



Introducing the winners of the inaugural Canadian Innovators in Education Awards

# Leaders *in* Learning

BY STÉPHANIE VERGE

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE** to inspire students and galvanize teachers? Who are the educators working to improve learning on a large scale? And how do they achieve lasting change in the classroom? Those are the questions we at *Reader's Digest* asked ourselves when we created the new Canadian Innovators in Education Awards in partnership with the Canadian Education Association. A celebration of the teachers, principals and administrators who have developed pioneering programs with long-term impact throughout their school districts, these prizes are an investment in the future of our children—and our country.

Rhonda Ovelson  
and Jamie Robinson

**First Place \$25,000**  
Central Okanagan  
School District  
Kelowna, B.C.

*Because student success means teaching the teachers*

For Rhonda Ovelson and Jamie Robinson, “shoulder to shoulder” is a motto and a practical vision. Working side by side has become the principle on which 43 institutions in British Columbia’s Central Okanagan

DARREN HULL



*Teachers at Quigley Elementary in Kelowna collaborate on an assignment.*

School District have pinned their hopes. The group's goal is to ensure every student learns in a purposeful and powerful way.

Four years ago, the district came up with a bold plan. Dismayed by reports of low satisfaction rates among educators after professional-development sessions, as well as poor student responses to some of the new classroom approaches, the group assembled an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). Comprising one district principal and six lead teachers, the new team vowed to help the educators be their best selves.

Before reassessing the message, the ILT tackled the messenger. The

team would provide collaborative planning, teaching and learning in schools to allow instructors to build their skills and ramp up students' engagement. Being on-site would be essential: proximity to the classroom would allow for development to be continuous and context-sensitive—and therefore more effective. When the ILT departed, school staff would have new tools to help them carry on planning and teaching together.

"I started my career in the early 1990s," says Ovelson, the founding principal of the ILT and currently a director of instruction for the district. "And as a new teacher I was pretty much given the keys to that classroom. I did the very best I could. But if I'd had access to infrastructure that would have allowed me to continue to learn and be responsive in class with the backing of the school team around me, it would have changed the way I went about teaching."

These days, Ovelson, current ILT principal Robinson and the other members of the team go into schools on a daily basis to provide support to teachers and disrupt the traditional isolation of their classroom work. "We're re-envisioning professional learning," says Robinson. "Administrators and teachers are coming together, along with our team, to construct best practices for kids."

Under the ILT, teachers have the freedom to act more like their

pupils, collaborating to solve problems. The district has seen educator and student engagement flourish in many of its institutions—just one happy by-product of this dynamic approach. The shift continues to pay dividends. To date, the ILT has joined forces with teams of teachers in every school throughout the district to address the needs of both students and educators. With each collaboration, a teacher-leader is

born, ready—and happy—to carry the banner of co-operation.

Ovelson was one of the first to support the ILT's professional-learning model, and she remains an advocate. "It's been built from the bottom up, and a lot of trust has been gained along the way," she says. "The learning is as personalized and meaningful for the adults as we want it to be for the children in the classroom. We want everyone to be empowered." **R**



## **Second Place \$10,000 Sun West School Division Rosetown, Sask.**

*Because technology maximizes learning in rural areas*

To say that the Sun West School Division is sprawling doesn't do the district's reach justice. Its director of education, Guy Tétrault, supervises 40 schools over 32,000 square kilometres, with a student body ranging from pre-kindergarten to Grade 12.

A 40-year veteran of the Alberta and Saskatchewan education systems, and the man behind St. Gabriel, Canada's first online middle school, Tétrault doesn't see the distance as an impediment. Rather, it's an opportunity: he wants digital tools to become the norm in his area. While 15 of Sun West's institutions are based in Hutterite colonies that shun technology, digitizing the remaining schools is key if the 4,700 other students in the division are to have access to a curriculum on par with that of their city-based counterparts.

In September 2013, the Sun West school board established a \$1-million

(TEACHERS) COURTESY OF CENTRAL OKANAGAN SCHOOL DISTRICT 23; (TÉTRAULT) DAVID HO



three-year fund to encourage educators to develop innovative projects focused on improving student learning and teaching. These initiatives are increasingly based in “blended learning,” a two-part approach: participants learn in a supervised setting using classroom methods, as well as through online tools; and students also help determine their own time, place, path and pace. In short, blended learning is about personalizing education.

Inside a Sun West classroom, you might find a teacher working face to face with a handful of pupils, kids individually immersed in one of the more than 115 online courses developed by the district’s Distance Learning Centre, and a group collaborating on a project and accessing resources through the Internet. In 2014, close to half of Sun West’s student body was enrolled in online offerings, which

range from a dual-credit business class with the University of Saskatchewan to a forensic-science course.

Each school has an educational assistant trained to help students with digital materials; as well, all teachers receive 15 professional-development days a year. The hope is that this instruction will allow them to amass a skill set befitting a 21st-century educator at ease with the latest digital materials—and excited to be part of a new model for Canadian schools.

“Before the start of the academic year, I had a chat with our district’s 50 new teachers,” says Tétrault. “I said to them, ‘2050: does that mean anything to you? It’s probably when you’re going to retire. You’re going to walk into schools next week and there will be a front door, a hallway, classrooms. If, in the year 2050, you retire from that same school, we will have failed.’ And I truly believe that.” **R**

### Third Place \$5,000 South Slave Divisional Education Council Fort Smith, N.W.T.

*Because improving literacy rates  
requires local investment*

When Curtis Brown moved from British Columbia to the Northwest Territories 28 years ago, he wasn’t planning to stick around. “Most people who come up from the south think this is



*“Reading buddies” at Joseph Burr  
Tyrrell Elementary in Fort Smith.*

an adventure and have no idea they’ll fall in love,” says the superintendent of the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC). But he stayed put, committing himself to addressing challenges faced by the North’s remote districts: the legacy of residential schools (75 per cent of South Slave’s 1,300 students are Aboriginal), split-grade classes, limited resources and high staff turnover.

In 2006, standardized tests revealed that less than half of SSDEC’s students were meeting the literacy and numeracy standards set by the Alberta government. Enter Leadership for Literacy (L4L), an initiative kick-started by the council and adopted by Brown and educators across the district’s five communities. Each of the SSDEC’s eight schools began by hiring a literacy coach to guide educators through on-the-job “teach-model-practice” instruction. The coaches share five core

strategies (one example is “read aloud,” which, other than the obvious, involves having kids discuss the material and their predictions for what might happen next in the story), demonstrate them in the classroom and provide feedback for teachers once they take the lead. By 2013, three-quarters of South Slave students were reading at or above the Canadian norm.

Bolstered by this significant jump over the 2006 scores, the SSDEC set another ambitious goal: to preserve the indigenous languages of South Slave by consulting local elders, publishing more than 200 books in area dialects and compiling two Chipewyan dictionaries. Linguistic fluency has since risen 18 per cent among children of all ages. A strong sense of identity is critical in northern communities, says Brown. “If students don’t feel proud of where they’ve come from, they’re less likely to be successful. If community members don’t see us as honouring their wealth of knowledge, we’re less likely to be successful, too.”

Paraphrasing John F. Kennedy, Brown likes to remind colleagues that L4L works because success has many parents. Or, as Marnie Villeneuve, an educator and mother in Fort Smith, attests, “Experts are teaching teachers, teachers are teaching teachers, teachers are teaching students, and students are teaching each other as well as their parents.” In South Slave, education is a right and a responsibility—for all. **R**



Curtis  
Brown

(BROWN) SCOTT CLOUTHIER; (CHILDREN) COURTESY OF  
SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL