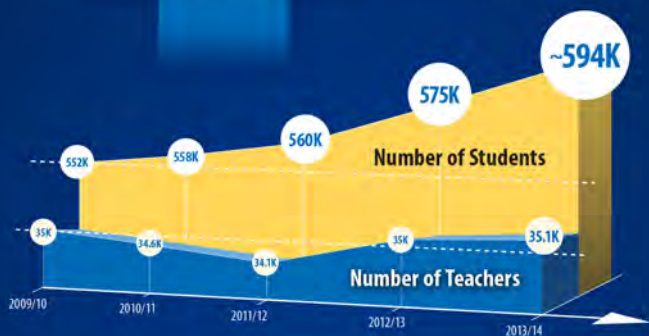
Between 2009/10 and 2013/14, funding uncertainty and underfunding has led to teacher layoffs at a time of rapid student population growth. In that time

+41,000

ADDITIONAL STUDENTS
entered Alberta's schools

106

NEW TEACHER POSITIONS
were created



Average K-3 class size



* The Alberta government did not release data for 2011/12

Albertans support K-12 education funding

76%

OF ALBERTANS

identified spending on core services as one of their first two priorities

58%

OF ALBERTANS

think spending on K-12 education should be increased (more than any other service area)

responses provided to government budget consultation survey

6 in 10
ALBERTANS
believe that class sizes in Alberta's schools are too large

ATA telephone survey of 806 randomly selected Albertans



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Impacts of Uplifting Leadership on School Communities

So what have we learned from these stories?

Teachers are providing welcoming, caring, safe and educational environments for children each day, invoking rich conversations at home about student learning and what is going on in the classroom. These conversations develop into a collaborative effort between parents, teachers and support staff to ensure the success of every student.

Teaching is about relationships – our teachers make every effort to go beyond expectations in order to personalize learning for every student, every day.

More than that, teachers know that developing trusting and positive relationships with students is key to an effective learning environment. Provided with the proper time, resources, and opportunity, teachers will develop those important relationships with kids. This has a positive impact on families as well, with parents becoming “more knowledgeable about their child’s education,” and exercising a higher degree of participation in the school community.

Teachers are the key element in providing uplifting leadership for school communities. When teachers can focus on their primary task, teaching children, amazing things happen in our classrooms. What often gets in the way are the many non-instructional tasks that prevent teachers from fully focusing on that primary goal.

It is vital that school districts, government and administrators facilitate the work of teachers in two separate, yet equally important ways. First, ensure teachers possess the tools and resources they require in order to build successful learning environments for students. Second, remove the obstructions and administria that interfere with the development of the positive relationships with students that are so vital to increasing student success.

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