

A School's Learning Journey

By Natosha Mastel and Terry Freeman

The Ministerial Order of May 2013 contains 10 "whereas" statements. These statements contain words like learner, competencies, inquiry, reflection, communicate, engagement and excellence in their learning journey. These words help form a vision of what the student of 2030 will look, act and think like. A big question arises, how do we get the students and their parents to that place?

River Heights School School, in Medicine Hat, AB, has a history of innovation, change, engagement and partnerships. What started as a magnet school in 1995 has evolved to a workplace of the Ministerial Order for students, parents, staff and the community. The 10th "whereas" contains a goal to "strive for engagement and personal excellence in their lifelong learning." Administrators and teachers at River Heights School are doing just that. It all started with the teachers examining where they are in the journey.

Due to the fact that River Heights School had a 20-year history of cross-curricular, thematic connections, the realities of the Ministerial Order of May 2013 did not appear daunting. The challenge for the staff was to align their work and vocabulary with the Order. Principal Natosha Mastel charged the school-based grade PLCs with a simple task: choose a project and cross reference the competencies inherent in the cross-curricular project. The first group to present was the kindergarten teachers.

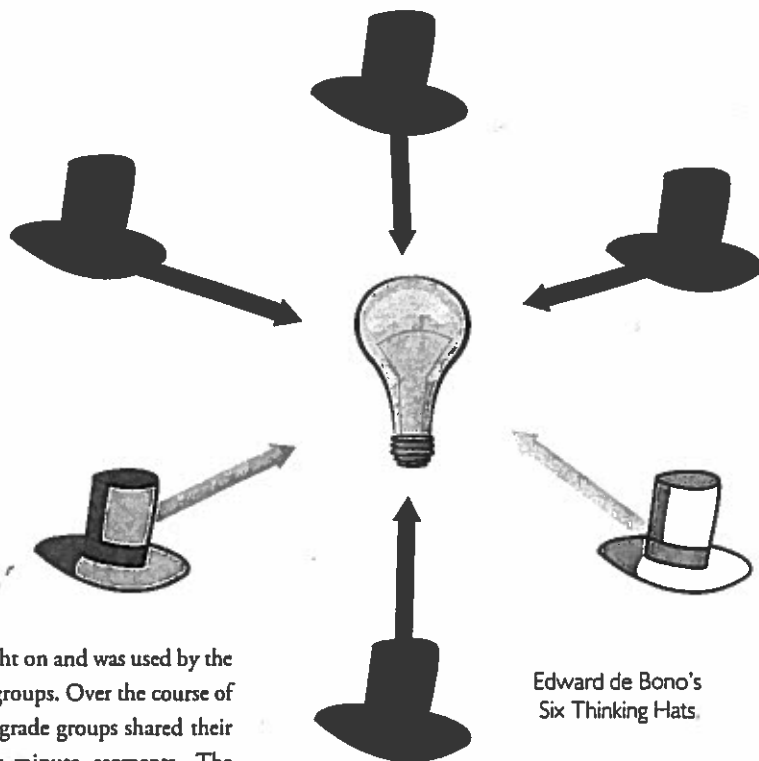
A poster was chosen as a visual to share the project. Although not mandated, the

poster format caught on and was used by the subsequent grade groups. Over the course of several weeks, the grade groups shared their projects in fifteen-minute segments. The beauty of this approach was that the competencies were kept up front and visited many times over the subsequent weeks.

Each January, the district hosts an Advance for the Administrators and the Board Trustees. The focus for the 2014 meetings was the Ministerial Order. For one activity the group explored and identified school actions that aligned with each of the three Es from the Ministerial Order (engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with entrepreneurial spirit). Ideas were then placed on three different charts. During this process it became evident that these Es were not mutually exclusive. Participants began placing the ideas between the Es. In reality, overlapping Venn Diagrams were evolving.

The next River Heights School staff meeting saw teachers repeat the process. However, this time, the graphic organizer used was a triple Venn Diagram. It soon became evident to the staff that many activities employed at River Heights School aligned perfectly with the three Es. One such example comes from the school's motto: Explore, Create, Reflect.

Reflection, one component of the competency of identifying and applying career and life skills, is used as part of the River Heights School' learning process and is an example of students demonstrating an entrepreneurial spirit. Students reflect on what they have done well within an



Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats.

activity or project, but also areas in which to improve. The desire and work ethic required to improve their learning takes perseverance as they strive for personal excellence.

To be truly reflective, one must be an engaged thinker and ethical citizen. One strategy for reflection would see students use Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats. The hats would focus the child's thinking and create opportunities for understanding compassion for all people, being able to ask for help and engage with other cultures, religions and languages. Students would do this after exploring multiple perspectives and working as a team member.

At the next scheduled school council meeting, the Grade 1 PLC shared their cross-curricular project competency poster. This sharing reaffirmed in the minds of the parent community that the goals of *Inspiring Education* and the Ministerial Order were well aligned with the current practice of the school. Knowing that not every parent attended council meetings, an attempt was made to reach out to the larger parent community. The hallway became festooned with competency posters grade level projects. These became magnets for discussion.

Recognition occurred that the current school newsletter did not reflect the learning that took place at River Heights School.

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The three Es became the format of the communication. Each month either of two approaches was used to share. A project could be featured and the relevant competencies were identified, or a focus on a particular competency could be highlighted and evidence of it within the school was then communicated.

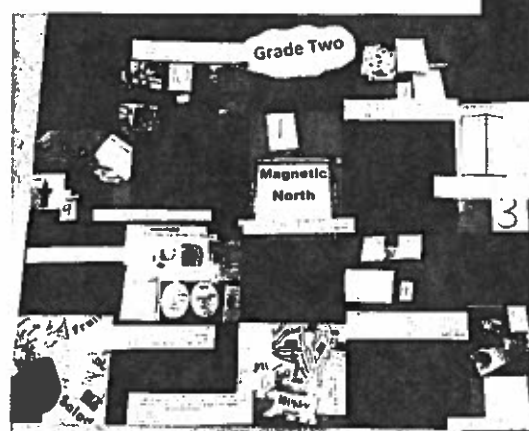
A Grade 2 project with iPads became a tool for sharing with the parent community. The newsletter contained images of the students engaged in the challenge. The newsletter shared that managing information and collaboration were just two of the competencies used in the project. At other times, the newsletter focused on a particular competency and images of it were evidenced in articles.

Knowing how to learn was the focus of the December newsletter. As one of the indicators, reflection was highlighted.

Being part of the mandate of the school, examples were shared.

As River Heights School moves forward, the school faces many challenges. One of those challenges is to keep the journey pertinent for students, parents and staff. The school's independence checklist needs to be aligned with the vocabulary of the Ministerial Order. Student learning portfolios are being constructed in order for students to demonstrate mastery of the competencies.

The annual Education Week is being planned around an activity for each of the competencies and the three Es. A staff reflection provided assurance as to where River Heights School is headed in regards to *Inspiring Education*, the Ministerial Order and the school's continuing learning journey. The future looks inspiring for River Heights School. ■



River Heights School's Grade 2 competency poster.

Natosha Mastel and Terry Freeman started their educational journey together in 1986, when Freeman was Mastel's Grade 5 teacher.

Freeman is the director of programs and instruction in Medicine Hat School District #76.

Mastel is the principal at River Heights School, a kindergarten to Grade 6 school, in Medicine Hat, AB.

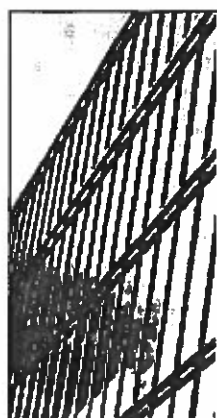
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