

The Little School That Could

Provincial testing goaded this school to improve its students' academic achievement.

By Heather Solokoff

Allan Kelly, the principal of an elementary school located on a gritty urban strip in Toronto, was skeptical of Ontario's provincial testing program.

But when he found out that his school — Morse Street Elementary — was one of the 10 worst-performing institutions in Toronto's massive public school board, he did something about it.

Almost 70% of students in grades 3 and 6 were scoring well below their grade level. That was in 1999, Mr. Kelly's first year as principal. Four years later, Morse Street, a 125-year-old inner-city school serving immigrant and transient populations, has turned itself around.

More than 80% of grade 3 students passed the reading and writing components of the 2002 test, substantially higher than the 44% average across the Toronto School Board.

Grade 6 students at the school stood out in math, with over 65% meeting the expected standard. The failure rate has been slashed by two-thirds, and morale among teachers, parents and students is high.

Young families moving into condo buildings in newly-gentrified pockets in the Queen and Carlaw neighbourhood are choosing Morse Street over private schools.

"It was a huge wake-up call," said Mr. Kelly, who, at 39, is one of the board's youngest principals. "The test shoved it in everyone's faces. The message that should come out of this is that you don't have to be a wealthy school to do well."

Morse Street's success makes it a sort of Cinderella in a world where the odds are stacked against poor children succeeding in school. Some come to school with no breakfast or lunch; with no meal program at the school board, it is up to teachers to quietly supply sandwiches to hungry students.

Some students have a parent in jail or out on the street. The active parents' council raises funds for field trips and activity days, but Mr. Kelly can't rely on parents to come up with the money for new computers or library books as they would in wealthier neighbourhoods.

Yet six years into Ontario's provincial testing program, Morse Street is one of a small but steadily-growing number of schools using the process to improve.

In the case of Morse Street, the province's standardized testing program worked exactly as it should.

The bad results, made publicly-available on the school board's website, opened Morse Street up to scrutiny from parents and board administrators.

"It was a good way for us to sit down and say, "OK, we can get our test results from there to here," said Mr. Kelly, who was previously the principal of a school for aboriginal youth. "When people are part of that process, they take ownership and pride."

Teachers started staying after school to work with students. When more than half the staff left, most taking early retirement, Mr. Kelly hired energetic new teachers.

He handpicked Suresh Sharma, a veteran from a private Montessori school in Markham, and put her in charge of the grade 3 class. Ms. Sharma "team teaches" 37 students with the help of a bright, young first-year teacher, Moniza Razi.

Ms. Sharma says she adores her job, even though she admits it is the toughest one she has ever had. She recalls starting new teaching units on Fridays at her former private school. By Monday morning, the children, guided by doting parents, would have researched the topic and prepared themselves for the new unit. Not so at Morse Street.

Still, she marvels at how much her students, now capable of working out complex probability problems, have learned this year.

Ms. Sharma has built up trust with Morse Street parents, making sure to call home whenever a child has done something good. When she could not stay to work with her students after school because of the teachers' work-to-rule campaign, parents called her asking for additional homework so they could make sure their children did not fall behind.

Mr. Kelly and the teachers devised a plan to use the test results to focus daily lessons on students' weak spots, attacking problem areas with additional teaching and assignments.

"If there was a particular strand of math our students did not do well on, we focused on it," said Mr. Kelly. "We asked ourselves, "Do we need more worksheets on this? Do we need to get parents more involved?"

Teachers cracked down on absenteeism and tardiness. The new rigor means there is no time to watch the occasional movie during class or do the "fun stuff" kids love about school, Mr. Kelly admits, but he firmly believes students at Morse Street are getting a better education.

Despite Morse Street's success, Mr. Kelly is not completely sold on the province's testing program. It stings to know the government spends \$50-million a year on testing when funding for basics such as textbooks and librarians has been cut.

At the end of the school year, Mr. Kelly will lose his part-time vice-principal, which means more work for him and the office secretary.

"There must be a way to deliver this more cost-effectively," he says, suggesting the government could test students every two or three years so it could gauge trends instead of annual dips and spikes.

(Adapted with permission from the National Post, June 17, 2003)