



Student Independence - Planning with the End in Mind

By Brendan Byrne Browne, PhD

As educational leaders tasked with preparing our students for their best possible future, we are charged with considering what is possible, challenging the status quo and redefining what student success means. Education is a moral practice because it involves intentionally influencing the lives of people (Starratt, 2004).

As we wrestle with big decisions about student support and doing more with less, it is imperative that we do so from ethically defensible positions, grounded in students' best interests, focused on fostering the greatest degree of independence possible. Consider our obligations to promote, support and foster human dignity, we are faced with challenging existing norms around student support, success, independence and pathways.

A recent article in the Toronto Star entitled "Ontario Parents Worry About Special Education Support" (Gordon & Rushowdy, 2016) presented as an accepted norm that the academic and social success of students with special needs is directly connected to receiving one-to-one adult support by an educational assistant or paraprofessional. A parent of a 19-year-old student highlighted this by saying, "Is someone going to remind him to eat his lunch?"

As educational leaders, our concern should not only be about his immediate need for lunch while he's a student in our Ontario schools, but also about his post-secondary opportunities. As we consider the dignity of each student in our care, we must plan with the end in mind.

Shifting Norms and Mindsets

Educational leaders are faced with difficult choices: how to spend limited funds and justify our decisions? Conventional wisdom that increasing student support equates to better outcomes for students is not only fiscally imprudent, but increasingly less defensible when we consider future pathways for students.

Shifting long existing social norms and established mindsets is no easy task. However, systemic "ideals" can support such seismic shifts.

As we re-imagine student support connected to independence, we might consider a systemic ideal as being one where every teacher's reaction to any/all students is to say: "I've got this." As we consider ideals as educational realities, we need not measure our ideals by whether or not we achieve them but by whether or not they point us in educationally defensible directions.

So how do we do this within our schools and throughout our systems? As educational leaders, we have to artfully negotiate educational ideals and school conventions. Considering futures for students who are as independent as possible requires a shift in the consideration of long-held norms.



Five Foundational Assumptions

For an approach to take hold in schools, it needs to connect with our deeply held educational intuitions, provide an intellectually defensible position, and lead to creative and ethical practices (Novak, Armstrong, & Browne, 2013). Planning with the end in mind requires that we consider where we want our students to be by the time they leave our schools and embark on post-secondary life. Planning with the end in mind is the responsibility of the entire system as conversations about pathways and independence begin with kindergarten registration and continue throughout a student's educational career.

A systemic shift from a focus on student support to a focus on independence involves shared assumptions. The educational perspective of a school board committed to student independence is centred on the following five *Foundational Assumptions*:

- All students can learn
- Teachers have the most influence over student learning
- We can all be more than what we currently are
- We require support and professional development to be so
- We accomplish this best in partnership with parents

Assumptions without further explanation risk being perceived as educationally romantic rhetoric. Since education can be riddled with slogans and catch phrases, it is important to explore more deeply these assumptions as we plan with the end in mind.

The **first assumption** is a simple idea that has radical implications. Every student, regardless of the complexity of their needs or the vastness of their gifts, can learn. From a student learning to lift his head or feed independently to a student contemplating string theory and everyone in between. Embracing this assumption recognizes the responsibility we have as educators.

The **second assumption** acknowledges the primacy of the teacher as being the biggest influence over student success. There is no substitute for a trained, qualified teacher's direct interaction with students. Teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement, with principals being second (Leithwood & Janzi, 2008). Teacher leadership and self-efficacy directly relates to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2010; Sharratt & Sharratt, 2006).

The **third assumption** is a liberating notion that frees us from the expectation of expertise. We recognize and embrace that we are not experts, but instead are life long learners. We don't have to know everything, but we can commit to ongoing learning while embracing a growth mindset.

The **fourth assumption** recognizes grade partners, school leaders, resource teachers and board personnel as key to job-embedded learning. If the teacher is primary to student success, the system acknowledges and supports through job-embedded learning and opportunities to grow professionally.

The **fifth assumption** celebrates partnership and relationships with the students' first and primary teachers the parents.

These foundational assumptions provide a unifying educational ideal for ethically defensible decision making about

professional development, the use of system resources and staff deployment focused on student independence.

A Look at Research

In order to build Independence, research suggests having an intentional plan for fading support over time. Assigning an adult as the primary support without an independence plan leads to reliance on a type of support that simply will not exist in homes or communities when students leave school (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Giangreco et al, 2009; 2005). Support that encourages independence and interdependence best prepares our students by providing access to greater opportunities whether in an independent living situation, a job or supported living.

In 2005, Dr. Deborah Ellison from the Child and Parent Resource Institute (CPRI) in London, Ontario, conducted a study of adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). She asked, how they would define success for themselves? The three most prevalent answers were: having friends, working part time and living independently. Dr. Ellison found that despite these relatively modest goals, 82 per cent of those studied were still living at home with their parents with limited options for residential homes and skills for independent living.

The unintended consequences of not having a focused plan for building student independence and/or over-supporting students with special needs with adult support can include separation from classmates, unnecessary dependence on adults, interference with peer interactions, feelings of stigmatization, limited access to competent instruction, interference with teacher engagement, loss of personal control, and provocation of behaviour problems (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Giangreco et al, 2005). Further impacts can include interference with creativity and with teacher contact and instruction (Causton-Haris & Burdick, 2008).

While the accepted social norm – as perpetuated by the Toronto Star article cited earlier – would appear to be that more support equals better outcomes for students with special needs, and that there is a moral imperative to allocate increased funds to provide this level of support, research suggests otherwise.



Independence Rubric and Structures

We cannot endorse a common philosophy if we are not going to restructure our existing practices in support accordingly. In the Halton Catholic District School Board, this approach to student independence continues to evolve as we communicate our shared vision through the foundational assumptions, supported by research, which informs a systemic focus and resource allocation.

The development of an independence rubric and an allocation tool provides the structure for practices that support what we profess. The rubric, and the processes involved, focus conversations between educators and parents on support and a pathway toward independence. Independence is considered through medical/health needs, safety, adaptive functioning, communication, social/emotional, academic and community/leisure/work. Data generated for individuals is collected and analyzed longitudinally with an eye toward moving students to the greatest level of independence possible. The data is also considered from a system perspective as it generates an allocation rate for schools and the system.

The conversations that the independence rubric generates have become focused on the on-going moral imperative of student independence, rather than the old norm of student support. We share our collective beliefs, grounded in the foundational assumptions, supported by research, and perpetuated by the structures, practices, and processes created.

Planning with the End in Mind

As educational leaders, we are not to be charismatic defenders of the status quo but rather constant and persistent advocates for shifting systemic mindsets. Our role is to constantly re-evaluate our practices to ensure they not only reflect our shared beliefs, but manifest in tangible and practical ways.

Many students are with us from the ages of four to twenty-one. As students transition into kindergarten, the conversations about ideal outcomes beyond school begin. Our role as Catholic educators is to promote the dignity of all students by creating the conditions for success throughout their lives. Planning with the end in mind acknowledges the moral imperative of our work to create the conditions for students to realize their greatest level of independence throughout school and beyond.

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