

Possibilities: Together Creating A Better Way

By Maria Sanchez-Keane
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“Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming after all, is a form of planning.”
- Gloria Steinem



Valley District School Board, and community agencies have gathered monthly to re-imagine how we work together. It has been an incredible opportunity to learn, grow, stretch, listen, be challenged and commit to creating better ways to serve our children and families.

Fashioning our preferred future: what have we learned along the way?

- Invite key stakeholders to the table: A year ago there were 5 representatives at the table, today we have a partnership table 35 strong and have another group of 230 who attended the *Possibilities Conference*; many, keen on becoming more involved.
- Hire a neutral facilitator and project manager: The fact that the ministries realized that it takes time and resources to collaborate has greatly enhanced our ability to move forward.
- Use change management principles: Many of us risk experiencing change fatigue. Across both sectors there have been many changes in the past few years. This initiative is about doing things differently. It has been important to use a change management lens in moving our work ahead. Our process is outlined below.

Create a powerful vision: This was one of the first tasks that we tended to. We asked ourselves: if we are going to commit to this work, what is it that we hope we will do? What will be different? What will it look like? What is our dream?

Develop a strong guiding coalition: This is on-going work. Tangible commitment is expressed in action. Being at meetings, following through on actions, engaging in the work. All partners must commit to both monthly meetings and monthly sub-committee meetings.

Teachers in many schools work with students in their classrooms who are struggling with mental health challenges, challenges which education alone cannot address.

Parents, overwhelmed by the complexity of service, are too exhausted to keep trying to find the “right service” for their child.

Across the region, community mental health workers are frustrated by a system in which many families come in-and-out of service like a rotating door.

When 230 participants attended the *Possibilities Conference* in January 2009, they all agreed on one thing, there has to be a better way! Educators from both the London District Catholic School Board (LDCSB) and Thames Valley District School Board

(TVDSB) as well as representatives from many of the children and youth mental health organizations in London/Middlesex, Elgin and Oxford and parent advocates gathered to talk, to dream possibilities and to begin to create shared meaning about how to serve children and youth impacted by mental health challenges and their families.

In February 2008, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Children and Youth Services created the *Student Support Leadership Initiative*. The provincial goals for this initiative are:

- Improved understanding of each cluster members’ services;
- Improved joint decision-making processes; and
- Improved access to existing services and supports for students and families.

We form Cluster #7 and since April 2008, representatives from the London District Catholic School Board, Thames

Share the vision, generate interest and champions: It was clear from the beginning that we need the voice of many to confirm our vision and to provide direction for our work. This was the purpose of the *Possibilities Working Conference*. This collective group determined top eight priorities for our work:

- School/community hub;
- Information and communication on services and resources;
- Protocols and streamlined access;
- Single point of coordinated access;
- Child Advocate Coordinator;
- Equity of services for county;
- Common language; and
- Cross ministry/systems issues.

Seek to understand: Our partnership table brings together experienced individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. We are learning to listen to differing views. At times, we have left frustrated and challenged but we commit to continuing to come back and continue to work toward understanding.

Develop guiding principles: As a way of building trust and understanding the context of our work, we have collectively developed our guiding principles which name the way we will work with one another.

Be flexible in our game plan: While we created a work plan and submitted to the ministry, there have been opportunities and changes within the initiative which have impacted our work such as city/county planning tables, new research and ripe opportunities. All of these inform and influence our planning. We have found the need and importance of not being rigid and ensuring we remain nimble enough to jump at opportunities presented.

Realize it gets hardest when ideas move to action: The hard work is not the visioning, the ideas sharing and generating. The difficult part is moving to action. The temptation to step back to research and move back to a safe place where we do not have to commit to change is a reality. Resistance is greatest before action. Change experts and our experience tells us this; we endeavour to move past it.

Generate quick wins! Those involved need to see movement forward and results. Loss of interest and momentum can occur if all the planning is for the long term. Knowing this, we have planned a follow-up to the January conference. In April 2009, we



An attendee packet from the Possibilities Conference.

hosted a cross-sectoral professional development workshop on Resiliency. This day served to build trust and further understanding (through a service fair), and continued to build common language and frameworks to work better together. A parent session was also hosted during the evening.

Change policy, protocols, processes to reflect our collective decisions: We know this will be part of the work which lies ahead for us. While only just beginning to touch on it, we hope this work will include creating simplified protocols and processes so that families are not overwhelmed by our systems.

Set people up for success: We are mindful that those who will take the first steps will need our support as well as appropriate and timely training to ensure that the new way of delivering our services to families occurs effectively.

Evaluation: What tangible changes will children/youth impacted by mental health challenges and their families experience because of our work? What difference will our efforts make? These critical questions must be a part of our efforts.

To allow for these dynamics to animate our work is to join in the dance. Collaboration takes time, energy, commitment and opportunities to build relationships and trust. Our focus for the next while includes:

- Increasing awareness of current services in schools and the community through an Information Technology platform.

- Education opportunities for front-line staff in schools and community agencies.
- Developing common language (we are exploring the Resiliency Framework as the common language framework).
- Building on our strengths and cross-ministry initiatives which are working.
- Sketching out a community/school as hub model for a rural setting.
- Agreeing on protocols of how we can best work together.

Likely the most important lesson learned to date is the importance of perseverance! We have no reason to be discouraged about our capacity to make a difference and every reason to hope. We've learned that the process is like a dance; two steps forward, one step backwards, a sideways step, a twirl, a dip, a twist! We learn as we go.

“To dance is to be outside yourself. Larger, more beautiful, more powerful.”
- Agnes deMille

Possibilities dance as we create a better way! ○

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