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A Coherent Instructional Guidance System

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

Background

This case study describes our approach to developing two strong district characteristics. These were characteristics in which we are making gains but also where we are stuck. These two areas are: *a coherent instructional guidance system* and *job-embedded professional development for all members of the organization*. As the concepts overlap, they have been treated jointly in the case study below. This opportunity provided us with a chance to reflect internally on our work and share these insights with colleagues beyond our board. This brief case study shares our thinking to date.

In 2010, the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board began engaging both service and academic staff in professional learning that focussed on collaborative inquiry. We shifted resources, changed meetings to give them a learning orientation, provided multiple entry points for engagement, and aligned this with our system's direction. We aspired then, and still aspire to grow a responsive, intelligent system—one that is coherent but also allows for contextual and creative problem solving at the local level. Leithwood emphasizes the importance of this: “The coherent system is intended to establish some legitimate boundaries around what can be done without stifling the innovative efforts of staff to improve their practices and the achievement of students. This feature of strong districts reflects evidence about the importance of focussing on the core function of the organization as the primary driver of success.” Providing a coherent instructional-guidance system and situated, job-embedded professional development for all members of the organization will help us realize this vision. Over time, our learning has evolved from establishing a level of common understanding and building coherent processes

that could enable the system to be effectively and collaboratively responsive to one where we are applying concepts to daily practices and problems. In short, this thinking has become habitual among leaders. However, as you will read below, we still have work to do.

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board has shifted its focus from being a top-down driver of the school improvement process, to one where school teams are collaboratively engaged in instructional improvement work. Principals are steadily gaining instructional leadership expertise and student work, student voice and achievement are used to help inform our direction and assess our efforts. Schools are recognizing the importance of facilitating higher order thinking for students and they are in varied states of optimizing this goal. Instructional coaches and consultants provide job-embedded support to teachers in an intelligent- responsive way. As well, superintendents play a visible partnering and supportive role with schools on their monthly visits during which the discussion is focussed on school improvement but also “drills down” to the individual student achievement (and intervention) level.

As the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board becomes more of a coherent learning organization, we are able to provide a greater range of professional development opportunities to our employees while directing most of our resources to school-based teacher release time. Increasingly, when system-led in-services are facilitated, the learning is integrated and facilitated by many departments. We have worked with our partners to reduce the amount of time dedicated to compliance and operational issues, which has freed up time for more professional learning. Even with fewer dollars available for professional learning, we have offered more opportunities outside of the instructional day and this seems to be met with some increased enthusiasm. For example, attendance at after-school and summer institute learning sessions has increased. We have just introduced a Master’s of Education program and additional qualifications courses in partnership with universities. We are also seeing wider take-up with our leadership programming. Indeed, at the heart

of this programming is a shift in the way we support learning: our leaders, managers and teachers are participating in intensive coaching and facilitation, which helps to support learning in context. Because we see learning through an inquiry and developmental lens, we are able to engage in conversations that support the transfer of ideas into action. Increasingly, we see principals asking open-ended questions and explicitly creating safe conditions for learning conversations. They are recognizing the value in allowing teachers to process the work collaboratively and are deliberately limiting the amount of time they talk at staff.

Since our efforts began in 2010, our theory of action has been to build the capacity of our principals' instructional leadership capacity so that they in turn can build the instructional leadership capacity of their teachers. Steven Katz has served as a critical friend and helped us to refine our thinking and the support that we provide to principals. The primary vehicle for principal capacity building has been the Principal Learning Team and over the years the learning has become more focussed. This may be explained by continual development of our "intelligent components" or system expectations. Most recently we have introduced a system-wide learning conversation protocol, which has led to greater precision and deeper learning. (The protocol is attached in Appendix A). We are beginning to recognize that teacher-inquiry based learning, has not been examined with the same rigour. Before 2010, the inquiry cycle was a compliance driven rigid structure, reliant on release time and did not allow for deep collaborative assessment and reflection that generates professional learning. While we are glad that we jettisoned the pre-2010 model, we still need to explore the function of teacher collaborative teams and consider how we can create greater clarity, optimize the use of time and employ clearer protocols without stifling the voice, efficacy and creative thinking of our teachers.

What our teacher, leader and service leader survey data tells us is that the conditions in which our employees work are increasingly conducive to learning; people report being able to share their thinking and feel comfortable "not knowing" or making mistakes. While change in staff approaches to learning is shifting, we

have yet to see a measurable and direct relationship between improved achievement results and our efforts with collaborative inquiry. As well, we need to find ways to work with more precision; for example, we need to regularly examine quality evidence while engaging in collaborative inquiry processes.

Creating conditions that enable collaborative inquiry for staff have been somewhat easy; creating those similar conditions that allow students to thrive this way within their classrooms represents a seismic shift for our teaching staff. To that end, we are asking our students about their impressions of learning. Student voice is collected through system-led and school-initiated surveys. Students are telling us they want to be more engaged in the learning and more connected to their teachers.

So, where once we were encouraging staff to participate in collaborative inquiry, we are now reaching beyond staff and including students in this approach to learning. This has led to the next step in our journey: We are creating “personalized, collaborative, inquiry-based learning environments” for each student from kindergarten to grade 12 and recognize that technology plays a key role in this work. We call this evolution, “Transforming Learning Everywhere (TLE).” Fullan and Langworthy’s *A Rich Seam*¹ has helped to clarify the development of our ideas. We acknowledge the critical role of technology and we are emphasizing the foundational role played by meaningful pedagogy and supportive learning conditions. We have recognized that we need to set our expectations high for student learning and engagement so we have settled on three broad learning outcomes for schools to focus on. They are: critical literacy, higher order thinking and problem solving.

We deliberately have not used the word “program” or “initiative” as we describe TLE because we believe this *is* the work. We are imbedding TLE into our school improvement practices and other structures to reinforce that this is central to our practice. And, importantly, we are recognizing the power of messaging to simplify this work and thus the steering team has synthesized TLE into 3 key messages:

¹ Fullan, M & Langworthy, M (2014) *A Rich Seam*.

1. Transforming Classrooms
2. Transforming Relationships
3. Transforming Learning Opportunities

In the 2013-2014 year, we put a pause on our district-led School Effectiveness process while we were working to make the school improvement process more consistent and meaningful across the system. We also needed to consider how to dovetail this TLE work with our school improvement work. Our goal is always to generate an intelligent/responsive solution. To tackle implementation, we gathered a diverse range of system and school based leaders to map out a path for optimizing the use of professional development days to engage all schools in a continuous school improvement process. This process stresses that school improvement and capacity building planning should be informed by the student needs. Essentially, teachers are using a marker-student approach to inform the school's learning direction. Student work is on the table and the focus of an individual teacher's collaborative inquiry and also contributes to staff-wide learning; trailing indicator data such as EQAO also help to inform the planning but they do not take centre stage as they once did. When teachers participate in this type of collaborative problem solving, they are identifying what might be their next best move to support the student's learning. The teachers return to their next staff-meeting ready to share their learning. At the same time, they are identifying what they need to learn in order to support the students. The principal and direction teams are using teacher-learning needs to chart out the next step in the school's staff learning and continuous school improvement plan.

Our hope is that this systematic approach will reach more teachers. We have previously relied on release time to build capacity but too few teachers are impacted. In our current approach, release time is allocated in an iterative way to meet the learning needs that emerge within a school. The role of the superintendent is to engage in monthly visits to coach principals and monitor progress and use of the release time. This leads to a differentiated, responsive support model; not all

schools get the same amount of support. Importantly, the school superintendents check in with each other weekly to discuss how this process and the continuous school improvement work is going. This does not lend itself to true consistency but provides greater coherence.

All of the critical pieces are beginning to fit into place across the system. For example, system-wide inquiry drive professional growth plans are beginning to align. Essentially, the learning plans focus on those we serve. The teachers are examining student work collaboratively to consider what learning needs to occur and this informs the school-learning plan. The school-learning plan reflects teachers' needs by division, department or grade. The teachers' learning needs inform the principals' learning plan, and the principals' learning needs inform the superintendents' learning plan. However, the provincial Principals' Performance Appraisal system does not align with this model. So, to promote coherence, we have changed the format of the leader's annual learning plan and adopted the inquiry framework to make it directly relevant to the principal's and superintendent's learning work. Leaders are now using an inquiry framework to support their learning plan rather than an irrelevant template. What we have not fully explored is whether we can do the same with the teacher's annual plan to dovetail with the inquiry framework; in this way, student-learning needs would officially inform the learning of the teacher.

However, as we actualize this plan, we are encountering some issues. For example, as we dug into the work, we began to question whether the three broad learning outcomes (higher order thinking, critical literacy, and problem solving) were the best choice: how did we land on these? Did we settle too quickly without fully exploring what they each meant and how they differed? As educators we often speak in cloudy language, assuming that we all share an understanding what is meant by these concepts. To address this, we quickly assembled some of our system's best thinkers (consultants, principals and superintendents) to look to the

research and create some accessible “one pagers” for each of these three broad learning outcomes, fully recognizing that the definitions may evolve as we evolve.

We also know that this continuous school improvement approach represents a shift for our system and if we are not careful, it may lead to confusion or worse, attributions that we are retreating back to a top-down leadership approach. While many leaders are co-constructing this school improvement model with us, currently, the only teacher representation on the system committee are consultants; we need to tap classroom based teacher voice to ensure we are heading in a direction that responds to their needs and speaks in a language they can relate to.

In addition, we believe in providing boundaries without stifling our professionals. However, with precious little professional development time for each teacher, we fit a lot of content into the professional development day and reduce the processing time that leads to shared problem solving and shared ownership. We all know this does not reflect how people learn. So, we need to clarify our “learning goals” so that staffs can construct their own understanding and ultimately their own “success criteria.” Going slow to go fast may be the strategy we need to adopt to allow structured discussion time for teachers to deeply process this thinking. And, if we know and communicate our own learning goals, we will be able to collect relevant teacher voice and student achievement data that informs the quality of this effort. This may help us to find a way to gather meaningful system-wide evidence while complying with ministry expectations regarding data collection.

Furthermore, we are wondering whether in our enthusiasm for creating conditions to promote inquiry, we may have lost sight of focussed instruction. This is causing us to revive the thinking of Hattie’s *Visible Learning*; a powerful resource that we had put aside recently. We need to return to focussed instruction and be clearer about how and when to use direct and constructive approaches and support the teacher in understanding one’s role as activator in either.

Another dilemma is with our secondary schools. The EQAO results in grade 3 and 6 have been steadily improving. However, our secondary literacy and Math results still need attention. We wonder whether we dedicate enough problem-solving energy to our secondary schools. And, perhaps we need to actively question whether what works for one panel, will work for the other. For example, across the system we have moved to relying on leading indicator data more than trailing indicator data to support school improvement. However, we know that secondary schools have a lot of trailing indicator data (such as pass rates, mark distribution) that is worth our focus. We have used it before but are we using it in a way that generates precise reflection to action? Perhaps we need to reconsider how SMART goals or the use of targets can help us with this secondary dilemma.

While it is still early, there may be nuggets of learning emerging from a project occurring in one area of the board. Sixteen schools, from both the secondary and elementary panels, are participating in the “New Pedagogies for Deep Learning” globalized project facilitated by Michael Fullan. The project provides rubrics (learning progressions) teeming with meaningful language in the areas of school conditions, learning tasks and student outcomes. To minimize the sentiment that this is “an add-on” or worse, “an initiative” this work is imbedded into existing school improvement structures such as monthly superintendent visits, continuous school improvement planning, Principal Learning Team work, teacher networks, directions team planning and teacher collaborative learning time (formerly TLCP). The tools and protocols are providing structure and precision to the learning conversations; they explicitly communicate what student learning looks like. The ‘evidence’ brought to the learning conversations provide richness for learning but also may tell us whether TLE is having an impact on student learning. These rubrics are helping us to move from a dualistic discussion about whether the learning is evident or not to a richer discussion about quality of the learning by using performance standards that recognizes learning as developmental. The NPDL dovetails so neatly with our ambitions regarding TLE that we have begun to

consider how we can move beyond the sixteen schools and engage other schools within the system.

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board has been engaged in continuous rigorous inquiry for four years and as this case study suggests we are encountering gains and challenges. This case study that narrowed in on the challenges associated with coherent instructional guidance system and job-embedded professional development has provided a lens for us to pause, reflect and assess our actions, to be courageous in exposing our blind spots and consider next steps. We have questioned small and large issues, potential implications and opportunities for growth. It has been a meta-inquiry of sorts, an inquiry about our inquiry work. And if Leithwood is correct when he says, “strong districts do add significant value to the learning of students beyond the contribution of schools and classrooms” it has all been worthwhile.