



## Achieving Dramatic Academic Change The J.Percy Page High-School Story by P. Jean Stiles

J. Percy Page High School is located in Millwoods in southeast Edmonton, Alberta. Millwoods has a population of over 150,000, making it the size of a small city. Millwoods is the initial point of entry for many immigrants to Canada. This gives Millwoods and J. Percy Page a multi-cultural flavor that I like to think of as “a rich United Nations environment.” Two years ago we asked students which flags they would like us to hang in our halls to remind them of their birthplaces. Over 56 flags have been hung.

During the past ten to fifteen years, Millwoods has received much media attention. None of it has been positive. Edmonton Public Schools has three high schools that serve the children of Millwoods. J. Percy Page is the most central of the three. Edmonton Public Schools are renowned for their **site-based decision-making** and their **open boundary system of programs of choice**. In Alberta, educational dollars follow children to their choice of schools.

With the open boundary policy it has been interesting to watch the enrollment patterns in Edmonton Public Schools and in Millwoods in particular. Two of the three high schools that serve Millwoods are “bursting at the seams.” They serve primarily a Caucasian and Asian population. Students are attracted to these schools because of their academic programs, such as IB, and their sports and extra-curricular programs. Although the two other schools are the first choice of many students, they cannot accommodate everyone that chooses them. As a result, they often need to hold a lottery - a random selection process - to determine the students from outside the school boundaries that will be allowed to attend the school.

Many students who attend J. Percy Page did not select our school as their first choice. The school had a poor reputation and it had a disgruntled teaching staff. J. Percy Page was known as a tough school with problems ranging from violence to poor academic performance. The school was considered to be in

crisis by the School District, the community and the Province. There have been definite enrollment trends along cultural lines.

I met with the Assistant Superintendent and requested this school as an assignment for personal and professional reasons. My mother was part of the administrative team that opened the school 23 years ago and the school has a cultural richness that I love. The school has the leadership challenges that I enjoy as a principal.

### **Initial Status of the School**

When I took over the school it had a \$400,000 deficit and a declining enrolment. The school can accommodate 1200 students but student numbers had decreased to 800. Based on completion rates for funding, the school ranked in the bottom 20% of the 20 high schools. The completion rate was 86% but the school had been staffed and budgeted for a 91% completion rate. The school had the highest number of school suspensions and expulsions. Students were leaving classes and courses but they could not explain why, other than they thought that they would not be successful.

The school had three Assistant Principals. I was given the option to select a new Assistant Principal to go into the school with me. Shortly after the start of the school year, another Assistant Principal resigned to take political office. I therefore started the year with two Assistant Principals with similar educational philosophies to mine.

There was a sense of urgency to make dramatic change and improve the learning conditions in the school. A new school has been approved for an area southwest of J. Percy Page that would provide more learning spaces for the population of Millwoods and could further erode the number of students attending Page.

### **Action Plan**

- In the first year I decided to concentrate on student and teacher behavior. In the second year I worked on having teachers examine their own teaching practice. They were encouraged to explore and execute action research projects in collaboration with their colleagues.
- Initially it was necessary to reestablish control of the school and to create an atmosphere where staff was visible and interacting with students in the

hallways. We promised the staff that the administration team would spend every break time throughout the day in the halls.

- Administration spent up to 50% of their time in classrooms supporting teaching. This gave us exceptional visibility to staff and students and it allowed us to develop positive relationships with students. If a student wanted to drop a course, we held an exit interview to ascertain why the student wanted to drop the course.
- We asked staff to do two main things: (1) to be at their classroom doors to greet students as they came to the class at the beginning of each period; and (2) to enforce the no cell phone and no hat rules. Teachers were required to post student results so that we could celebrate student achievements.
- We changed the staff meetings to Professional Learning (PL) sessions and celebrations of success.
- We held monthly student assemblies to celebrate student and teacher successes, including: attendance, academic achievement and citizenship.
- We organized weekly, 20-minute advisor classes. All three grades were integrated into the advisor groups. Each teacher and administration staff member was responsible for an advisor group.
- An important component of the action plan was to give the students a sense of ownership of the school and to create a sense of pride in the school. Each classroom is equipped with a television. Students asked me if they could begin a television program that would highlight school activities and accomplishments. I agreed and the student-produced Page TV was established.
- Twice a month, the Instructional Leadership Team met to review data and to discuss best teaching practices to address the issues arising from school performance data. Data were generated from multiple sources at the school level. The data was used to reveal the students who are at-risk of not completing their courses, as well as those that could achieve at a higher level.

- We established a common focus on Assessment for Learning. Teachers made a tremendous paradigm shift in assessment. Through our approach of Assessment for Learning we created a focus on student success. Teachers began to allow students to revise their work to improve their grade and focus on the learning. It also created an academic culture that changed the language of excuses for incomplete assignments to the language of results in the classroom. The teachers' emphasis on the at-risk learners and the examination of how these learners were being assessed empowered staff to question their own grading policies. We established the attitude that whatever it takes to push, pull or drag a student across the finish line was worth the effort.
- One department decided to examine what would occur if a "no 0" policy was implemented. The premise was that zeros were allowing students not to complete assignments and were more a comment on student behavior than an account of student learning and achievement. The results were dramatic and other departments adopted similar policies. There is now a school-wide culture of "no zeros" and second chances.
- Staff attended in-professional learning (PL) sessions and examined instructional practices that could further assist high quality teaching and enhanced student learning. An atmosphere of safety and risk-taking was created as staff tried new methods and engaged in collaborative dialogue about best teaching practices
- We began instructional walkthroughs with critical friends to collect evidence of student engagement, teacher student rapport, instructional best practices, and overall school climate. This was extended to include walkthroughs with the Leadership team and visiting guests. Most recently we have walked the school with every staff member.

### **The Leadership Team**

The leadership team includes the school administration, department heads, the librarian, and the business manager. Everyone on the team participates in the same professional learning (PL) training. Everyone is in "the know." We debrief every PL session to decide key messages for staff, what to present to departments and what actions if any we will take as a group. I model the processes for the Leadership team to use in their department meetings.

Typically, at one meeting per month, we examine the school generated ABCD reports that contain department, class and teacher information on who is passing and who is failing a course. Department Heads discuss what they are doing to address any problems and what they are doing – class-by-class, teacher-by-teacher, and student-by-student. This is an opportunity to discuss “best practices” of what is and what is not working. At the second meeting, we examine current research on learning strategies and, in particular, assessment practices. This is our time to look to future directions and to ask where we fit in current trends.

We have three external “Critical Friends” who I invited to attend one of the two monthly leadership meetings. The Critical Friends include the associate superintendent responsible for J. Percy Page, the School Board’s Director of Assessment, and a retired Professor of Curriculum who is external to the District. The Critical Friends provide an external set of eyes. Their role is to participate in the Leadership meetings through discussion, questioning, giving feedback and insight into our work. Our Leadership team has accepted them with an equal voice at the leadership table.

### **Indicators That We Were On Track**

The English Department provided the early indication that we were “on track.” In one semester of tracking grade 10 students with a “no zero” policy on assignment completion, completion rates improved by 27% achieved impressive results.

- Throughout the first semester we were aware of:
- Improved attendance.
- Students were engaged in their learning and had accurate information about their academic standing in a course.
- Students were asking if they could “fill” their timetables.
- Noon hour tutorials were well attended.
- Teachers began to ask to spend time with students rather than lunch hour supervision.
- Parent feedback was supportive and they expressed that they felt that the school “cared” about their children.
- Teachers were asking for time to collaborate on improved teaching practices.

- Other departments began to “buy into” the focus on academic results.
- Student talk, Teacher talk and Parent talk became focused on and passionate about academic success.
- In the classroom there was a shift from “you must do this” to how can “we best do and understand this?”
- Teachers began telling stories of how community members were talking about the huge changes occurring in our school. Teachers were expressing pride in our work.

### Current Situation

The most dramatic change for J. Percy Page is that we are a school that has done something unique and others want to come and see what we have achieved and how we achieved it. We take them on “walks” through the school to see the teaching and learning in action. Teachers and students accept visitors in their classes without interrupting the class and visitors can observe what the students are learning and how they are performing in the class.

By the end of 2005-2006, all core courses at the Grade 10 level had improved results. The following table illustrates the extent of this improvement:

	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006
English 10-1	78%	91%	97%
English 10-2	49%	78%	82%
Social Studies 10	81%	91%	91%
Social Studies 13	50%	75%	79%
Pure Math 10	75%	87%	88%
Applied Math 10	67%	67%	73%
Math 14	59%	71%	75%
Science 10	73%	77%	83%
Science 14	51%	71%	80%

Overall course completion rates at all grade levels (10 through 12) increased from 86.5% in 2003-2004 to 95.6% in 2005-2006.

Based on high school completion rates, the school now ranks in the top third of high schools in Edmonton Public Schools. With these improved completion rates, the school deficit has been eliminated and the school enjoys a large operational surplus. The current enrolment of students in the school is 1100 and we have significantly reduced the number of school suspensions and

expulsions. J. Percy Page has become a serious place of learning. Students are in class during teaching times.

Through student assemblies and student activities, the students have taken “ownership” of their learning and they have pride in their school. They acknowledge that they are first and foremost at school to learn and they accept that the only place for them during class time is “in the classroom.”

We have our staff meetings on Friday mornings at 8:30 AM. This gives staff an opportunity to meet weekly for professional learning and to update and highlight school progress and student achievements. School starts at 9:30 AM, a half-hour later than other days of the week. The students consider this a real bonus. When they come to school they see us meeting in the cafeteria. “What are you doing there?” they ask. “We are talking about you,” is the common response. It sets the atmosphere in the school for the following week.

The leadership team has set high expectations for themselves and for students and staff at J. Percy Page. Through the process of examining data at regular intervals, aligning best practices with the data and articulating the vision for all, a phenomenal improvement in the school, from student performance to school climate, has occurred.

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**P. Jean Stiles** *the former principal at J.Percy Page, is currently leading a second high-school in Edmonton, Canada. Additionally, she serves as Senior Associate with Targeted Leadership Consulting.*