



The Learning Clinic

Education & Career Development Agency

An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.

Anatole France

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

Oscar Wilde

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

William Butler Yeats

Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.

B. F. Skinner

Education... has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.

G. M. Trevelyan

Much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants.

John W. Gardner

Why should society feel responsible only for the education of children, and not for the education of all adults of every age?

Erich Fromm

To be able to be caught up into the world of thought - that is being educated.

Edith Hamilton



Finding The "Blue Oceans" In The Education Sector

REFLECTIONS by...

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Blue Ocean Strategy is a book that was written by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, two distinguished professors of strategy and management with INSEAD, one of the world's leading and largest business graduate schools. INSEAD was founded in 1957 in France and with the opening of its North American office in New York City in 2007 now has branches on three continents.

The book was published in 2005 by the Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation which is located in the United States. It is available at most reputable book stores and can be ordered online through Chapters. A dedicated web site has been created at www.blueoceanstrategy.com and there are many videos on this topic that can be found on You Tube.

While the book offers an approach to the marketplace that seems at first glance to appeal mainly to the business community, there is tremendous relevance when you consider how the core principles might apply to the education sector. *Blue Ocean Strategy* is a book I would highly recommend for every trustee, director and administrator involved in any way with the public school system in Ontario.

The Province of Ontario currently consists of four distinct school systems competing head-to-head for competitive advantage of market-share of a shrinking pool of students. We find ourselves in the early stages of the 2nd decade of the 21st century immersed in a bloody "red ocean" which is forcing all school boards to find ways of reducing costs in order to deal with a serious state of declining enrolment that is resulting in a loss of revenue from provincial grants. Each of the four public school systems is engaged in a struggle for differentiation to maintain market share while being subjected to a Ministry that dictates the "rules of play".

Kim and Mauborgne argue that the leading corporations of tomorrow will succeed "not by battling competitors, but by creating 'blue oceans' of uncontested market space ripe for growth." The authors provide a systematic approach to making the competition irrelevant by expanding the existing industry boundaries so that you are no longer competing with other companies, but instead you are changing the rules of the game. Since every school board in Ontario is a "corporate entity" with policy decisions driven by a relatively small group of elected trustees, it would appear that the

Blue Ocean Strategy might be something that could very well be adopted by progressive minded leaders of these “public school” corporations.

Right now school boards direct a tremendous amount of money towards annual advertising campaigns in an attempt to convince parents of the benefits of enrolling their children in their respective systems. Every year we are bombarded with countless promotions and public relations material filled with messages that school boards think parents want to hear in order to help them make their choices.

Blue Ocean Strategy suggests that instead of focusing on “beating the competition” you “focus on making the competition irrelevant by creating a leap in value for parents and students, thereby opening up new market space where there is virtually no competition. The authors suggest that to “break out of red oceans, companies must break out of the accepted boundaries that define how they compete.” With respect to the education of elementary and secondary school students in the Province of Ontario, all school boards have similar services in different forms but offer “the same functionality or core utility that end up being “substitutes” for one another. *Blue Ocean Strategy* is about offering “alternative” services that have “different functions and forms but the same purpose.” That is why I am suggesting that *Blue Ocean Strategy* principles lend themselves well to the education sector.

Kim and Mauborgne point out that “untapped value is often hidden in complementary products and services. The key is to define the total solution buyers seek when they choose a product or service. A simple way to do so is to think about what happens before and after your product is used.” The authors cite the example of a movie theatre offering a babysitting service. This would attract many potential customers who find that the cost and bother of babysitting young children is too much of a deterrent to even consider going out to the theatre. By providing a free or low-cost babysitting service on site, a movie theatre may attract new customers from a segment of the market that is currently not attending movies because of the challenges of finding babysitters. Giving these non-customers the convenience of dropping the children off at the theatre while they watch the movie and then picking them up after the movie is over is an example of a company opening up “new and uncontested market space”.

The Early Learning Initiative that is being rolled out by the Ministry of Education is an example of just such a *Blue Ocean Strategy* that was adopted by many French Language school boards many years ago. These school boards established before- and after-school day care services right at the school itself, thus providing a “complementary” service that most other school boards were not offering. It likely helped French Language school boards maintain or grow their small share of the market. Now that the Ministry of Education has mandated that all school boards must offer these before and after school services, the French Language school boards may lose some of that competitive edge. They will now have to search for new “blue oceans”.

There is no question that declining enrolment is something that all existing school boards are facing. With funding dependent upon enrolment, it will be incumbent upon school boards to maximize their share of the existing market place or face insurmountable financial challenges. This situation is occurring when the “total market place” is shrinking to begin with. One solution is to find ways of “pushing the existing boundaries” to attract students who are currently not part of the traditional elementary and secondary school scene. This means finding value innovations that will appeal to parents of children who are not yet part of the public education system and/or providing services that appeal to potential adult continuing education students.

Upon closer examination, one discovers that there are many initiatives that would qualify as *Blue Ocean Strategies* for Ontario school boards. Some are already being attempted in various forms, while others are completely new ideas that deserve further investigation. Consider some of the following as examples:

1. Establishing system-wide JK/SK split classes;
2. Triple grades in primary and junior divisions with 1/2/3 and 4/5/6 classes offered as a choice for parents. Each student would be entered into a class at the beginning of the division and would remain with the same teacher for three years;
3. Giving parents the option of single sex classes at all grade levels from JK to Grade 10;

4. Organizing all secondary schools into Grade 7 to 12 units;
5. Offering the opportunity for secondary school students to earn credits in 24-day “immersion blocks” where they would take one subject all day long for 24 straight days. Students would still earn a maximum of 8 credits per year, but they would be able to travel to different secondary schools in the district to obtain credits in programs that may not be offered at their home school;
6. Discovering new ways of delivering secondary school credits to students who did not graduate. This would involve finding ways of tapping into the 19 to 30 year old demographic into which over 20% of our students eventually fall. Also finding ways of delivering credits to older adults who may never have completed their Grade 12 diploma requirements, but for whom a secondary school diploma would mean so very much in terms of personal accomplishment;
7. Dedicating surplus space and/or schools to the provision of “private school style” options for parents who may now be sending their children to private schools in or outside of the region. This may include saving some of the smaller rural schools and converting them into “boarding schools” where the curriculum offered is more in keeping with specialty programs that would be expected to form part of what a private school might offer. Fee structures would cover the additional expenses and provide parents with an alternative that they might prefer in order to remain within the public school system.

The above are all examples of how *Blue Ocean Strategy* might be employed by school boards operating within the Ontario public education system. Each of these ideas can be described in more detail to demonstrate how they offer value and innovation that is currently not available. School boards that adopt one or more of these and/or other similar-minded strategies will soon find themselves in a “blue ocean” where they are re-writing the rules and opening up uncontested market space.

Through their book, *Blue Ocean Strategy*, authors Kim and Mauborgne have presented a framework and the tools for the future that can be utilized by school boards in order to escape the “red oceans” that dominate the public education system today. The six principles explained by the authors show how to “reconstruct market boundaries, focus on the big picture, reach beyond existing demand, get the strategic sequence right, overcome organizational hurdles, and build execution into strategy.”

In conclusion, I must agree with a comment that was found in the Business Strategy Review which is published in the UK. “*Blue Ocean Strategy* challenges everything you thought you knew about strategy.”

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