

Change Required

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Chris Smeaton, Superintendent for Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and was published on January 9, 2019. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

I've never been one for New Year's resolutions. They typically require far too much change and, as we know, change is very hard. I'm a little friendlier with "fresh starts" since they can occur at any time throughout the year. But I think all of us, whether in education or in general life, should be looking at slow and steady improvement. Massive change rarely happens overnight and without many casualties. In reality, massive change tends to occur when little steps are taken and repeated until they become the norm.

Before I wrote this article, I took some time to review my superintendent colleagues' musings over the past year. Virtually all of these articles spoke about change; things being initiated, practices being tweaked or improvements being made. Interesting when we know how difficult change is to accomplish. Douglas Reeves explains that, "Change of any sort is difficult and painful. Change represents a loss - a loss of prior practices and a loss of an established comfort zone."

So what is the alternative? Do we really want to just maintain the *status quo*? Most people believe in change as long as it doesn't impact them. There tends to be a fair amount of finger pointing when the topic of change comes up in any organization. Statements like, "They must be talking about him," or "That never happened in the old days when she wasn't here," might be heard. The ever-increasing speed of change only seems to add to our resistance.

And what about leaders? They have seldom been hired to maintain the *status quo*. They are generally asked to build a better future, increase profits or get better results, all of which require improvements - and that means change. Being the best organization requires constant incremental shifts in policy, procedures and practice. That is part of the job description of any leader.

Change, whether from an organizational point of view or a personal perspective, begins with some uneasiness. Though no one likes to be uncomfortable, most of us know that being stuck in the same old routine is not overly healthy either. Improvement needs to come from honest reflection of one's work and achievement of one's goals. That in itself can be difficult, but it is a necessary step to begin the change process. Contextual data is far more important here than any individual's opinion or judgment.

In the coming year, Holy Spirit will begin working on our next 3-Year Education Plan. Through a review of Alberta Education's Accountability Pillar surveys and our annual ThoughtExchange data, trustees will begin to set the direction for the next three years and administrators will wrestle with how best to build on current successes and shift priorities to continually improve. We don't want to lose the good work we've achieved through our focus on faith, literacy and numeracy or our commitment to First Nations, Metis and Inuit learning, but our priorities and efforts will need to be reevaluated and challenged to ultimately become better.

That is the essence of change, to become better! School systems across the province have always been charged with that goal. We can't do what we've always done and expect that the students in our schools will be better served or organizations will suddenly improve. Change is hard work; mostly because it is unpopular and creates uncertainty. Yet we can't just wish for a better anything without making the necessary changes. Call it a New Year's resolution, or a fresh start or simply building on your own successes, but engage in change this coming year to become the best version of yourself! As eloquently stated by Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."