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A Coherent Instructional Guidance System

Halton District School Board

Background

The Halton District School Board (HDSB) is sharing this case study with the intent of demonstrating how a high achieving board has turned its attention to students who are often left behind. Left behind because we, as educators, don't see the disengaged students who are not the norm in our board. Our Halton journey over the last few years indicated to our senior leadership team that, despite having been near the top of provincial results for numerous years, we have continued to have students who do not succeed in the ways in which all parents want their children to succeed. This was initially drawn to our attention when our superintendent of program pointed out to us that our reading achievement levels for primary students significantly lagged behind our EQAO results. An analysis of data from the research of Doug Willms illustrated to the senior team that the odds for the success of these students would be an uphill battle throughout their education and throughout their lives. Thus, we began to look deeper into the system supports for our low achieving students.

This case study will address how we utilized the following characteristics of Strong districts, a coherent instructional guidance system and job-embedded professional development for all members of the organization to address this issue. It will illustrate how the creation and use of our "learning needs model – *the egg*" (created in 2010 as a principal professional development model) has guided senior leaders in a systematic approach to address gaps in teacher and leader knowledge of content and effective pedagogy in literacy and mathematics instruction and assessment.

When we initially turned our eyes and minds towards students who were not succeeding, Family of Schools superintendents did an analysis of school/community data for all of our elementary schools. Through an examination of the following data, we ranked the schools from those requiring greatest support to those requiring lesser support. (This strategy was new to us as we have always resisted “ranking” our schools, given the impact this can have across our communities.) The data we used included: EQAO trend data, PM Benchmark (PMB) data, socio-economic data drawn from the census, the Halton School Needs Index, the type of Ministry support/resources currently provided to each school, suspension data, Individual Education Plan (IEP) data, school size and single principal schools.

Sharing this data at the senior administrative council meetings gave rise to many questions: *What were we doing to raise the standards in some of our neediest schools? Why was there an apparent disconnect between our EQAO results (particularly Grades 3 and 6, as well as Grade 9 Applied Mathematics) with our report card data and our system PMB and Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) data?* These questions gave rise to our team beginning to question whether we should be differentiating our support to schools. Perhaps treating every school the same, as was the Halton tradition, was not addressing equity. As a senior team, we did not have an understanding of why so many students remained “unsuccessful”. While having 75% to 90% of our students achieving standard in provincial results, we grappled with two questions:

1. Why were some students continually unsuccessful (the 10 to 25% who did not meet provincial standard); and,
2. Were we, as a Board, providing the right balance of learning for our principals and teachers to ensure that our schools had strong instructional leaders and effective teachers who could meet the needs of all of our students?

With that concept in mind, our senior team began to implement differentiation of supports to our schools with low EQAO results, low PM Benchmark results and that

were located in needier socio-economic areas of the board. Our initial action was to provide up to \$10,000 dollars to a few schools. This money was to be used by the principal to provide opportunities for their “needy” students to more deeply engage in schoolwork and school life. A small start, but a huge step! We then began to differentiate technology support based upon this data; using the data to differentiate central staff support as well soon followed this. It was this initiative that opened us to questioning other areas of success for students.

At the same time as the senior team was looking at this data, some school principals and superintendents with strong curriculum background, were expressing concern that literacy in our primary classrooms was not addressing the needs of the 20 to 25% of students who were not reading at standard. Observation of comprehensive literacy practice evidenced a wide variance in teacher understanding of what constituted “guided reading”. A similar concern about mathematics instruction in the junior and primary grades began to arise from a few of our mathematically strong elementary principals – our EQAO results, particularly for junior, followed the provincial pattern of a downward trend.

As the program department and the Family of Schools superintendents began to dig into questioning the literacy approaches in our primary classrooms, not all principals saw the need to increase their instructional leadership - *why do I need to do things differently if my school is achieving well?* (It is important to note that this was not apathy, but rather, a positive outlook in schools that were achieving well, had a happy staff and contented community. Principals were not seeing the system overview of all students.)

Concurrent with this, the program department had embarked upon a review of the early literacy strategies and the capacity of our primary teachers to support our weakest readers. With a firm belief that “Every Student Can Learn to Read”, our program superintendent and staff implemented a specific plan to provide training to our primary teachers to increase their capacity to use reading data (running records) to target struggling readers and bring them up to grade standard. This

required the Family of Schools superintendents to support a system wide message that the systematic collection and use of PM Data, twice a year, was a required task of all K-3 teachers. (As was the case with the required focus of principals on instructional leadership, many primary teachers resisted a greater focus on teaching reading. They believed their students were doing fine...in some cases, teachers believed they could not help the two to four students per class (20-25%) who were not reading, or who were not reading at expected level.) While our Board had collected this system data for a number of years, there was little or no follow up on its use. The superintendent of program partnered with our research department and the monitoring of the PM data entry, and its use, became a priority. Data was shared with all Family of Schools superintendents. Praise was given as often as possible to schools that were using the data. The monitoring of the system data drew attention to our comparatively low PM results. This brought forth the need to embed a primary reading goal into our Multi-Year Plan, not something we had ever done before.

The supports, messaging and the monitoring that accompanied this focus on the use of PM data included:

- We developed/published a four page glossy pamphlet *Every Student Can Learn to Read* that articulated the system messaging for instructional and assessment strategies in all literacy classrooms and released it at our August 2012 Leadership conference. All primary teachers received a copy; this desktop pamphlet focused teacher attention on instructional reading strategies to address individual student need.
- Running Records Institutes were offered by program staff. This multi-session series occurred after school and provided multiple three-hour sessions of learning for primary teachers who chose to sign up. Sessions were offered every second week and involved an application task that participants had to use with their students in the in-between week. Promotion and marketing were strategically used by program staff in response to a perceived system learning

need .The day that the Running Records Institute sign-up opened, the Institute filled – 100 spots! The teacher learning need was there! (A second Running Record Institute was immediately released in a different geographic area of the board – this too filled up.) Principals were encouraged to attend the institutes with their teacher teams.

- Central program staff was provided with the list of Institute participants who taught in their schools. The central staff was required to provide on-going and subsequent support.
- An intensive reading intervention program was introduced in 15 schools. Staff was dedicated to supporting targeted struggling readers every day for thirty minutes for sixteen weeks. The Literacy Resource Teachers who were dedicated to this initiative became experts in reading instruction and were subsequently used to help train all grade one teachers and some grade two teachers.
- A principal learning team, led by a knowledgeable principal, focused principal learning on the structures and supports needed in schools for effective literacy instruction – this was framed around the published resources *The 13 Parameters*, Sharratt and Fullan, 2005 as well as *Putting Faces on the Data What Great Leaders Do!* Sharratt and Fullan 2012. (Copies were later provided to every principal in the system).
- A principal learning team focused on learning more about guided reading – this was an area of diverse practice across our schools. We sought to clarify what guided reading was/was not, how data should be used, how often data was to be collected, and how principals could support and monitor their teachers to improve/implement this practice.
- A primary reading goal was included in our Multi Year Plan: *Every Kindergarten to Grade 3 student will receive intensive guided instruction in reading. Students who do not demonstrate movement toward their grade level target will be assessed and supported by a second tier of support.* The multi-year plan also included the following strategy: *100% of elementary principals and teachers will use a*

comprehensive literacy program incorporating phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

- A requirement of every elementary school to have a Data Wall in a teacher accessible location and a requirement of the school principal to facilitate/coordinate monthly data wall conversations was messaged and monitored across the system. Family of Schools learning time was utilized to support principal knowledge of actions to facilitate this.
- A deeper Program/FDK partnership was forged to engage teachers and ECEs in a deeper understanding of the need for guided reading/practice and use of data in FDK. (The initial implementation of FDK had focused so intently on the play-based learning environment, that teachers and ECEs needed to be trained in how to address literacy, and later, mathematics, in the FDK environment.)
- We included an FDK goal in our 2013-2014 Board Improvement Plan. *60% of Senior Kindergarten students will reach reading level 5 on PM Benchmarks through a balanced, play-based, guided and explicit instruction program.* We then provided release time with a requirement that every FDK teacher complete targeted instruction plans for up to five of their students who were “not yet reading”.
- We inserted an innovation goal into the Multi Year Plan and dedicated budget dollars to this. The Multi Year Plan goal is *Halton will optimize the resources and learning environments through innovative program delivery models and partnerships. HDSB will develop and implement a system innovation strategy.* This plan enabled teacher leaders to submit applications for money to lead innovative projects in their schools. These projects tended to focus on literacy, mathematics and technology. Teachers were connecting their inquiries to align their practice and improve pedagogy.

Each of these actions involved the careful and consistent monitoring of data: number of institute participants, schools the participants came from, whether or not the principal/vice principal accompanied staff at the institute learning, a principal

survey on the status and use of data walls, sharing of literacy pedagogy at Family of Schools, sharing of the reading intervention student data and parent feedback with trustees and senior administration.

Over the past two years, we have seen considerable change in classroom literacy practice, and the PM Benchmark data across the system shows outstanding growth in the reading skills of our students. Little by little, the classroom teachers delved into guided reading, embedding the use of running records on a regular basis; they were astounded by the growth in student abilities! This growth looked the same in our schools, both our neediest, and our larger more affluent schools. While we believe we have levelled the playing field for all of our students, we also believe we have changed the mindset of our classroom teachers, our principals and our superintendents. They now appear to believe *Every Student Can Learn to Read*. This belief is a result of learning of research-based practices in reading instruction at all levels of the system. We have a strong believe in the foundations of reading instruction, and we see that by providing resources to schools on a needs basis, has helped to enable all of our students to reach their goals.

We now have an enthused and committed team of 84 elementary principals who know what they need to do to “get kids reading” and who have become quite strong in their instructional guidance to staff. Superintendents and program staff have ample feedback from school principals, which evidences their commitment and excitement about the changes they are seeing in their staff and in student reading achievement. One principal expresses it in communication to the superintendent of program:

The level of excellence and school support (i.e. resources, programs and information) has been truly amazing. Administrators, teachers and support staff are becoming more aligned horizontally and vertically. The level of resources and data driven best practices that are now being shared and used in schools is simply amazing!!! I am seeing and hearing educators use consistent language (in both Numeracy and Literacy), assessment tools and teaching

practices that are not only engaging students but pushing achievement levels to higher levels of comprehension. In particular, the reading intervention program has changed the manner through which my teachers, students and parents approach and develop in Literacy. It is one of my greatest rewards as a Principal to see how my struggling readers complete the lessons/cycle being able to read. So simply- Thank you. You are making a HUGE difference in the lives of our students. You had the vision and determination to raise the bar in the instructional practices of our school board. Thank you for what you do.

The actions we utilized to address student literacy needs have been repeated in our actions to address the mathematics needs of our system. While we recognize the greatest student learning need is in the area of junior mathematics, as evidenced by the provincial EQAO results, we see the foundational skills acquired by students in the primary years (K – Grade 3) as contributing factors to success, or lack of it, in junior mathematics.

This year we devised a mathematics plan to address the declining math results in EQAO. Our math plan is focused on the learning needs of our students, classroom teachers, our principals and our superintendents. We believe that by addressing these needs, student results will increase. The math plan has three areas of focus:

1. Student needs: mental math, deepening understanding of the mathematics;
2. Teacher needs: capacity building in content knowledge for learning and teaching mathematics, strategies to make student thinking visible, and diagnostics; and,
3. Principal/superintendent needs: capacity building in recognizing and monitoring effective instruction and assessment in mathematics.

The key elements of our math plan revolve around professional development for classroom teachers. Our model for teacher professional development mimics the model for teacher literacy professional development:

- Clear and precise messaging from the senior team that “we are all going to address the math discrepancy”. A strategy we used this year is to devote seven of the nine Family of Schools meetings to mathematics leadership, monitoring, and understanding of the strategies teachers are expected to be using in their classrooms;
- Provision of mathematics K-12 principal learning teams;
- Five part primary and junior mathematics institutes for teacher learning with modules two weeks apart so teachers can do their “classroom task” and bring back observations and evidence of student work and student’s at work;
- Mental Math inquiries;
- Board wide Grade 3 and Grade 6 math teacher training to deepen knowledge of effective math learning for all students;
- Staffing dedicated to math coaches in almost half of our elementary schools;
- Central program staff are assigned to provide in-school support for the mathematics learning;
- The implementation of adaptive learning technology, DreamBox, the majority of our schools. This program enables students to work at their level and is moved to the next level based upon how they respond versus the correctness of answer. Teachers can track the student data and the program has a home component. (The use of DreamBox has significantly deepened student engagement and teachers are expressing surprise at how much their students are capable of);
- Funding support for additional qualifications in mathematics;
- Family of Schools co-learning sessions to deepen principal instructional leadership in order to facilitate professional learning and dialogue around effective practice in identifying and monitoring best practice in mathematics; and,
- A commitment of the Family of Schools superintendents to one hour of monthly math training at their School Operations meetings. (While we were only able to do four sessions, we see this as a great opportunity for superintendents to more effectively monitor the work when they visit their schools.)

All professional development sessions gather feedback data from the participants. As an example, at every session of a mathematics institute, mental math inquiry, etc., feedback on how the learning from the previous session was applied in their classrooms is gathered and teacher reflection on their confidence in continuing to implement the strategies. Program and research staff analyzes and shares the feedback with participants, and the feedback is used in planning for subsequent learning. Feedback from teachers and data on student performance is showing us that the confidence level (and hence engagement) of our teachers is increasing at the same time as student performance is rising, e.g., at the conclusion of a Mental Math collaborative inquiry series on teaching Multiplication and Division in grades 4 to 6, three out of four teacher participants reported they were highly confident. Our Primary Mental Math Inquiry's data for student pre and post tests show significant improvement in student ability to explain their thinking and perform math tasks. Sample feedback is below:

Thanks to all of you for the "ah ha" moments of this course. I taught for 6 years... have discovered what could be another passion--teaching Math. I often wish that Math was presented to me as a child in the way and with the concrete materials and schema that I have experienced through this course. Now I have the opportunity to teach Math in a way that honours and supports students' thinking and prior knowledge and experience--empowering!

Thanks for the wonderful opportunity to participate in the Math AQ. I realize this was a huge investment for the Board and I am truly grateful. The learning was incredible. As an FDK teacher I have been challenged! The instructor's passion for math was contagious and I was always inspired to be a better Math teacher when I left her class!

It has been some of the best PD I have ever done and I am far more confident about math and what it can look like in Halton than when the course started. I look forward to being able to 'talk the talk' with my colleagues, apply what I

have learned wherever I can and support my teachers as they work through it all too.

Much of the research will tell us that change requires clarity of message, provision of resources and training, and time for practice. In looking at the Halton instructional guidance provided for elementary literacy and mathematics change, and at the job-embedded professional development strategy, we are seeing change happen. It began very slowly with a renewed clarity of the expectation that all children would learn to read and that all children can do mathematics. The work of the system was to ensure this message was heard across the board, training was provided, resources were put in schools, and the principals and superintendents monitored what was happening. In the past, Halton has done some work with Steven Katz, through their leadership conference. Katz's perspective on the need for prescription preceding professional judgement when implementing change that would be sustainable is descriptive of the pathway Halton has taken with its focus on staff and student learning in literacy and mathematics. As stated near the beginning of this case study, many teachers and principals did not see the need for a change in instructional and assessment strategies, particularly in literacy. In the words of one teacher as expressed to a superintendent visiting an FDK classroom:

Are you the superintendent that sent that system message about FDK teachers doing guided reading? Do you know how much that has frustrated me, I do not believe I should be doing that, you are ruining my program.

This was at a time when over 53% of our senior kindergarten students had just entered grade 1 below reading level. Today, after much prescription, support, training, resources and high levels of expectation, 70% of our FDK seniors have improved their reading level, with 61% of them reaching the expected level as of June 2014. One doubts that would have been possible without ambitious aligned goals, clear expectations and supports to classroom teachers and principals, and an expectation that teachers serve students – this we do to ensure students have a

pathway that they are able to travel rather than a series of insurmountable obstacles throughout their educational journey.

Suffice it to say, on that same school visit, two doors down the hallway, another teacher said to the same superintendent:

Are you the superintendent who sent that message about us ensuring we provide guided reading to our students – I want to thank you for the clarity because it enabled me to dig deeper with my colleagues and my students. You made my job easier!

In closing, while *the Ontario Leadership Framework* and the *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* document do not often appear on our senior team agendas, over the years these documents have provided our principals and our superintendents with clear expectations on our actions to ensure student achievement advances. Without a firm belief in the ability of all of our students to achieve, it is difficult to activate a growth mind set in all staff. Using the data and focusing on every student almost always gets the buy in from the classroom teacher. Teachers want what is best for their students. Beliefs only change when teachers see that a strategy has moved a student forward. Hence, the critical importance of using data on student achievement, data that is as close to the classroom as possible. For us, it has been the use of data that has enabled us to activate a different way of looking at how we meet the needs of students who are not succeeding. How do we connect those needs to what we need to provide teachers with, be it learning, resources and/or clarity of expectation? And for the senior team, how do we ensure that we remain focused on student achievement? We do it through the data, knowledge of research in evidence-based practices to support student learning, achievement and engagement, and a firm belief in student ability.