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Deliberate and Consistent Use of Multiple Sources of Evidence to Inform Decisions

Rainbow District School Board

Background

Rainbow District School Board covers a geographic area of more than 14,757 square kilometers in the heart of Rainbow Country. The Board provides quality programs and character education to students in Sudbury, Espanola, Manitoulin and Shining Tree in 35 elementary schools and 10 secondary schools. The Board also operates educational programs at the Ruth MacMillan Centre, Frank Flowers School and Cecil Facer Secondary School.

Our vision statement is: *We are leaders in learning inspiring success for all students by reaching minds and touching hearts.* Our mission statement is: *We bring learning to life enabling students to fulfill their aspirations.*

This case study describes how the district has gone about enhancing the condition of two of the nine characteristics of strong districts: deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions and job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization.

Why these Characteristic?

The district's Strategic Directions, 2011-2015, were created in the fall of 2011. As these directions come up for renewal, we want to continue to emphasize the importance of our principals and vice-principals as "learning leaders" in their schools. As well, the number of Rainbow students reaching level three on EQAO tests of reading and writing has steadily increased over the past five years, at a rate slightly better than the provincial average. Pass rates have also increased. We want to continue to enhance learning opportunities for students in reading and writing as well as in other areas of the curriculum.

What We Did?

For the past 7 years, we have allocated Ministry and district funds to each elementary and secondary school so they can engage in "learning cycles". Learning cycles provide opportunities for teachers, administrators and program staff to come together at the school level to work on improving learning opportunities for

students. The district's learning cycle work is the most likely cause of the improved student achievement results mentioned above.

For purposes of this case, we focused on "learning cycles" in four schools undertaken with two goals in mind: to increase student pass rates as well as EQAO achievement results; to increase the roles of principal and vice-principal as learning leaders, as well as to encourage teachers to play a more significant role in learning leadership.

To pursue these two goals, senior district leaders enacted those leadership practices described as part of deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions and job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization in *Strong Districts and Their Leadership*. The first recommends that senior leaders build district and school staff's capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions by:

- using data from all available sources to assist decisions making in the central office;
- insisting on the use of the best available research and other systematically collected evidence to inform decisions wherever possible;
- encouraging collaboration in the interpretation and use of data;
- building system's capacity and disposition for using systematically-collected data to inform as many decisions as possible
- providing training for principals and staff on the use of data and research literature to sustain decision-making; and
- modeling evidence-informed decision.

In all four schools, literacy was the focus for the learning cycles. Data were provided by the central office, as well as EQAO, to make informed decisions. The secondary literacy coordinator worked to ensure that the best available research was available to staffs for improving literacy opportunities for students. Staff at all four schools became very adept at interpreting student data and student work to further inform instructional decisions.

Learning cycles provided wonderful opportunities for evidence-informed decision making and for ensuring that all teachers engaged with one another and their administrators in deciding on the next best steps to take to improve student learning.

Job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization encourages senior leaders to "provide job-embedded professional development for staff by:

- providing extensive professional development opportunities for both teachers and school-level leaders, most of it through some form of learning community of on-the-job context;

- using internal system networks as central mechanism for the professional development of school-level leaders;
- aligning the content of professional development with the capacities needs for the district and school improvement;
- requiring individual staff growth plans to be aligned with district and school improvement priorities;
- holding staff accountable for applying new capacities by monitoring the implementation for school improvement plans.

Not only were the learning cycles in our four schools driven by data, they were also based on job-embedded professional learning. Teams met approximately six to eight half days to further explore literacy strategies in a variety of content areas. Teachers and principals, vice-principals created their annual learning plans and growth plans based on literacy instructional and assessment strategies.

Outcomes

Principals and teachers met and discussed the importance of the classroom library and its relationship to reading achievement, looked at how often the students chose the classroom library and worked together with the rest of the staff to develop guidelines for a quality classroom library. Staff involved in the learning cycles worked to select books from the school library, to supplement their classroom libraries that matched the Learning Cycle target goals.

Books were organized according to genres and curriculum focus and high interest books were gathered specifically to engage non-readers. Grade-level curriculum expectations were listed on the exterior of book bins and the school library was reorganized to make it more user-friendly for teachers.

All the teachers and administrators involved in the learning cycles spoke highly of the opportunity to come together in a focused way to collaborate with one another.

Current Status

Rainbow District School Board continues to provide funds for school-based learning cycles. In the past, only certain elementary schools received program support whereas all secondary schools received such support. We have become much more strategic about which schools, elementary and secondary, receive program support (i.e., consultant attached to the learning cycles) based on student needs, staff needs and the focus of the school. For example, we have twenty-two elementary schools focused on math and are able to provide a program consultant for each of these schools for their school-based learning cycles, which include co-teaching in a math classroom each time.

Advice for Others

Our advice to others, based on our experiences to date is to (a) find ways to eliminate barriers for principals and vice-principals to engage in school-based professional learning and (b) respond to the needs of specific schools by providing differentiated levels of support (e.g., funding and program staff).