

**OECD SCHOOLING FOR TOMORROW
PHASE III INTERIM REPORT (DRAFT)
MARCH 2006**

BACKGROUND

One effect of many years of educational reforms in Ontario has been to solidify attitudes of groups of stakeholders to various reform efforts and to make meaningful discussion among them more difficult. Most tended to adopt relatively hard positions about new policies and come to the table with preset positions unlikely to change as a result of direct debate. In the Phase I of the OECD project, Teaching as A Profession, Ontario formed an international study group made up of educators, bureaucrats, administrators, academics, lawyers, political advisors and union leaders from across Canada and the United States. This group helped it develop a series of Phase II workshops. These engaged an increasingly wide variety of about 200 participants in an attempt to use scenarios to open up freer discussion about the future of teachers and teaching in Ontario.

By the time we moved into Phase III, the Ontario political environment was starting to soften, which made it possible to dialogue about Ontario issues and further more, allowed the bringing together of a group of stakeholders with the Ministry to work on a variety of issues.

Feedback from workshop participants indicated that the use of futures scenarios was indeed an effective way to open up people's thinking and to challenge entrenched biases and viewpoints. Employing the scenarios gave participants the opportunity to discuss potentially contentious education issues in an open, non-partisan environment. Despite these successes there was the sense that they did not capture the context and situation-dependent arena in which policy is designed, decided upon and delivered. This meant that their role as a tool in actual policy development might be somewhat limited.

Ontario hosted an OECD Conference in June of 2004 in which it shared its results and engaged in international dialogue on the future of Teaching as a Profession. It also made a commitment to the next phase of the OECD program - to expand its exploration of the use of scenarios in policy development. Phase III of the project has begun to do this.

AIMS

The Teaching as a Profession project attempts to respond to a key question facing education today – “how to overcome the preoccupation with the short term and think strategically?” – by compiling and developing analyses, models and tools to support long term thinking, and increase the sustainability of a given policy. It is hoped that the development, use, and evaluation of futures thinking will contribute to the international knowledge base on fostering dialogue, building capacity and leadership, as well as promote strategic thinking for policy development, to help meet current and anticipated challenges within the educational sector of Ontario and other participating jurisdictions. Phase III of the Ontario initiative aims to test the impact of scenario thinking on live policy issues.

Phase III of the Teaching as a Profession initiative has two methodological approaches. The first considered future scenarios in conjunction with case studies of recent policy initiatives in other Canadian provinces. The second juxtaposed future scenarios with a live policy issue in Ontario.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/ACTIVITIES FOR JANUS SCENARIO APPROACH

This methodology has been dubbed the “Janus Scenario Approach” Like its namesake mythological Roman god of beginnings, gates and doorways, the Janus approach has two faces, and looked simultaneously in opposite directions: to the past and the future, by combining the use of futures scenarios with comprehensive case studies of authentic policy decisions of the recent past in other Canadian provinces.

The use of the futures scenarios was integrated with an overview and analysis of the development and implementation of a specific, recent policy initiative. Case studies were developed on topical policy issues in different Canadian jurisdictions to provide workshop participants with a better sense of the complex, imperfect and sometimes disordered political and socio-economic context in which actual policy development emerges, compared to which traditional scenario workshops may be wanting. Policy questions external to, but still timely and relevant to Ontario, were selected to aid participants in leaving behind any perceived roles or constraints inherent to the domestic political/policy environment, which may impede a critical and multi-faceted policy analysis. The topics of the case studies selected included:

Raising the Mandatory School Attendance Age to 18 (New Brunswick)
Provincial Student Assessment Program (British Columbia)
Open School Catchment Boundaries (British Columbia)

The case studies provided details on the key driving factors that attracted political attention to the policy issue, positions of key stakeholders, media coverage and public opinion, consultation and implementation strategies, alternatives considered, as well as a retrospective look at any resulting successes and shortcomings.

Modified pilot workshops were designed to submit the case studies to discussion using futures scenarios as a vehicle, in the spring of 2005. An April 2005 pilot workshop used Study Group members as participants and considered the New Brunswick Mandatory School Attendance policy that raised the school leaving age from 16 to 18. Participants were asked to examine this policy in the context of each of the five futures scenarios using the following questions: “Would this policy make sense in this scenario?” “How would you change it?” “How would the policy affect teachers and teaching in this scenario?” and “What other policies would you consider or introduce in this scenario?”

Based on the feedback from study group members, the pilot was refined to include more than one case study, namely the addition of the Open School Catchment Boundaries in British Columbia, for a June workshop. The June session included a wide range of participants, including prominent members of the academe, teachers’ organizations, media organizations and national education associations.

Results of the Janus scenario approach were promising. Discussions included detailed and lively elaborations of the case study, which explored the relevant policy's place in the social, economic and political context of the time. Feedback from the pilot workshops indicated that utilizing case studies combined with futures scenarios was extremely useful and stimulating in terms of generating discussion and adding rigour to examining the robustness of policy ideas. Case studies were an "anchor, the grounding, needed before dealing with the abstractions of the scenarios"; (the mainly non-government sector) participants claimed to have a better appreciation of the complexity and nuances of the policy-making process; "the cases resulted in a more far-reaching and substantive discussion than the use of scenarios alone could have possibly provided"; "scenario/case work is an objective exercise, which stimulated dialogue that was not framed by ideology. . . provides a useful means to speak truth to power".

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/ACTIVITIES FOR LEADERSHIP WORKSHOPS

A change in government in Ontario in 2003 brought with it a renewed interest in improving leadership capacity to support teachers in order to improve student outcomes and has also brought about a better climate overall. The new government has made some effort to increase the leadership capacity of all those involved in the system including teachers, principals, school superintendents and directors of education. How to assess and increase leadership capacity in education is a live policy issue in Ontario.

In December 2005 a new opportunity required a new approach to scenario workshop design. We applied scenario thinking to the issue of leadership capacity by engaging with members of a "leadership think tank" which was developing a self-review tool to assess the leadership capacity in school boards. The think tank members include school principals, supervisory officers (SOs), and directors of education.

The workshop began with vignettes about a day in the life of school principals, school supervisory officers and directors of education. The entire group spent some time clarifying the vignettes and their use as a starting point for group exploration of these leadership roles. The five scenarios were then introduced and time was allowed for clarifying their major thrusts. Participants filled out forms in which they voted on the most likely and the most preferred scenario.

Three groups were formed consisting of ministry officials, members of the study group, and members of the think tank (including principals, directors of education and supervisory officers). Each group considered one leadership role and examined it through the lens of all five futures scenarios. They were asked to consider the following questions while examining the roles in each future scenario:

What would this role look like in each scenario?

Who will lead and what will they lead in each scenario?

What are some critical factors in answering the first two questions?

Which are specific to each scenario?

Which are relevant in all scenarios?

Much of the day was spent on completing this task and preparing a presentation of their results. Immediately before the presentations a second vote was taken on preference and likelihood.

The group discussing the role of principals stressed the ethical, moral and social standards for which principals must maintain in all the futures. Principals would have to focus on what needed to be taken care of, recognize the collective needs and share responsibility with the community. This would allow for the delegation of tasks and provide the time needed to focus on the major priorities of the role.

Discussions about the supervisory officer suggested that the SO was critical to ensuring equity and access for students, regardless of the circumstances. In some scenarios more managerial/business skills would be needed along with the capacity to communicate and facilitated effectively. One participant described the role as requiring equal parts of craftsmanship, flexibility, consciousness, efficacy and interdependence.

The group examining the role of director of education recognized the need for both managerial and leadership skills in developing a learning environment while serving the changing needs of the community. The scenarios stressed the importance of adaptability as circumstances change and a passionate belief in learning, for students, staff, and trustees.

Members of the think tank changed their vote in most cases. The general discussion that followed this second vote was particularly interesting. Members of the think tank suggested that in considering leadership development they began to recognize that a broader focus beyond the three roles was probably necessary. Secondly they recognized that the distinct roles within the education system might disappear in some of these scenarios, although the need for effective leadership might increase. It became apparent that leadership would not be role specific, that it would be acquired through exercising the qualities of leadership, not from the power of position. It would need to be more contextual and would require the building of alliances.

A more fundamental approach would not assume the current education structure. It might help policy makers to develop a system that enables stronger leadership, allows innovation, and encourages greater collaboration. Examples of such fundamental questions include: “What does the student need?” “What kind of system would be built from this answer?” “What aspects of leadership are required, and what configuration of director, SO and principal is necessary to meet these needs?”

Many participants commented that the task which restricted them to an examination of these distinct roles felt confining, and might have kept groups from imagining different ways in which education delivery could be organized. Future workshops might want to ask broader and more fundamental questions such as:

How do we provide education? Is a publicly funded education system the only desirable option? What would leadership look like in these scenarios? What would an education system/structure look like in these scenarios?

How does learning occur in each scenario? How is knowledge transferred? What if it doesn't occur? What structure must be created anew for it to foster learning?

In spite of the narrowness of the questions posed at the workshop, all groups recognized the importance of leadership in each of the roles described, even when the scenario blurred the usefulness of the role. Each role, in each situation, seemed to require someone who worked for access to education and equity in education that was based on a service model and had some standards of accountability.

DEVELOPMENTS

There have been a number of changes over the course of Phase III. The political landscape has changed and this has allowed the design of the workshops to change. The workshop format has evolved from one that combined futures scenarios with case studies to one that combined scenarios with a live policy issue. There has been a change in how participants were selected. For the live issue workshop, participants included some of the individuals involved in the development of the actual policy. Previously, there had not been a specific link between content and participants. To evaluate the impact of the workshop involving a live issue, we conducted interviews with members of the think tank to examine whether the workshop had changed their views and/or their practice. There had not been a similar evaluation of previous workshops.

A follow up workshop is being planned for spring/summer 2006. The topic is still under development but the intent is to have a broader examination of leadership that is not tied to a specific strategy.

RESULTS

Analysis of the activities to date of Phase III lead to the following observations:

- The use of scenario thinking to open up discussion has been clearly demonstrated. The linking of past and future through the combination of a case study (whether a live issue or a completed policy) and futures scenarios has resulted in richer discussion than the use of scenarios alone.
- It appears there is not a link between the abstract discussion of a futures workshop and a concrete strategy such as the specific instrument that the think tank is developing. One did not impact the other.
- A workshop with an open design that does not limit discussion to a narrow topic, such as a particular role, allows some fundamental questions to surface and be explored.

- Members of the think tank who participated in the workshop have expressed interest in expanding their mandate beyond the development of a specific instrument.
- The effect of the workshop on policy is mixed, depending on the viewpoint of the participant. Participants who are involved in thinking about leadership at a high level, either as researchers or practitioners, did not find their views changed. On the other hand, participants at the mid-level, either principals or supervisory officers, reported the workshop did have an impact on their thinking and practice.

In conclusion, it appears that scenarios thinking combined with the context of a policy issue has promise as a mechanism for supporting change in the system.