

The ADVOCATE

JUNE 2009

ISSUE NO. 203

Newsletter

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BUSINESS OFFICIALS

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By Bill Blackie

A year ago if you looked out on the economic landscape in education in the province, it is unlikely that you would have seen the storm clouds on the horizon. Nor would you likely have predicted that in a short period of time these clouds would create for education a perfect storm. While the coming storm might not have been predicted, school business officials were not sitting quietly without taking action. They have, in fact, been working for over two years to identify areas that could be studied to establish best practices or efficiencies. These studies included green cleaning initiatives, employee benefits, contracting practices, attendance support, broadband connectivity and support for professional development. In the past year they worked with the Ministry of Education to consider the impacts of declining enrolment and how those impacts could be reduced or moderated. However, this type of

advance work took on additional importance when external forces came together to create the perfect storm. The forces that I suggest for consideration are the economic crisis, declining student enrolment, staffing changes, provincial labour frameworks and leadership experience. All of the elements are interconnected, and as a result, these interactions must also be considered as part of the situation matrix.

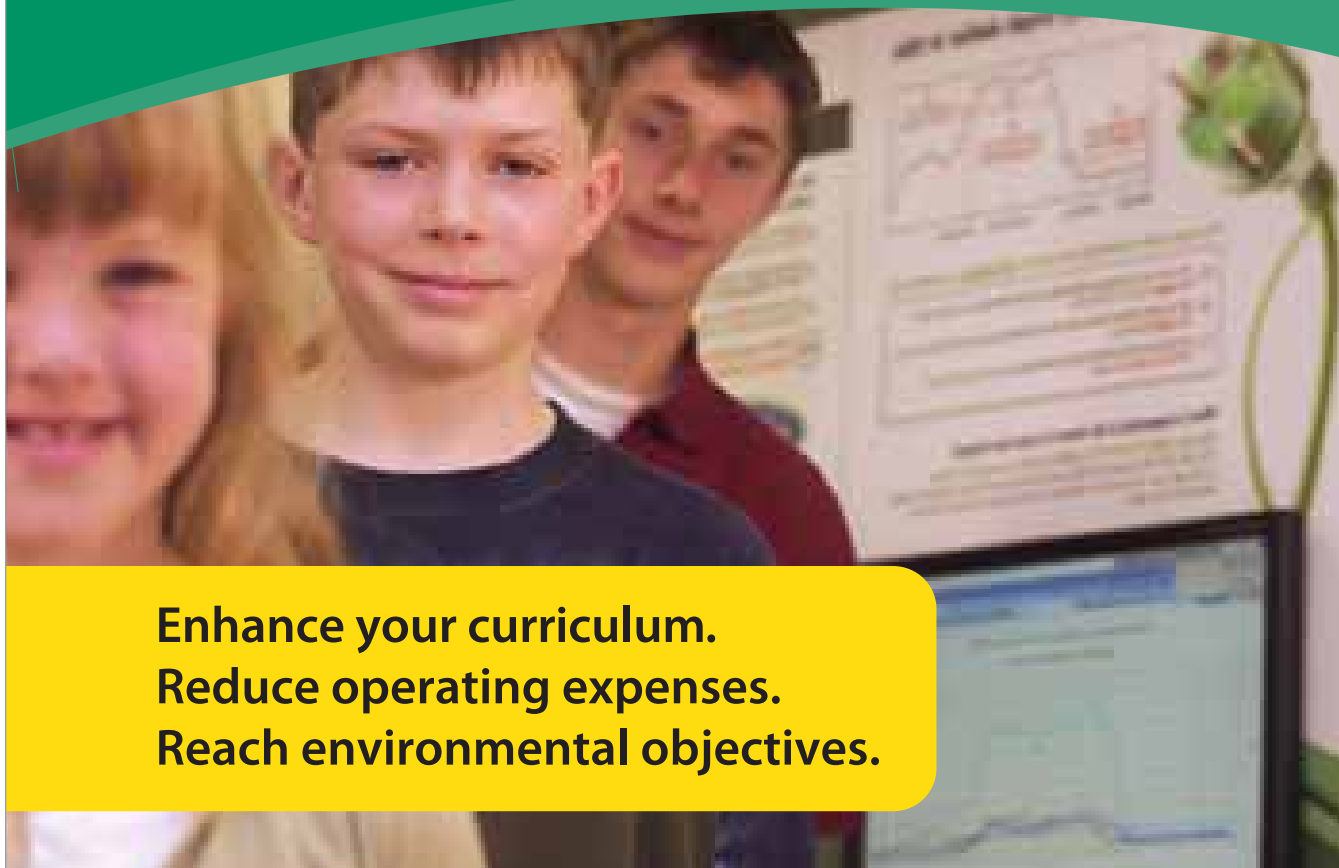
The failure of a large portion of the economy in the United States and its impact on Canada, and Ontario in particular, might well be seen as the focusing element for all the other aspects. Of particular note is the loss of manufacturing jobs and the consequent support structures. Since the majority of funding for education comes from the government in the *Grants for Student Needs (GSN)* the potential for the economic crisis to have a significant

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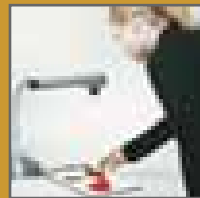
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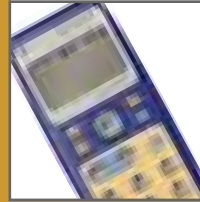
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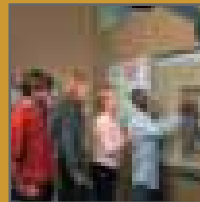
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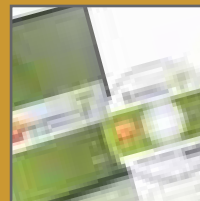
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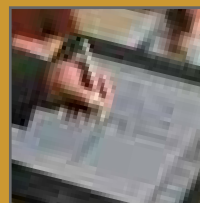
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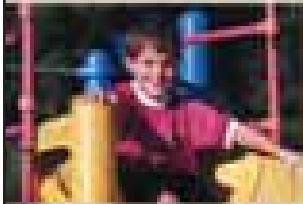
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The ADVOCATE

Issue Number 203
June 2009

The Advocate is the official publication of the Ontario Association of School Business Officials (OASBO). It is distributed free to members of the association.

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School Business Officials
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PUBLISHED JUNE 2009/OSB-A0009/8967



Prepare Your Financial Umbrella to Weather the Economic Storm

(ARA) – With job loss at its highest rate in more than two decades and financial systems crumbling, people are dealing with the aftermath of a perfect storm of economic events. According to a new survey, one in four people (25 percent) say they're worried about losing their jobs in 2009, and there is no better time for consumers to batten down their financial hatches to prepare for that possibility.

“For consumers, part of weathering this storm will be ensuring that they have the proper financial umbrella,” says Lucy Duni, vice president of consumer education at TrueCredit.com by TransUnion. “There is no better time for consumers to put their finances in order and prepare for the possibility of losing their source of income.”

In addition to polishing their resumes and portfolios, current and future job seekers should make sure their financial reputation

reflects their desirability as a potential employee, since the survey, commissioned by TrueCredit.com and conducted by Zogby International also revealed that nearly one in six human resources decision makers (16 percent) say their company uses a pre-employment credit report as part of the screening process for potential employees.

TrueCredit.com offers the following advice to consumers:

- **Drop the Shopping Habit** – With unemployment rates skyrocketing, it's time to examine your budget. Even if you aren't worried about losing your job, sticking to a strict budget well within your means will create a safety net if something happens to your income.
- **Stash Some Cash** – In the past, having enough to cover three-to-six months of expenses was considered adequate, but today, aim to stash enough to maintain

*Nearly one in six human resources
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living expenses for no less than six months. If you do lose your job, your savings will allow you to continue making your payments, and will help you avoid missing payments altogether.

- **Live Within Your Means** – In addition to saving, you should make paying down debt a priority while you have cash coming in. In terms of credit card debt, shoot for carrying balances that are less than 35 percent of a card's limit.
- **Don't Be Late** – One of the most important contributors to a strong credit history is paying bills on time. Regardless of your employment status, you should try to pay at least the minimum amount due on time each month.
- **Limit New Credit** – Use restraint when applying for credit, as multiple applications over a brief period of time can negatively impact your credit score. In these tough economic times, you don't want to appear desperate to lenders or potential employers.
- **Know What Employers Are Seeing** – Monitor your credit reports to keep tabs on your credit history. If you lose your current job and need to seek new employment, your credit report is one of the factors that potential employers might check.

To learn more about managing your finances, visit the learning center at www.gotruecredit.com. ■



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A Perfect Storm

continued from page 1

effect on education might well have been expected. However, the existence of a provincial labour framework which was entered into prior to the onset of the economic turmoil meant that there would need to be significant investment in education. With a year-to-year increase of about 3 percent principally to cover the framework costs means the flexibility in education is gone. However, this type of investment by the government is supportive of an overall strategy for the province and where it needs to move to be economically competitive in the future. The loss of flexibility makes it more difficult to deal with the other impacts and makes the need to promote new solutions all the more important.

The declining student population was predicted. Since the 2002-03 school year, the enrolment in the province as a whole has been declining; however, the rate and severity, as well as the timing, varies by region. Steps to reduce its impact have been implemented in a variety of ways by different school boards, but the Ministry of



Education will need to weather out the economic storm.

Education's working group on declining enrolment, which has recently released its report (*Planning and Possibilities: The Report of the Declining Enrolment Working Group*), took the first coordinated look at the issue. In their report they examine the trend by region over time and in the province. The report recognises the sensitivity of funding to enrolment. They also identified that since 2002-03, the portion of the GSN tied to enrolment has fallen from three-quarters to two-thirds in 2007-08. This is the result of the addition of school- and region-based elements in the GSN. I will come back to this area when I consider some solutions. However, with nearly two-thirds of the funding linked to student enrolment, this is a significant issue. In particular it leads to the next aspect: staff changes.

Staff changes are driven by at least two factors: first, the funding available and second, the demographics of the organization. Declining enrolment has put significant downward pressure on staff. In some situations this impact has been reduced by government and board initiatives that make use of specialist teachers, special programs and an emphasis on student success. In the business areas there has been a growing demand for new and different roles to meet new requirements for reporting, primarily in the finance area. Across the province the average age of the business staff has been increasing, and we are poised to see large numbers of senior staff leave boards. This is a double edged sword in that a new work force will be hired to meet some of these new demands but there is also the loss of a significant body of corporate history and culture. All of these forces come at a time when there is increased pressure to reduce the expenditures for staff.

Another staffing issue is that of experience. Many senior leaders in school boards, on both the academic and the business

side, have only recently entered those roles and have not previously faced the pressures related to significant reductions in funding or staff skill sets. While they are competent leaders, this lack of experience will place additional demands on them when they can least afford them. To meet this challenge, the senior teams in boards will need to work as a team more than ever before.

The last area to examine is the impact of the provincial labour frameworks. The involvement of the Ministry of Education, Trustee Associations, Unions and school boards combined to produce a complex environment that, while moving the negotiations forward, left some confusion as the various roles of the players. Added to this complex picture is the fact that some groups had settled on the elements of the framework before the impact of the US economy had been felt in Ontario. From the business perspective these frameworks are becoming increasingly constraining on boards. This means that boards are finding it more and more difficult to exercise the budgeting flexibility they once had.

So these are the forces that combined to put pressure on the business operations in school boards. What can be done to lessen the impact and improve the overall business operations as we continue to help meet the underlying aim of improving student performance and success?

It is fair to assume that education will need to weather out the economic storm. But in that process we need to consider how we increase efficiency, build teams and change practices to support new and expanded roles in school boards.

Since a key part of the problem is declining enrolment, the recommendations of the declining enrolment working group is a good place to start. They make several recommendations about the need for multi-year plans for how to handle the problem



and have asked the government to have agencies and services that they fund to consider utilizing space that exists in education sites. This is part of a broader strategy that involves the creation of community hubs that might lead to one-stop-shopping for services. It also ties to a recommendation to explore potential partnerships. This concept of partnerships is one of the strategic directions of OASBO and was also identified in the report of the Economic Crisis Summit of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) held in December 2008.³ In this report they specifically identify a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) as a variable enterprise if it can be a true partnership where there is a shared stake in the outcome. Boards and their senior staff may need to consider making overtures to potential business partners and service providers that could share sites, or processes that would produce a benefit to both partners. The declining enrolment working group also made reference to the need to examine the expanded role of technology in delivering programs. This too might be an area to consider for partnerships.

This expanded role for technology might also be a possible source of providing professional development for business staff to

become familiar with new roles and the skills necessary to performing them successfully. The time away from worksite and the costs for travel or accommodation are often barriers to the conventional delivery of professional development. Low cost options such as Web casts, streamed video and online sharing are elements that can be built into a basic framework for delivering programs both for students and staff. If we take this opportunity to consider how this type of environment might provide a method for sharing work functions between organizations or worksites then we will have taken the concept of partnering to new level.

The establishment of mentorships is one strategy that could be considered in helping bridge the skill needs of newer staff and also transferring some of the corporate culture. A formal mentorship program will also contribute to the development of a sense of teamwork in an organization. To further this trend, business members need to become more actively involved in academic decisions, and academics need to be more aware and involved in business decisions.

The studies on efficiencies have provided a significant background for action. It is important that we move from research to

implementation. This means that we will need to become involved in serious discussions within and between school boards, Ministry and other partners to begin moving toward a new way of doing business. It will need groups to take up the initiatives and champion them. While the studies have identified potential efficiencies and savings, they also present challenges to the status quo for how we work. We need to embrace these changes and build on the strengths of existing practices.

The storm we face is a potential driving force to move the operations of business functions to a new and expanded level. If we can capture some of these opportunities, the business functions in education will emerge as a vital and integral part of a new education environment. ■

Bill Blackie is the Executive Director of OASBO.

¹*Grants for Student Needs – Legislative Grants for the 2009-10 School Board Fiscal Year* available on-line at www.edu.gov.on.ca.

²*Planning and Possibilities: The Report of the Declining Enrolment Working Group*, Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2009 available on-line at www.edu.gov.on.ca.

³*Economic Crisis Summit: A new future for education funding*, is available on-line at www.asbointl.org.

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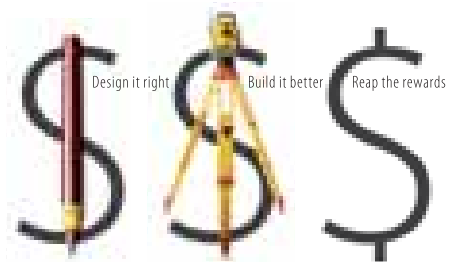
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