

St. Christopher Catholic Elementary School

Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board Windsor, Ontario

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About the school ...

St. Christopher is a JK to Grade 8 Catholic school, located in a middle-class community in central Windsor, a city in southwestern Ontario on the American border closely tied to the auto industry. The school has a population of about 550 students. A recent renovation, adding 13 classrooms, administrative offices, a staff room and a modern resource centre with a computer networked lab, has greatly improved St. Christopher's appearance and technological capacity, creating a bright, state-of-the-art learning environment.

The school motto at St. Christopher is "Soar Like an Eagle." All children are encouraged to try their best and to reach their full potential. Each year, the staff identify three school goals, two academic and one character goal, as part of the School Improvement Plan. The task then for the staff is to work diligently to meet these goals. As one teacher said, "There's no mistaking when you walk into our school what our goals are!" The school hallways are a celebration of student work, talents and interests, as is the school website, which features "hot news" student-made video clips. Parents, students and staff are proud of the school and are determined to support its continuing growth and achievement.

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- participate in dance, drama, choir, chess and all the major sports
- lead "Spirit Days," bringing students of all ages together to celebrate character and academic achievements
- create online videos, including award-winning "Pourquoi-Take-French" (posted on TeacherTube)

Parents ...

- support annual "Celebrity Read-a-Thon" (with police officers, elected officials, local hockey players, TV/radio celebrities and many others), the 100 Book Challenge and Parents as Partners in Reading programs
- work with a very active School Council to keep up to date about what is happening at the school
- are strong in their appreciation of the work the teachers and principals are doing, the support the board is offering and the commitment of the entire system to student growth and parent engagement

Ongoing improvement ...

Significant increases in EQAO results over the past three years have led to higher levels of student achievement in all six assessments. The highest result three years ago was 56 per cent of students meeting or exceeding the provincial standard in Grade 3 reading. In the 2007-08 EQAO assessments, between 71 and 74 per cent of students achieved at or above the provincial standard in five assessment areas. This improvement reflects the commitment to increasing student learning and achievement.

Success after struggle ...

The administrators and teachers at St. Christopher describe their Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership experience as the impetus for reflection, self-assessment and redirection. They openly acknowledge the early challenges associated with change. In the words of one teacher, "Collaboration is not easy. There's a lot of give and take. You have to work at it." In the initial stages, they found it difficult to articulate beliefs about teaching and learning, to build new relationships on a professional as well as personal level, and to support one another to overcome reluctance to change. Teachers had to work at relinquishing resources housed in their

individual classrooms in order to create a shared bookroom. But they persevered through the challenges, taking one step at a time.

Staff began by redefining the school's mission so that the prime focus was on student learning, success and achievement and evolving to a results-oriented school improvement plan. The motivation to continue came from the positive and measurable impact on student learning and achievement.

Among the components that were, and remain, crucial to student success are:

- **Goal setting:** This exercise unified the staff to focus on three SMART goals (two academic and one on character) and to work diligently to achieve them. Monthly tracking of each goal enables each staff member to be accountable for student success.
- **Collaboration time:** Daily shared prep time for grade-level partners is now part of the school's organization as is additional once-monthly collaboration time provided by the administration team. Staff members are encouraged to take risks, open their classroom doors and contribute to professional dialogue and learning.
- **Principal visibility:** Daily "drop-ins" to classrooms provide the principal with the opportunity to validate good practices, reflect on effective instructional strategies and observe improved student work – and to share with staff the evidence of what was working well.

Teaching, learning and leading ...

Literacy and numeracy blocks. At the board level, a number of specific strategies for improvement were identified, among them uninterrupted blocks of time for literacy and numeracy instruction. At St. Christopher, this was one of the most powerful board-identified strategies – 100 minutes for literacy and 60 minutes for numeracy. Professional learning sessions helped teachers organize and deliver balanced instruction in learning blocks to maximize student learning. Changes were made to the school day to minimize interruptions.

Formal and informal assessment. The school's SMART goals are based on assessment data that identify student needs. Then, student results are analyzed on a continuous basis to monitor success in achieving these goals. Teachers take responsibility for the data walls for Primary and Junior grades to measure student progress and then use the data to plan instruction.



School-wide emphasis on non-fiction. The emphasis on non-fiction reading and writing, a "number-one factor" associated with improved student achievement, is described in detail as a SMART goal in the school improvement plan. The school introduced this focus by purchasing professional resources for staff and engaging materials for students. Professional development sessions (including in-school sessions) have assisted teachers in sharing and honing the strategies and practices they will employ to provide the most effective instruction.

Teacher leaders. Teachers, support and system-level staff, and parents describe the principal and vice principal as strong, highly capable and enthusiastic leaders. They emphasize that the administrators provide clear direction, relevant data, support for focused learning and action, resources and encouragement, modelling what they expect and closely monitoring the implementation and impact of the school improvement plan. Within a culture that values collaboration and capacity building, many teacher leaders are coming forward to share their expertise with classroom partners and colleagues. As one teacher explained "Every teacher has something to offer."

"They focus on what it is that will make each child shine. There's a trust here. It's a family." *Parent*

"We work as a team – and that's how we get things done." *Parent*

"No one person can do it all. We need to work together." *Teacher*

"Data help us focus collectively on student needs." *Teacher*

Moving into the future

- ◆ explore teacher moderation in more detail across all grade levels
- ◆ learn how to use purposeful talk and PLCs more effectively in both literacy and numeracy and network with other teachers to support student learning
- ◆ build on the current level of parent engagement to make it more effective
- ◆ share ideas to continue to enhance writing instruction
- ◆ investigate additional opportunities for teacher collaboration, team teaching and visiting each other's classrooms