

# Cassandra Public School

## Toronto District School Board Toronto, Ontario

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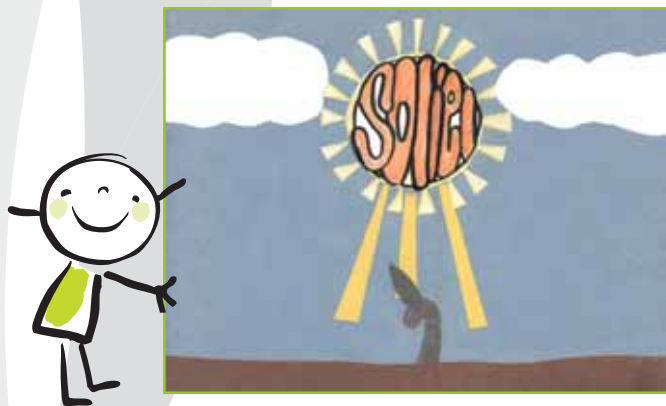
## Some Snapshots

### Students ...

- are involved in recycling, organic waste collection and educating others about their responsibility for the planet
- have "their say" in the school blog
- act as peer mediators and school ambassadors and are recognized for their "random acts of kindness"

### Parents ...

- support in-school presentations and performances and join classes on field trips
- run the Booster Reading program to support Grade 2 students and work directly with individual students and small groups in the classrooms
- help organize and take part in Literacy and Numeracy Evenings and Movie Nights



## About the school ...

Cassandra Public School is a Kindergarten to Grade 5 school in North York, a bustling, highly multicultural community in the north-central part of the city. Among a school population of 280 students, about 40 per cent speak a language other than English at home even though the many of these students (about 80 per cent) were born in Canada. Major language groups in the school include Chinese, Arabic, Farsi, Romanian and Urdu. The school includes an Extended French program.

Cassandra opened its doors in 1965 with the planting of a ginkgo tree, emblematic (and logo) for this "Platinum Eco School." "The ginkgo was once widely scattered over the globe," explains the school website. "[It] may be the oldest living seed plant." Staff, students and the larger Cassandra community have honoured the school's ties to the earth by contributing to environmental awareness and to the "greening" of the school yard, creating, among other eco-projects, an "Amphibian Oasis" and an "Outdoor Classroom" with shade trees and seating for students. As community friendly as it is environmentally friendly, the school nurtures relationships, deliberately building parental involvement and a school culture that fosters safety, respect and harmony in diversity.

## Ongoing improvement ...

Cassandra Public School has shown steady, year-over-year improvement in all Grade 3 EQAO assessment results since 2004-05. The improvement in results has been significant. Reading improved by 30 percentage

points to 79 per cent of students achieving at or above the provincial standard. Writing assessment results increased by 29 percentage points to 82 per cent. Mathematics assessment results show that 97 per cent of students achieved at or above the provincial standard. These results reflect the successful focus to raise student achievement while facing numerous challenges.

## Success after struggle ...

Several years ago, the school team identified three areas that needed attention and then invested a great deal of time and effort in addressing each. One area was parental involvement. Many parents wanted to participate in school activities but lacked both information and opportunity. With School Council support, staff members undertook a survey to find out more specifically what parents wanted to know (and do) and then found the funding to respond. They translated and sent key documents home and offered a seminar series "Parents as Partners" dealing with such topics as helping students with homework, navigating the school system, special education and EQAO testing. Outreach to parents has continued to evolve, and reciprocally, parental involvement has mushroomed, with parents not only helping with field trips and special events but also playing a pivotal role in the Booster Reading program, supporting the library and helping classes with "grade parents."

School improvement planning (SIP) was another area identified by the school team for collective action. As a school in a progressive family of schools, Cassandra had to make a conscientious effort to align its

SIP goals, including budget priorities for areas of greatest need, with those of the larger group. Parents, teachers and other support personnel (e.g., Family of Schools Literacy Coach, Instructional Leaders) became involved in the development, implementation and follow-through of the school plan. Teachers began to take a lead role, too, leading the various subcommittees and reporting back to parents and staff at regular SIP meetings.

Using school data, a final area identified for attention was student behaviour. Staff felt it was important to find ways to promote pro-social behaviour and to build character education into the culture of the school. Four innovations were introduced:

1. Monthly Student Recognition Assemblies (students use song or skits to demonstrate a TDSB “Trait of the Month”)
2. Recognition of Random Acts of Kindness (students “caught” in a random act of kindness are given a leaf stating their act – and a chance to “customize” the message before it is announced on the PA and then posted in the foyer)
3. Peer Mediators (Junior students are trained in peer mediation and then assigned to help solve minor conflicts in the school yard)
4. Student Ambassadors (students are assigned to help orient new students on the basis of first language and approximate age)

As parental involvement has increased, school improvement planning has become more precise and student behaviour has improved. The whole Cassandra community has benefited.

## Teaching, learning and leading ...

**Using Q4E time (Quest for Excellence).** Time set aside for professional dialogue is fondly referred to by Cassandra staff as “Q4E time.” In the past year, staff members have used Q4E time to participate in a teaching-learning critical pathway (TLCP). Every six weeks, all teaching staff including classroom teachers, resource teachers and specialist teachers are released to identify student areas of greatest need, to select assessment criteria and rubrics and to participate in moderated marking sessions to guide future planning and program delivery. Before teachers begin their meetings, they “unpack” (in divisions) EQAO data to determine the starting point. This year the focus for the TLCP has been higher-order questioning skills, making connections, non-fiction reading and writing and problem solving in math.



**Tracking student progress.** With the data available (diagnostic reading assessments, CASI, EQAO and report card data), staff identify “at-risk” students in Grades 2 through 5 and determine specific strategies to bring about positive growth and increased success. At regular staff meetings, progress is revisited and strategies shared among the staff.

**Working with children from challenging backgrounds.** Staff use a range of strategies to ensure success with children who are grappling with adjustment to a new school and a new society. Among these strategies are the following:

- **Build relationships** – Everyone needs to feel comfortable to take risks and to make the inevitable mistakes. Children need to trust their teachers and know that they care about them and the work that they do.
- **Have high expectations** – Keep the vision that all students can stretch themselves. When students know what is expected of them, they will rise to the challenge.
- **Establish routines** – Classroom routines are established to allow children to work independently while teachers work with individual students and small groups.
- **Model what good work is supposed to look like** – Teachers develop anchor charts and keep them visible so that students can refer to them as required.

“At this school it’s not ‘you don’t know’ ... it’s ‘how can I help you learn?’” *Parent*

“Learning is exciting for every child if you find out how to ignite their interest.” *Teacher*

“We all make a conscious effort at inclusion because we have students coming from so many different places.” *Principal*

## Moving into the future

- ◆ learn more about numeracy, in particular, problem-solving strategies and communicating understanding in written format
- ◆ learn more about environmental stewardship and how to integrate environmental education into all aspects of the curriculum
- ◆ help students better understand how to use learning strategies in both English and French to deepen understanding and develop thinking skills
- ◆ learn more about the inclusive classroom and how to help students who are struggling