

Sir Wilfrid Laurier Junior High School

Leaving the old, both worlds they view
that stand upon the threshold of the new

Edmund Waller

Its overwhelming size consumes a whole city block in Montreal North. It looks like one of those mammoth new comprehensive secondary schools rather than a junior high school, its officially designated hybrid status. On the first entry, One thinks the obvious: how can the bigness of the plant defer to these young inhabitants, a mass of varying sizes, needs, and interests?

**Episode I:
10:15 a.m.
April, 1981**

The cafeteria is a lively and bustling hub of activity and a din of animated chatter. These students do not look alienated, plagued with self-doubt, nor addicted to extreme fads. There is even a distinctive warm, friendly ethos and humane character about this institution.

Two of these "early" adolescents approach me with a deliberate forthrightness and inquire about the nature of my business. A look of disappointment registers on their faces when I reveal that I am not a "sub." I follow my willing guides upstairs to the second floor, impressed by their self-assurance and the ease with which they engage in conversation with an adult.

Someone guards the entrance to the front hallway. She looks physically older than her twelve years. Her sophistication and poise continue to dispel the idea that bigness may be

noxious. There is a sense of personal responsibility about her. Socially confident and aware of her powers, she takes her \$1.20 a day monitor position seriously.

Three of her peers race up the stairs and come to an abrupt halt in her presence. One seems like Shakespeare's "schoolboy with shining face", the other "bearded like the pard".

Monitor:

Where are you going?

Student 1:

I need to see Mr. Dion about the variety show.

Student 2:

Je veux aller a la bibliotheque.

Student 3:

Ai visto Marco?

Monitor:

Where is your pass?

Student 2:

(turning to me) Do you know how heavy a killer whale shark is, Miss?

Student 3:

About the same size as me (he stands about 5'7").

Student 1:

Ugh. One of you is bad enough.

Student 2:

Yeah, well you.

The monitor interrupts this banter and delegates one of them to lead me to the conference room next to the Principal's office.

Episode 2:

10:45 a.m.

Eleven department heads and the guidance counselor await the principal in the conference room.

He enters. He has a way of talking and a decided presence. I understand why the impetus for the idea of this junior high school arose in him. He asks the assembled group, "How are we going to arrange core for the next year?"(1) I have the school's written statement of purpose in front of me. I notice individuals are forewarned that "persons seeking a static situation will not feel at ease in this school", and that "teachers interested in working in the school should have a love of people and hence be prepared to see their students first as persons and secondly as students."

The conversation switches to the teacher surplus situation next year. He informs the group that twenty-four teachers will be leaving the school this year. "It's important how we arrange ourselves. Do we need to change our priorities?"

He talks about the practicalities of implementing core in terms of the number of sections, minutes, periods and the new

teacher contract. He asks, "Can we provide teachers with examples of possible combinations?" The Math Department Head asserts, "It is easier to have an English teacher teach Math than a Math teacher teach English." Someone disagrees. Another department head interjects that to his surprise his teachers actually enjoy teaching the core program. Another expresses concern if they are going to have to teach more than three subjects. She queries, "How competent can any one teacher be in three diverse areas like French, Geography, and English?" The Principal says, "We may have a problem with core; next year, History and Science will be half-year courses. How can we work out a teacher workload, preserve core, and retain the integrity of the discipline?"

He suspends the interchange again to take a phone call. He returns muttering; "The difficulty of finding and retraining teachers for junior high school cannot be minimized." They resume the process of reflecting and clarifying the curriculum for next year.

The principal and the school

The quest for core curriculum in this conference room is of utmost importance in the process of clarifying and evaluating the school's objectives and adapting to changing circumstances. They seem to have come full circle. The issues center on the aims and purposes of a junior high, its curricular and internal organization, the role and competence of teachers, and the means of establishing continuity between junior and senior high school.

The problem is both pedagogical and administrative: how to obtain a balanced team of teachers for the specific purposes of the school? The resolution of this dilemma falls upon the principal, Kevin Quinn.

The school is Sir Wilfrid Laurier Junior High School, a Catholic School housing 1,125 grade 7 and 8 students, mostly of Italian background. Approximately 550 new students from eight elementary schools feed into Sir Wilfrid Laurier from the Montreal North and Rivière des Prairies areas, and 560 students leave this junior high school within the Province of Quebec or within the Commission des Ecoles Catholiques de Montréal. Sir Wilfrid Laurier is a **very** large Catholic Junior High School.

The three stages in the evolution of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's educational plan as presented in Figure 1 should be conceptualized as a circular ongoing process, of a single school formulating and reformulating its own identity.

Figure I**THE EVOLUTION OF SIR WILFRID LAURIER
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL****EMERGENT PHASE:**

- 1975 Lacordaire High School, an existing secondary school annex of Pius IX High School (Secondary 1,2,3)
- 1974-1975 Reorganization of Montreal Catholic School Commission schools into Regions A & B. Lacordaire to close.
- Early 1975 Principal, Lacordaire, unveils statement of purpose for proposed junior high school

DEVELOPMENT PHASE:

- Spring 1975 Principal's plan of action and planning.
- September 1975 Sir Wilfrid Laurier opens as a junior high school
- 1975-1978 Development of core program and core teachers

**MAINTENANCE, ADAPTATION,
AND EVALUATION PHASE:**

- 1978 Beginning of loss of staff; school closings
- 1979-1980 Development and integration of new staff into core programs.
- 1981 Core program and school philosophy re-evaluated in light of school closings, teacher surplus, and regime Pedagogique. Development of House system.

**An Interview:
10:30 a.m.
June, 1981**

The scene is the office of the Principal, Kevin Quinn. Two teachers enter; they are remarkably similar in appearance and in age. The only notable difference is that one (Teacher A) is quite relaxed, having been with the school since its inception as a junior high school, while the other (Teacher B), a transfer teacher from a comprehensive secondary school who is about to be interviewed by the principal, appears nervous about the situation at hand. Quinn opens with the traditional social amenities and his favourite leit motif on not becoming a dinosaur in the teaching profession.

Quinn:

How flexible are you in what you can and want to teach?

Teacher B:

I've been teaching senior high history, geography, and economics for the last eight years. I've had some experience teaching children with special problems. I'm also interested in wood-working as a hobby.

The transfer teacher allows Quinn to begin his reportage of how this school came into being. Teacher A, a Department Head, has heard the chronicle before. Quinn states that the school evolved as a junior high school largely in response to the specific situation in which he found himself in 1973 as Principal of Lacordaire High School, one of the two annexes physically severed from Pius IX, a larger secondary school.

Quinn:

We housed younger kids (Secondary 1, 2, 3) in a rented industrial building near the Metropolitan Boulevard. Although I was glad not to be plagued with the usual constraints of a senior high, like rigid timetabling, graduation, year books, examinations, I felt the need for some changes in the organization and orientation of the school. Look, the average total number of teachers encountered by a child during the first six years of schooling is ten or twelve. Yet the structure of this school was going to expose students to an average of thirty teachers during the first two years of high school. I deliberately solicited teachers who would be willing to teach a minimum of two subjects, such as maths and English, and scheduled those subjects concurrently or in block times. Because we were housed in a former senior high school and had some unusual resources like shops, science labs, and an amphitheatre, I introduced a fine arts core of art, music, and drama, and a practical arts core of wood-working, sheet metal, and electricity.

Teacher B:

The sharp lines between disciplines seem to have been reduced to favour a more human relationship with the individual, but how were these changes accepted by the staff?

Teacher A:

They were accepted by our staff for the most part, largely out of curiosity, although if left on our own we probably would not have **experimented** with core programs. We did feel flexible to teach subjects separately or to correlate two or more subjects.

Quinn:

(interjects) Yes, I was concerned with developing a humane school. During 1975, I also had several conversations with Roy Bailey, Principal of Vincent Massey Junior High School, about how to make this transition from elementary to secondary high. During this year, seven schools within CECM were scheduled for reorganization both in structure and in personnel.(2) Because this proposed reorganization meant that in theory these schools did not exist, I envisioned this situation as a unique opportunity to develop a junior high school with a strong element of **choice** with respect to both school philosophy and teacher selection.

Teacher B:

I hear that twenty-two transfer teachers will be coming to this school next year. Are you planning to interview them all as you are doing today?

Quinn:

(Nods) I want all teachers to know beforehand what they are getting into. I don't think a mere written statement of purpose or of orientation of a school is enough to ensure that a school will make any progress. It's easier to change the designation of a school than to change its teachers.

Teacher A:

One third of this staff changes every year, and we have lost a number of key people who were integral to the development of this school.

Quinn hands Teacher B the statement of purpose and states that all information sheets are published in English, French, and Italian.

Teacher A:

I think that you will find reflected in this pink sheet that all learning activities need to be uniquely keyed to each child in this school.

Teacher B:

What does this **really** mean?

Quinn:

What this really means is that children in this school are liked and can approach adults. I would like my teachers to do things in this school with good grace. Flexibility. I like to think that for any child who has a problem modifications can be made. For example, this year we have five visually-handicapped children and one hearing-impaired child who are mainstreamed for part of the time into our core programs, and we are also following the progress of twelve children with special problems through our Multi-Disciplinary Team.(3) We attempt to solve the problems because of the effect on other kids.

Teacher B:

I notice some older-looking students in the hallway; they seem to belong more in the senior high.

Quinn:

(Hands Teacher B the information sheets on the Retention Program mailed to parents). We have a Retention Program for high risk kids who are not likely to succeed in Secondary 3. Some are fifteen years old and are functionally disabled, or behind two years in basic skills like English and Math. Most kids of this type drop out of school by grade 9. If we can buy them a successful academic year, we can ensure that they get into a long vocational program, and they might complete senior high school. These students come under Special Education norms.

Teacher A:

Some of these children are also helped by means of our Tutorials, which are scheduled as part of a teacher's workload. These are designed to help a student in one particular subject area for a tri-semester (12 weeks). Twelve weeks seem more like a natural break.

Teacher B:

How did you get all this through the Commission and accepted by the parents?

Quinn:

Each region received a copy and approved the statement of purpose. I then wrote to the eight parent school committees of our feeder schools and invited parents to an organizational meeting to examine the statement of purpose, and to ascertain their views on the general orientation of the school. I then instituted a school committee of parents, which then approved the statement of purpose.

Teacher B:

Do you mean that you had a school and a school committee before you had, in fact, a staff?

Quinn:

Exactly. The next step was to choose a school name. Sir Wilfrid Laurier was chosen to reflect the harmonious relations that should exist between the two founding peoples of Canada. After visiting the children of the eight feeder schools and soliciting their written opinions, the name of the school was presented to and approved by the School Commission on July 10th, 1975. I seized the opportunity to organize a staff from the grass roots. I interviewed all the 97 teachers who applied for the 55 available posts, as well as additional teachers because of the tri-semester core program in the practical arts.

Teacher A:

You should mention that at these scheduled meetings you emphasized that coming to Sir Wilfrid Laurier meant an increased workload.

Quinn:

Yes. To ensure a secure pattern of teacher-child relationships, I proposed smaller classes and more teaching periods, but I was still within the norms of the collective agreement. I have less leeway now.

Department Heads were appointed and a staff council formed. This new crop of young teachers were ready to exploit the school's notion of flexibility. Teacher A can describe the different ways we tried to group kids and experimented with team teaching, tri-semester (grade 7) programs, and half-year courses.

Teacher A:

In Cycle I (Grade 7) we organized core programs around subject combinations like English/History and Math/Sciences. In Cycle II (Grade 8) we organized ourselves with particular teacher-subject combinations of cores, depending on the competence and interest of the teachers. Next year, we will organize core programs by a House System and experiment with "coring" within the House. A House will consist of six teachers who will be assigned to four classes. This system may provide for both generalization and specialization within the core.

Teacher B:

This school seems unusually clean. Can you tell me about discipline in the school?

Teacher A:

The kids seem to take pride in this school and by and large respect school property. We suffer little from chronic vandalism and absenteeism, unlike the large comprehensive high schools, yet we are as large in student population; although this year we have experienced some incidents of destructive behaviour.

Our administrative agent says it's partly due to the nature of

the school itself, the monitor system, and the advisory system. Perhaps it's really because they have a chance to be themselves "in these in-between years." Some of the pressures of the senior high have been removed. While there is probably no universally right age of transfer for all students, the ages of 11, 12, 13 seem too early for important decisions to be made about the future education of these students. The Principal himself is interested in the building. It is not unusual to find him repairing a light switch after hours.

Teacher B:

You both have spent a good portion of this interview emphasizing the philosophy of this school, which I take it is at heart concerned with the individual child. How do these core programs fit into this school's philosophy and facilities?

Quinn:

Perhaps a tour of the school itself will clarify this.

Beauty and the Beast: the criteria and the threat

Five process criteria have been proposed in the first article of this issue as necessary and sufficient for an educational project. Analyzing the Sir Wilfrid Laurier project in terms of these criteria raises a number of questions about the future of English confessional education within this province. That a single school can transform itself into whatever it wishes as long as these five criteria are met is not as simple nor inevitable as it might seem.

This case study demonstrates that the process by which a single school defines itself does not stop once the product has been created. If its character and survival are to be determined solely within the constraints of the teachers' collective agreement or the Régime Pédagogique, there are inherent dangers to an educational project like Sir Wilfrid Laurier. The obvious danger in the successful evolution of a project like this one is the decline in freedom of a school to develop its own curriculum and deploy its teachers appropriately.

Initiated from within

The success of this project results largely from the impetus of a principal, known for his drive and commitment to quality education. In the development phase this principal spent much time on curriculum decisions and teacher selection. He admits, in the interview with the transfer teacher, that he has less leeway now, with a shrinking system and teacher surplus, to build a stable, competent and appropriately deployed staff.

The success of a project like Sir Wilfrid Laurier depended very much on the attitude of teachers and on individual teacher competence; it required dedicated teachers with a wide range of skills and interests. This first process criterion demands

something of the educational milieu for which it has not been particularly noted: unity and cooperation. The problem will continue to be how to avoid a fragmented staff and school. How can something initiated from within withstand conflicting external pressures like teacher relocation, school closings, rapidly changing curricula, technological and social change?

Reflecting consensus

The successful evolution of a venture like Sir Wilfrid Laurier also depended on the full cooperation of its teachers, parents, students, and administrators. The rationale for this school as a Catholic Junior High School is explicit; the school philosophy is known to the whole community as a result of a process of description, clarification, and negotiation. In this respect, it reached consensus in its developmental phase.

From a parent's point of view, the peculiar nature of the junior high with its two-year program seems to militate against direct and continuous involvement of parents. If an educational project takes time to evolve, and if it is difficult to develop lasting relationships with parents, how direct can parents' involvement realistically be in a junior high? Is there a danger that a formalized structure like an Orientation Council may hinder or prevent the actual decision-making process?

The traditional dividing lines which exist between elementary and secondary school also exist between parent school committees. In a time when school closings and staff upheavals prevail, might we look for a new relationship between parent committees in the elementary and secondary schools of a community?

The existing pattern of small children attending small schools, early adolescents middle-sized schools, and senior adolescents larger schools might warrant a more careful differentiation between social growth and social pressures. What are the differences in students' self-image as a result of being involved in elementary, junior and senior high schools? What are the dangers of stratifying student populations by age?

Fostering the development of participants

Whether there is really a greater concern for students and greater humanization of their educational program in this school, as opposed to other junior or senior high schools, is difficult to answer. However, it may be said that there has been a genuine attempt on the part of the administrators, teachers, and parents in this school to organize teaching and learning so that it can be effective, meaningful, and enjoyable for individuals.

The opening up of timetabling, space allocation, and core curriculum content affords both teachers and students opportunities for choices to be made. It provides students with varying learning situations and teachers with a repertoire of teaching styles, and opportunity for both to participate authentically in the life of this school. Thus the attempt at the centrality of the teacher-student relationship is perhaps the

most critical component of this school's project.

Evolving through adaptation

It is interesting that Sir Wilfrid Laurier Junior High School evolved during a time of change and reorganization within CECM. The development of a House system for next year demonstrates that this junior high school does not seem to have lost its exploratory function.

The concept of a junior high school received official public recognition and support with CECM in 1974. Although recent conversations with central office administrators suggest that there is every indication of their strong desire to maintain the junior high school, there are constraints which may impinge on their good intentions. A pressing dilemma is how to continue to preserve the existence of these junior high schools and smaller schools as the costs of operating the senior comprehensive high schools become increasingly prohibitive.

Should a school commission continue to maintain mammoth secondary schools with their superior facilities and close down the smaller schools? or,

Should these larger schools be closed and the smaller neighbourhood schools be preserved?

If they continue to maintain the larger schools and physically separate the junior high students in certain designated areas of the plant, can a school like Sir Wilfrid Laurier be moved in one piece and still retain its distinctive character and ethos? Is there not then a danger of the junior high school becoming a miniature departmentalized senior high school, or an endangered species? What would be the role of the department head if a House system were set up in such an organization?

In a shrinking system, can a neighbourhood school housing grades 1-11 be envisioned as a future model of school organization?

Known about and understood

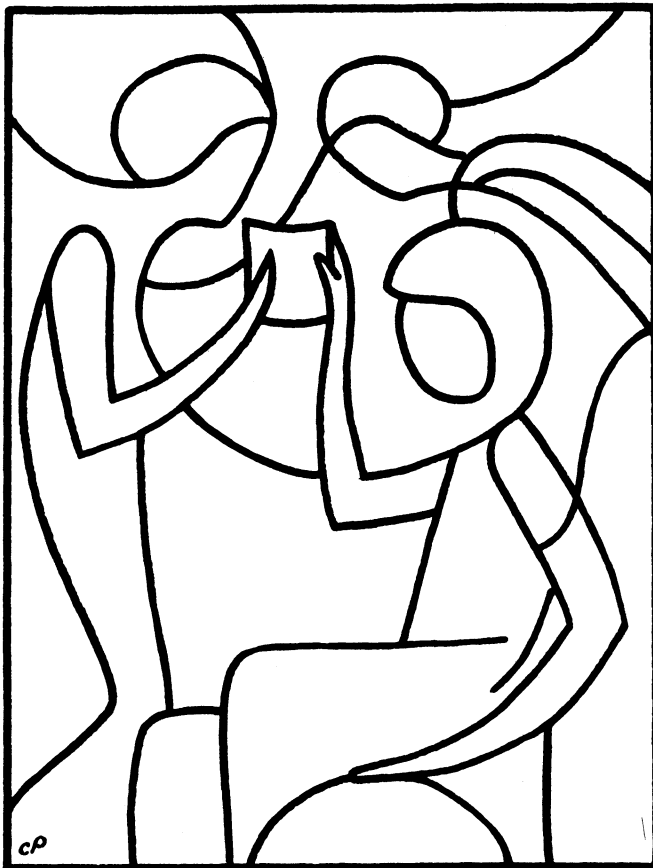
This school appears to have established a logical and consistent link between its educational ideology and its practice. Although no measurable results are available for this case study, it appears that staff, students, and administrators, when closely queried, are consistent in their perceptions of the function and purpose of this school.

The metaphor of core, a feature of this school's curriculum, suggests a basic, essential, enduring part. It would seem that the participants in this school's project are not asking whether there should be a core, but they are still in search of it. What subjects fit easily and naturally together and contribute usefully and meaningfully to an integrated core? Is there a danger that the metaphor of a core might lead participants to think of it as a finite product rather than as a continuous process?

Many questions remain unanswered with respect to the complexity of early adolescents, their growth in knowledge,

language, and personality, and the teacher's role in facilitating this development. The Plowden Report about the British Middle School experiments best describes the dilemma:

"If the middle school is to be a new and progressive force, it must develop further curriculum methods, attitudes. . . It must move forward into what is now regarded as secondary school work, but it must not move so far away that it loses the best of primary education as we know it." (1967, p. 383)



NOTES

1. Core programs, usually taught by a single teacher or a team of teachers, may be organized with a particular curriculum emphasis such as a fine arts core of music, art and drama, or by interdisciplinary approach, cutting across the boundaries of separate subjects taught in the secondary school, in which a particular learning unit is central and occupies the learner's time.
2. In 1975 - 77 schools in regions A and B within CECM (the Montreal Catholic School Commission) were scheduled for reorganization. The School Commission's plan for reorganization was the following:
 - a) John F. Kennedy High was to become a Comprehensive Senior High School
 - b) Papineau was to become a Junior High School
 - c) Holy Names was to become a Senior High with an academic emphasis and no shops
 - d) Pius IX was to become Lester B. Pearson
 - e) Lacordaire was to close
 - f) Pius X was the only school to be untouched by reorganization.
3. Multi-Disciplinary Teams exist in all CECM schools. They consist of the Principal, Vice-Principal, Guidance Counsellor, Supervisor of Students, Social Worker, Attendance Officer, Nurse, and Chaplain.

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