

# From Compartmentalization to Cooperation One District's Story

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**The Durham District was the recipient of a prestigious international award for excellence in education.**

The cooperative learning journey of the Durham District School Board began in the 1980s when a comparative study of eight school boards in Southern Ontario revealed that the Durham District took last place in the categories of expenditures per student, staff development, in-service training and evaluation by teachers and principals. Ten years later, in 1996, the Durham District was the recipient of a prestigious international award for excellence in education.

Two forces accounted for this incredible transformation. One was the establishment of a Staff Development Department under the direction of Norm Green with a focus on instructional excellence. The other reason was Durham's association with Dr. Michael Fullan and the Learning Consortium, a collection of four school districts with the Faculty of Education of the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This university-school district partnership focused on staff training and chose as its first innovation the implementation of cooperative learning.

In 1988 the first institute in cooperative learning was held at Scarborough College in Toronto. Representatives from each of the six partners sent teachers to an eight-day training session. This small beginning was the stimulus for making the major shift in the way the Durham District did business. Those teachers who were trained went back to their classrooms and resource positions to work on perfecting their cooperative learning strategies.

**One of the experts who continues to contribute to our on-going success during**

In order to support the cooperative learning initiative, additional training was offered in sessions ranging from short after school training to four day intensive training. These training sessions were offered only to school teams consisting of teachers and an administrator. To provide additional expertise for these cooperative learning practitioners, teams of teachers were sent for training. One of the experts who continues to contribute to our on-going success during the past ten years is Dr.

**the past ten years is Dr. Spencer Kagan.**

Spencer Kagan. Not only do our teachers visit and train in California and Florida at Kagan summer institutes, but they also have the opportunity to meet and learn from Dr. Kagan as he visits our schools and by attending his sessions each May at the Great Lakes Association For Cooperation In Education (G.L.A.C.I.E.). Dr. Kagan's particular interest in spreading the good news of cooperative learning in Canada has been credited in sustaining Durham's momentum in cooperative learning.

**Kagan structures are an integral part of everyday instruction.**

As we travel the halls of our schools it is common to come upon classes from elementary to high school where Kagan structures are an integral part of everyday instruction. Although everyone has favourites, Timed Pair Share, Pairs Check, Inside/Outside Circle, Find Someone Who seem to predominate.

Administrators are modelling cooperative structures such as Corners, Line-Ups and Spend-A-Buck in faculty meetings.

The Durham District Staff Development Department offers four-day trainings in Kagan structures as well as after school introductory and refresher courses. There are also professional development sessions provided for student leaders to use Kagan structures in student council and committee work. District sessions of our School Community Councils also use Kagan structures such as Rotating Review and Simultaneous RoundTable for input on board policy issues.

To date, over three thousand educators in Durham have been trained in various facets of cooperative learning. The success of cooperative learning is evident not only in the classroom but at all levels in our organization, including faculty meetings, senior administrative meetings, parent councils, school committees and student leadership.

**Comparative data reports an increase in students' self concept, social/interpersonal skills, motivation to learn, academic**

The Durham District has compiled comparative data over seven years through longitudinal student attitude surveys. Findings indicated that each year students have had greater opportunities to work in cooperative groups using language skills to effectively to communicate. They value the views and opinions of others, and find the school a safe place to be. These findings that relate specifically to research of the benefits of cooperative training are also reflected in the responses from a 1500 teacher survey. This reports an increase in students' self concept, social/interpersonal skills, motivation to learn, academic achievement, and interest in school.

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Our journey has been very aptly summed up by Pauline Laing, our past director by her comments in 1992.....

**Since the inception of cooperative learning, we have extended our instructional repertoire to other strategies. However, cooperative learning remains the foundation in our quest for instructional excellence.**

"Lets begin with what we have been doing about the quality of the teaching-learning process. A great deal. The cornerstone of our work over the past three years has been in Cooperative Learning. The choice is no accident for a system that espouses self-confidence, preparation for societal responsibility and respect for others as key to its vision. We know that our students, like us, will spend their lives learning in and contributing to groups, and our choice has been to help them become consciously competent rather than accidentally adequate. We have a significant reservoir of expertise now, but I suspect we are still some distance from making this strategy an easy part of every teacher's repertoire. It is worth our persevering, against whatever complaints of overkill we may hear, because things worth doing are worth doing for long term good, not for the dubious glory of the bandwagon. Everything we read says that the toughest moment is when the glow of novelty wears off and people must perfect and use what they've learned. I trust us to face the tough stages."

Since the inception of cooperative learning, we have extended our instructional repertoire to other strategies. However, cooperative learning remains the foundation in our quest for instructional excellence.

**Chris Ward**

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