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Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Ottawa Catholic District School Board

Problem of Practice

How can the leadership team foster a learning-oriented organizational improvement process for 4000 employees spread out over 82 sites that impacts student achievement?

Identification

Initial discussions at executive council (academic superintendents, business superintendents, deputy director, and director of education) identified a need to scale our existing networks if we hoped to impact system change. EQAO data and quantitative indicator data combined with qualitative data signalled a need for strategic action to impact system change.

Initial Conditions

The board priorities had been established centrally for many years. An expanding central team was creating the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) and school principals and small school-based student success teams created School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement (SIPSA). These key areas that had the ability to help the board staff focus its initiatives were loosely coupled and appeared to be add-ons to the existing good work taking place across the District.

Creating the Conditions For Success

The board priorities are precise and targeted. The three key priorities of: Success for Students, Success for Staff, and Stewardship of Resources, became the key framework at all major retreats and strategic planning sessions. The board priorities are now reviewed on an annual basis during the Trustee Retreat, during the Senior Executive Team retreat, by our Catholic School Parent's Association and by all principals, managers, and coordinators during a larger Catholic Learning Leaders meeting (CLL). Google Docs was the tool used to allow for collaboration and input. Each review ensures that our budget, and our time, and our initiatives are aligned to these three board priorities.

School Improvement Plans For Student Achievement (SIPSA)

School Improvement Plans for Student Achievement are now dynamically created and reflect the Catholic Professional Learning Cycle (Plan/Envision – Act/Sow – Observe & Gather/Nurture – Reflect/Discern). Schools receive central release time to work on their plans. School teams are brought together in clusters to share and exchange strategies used in their plans. Each professional activity day includes time allocated to reviewing and modifying the school improvement plan for student achievement (SIPSA) to ensure that the plan is a living document. The plan is created in Google Docs and shared centrally and accessible to each family of school superintendent. Tools such as Google Hangouts allow for networking and collaborating across the district without the need for mandatory face to face meetings. Student Success staff engage in a “SIPSA Sort” where they go through all 82 plans and group them by common focus. This creates a natural network of schools that can work collaboratively and share practices. The SIPSA Sort is also used to inform the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement.

Board Improvement Plan For Student Achievement (BIPSA)

The Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement is divided into four main pillars. A superintendent is assigned to lead each of the pillars. An

interdepartmental team is created to ensure that each of the pillars reflects major ministry initiatives and reflects the information gathered from the SIPSA Sorts. Time for common meetings is scheduled a year in advance to ensure that priority is given to monitoring and modifying the BIPSA. A researcher is assigned to each of the four pillars of the BIPSA to ensure that evidence informed decision making is leading to action. The BIPSA is also created in Google Docs to allow for continuous input and modification. The BIPSA is reviewed by all principals, managers, and coordinators and is presented to trustees at board meetings and during a trustee retreat for further modifications. This cyclical process creates the necessary accountability to ensure that the plans are no longer binders on shelves that are looked at once a year.

Learning Networks

The SIPSAs, the BIPSA and the board priorities are key to the success of each of our learning networks. Principals meet with their family of school superintendent at pre-scheduled times during the year to focus on research based practice that is reflected in their school improvement plans. In addition to the family of school network, each principal belongs to a smaller cluster of schools that is often based on the outcome of the SIPSA sort and/or based on like neighbourhood clusters where they can focus on similar aspects of their school improvement plans. Technology is used to facilitate the sharing of evidence and school staff is provided with release time to meet in their cluster or triads of schools.

Turning Points

A significant turning point in the success of our structure included scheduling meetings one year in advance. This simple step took away many of the competing schedule conflicts that existed in previous years. Providing staff with a tool such as Google Docs, allowed for more collaboration and helped to keep the school improvement plans dynamic. Providing time at family of school principal meetings allowed principals an opportunity to modify and review their plans with a trusted

critical colleague who was focused on a similar goal. Keeping the same three targeted board priorities has allowed all employees across the organization to see their important role in a learning organization.

Learning Organization

The structures that have been put in place have allowed our board to transition from a system that was focused on a performance stance to a system that is now focused on a learning stance. Evidence includes the increased number of staff participating in learning networks, the evidence gathered during student success visits and the district support process, and our overall EQAO data and student success indicator data.

Conclusion

A culture of learning requires a commitment of all employees regardless of their role in the system. Providing leadership opportunities in all areas of the board will result in distributed leadership and validation of the ability to lead without a title. Staff that is fortunate to serve in a formal leadership position need to create the structures to allow others to share their talents and ideas. Technology can help to provide tools to improve collaboration, if a trusting environment has been fostered. Innovation and change can foster in a learning network where staff see their role in the overall success of the organization.