

## ***Balwin School – Striving for Intercultural Understanding***

### ***Introduction***

Schools are places where newcomers come into close contact with their adopted culture, and sometimes the experience requires families and teaching staffs to make significant accommodations for one another. In response to a large influx of refugee students in the mid-2000s, the staff at Balwin School implemented a radically different Intercultural Early Learning Class in 2007. This program, the Edmonton Public School Board's own work to further its understanding of immigrant and refugee issues, and input from community partners have led to planning for a Transition Program set to begin in September 2010.

This story describes how the Board's site-based planning model and a culture that supports innovation have resulted in responsive, timely learning solutions for new Canadian families in Edmonton.

### ***In the boy, you see the man***

Dean Michailides grew up in a Greek-speaking enclave in Edmonton in the early 1960s. His mother, a nurse, had come to Canada in response to a newspaper advertisement for nursing jobs in Edmonton. She met and married a Greek man who had come to Canada to make his fortune and return home. Instead, the couple had two sons, one year apart, and built a life in Edmonton.

*This story is part of a project carried out by the Program Unit of the Edmonton Public School Board and Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. Its purpose is to understand the ecology for innovation and collaboration in the Board's schools by exploring the experience of four schools or school collaborations. The Caledon Institute is publishing two community stories as part of this effort: one on the Cree Language Program at Abbot School and a second which describes the emergence of a transition program for immigrant students which was influenced by work done at Balwin School.*

Because the older boy spoke only Greek when he arrived at school, he struggled to learn English and ended up repeating Grade 1 (no kindergarten or preschool programming existed at the time). The two Michailides boys went through school together, and the going was rough. Dean remembers asking his older brother (in Greek) in Grade 1 what it was they were supposed to be doing. “Just look around at what everyone else is doing and do the same,” his brother answered. Dean survived the confusion and constant bullying by gravitating to a group of ethnically diverse children – all of whom were born in Canada but who stood out linguistically and culturally. He remembers one teacher in elementary school who seemed to connect with him but, for the most part, he felt abandoned by the adults in his schools.

Those early experiences created a resolve in Dean to become an educator and help children who were having trouble fitting in. Looking back, he recognizes that without the family and community support he received, he might have chosen a very different path. As the child of hardworking parents whose family remained intact and connected with their church and community, he had some measure of stability and comfort. He knows that many of the refugee students now entering schools in Edmonton are not so lucky.

### *Welcome to Balwin*

Dean was appointed assistant principal of Balwin Junior High School in 1997. Located in Edmonton’s northeast corner, it served 400 students in Grades 7 to 9. The area surrounding the school offers affordable accommodation and attracts many refugee and immigrant families. Between 1997 and 2000, Dean forged strong relationships with his students, their families, the staff and the many community partners associated with the Edmonton Public School Board.

By 2004, enrollment figures at Balwin and a nearby elementary school had reached a critically low point. Trustees decided to close the elementary school and bring the students into the junior high facility. Parents of younger children were concerned that older students would bully younger ones, so it was imperative that the Board assign a principal whom the community could trust. Dean was appointed principal of Balwin School – now a 500-student preschool to Grade 9 facility – in the fall of 2005.

Dean believes that the kindergarten to Grade 9 model – serving children ages 3 to 15 – is an ideal way to train older students to be responsible for younger ones. “It’s the way to go,” says Dean. “Junior high students should never be marooned on an island by themselves. At Balwin, they are taught to lead. They participate in buddy reading programs and help plan and operate community events and, as a group, we think of ourselves as a family.”

Dean’s arrival at Balwin coincided with a large influx of refugees to Edmonton, mainly from the Sudan, Afghanistan (some via Russia and Turkey), Somalia (some after spending many years in Kenyan refugee camps) and Kurds from Iraq. Says Dean: “The children coming to our schools were now more commonly experiencing high levels of emotional stress. In some cases, parents had made the difficult decision to place them with relatives or friends in order to meet family size immigration quotas. Once they arrived in Canada, there was no guarantee that families would be reunited.”

Parents' education levels were generally lower and few spoke English. With the strains of finding work, learning a new language and attending to the details of establishing a household, many parents were unable to spend much time with their children, let alone recognize and deal with the pressures they all were experiencing.

A Somali mother and her four children embodied the kinds of problems these families were facing. On the day they came to sign up at Balwin, the family's eldest child – a boy of 15 who had spent many years in Kenyan refugee camps – was expelled for lifting up the blouse of a Canadian-born Somali girl. The same day, the second son threatened to kill some Canadian-born Sudanese boys on the schoolyard (Sudanese brutalized Somalis in the camps). The mother was doing her best to hold her family together.

Because of Balwin's location and housing profile, what appeared as a trickle of immigrant students in some parts of Edmonton was experienced as a flood. Dean and his teachers scrambled to put in place as many supports as possible for their students but they felt overwhelmed. One of Dean's first calls for help went to the Board's Centre for Education. Manager Karen Bardy joined Dean in looking for program models that would suit this new group of English Language Learners (ELL students).

Says Dean: "One of the things we have learned from our Aboriginal students is the importance of supporting the heart language – our term for the child's first language. When a language and culture are devalued, uprooted or denied, we see the creation of a semi-literate community. Studies show that when a child's first language is retained, it's easier for them to learn another language. In 2007, we decided to create a program for an early education class that included participation by three first language brokers from the community who could speak our students' heart language. We used ELL funds, Program Unit Funds and a donation from an anonymous donor to pay the costs of the program and staffing. By the second year of the program, we learned that any deficiency in language acquisition – be it English or any other language – could be addressed through this program." The initiative now included children whose heart language was English. Program costs continued to be paid by drawing on various budget areas and through the donor.

Balwin's Intercultural Early Learning Class began as an experiment both in maintaining a child's first language and encouraging intercultural bonding. An English teacher and three assistants – each speaking another language – worked to replicate the normal home-environment activities of 3- and 4-year-old children. These included making tea, singing songs to entertain the babies, going to the market and talking about everyday items from home cultures – simple things like blocks, sticks and other artifacts. These activities helped open up discussions and allowed children to find similarities between their families' day-to-day living experiences and those of their classmates and teachers.

The decision to open the language program to any student with poor English language skills was a key turning point in the way staff members conceptualized ELL programming. "We saw that the important piece was not where a child was born, but how well they functioned in their heart language, be it English or something else," says Dean. The updated model is harder to fund because it does not fit neatly into provincial parameters. But other sources, such as Program Unit Funding, have been accessed to help cover expenses.

The Intercultural Early Learning Class – seen as a radical idea and the only one of its kind in North America – began to influence how older Balwin students were taught. ELL had been delivered as a withdrawal program. Students left their home classes a few times a week to work individually with a teacher or in small groups with other ELL students.

Forty percent of Balwin students are new immigrants and 45 percent are classified as English Language Learners. Besides the 21 children in the Intercultural Early Learning Class, the school’s ELL program now assists 50 students, split into three divisional groupings which can be further subdivided into ability groups, as required. Four ELL groups are currently operating at Balwin.

Before the intercultural model was introduced, the Board had established two early learning classes in other schools. One year after being pilot tested at Balwin, elements of the Intercultural Early Learning model were adapted for use in seven new early learning sites.

### *School board support*

The Central Services Department of the Edmonton Public School Board includes the Centre for Education – a unit that creates, develops and support alternate programs. These range from language instruction to faith-based and learning style-focused pedagogies.

Says Dean: “The strength and power of this Board comes from the multiple layers of conversation among its members, the education department and our families. One conversation or idea can lead to any number of solutions.”

When organizing its work, the Board is guided by the priorities set by the Ministry of Education, its own priorities and the needs of its 200 school communities. In turn, individual schools and Central Services develop and report on plans of their own. The Centre for Education works with many partners and consults regularly with individuals and groups that have a particular educational interest. Ideas become prototypes (described elsewhere in this report as “thinking with our hands”), which may be rolled out as pilot projects that may, in turn, be instituted as ongoing programs. The Centre acts on new ideas and establishes new initiatives. Once a program is deemed capable of maintaining itself, the Centre becomes an ongoing source of professional support.

The Centre regularly reviews changes in the Board’s student demographics and works proactively with school staff and the community. Since 1974, the Board has instituted 39 alternative programs in response to identified needs.

Karen Bardy is a program manager in Central Services and has worked for the Board for 28 years as a teacher and program developer. She and fellow Centre employees were aware of the immigrant and refugee challenges being faced by Balwin and other schools. Says Karen: “Sometimes we work in response to a request, but often new initiatives arise from our ongoing meetings with principals, staff and community organizations. Much of our work is to identify needs and develop supports, projects and programs in collaboration with district and community stakeholders.”

The large influx of new Canadians at Balwin led Karen to begin researching good practices in other jurisdictions. Says Karen: “Having more of a concentration of children in one school with similar needs is, in some ways, easier to accommodate than working with only a handful of students. We are more readily able to access resources from both within the district and from community partners to support these students.”

Balwin’s larger numbers allowed them to include multiple home languages in the Intercultural Early Learning Class. Says Dean: “In this neighbourhood, you can’t select only the biggest language group. We knew, for example, that the Kurdish population in Edmonton is small and widely dispersed. We felt that this group – whose language had been outlawed and whose culture had been suppressed – was in particular need of support, so we made a point of including their language in our program. We wanted to communicate the beauty of our Canadian culture – that it’s OK to be 100 percent *you*.”

Dean’s experience and his determination to provide his students with the best possible program supports were matched by Don Blackwell, principal at Queen Elizabeth High School. Both men accompanied a group of Board employees that were going to Seattle to learn about an immigrant transition unit. Seattle’s stand-alone school gives its 200 students intensive English-language training and provides community supports for children and their families. A visually and linguistically diverse staff are led by a principal who works around the clock to get what his teachers and students need.

The idea of establishing a school as a service and support hub had definite appeal for the visitors from Edmonton. Inspired by the passion and innovative practices they observed in Seattle, the group began discussing the idea of establishing some kind of transition centre or program in Edmonton.

Over the last five years, the Board has worked to develop its relationships with immigrant community organizations and cultural communities. Thanks to its deeper understanding of the needs and pressures experienced by its immigrant and refugee families, the Board voted to adopt a new multicultural policy in June 2009. In December 2009, the District Superintendent approved a new regulation that outlines expectations for schools and central services. Policy and regulation provide the foundation for future planning by Central Services, including the establishment of a Transitions Program.

The Edmonton Public School Board is accustomed to stepping boldly into alternative programming that later is adopted by other school districts. It is supported by a provincial education ministry that is similarly committed to innovation. In collaboration with schools and community organizations, Central Services is now planning the most appropriate parameters for the design of its Transition Program – its focus, framework, resources, and location – even the possibility of establishing multiple centres. Initial feedback from community organizations has indicated that a centralized Transition Centre might intimidate parents who would prefer to access services at local schools.

Karen anticipates a three-year development process for the Transition Program model. Board staff also recognize the need to answer outstanding questions regarding the future of existing ELL programs like the one at Balwin.

All of the efforts Board employees have made over the years to develop relationships among various immigrant groups have borne fruit. For example, the first members of Edmonton's Somali population began arriving 20 years ago and their leaders are now involved in Transition Program discussions aimed at supporting new arrivals. Says Dean: "Our community has learned that the school system is a reliable safety net. We use the term 'intercultural understanding' rather than 'multiculturalism' to express the belief that we can build understanding of our commonalities and differences in order to achieve something bigger and better for our students and their families."

### *Future plans*

Funding for staff to continue school-based ELL programming is very much dependent on the provincial economy and the Ministry of Education's subsequent budget. In particular, funding for transportation may drive selected program decisions. For example, students currently bused to Balwin may have to have their needs accommodated at their local schools.

Fewer funds force creative program responses. "Which would you prefer?" asks Dean. "A French-speaking teacher who infuses their language into the program every day or a specialist who visits every second day?" Dean believes that the future of intercultural education lies in developing highly competent teaching staff who can differentiate the learning experiences needed by each child.

Much has improved since Dean arrived back at Balwin in 2005. At that time, some of his students had been known to manipulate their parents' poor English skills to avoid school and home responsibilities. This winter, he heard a request from a group of children that are concerned about their parents' diet and smoking habits and want the school to organize a healthy lifestyle workshop on their behalf. In the space of five years, children have learned to trust the system instead of avoiding it.

Says Dean: "When I was a boy, there were no educators of colour and few of the adults understood the pain of not fitting in. It's hard to know the inside of a child who is bullied and marginalized, but now there are many educators willing to help, and that's where we start. The adults are responsible for creating an education system that is sensitive to a child's every need. Site-based planning allows schools to make immediate changes to improve a situation, and then the larger system catches up."

Balwin faces another challenge: Dean has been asked to open a new school and a new principal will be assigned to Balwin. Because of the flexibility inherent in site-base planning and the principal's control of 92 cents of every school dollar allotted, teachers are involved in determining programming priorities for the coming year. Dean's transition coincides with this annual process and staff members are now considering the options for ELL programming. Will they continue the Intercultural Early Learning Class? The divisional ELL classes? Will they instead find ELL 'hot spots' and address only the highest-need students?



The goal for all exceptional learners is that they eventually get the support they need to re-enter the mainstream. Dean is confident that the groundwork he and his staff have laid will hold the community in good stead. They have become the helpful adults with the missing puzzle pieces children need to fit in, learn and thrive.

*Story Postscript:* The Somali children referred to are making a solid transition to life in Canada. While the oldest brother continues to receive help to resolve post-traumatic stress disorder issues, his sister and younger brothers did a presentation to the Board outlining the positive things that have happened to them since their arrival. The family's youngest boy is in a special needs classroom and the sister and second oldest boy have received support from special needs programming. Both of the older children will move to regular classes in the fall of 2010.

### ***Lessons about collaboration and innovation***

The story of Balwin highlights several important lessons about innovation.

#### ***Personal experience matters***

Innovation may arise through the personal experiences of key players. Had Dean Michailides fit easily into the school system as a child, he may not have developed the passion necessary to conceive and design the kinds of supports that immigrant children desperately need.

Teachers are typically people who liked school. They generally were good, successful students. Teachers from the cultural mainstream may not 'see' the many ways in which children are challenged socially and culturally. In Balwin's case, it took a person with the visceral experience of being ostracized and bullied to break through the inertia and conceive of a new way of responding to a problem.

#### ***Site-based planning encourages innovation***

Education often adapts and modifies existing programs but, at a certain point, the original model has become so covered with duct tape that its original purpose and functionality are lost. Something new is waiting to take its place, but often the words do not yet exist to describe it (think: internet).

Robust innovation occurs when people closest to a challenge experience the urgency to act and have the autonomy and resources to experiment.

Dean and his fellow collaborators made good use of two new terms: heart language and interculturalism. Both are novel responses to previously-understood concepts. Heart language as opposed to mother tongue is a richer, more textured description of one's first language, and allows a

deeper understanding of why culture and language matter. The mind will follow where the heart leads – a truth that underlies this new term, and that makes intuitive pedagogical sense.

Multiculturalism is a term that suggests many things to many people and Canadians have struggled to define it. ‘Cultural mosaic’ has provided a useful metaphor, but it does not capture the mixing and blending of food, words and ideas that occur over time. A mosaic’s colours are separated by hard grout. By contrast, interculturalism captures the notion of cultural sharing and exchange, and mutual respect without which cooperation and collaboration cannot exist. The concepts of heart language and interculturalism define the elements of the Intercultural Early Learning Class.

Whether Central Services could have developed Balwin’s model in isolation is questionable. There is a necessary tension between theory and practice which gave rise to Dean’s big new idea. His particular experience, Balwin’s many cultural groups and the neighbourhood’s demographics and structure were all ingredients that led to a unique new solution.

### *The critical nature of multiple perspectives*

Program Unit Director Gloria Chalmers identifies a barrier to Dean’s dream of interculturalism: cultural blindness. Says Gloria: “Whether it is questions related to poverty or culture, educators as a group are mainly middle-income earners from mainstream groups. Many cannot see the problems faced by children from disadvantaged groups, or may minimize the seriousness of the issues.”

This inability to appreciate differences also extends to others. For example, when engaging parents on issues such as school closures, assessments and school placements the same paper-based, written response strategy is often used with families from high needs or high poverty areas and middle- and upper-income neighbourhoods – despite low literacy and low English language skills. As a result, the Board gets fewer, less accurate and less authentic input from a group of people that have a high stake in the outcomes.

Attitudes permeate all elements of a learning community. The words that instructors and learning materials use to convey concepts – analogies, comparisons, metaphors – represent a particular cultural experience and history. They are often completely unintelligible to people raised in other cultures and environments, which makes it even more difficult for learners to grasp new ideas. Bridging these differences requires both awareness and mental agility on the part of both learners and instructors.

Gloria continues: “This inability to recognize reference points extends to other areas. District advertising and hiring practices historically used mainstream media, but the Board now advertises in various culturally-diverse print and electronic media. Children born in other countries still express surprise when they see members of their communities working as education assistants. This confirms that we need a more diversified staff, reflective of our current demographics. Until our employees are more diversified, our overall level of cultural understanding and ability to better bridge differences will remain low.”



### *The habit of collaboration*

Collaboration begets more collaboration and more creativity. The solution devised for ELL learners at Balwin resulted from Dean's habit of working collaboratively. When he identified an obstacle, his first impulse was to call on his contacts and begin locating the kinds of resources that fit his students' needs.

Dean had already had the benefit of working with "Partners for Kids" at Abbott School. In his mind, the pulling together of resources was an established board practice that he simply took to another level. He wove his ideas together with people and resources in a way that made perfect sense to other board personnel who were already thinking and working in the same, self-refuelling way.

### *The critical role of intermediaries*

The Board's Program Unit provided a rich environment from which to draw ideas and people. By working with schools and community partners, Karen Bardy and her colleagues in Programs have learned about the difficulties faced by recent immigrants and researched promising solutions in other jurisdictions. The trip to Seattle and its impact on planning were the next link in the chain of responses. The unit's ability to act as a research body, and to provide the link between provincial and board guidelines on one side and on-the-ground experience on the other, helps keep the system fuelled with practicable ideas for solving complex problems. From their vantage point, program unit staff can see both sides of the situation and facilitate communication and optimal design.

The eventual design of the board's Transition Program provides an example of the unit's ability to take a good idea and work it into a promising prototype. Research led a group to Seattle and started them thinking about a dedicated facility with resources for students and their families. Already, ideas for creating that centralized facility have been re-thought as a result of community input that suggested more localized planning in several sites would be preferable. Matching these inputs with board data will likely allow the emergence of several more potential models.

### *The dilemma and paradox of rotating principals*

The practice of rotating principals from school to school fuels innovation within each facility and across the Board. It ensures a fresh flow of ideas across schools and results in bursts of creative energy when principals bring fresh eyes to established practices or situations.

It paradoxically can also short-circuit the innovation process by putting promising programs in peril if they have not had sufficient time and resources to prove their ultimate value. Because Dean's personality was key to Balwin's successful transition from middle to elementary and middle school and to the launching of the Intercultural Early Learning Class, it remains to be seen whether his replacement can maintain and extend the initiatives and school spirit he fostered. Pilot projects are generally given three years to prove their worth. The program at Balwin is best described as a

prototype, since it was developed spontaneously and originally. As such, it must be seen as a learning experiment and requires greater flexibility from administrators in regard to outcomes.

Dean's re-assignment comes at a critical juncture where provincial and Board funds may be significantly reduced. It may not be possible to ensure the survival of the ELL work begun at Balwin. Dean's belief that the future of intercultural education lies in developing highly competent teaching staff rests on the assumption that such training is available and affordable.

### *A working conclusion*

The Balwin example highlights the productive tension that the people in the Edmonton Public School Board experience by trying to juggle numerous agendas. The dynamics of authentic innovation and collaboration contrast with Board policies and practices designed to ensure high academic achievement. New student and family demographics, uncertain resource flows and shifting public policies and expectations present additional programming challenges.

The tension and possibilities inherent in the various 'sides' of the equation should not be viewed as forcing either/or choices but rather opportunities for creativity and inspiration. For example, fewer education dollars available can help focus attention on smarter, more creative use of funds. It may even be possible to introduce notions of flexibility regarding principal rotation in response to unforeseen programming developments or complications.

In order to build on its history of innovation and its reputation as a reliable community resource, the Edmonton Public School Board can see the idea of transition programs as an illustrative and instructive case study. It represents many of the innovative efforts that have arisen across the district as educators respond to an increasingly complex and intercultural society.

*Anne Makhoul with Mark Cabaj*

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