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CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

LEARNING AND LEADING LESSONS FROM CHALLENGE

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PROMISING
PRACTICES

BUILD SCHOOL
CAPACITY

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IMPROVE
STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT



Ontario





Transcending Challenges:

Progressive Steps Towards School Safety

Stu Auty

School safety, a key consideration in the current educational context, has been the focus of Stu Auty's on-going work for a number of years. Below, Stu, President of the Canadian Safe Schools Network, responds to questions about educational lessons learned with respect to school safety posed by Suzanne Molitor, a member of the Changing Perspectives Editorial Team.

Suzanne: What is the Canadian Safe Schools Network and how was this organization created?

Stu: The Canadian Safe Schools Network (CSSN) is a national, not-for-profit, registered charitable organization that works in partnership with many boards of education, non-government organizations, and police services across Canada. CSSN is a child of the Ontario Safe School Task Force created by the Ontario Secondary Principals' Association in the early 90's. In 1997, the Task Force was nearing completion and I was returning to the Peel Board when Toronto Police Chief David Boothby asked if I would consider carrying on the work of the Task Force in another form. I agreed that a not-for-profit approach seemed like the best idea. We launched the Canadian Safe School Network to a full house in the Toronto Police Headquarters auditorium in the spring of 1997.

CSSN's mandate is to reduce youth violence in our schools and

communities. Early Task Force research showed that violence in schools was a rapidly developing phenomenon that wasn't about to go away. The pressures were felt in small rural as well as large urban settings. With the odd exception, the overriding approach that government and boards of education took at the time was one of denial. It was tough to wrench people into the real world and convince them that action was needed to stall the erosion occurring in our educational system. That was almost 20 years ago; much has transpired since then.

Suzanne: How does CSSN support Ontario schools? What partnerships have helped CSSN to be successful?

Stu: CSSN's support for Ontario schools has been extensive and ranges from conducting research to developing safe school resources in both English and French, hosting professional development conferences and training institutes, and providing comprehensive and current commentary on safe school issues to media outlets throughout Canada. On the research side, CSSN's Safe School Think Tank is an annual event that is held each August, and attended by senior school board delegates from across Ontario with the Minister of Education and/or Parliamentary Assistant engaged in interactive sessions. For example, CSSN's "Cool Kids in the Zone" is an early intervention (JK to 2) bully-prevention resource that has impacted over one million children in schools across Canada. CSSN currently administers, in partnership with the Toronto Police, the City of Toronto and the four Toronto school boards, the largest student-driven, school-based safety program in Canada, Empowered Student Partnerships (ESP).

In 2008, CSSN hosted its 11th annual Safe School Conference.

Attended by over 700 delegates from across the country, this conference is the largest safe schools gathering of its kind in Canada and has now expanded to an additional four single subject conferences held throughout the school year. As well, CSSN's three-part Safe School Certification Institute is an annual summer fixture that has recently expanded into a direct delivery program to the Upper Canada District School Board with other boards on a waiting list. The Institute has moved into the Faculties of Education with the successfully piloted Safe School Teacher-in-Training Institute at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) having now become an annual event.

Initial partnerships that began with the Public and Catholic school boards in Toronto and the Toronto Police have now expanded to over 15 boards in Ontario as well as the Ontario Provincial Police. These partnerships have provided access to leading edge safe school practitioners and best practice programs that CSSN has been able to showcase either through the media or through the many conferences and events that it hosts. Both school boards and police services act in an ongoing advisory capacity for CSSN program development.

Suzanne: Why has school safety become such a major focus for Ontario's schools?

Stu: Who would have thought that school safety would have trumped literacy and numeracy in the new millennium? The Durham District School Board's most recent 2008 community survey confirmed earlier findings in 2003 that parents regard school safety as their number one concern (*Durham Directions, 2008*). It follows, of course, that if children do not feel safe, they will not learn. Safety has always been assumed and not questioned. Schools have always



been considered as safe havens where lower speed limits were imposed as traffic approached. "Proceed with caution" was the catchphrase, weapon possession was unheard of, rules were to be followed, and there was no question that the teacher, backed up by the principal, was in charge. Schools were believed to be special places where kids were nurtured and protected. They still are, but what a different world schools have become!

Now, the perception of many, fueled by media reporting, is that schools have become incubators for violence where lockdowns and the use of weapons appear to be the norm. Violence in schools is a headline grabber that continues to impact the attitudes that people have about life in today's schools. In today's high tech world, communication is instantaneous; what happens at Columbine in Colorado, Dawson College in Montreal or C.W. Jeffries in Toronto, spikes anxieties in homes across the country with every high profile incident that occurs.

The reality is that schools are still the safest place for kids to be during the day. The communities in which schools are located, however, are by far harsher places. Kids today are immersed in violence from all angles. Rap music, video games, movies, professional wrestling, the Internet and even daytime television thrive on violence to feed their bottom line. It's a moneymaking juggernaut. Research shows that there is a direct connection between a daily diet of violence in the media and how kids are programmed to react in conflict situations. Studies conducted in Australia, Finland, Poland, Israel, Netherlands and the United States show that children may become aggressive as a result of watching violent television programs. These children also perceive these shows as a reflection of reality and identify with aggressive charac-

ters portrayed in these violent shows.

Suzanne: Given this context, what do you believe is the key to creating a safe school?

Stu: The great majority of kids are good to the core with an unlimited ability to do the right thing. Teachers, by nature, are caring individuals who love their jobs, love working with kids and want to work collectively to make their world better. What I have witnessed over the years is a huge potential to make a difference by galvanizing the collective power of the stakeholders. The power lies in brokering, in partnerships and in networks that are the tools for change.

The power of knowing 'I'm not alone' reduces pressure and allows for true collaboration especially if people are secure in their own roles. They can take advantage of the ascribed power they have, and be creative, knowing they have support. Promising safe school practices are emerging from districts, principals, teachers, students, universities, and community workers who are facing common challenges.

The big message is that brokering, partnerships and networks unlock a communal power. People in charge, from the provincial Minister to directors of education, school superintendents, and principals, have the capacity to remove the silos of isolated action and facilitate positive change. Harnessing and directing that collective power is the key. I've often used the expression, "Safety is everybody's responsibility." Part of the responsibility of leaders is to allow the people under their direction to reach out from a silo-driven corporate umbrella to share and experience the good work of others.

Suzanne: What promising practices have you supported in order to promote school safety?

Stu: There are many, but I will mention one that CSSN continues to champion. In its short five-year history, ESP in Toronto has developed into the largest student-driven, school-based safety initiative in Canada.

The concept was simple and began as a Toronto Police initiative, brokered by the CSSN to engage students in city schools to exercise ownership in contributing to the safety of their schools and communities. Under the tutelage of Toronto Police Inspector Jim Snee, and with the support of school staff and senior personnel from the Public, Catholic and French boards, a structure was created that facilitated kids taking action. Bell Canada provided financial support to showcase the students' good works at year-end, and the base was established. This showcase is now an annual event; this year, over a thousand students celebrated their achievements at the Winter Garden Theatre. The enthusiasm from the kids in the room was electric and truly underscored the power of collective action. ESP has today grown into a movement that has evolved from engaging a handful of voluntary participants to a fully board-mandated program in the city of Toronto.

Suzanne: What are some of the highlights or things you celebrate as you continue this work?

Stu: You know, I really do have one of the world's better jobs. I'm fortunate in that it's an everyday highlight to be surrounded by an outstanding staff of very accomplished people with a mandate to move an important cause forward. School boards and teacher federations have been generous in providing participants to CSSN's program advisory committees and this has ensured state-of-the-art programming for our conferences, resource developments, and events.

CSSN is currently looking forward to the completion, in early 2009, of a new teacher resource funded by Ontario's Office of the Attorney General dealing with the sexual exploitation of young women. The resource, entitled *Where's Your Line? Preventing Peer Sexual Victimization*, will be supported by a teacher guide and DVD. This resource will align with the current mandate of the Ministry of Education's 2008 Safe School Action Team and each young person that it helps will be worthy of a celebration.

More kids are getting involved as ESP expands to Collingwood this school year with a new CSSN pilot partnership with the OPP and the community's public and Catholic high schools. Our 11th annual conference at the International Plaza Hotel this past February sold out to an audience of over 700 delegates from across Canada. We expect to repeat our success this coming year on February 19, 2009 at the Toronto Congress Center. The same sell-out format held true last June with our annual golf tournament hosted by Martha's Garden and Summerfresh Salads and it was again a pleasure to witness the efforts of this year's CSSN dinner committee putting together our 12th annual "Unforgettable Dinner" at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel. It's a celebration each November that fills the Canadian Room with our corporate supporters, board partners and many others who come together to recognize educators and students for excellence in contributing to a safe school environment. There are so many highlights and so many people of good will!

Participation from all sectors is on the upswing and continues to grow. Perception becomes reality. Educators are empowered by the knowledge that, "We're reducing violence and promoting respect. We are making a difference in our schools." When this happens, others

will say, "We're going someplace. We'll join in." Solutions come from asking and connecting with other like-minded, like-willed people. Everyone has the opportunity to do something incrementally. Leaders who are secure in their own skins and who possess a willingness to enable their organizations to reach out and participate on a bigger playing field empower and mobilize others.

At another level, Education Minister Kathleen Wynne, supported by Parliamentary Assistant Liz Sandals, established the Safe School Action Team in Ontario. Initially focused on bully prevention and making safe school legislative changes to the Education Act, the Action Team is currently mandated to make recommendations dealing with sexual exploitation of youth, homophobia, and gender-based violence. These are sensitive subjects, but it is encouraging to see there is a political will to mobilize the expertise and energies of individuals and organizations willing to move toward positive change. Recently, First Student Canada (formerly Laidlaw), under the direction of its president Jim Switzer, partnered with CSSN to host a web-based Town Hall meeting bringing together bus drivers and educators to dialogue about safety issues of mutual interest. As a result of this leadership, participants were empowered to take part and experience an improved understanding of each other's problems and ways to more effectively work together. So much of the world of the school bus driver dovetails with that of the teacher.

Working together with the police and CSSN, and under the direction of Gerry Connelly and Kevin Cobus, the Toronto District School Board and Toronto Catholic District School Board mandated ESP, the Empowered Student Partnership, in all Toronto schools. This partnering example has energized scores of staff

in both boards to reach out beyond their individual work place to work with others at making their schools safer. Cathy Byrd, a child and youth worker at TCDSB's St. Mary's S.S., has galvanized the student population around the ESP concept and demonstrated the capacity of a Child and Youth Worker to reach out into the community and fulfill a leadership role in a school.

On another front, Professor Jennifer Laffier at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), Faculty of Education has established a ground breaking CSSN safe school training program for students. The goal of the teacher candidate training is to provide current safe school information and teaching strategies to UOIT Faculty of Education students entering Ontario schools. Pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in the training are provided with an understanding of student, parental, and administrative expectations when confronting conflict. With the support of the Dean of UOIT, Jennifer's personal energy and initiative made this happen.

Yet another example is Jason Colero of the Toronto Argonauts, the driving engine and creator behind the Argo "Huddle Up Against Bullying" school assembly program supported by CSSN. Huddle Up brings Argonaut players to schools to talk about their experiences and to provide advice on dealing with bullying issues. Over 50,000 students have been touched by this program in the past year. The Argonaut corporate philosophy, led by Michael Clemons, provided the creative space for Jason. The list goes on and the questions asked need only be: What can I do? What's possible? Who can help me? Excitement results when small successes build and grow into something bigger. If we stop worrying about the 'what if's' and just do it, the results are satisfying, empowering, and good for kids and communities.



Suzanne: What advice regarding school safety would you give to district and school administrators working in challenging communities? What are some preventative elements that should be in place in any school?

Stu: School administrators and particularly principals need to be perceived as being in charge of their schools. As in many professions, there has been, over the years, an incremental erosion of administrative authority that has, for many, created the impression of a rudderless ship. Administrators must effectively communicate that safety is the number one priority for the school system and further ensure that this commitment is backed up by resource allocations that support kids, teachers and support staff. School administrators should be encouraged to reach out into their communities and engage parents and community leaders to be part of a safe school movement. The development of outreach programs to parents and organizations in the communities with the goal of gaining trust and cooperation should be a positive focus.

Preventive elements should include ramped up in-service and professional development, and open communication between the school principal, staff and parents on issues of the day. Schools need to be tightly supervised by teachers and support staff working as a team with the school administration. Principals and vice principals who work alone without the cooperation of staff are climbing a very difficult hill. By the same token, teachers must receive strong support and backing when dealing with difficult situations.

Preventive elements should promote the teaching of values to children at the earliest levels with the objective of providing an understanding of the essential differences between right and wrong. Children usually

establish their value system by about age seven and, at the very least, schools can attempt to fill in that gap where children have not had the opportunity to learn appropriate values at home. It is highly unlikely that children with a positive value system would be inclined to carry a weapon to school and use it to solve a particular conflict.

Suzanne: What advice would you give to classroom teachers working in challenging situations? What is their role with regard to school safety?

Stu: Prepare, prepare, prepare, and get comfortable dealing with safe school issues. One of the primary roles of the teacher is to guide learning in a carefully sculpted, safe and caring environment. To do that, teachers need to have a comprehensive understanding of where they fit in the big picture. They need to be informed about safe school legislation, board policies, administrator roles and the professional constraints that impact their day-to-day work. They need to be fully prepared to deal with conflict, to have a plan B when conflict occurs, and to seek office support when handling student behavioural issues as a last resort.

It is also important that students see their teachers as skilled, trusted adults who have solutions. Teachers need to get to know their students on a personal level and, where possible, to be in a position to offer understanding and support. Trust and respect are essential to providing a strong student-teacher relationship that is fundamental to conflict resolution. The teacher's role is to contribute as a true member of a supervisory team that works together for support and strength. To back away from the team into isolation is a certain recipe for failure.

Suzanne: What are the next steps for CSSN?

Stu: The Canadian Safe Schools Network continues to be a work in progress. It is unique in Canada and has matured into a multifaceted organization where demands for its services continue to grow. CSSN does not receive government funding and has achieved financial independence and sustainability through the quality and variety of services it provides. I believe this to be a good thing as CSSN's independence has allowed it to maintain an arm's length, unencumbered relationship with its many partners.

Organizations and individuals contact our office on a continual basis with requests to partner, volunteer and collaborate. Sorting out the interests and increasing CSSN's organizational capacity are desirable problems and part of our challenge. Corporate sponsorship is expanding, and with that comes the exponential growth it brings to our network of support. It has been wonderful to experience the voluntary efforts each year of those who contribute to our annual golf tournament supported by Martha's Garden and Summerfresh Salads and CSSN's "Unforgettable Dinner" at Toronto's Fairmont Royal York Hotel. The future of CSSN is secure and its influence will be felt for years to come.

Suzanne: What impact has CSSN had on Ontario's schools?

Stu: CSSN's impact on Ontario schools is felt in a variety of ways. "Safe Schools is Everyone's Responsibility" is a sentence coined by CSSN years ago and it is now echoed everywhere. CSSN's influence can be seen ranging from contributing to changes to Ontario's Education Act, to the creation of safe school programs throughout the province that were spawned by delegate attendance at our many conferences and events. Thousands of people from all walks of life have attended these events. They have attended workshops, led workshops

and shared business cards with colleagues. Seeds have been planted, networks created and safety for kids has been improved in schools across the country.

Media contact has certainly magnified CSSN's impact and influence for change. When interviewed, I can comment without the worry of restrictive constraints. Interviews are invariably sensitive moments where I give a great deal of thought to the impact of my comments. There is no doubt that the media feeds into increasing the anxiety levels of the public, and it is with that in mind that I try to temper my comments and focus on the positive. On a personal note, it has been a privilege to have experienced the confidence of government and to have been selected to serve on Federal Justice Panels and to be a member of the Ontario Safe School Action Team. The work of the team will continue to contribute to the fabric of safety in

Ontario schools well into the future.

The impact that the Canadian Safe Schools Network has been able to achieve over the years is through its ability to broker and bring together large groups of people, all of whom have a share in creating safer schools and communities. There is an enthusiasm from all sectors that can't be denied. The power is there. It needs only to be tapped and channeled.

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Stu Auty is the founding President of the Canadian Safe Schools Network (CSSN), a multifaceted charitable organization with a mandate to reduce violence in schools and communities in Canada. He has been the recipient of many professional awards: the Ontario Public School Boards Association's "Outstanding Contributor of Education Award"; the Ontario Crime Stopper Board's "Safe School Award"; and the Ontario Principals' Council Award for "Outstanding Service" in the promotion of safe schools in Ontario. He currently serves as an appointee to the Ontario Ministry of Education's Safe School "Action Team". The action team examines policies and programs and makes recommendations to the Minister of Education for a safer school community.