

# School Snapshot: Focus on Collaborative Work Culture

**T**horah Central Elementary School today has built itself a collaborative work culture, but it wasn't always so. A few years ago, as then-new teacher Marie Geleen remembers, the professional isolation was stifling:

When I arrived at the school, I soon found out that teachers believed in the closed door syndrome. I had no idea what was going on in other classrooms. There was little kid-talk in the staff room—mostly complaints. I felt as if I was working in a vacuum. Classroom management had never been a problem for me before, but these kids were the most obnoxious, poorly motivated kids I had ever had to deal with. I was never quite sure if the negative attitudes of the students were being fostered by the home-room teachers. That year I spent a lot of time upset, questioning my competence, questioning my instructional strategies, and looking for a different job.

Principal Don Real's assessment of the situation was that the school's isolation was keeping Thorah's 23 teachers from doing more than just a "good, steady job." Thorah, in rural Durham County, is a K-8 school northeast of Toronto, Ontario. Most of its 300 students are bused from across the sprawling county. A good hour's drive from the board office, the school's location didn't provide opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues at other schools and, for whatever reasons, they didn't work with one another very well either.

Don Real began his effort to change

the school with a personal decision: he would learn more about strategies to support three initiatives Thorah had already undertaken: the whole language approach, the full-time integration of exceptional students, and multigrade classrooms. In 1988 he invited two teachers—Gloria Snodden, a 4-6 multigrade teacher, and Marie Geleen—to go with him to a seven-day Summer Institute of the Learning Consortium, which focused on cooperative learning, peer coaching, and the management of change—including the development of collaborative work cultures.

That fall the three educators got to work. Real committed to team-teach a 7th grade mathematics class with Marie Geleen. Every six days, Real recalls, "we worked as a coaching pair. We planned the lesson together. We alternatively taught the lessons while the other person watched, and then we would process the lesson after it had been taught." Noticing how "genuinely enthused" their students were becoming, the two became convinced that collaboration was the key.

Snodden, who had been trying to implement some of the cooperative learning ideas on her own in her multigrade classroom, was becoming convinced about the same idea. "What

really changed me," she now recalls, "was the integration of the special education children into my classroom in 1987. Now there were other students and teachers in the classroom, and we had to learn to work together."

Snodden found the multigrade classroom an ideal place to use cooperative learning—children of all ages and abilities could be challenged to work according to their own level on the same themes. "The goal of multigrade classrooms is to be more like a family. There is less peer pressure...it's also a good place to integrate exceptional children."

Terry-Lynn Jago, a special education teacher who today team-teaches



The "closed door syndrome" has vanished at Marie Geleen's school, where a collaborative spirit now pervades teaching and learning.

with Snodden, agrees that cooperative learning builds self-esteem in children as well as adults. The power of being in a group, Jago says, has made all the difference for her kids. "Each child is part of a group—the group is their

home for half of each year." For an exceptional child, "if you don't belong to a group and you're in competition with everyone else, you don't build self-esteem, especially if your behavior really sticks out."

Real, Geleen, and Snodden visited other district schools that had participated in the Summer Institute and

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invited teachers from those schools to Thorah. Other teachers at Thorah began to show more interest in cooperative learning toward the end of 1988, so the Institute trainer gave an introductory session on cooperative learning to the whole staff.

At staff meetings, the principal reinforced the cooperative learning concept by organizing teachers into groups of four. Rather than present material in the usual manner, Real gave topics to the groups to discuss, and they used various cooperative learning techniques to report their conclusions. For example, one member of each group would be called on at random to report the

group's findings, a method that effectively raised involvement and accountability levels of all staff members.

Over the next three years, the principal and other staff members participated in other Summer Institutes, Cooperative Learning Institutes, and Learning Consortium training institutes. They worked at integrating cooperative learning into various curriculum areas—mathematics, history, and language arts. They have given many presentations on cooperative learning, integration of exceptional students, and the collaborative development of school plans.

In September 1991, Don Real was transferred to Cartwright Central Public School, and Cartwright's principal Roden Rutledge was transferred to Thorah. Thorah continues with its cooperative learning impetus, and now teams from each school, after attending a Summer Institute on creative conflict, are planning ways to link the two schools as they implement and integrate ideas on cooperative learning and creative conflict.

This year, an outside researcher interviewed teachers at Thorah to see how things are going there. The researcher found positive feelings of trust among staff members. Discipline problems are minimal, there's a high energy level, staff room conversations are focused more on kids, and staff meetings are run on a cooperative model.

Now, four years after joining Thorah, Geleen observes:

There is more smiling. There is a family atmosphere. I find it a very relaxing atmosphere to be in. I know I can make mistakes and say I tried this and I'm not happy with it. There is much more collegiality—more openness. There was little interaction before, but now there is lots of sharing. Staff members are

more enthusiastic about how kids learn. Students show more respect and understanding of each other. I have special education students who are able to teach a concept to the group. There are fewer classroom discipline problems.

Twenty-one of the twenty-three teachers that were at Thorah in 1988 are still there, yet so much is different. And although teachers appreciate the principal's active leadership, they don't see him as a visionary. They simply acknowledge that his enthusiasm sparked their own involvement. As Gloria Snodden explains:

Don is not charismatic really. He just had these expectations for the school. People really respected that. He was so excited about cooperative learning, I just got caught up in it.

And Real himself recalls:

Someone asked me for my implementation plan. Well, it really wasn't there, we just rolled with it....I sure wanted them to do it when I found it was successful....I believe they felt pressure, but in the initial stages there was not pressure. It was an invitation. It was the success we saw with the kids that really committed us.

The whole experience changed Don Real. He now finds himself "doing things now as a person that I wouldn't have done before. Like doing workshops. I hate speaking in front of people—it gives me a great deal of stress. But I'd volunteer to do those things now."

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—Michael G. Fullan

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