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Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board

Background

The Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board has celebrated Catholic education in Huron and Perth counties since 1848. We are a small school system that celebrates our rural heritage and urban living with 4200 students and 18 schools in southwestern Ontario. Our school board spans 6000 square kilometres along Lake Huron from Goderich to Grand Bend and encompasses vibrant rural communities from Listowel to St. Mary's, Ontario and the City of Stratford. A large percentage of our residents live in rural areas – 33% in Perth County and 60% in Huron County compared to 14% of Ontario's population. Huron and Perth counties host 4700 farms and comprise 9% of Ontario's farmland.

The Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board is rooted in the development of all persons and employs 1000 employees with an annual budget of \$59 million dollars. Our schools are sacred learning spaces in which children and youth grow within an inclusive model to nurture a Christ-centred environment, provide student-focused opportunities and support the growth of the whole person. We are committed to shared leadership and improvement processes that are informed by practical, evidence-informed strategies.

This case study describes how the Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board has enhanced the conditions of two of the nine characteristics of strong districts: learning-oriented organizational improvement processes and job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization. These two characteristics highlight the salient focus of our system on an inclusive model to support the achievement of students and align our improvement processes.

Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Learning-oriented improvement processes are rooted in organizations that:

- have a coherent approach to improvement which usually includes a small number of key improvement goals consistently pursued over sustained periods of time;
- proceed in manageable stages using the early stages as learning opportunities;
- do not overload schools with excessive numbers of initiatives;

- make considerable effort to build the capacities needed by school staffs for successful school improvement;
- encourage improvement efforts in schools guided by explicit and well-tested frameworks, policies and practices, as well as widely shared goals that permit local adaptation.
- clearly define the role for all stakeholders to play in this approach to school improvement;
- integrate new initiatives into existing routines and practices. Established structures and procedures are maintained and built. Care is taken to ensure continuity and extension of core values.

Job-embedded Professional Learning for all Members of the Organization

The *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* study denotes that professional learning is optimally based in school systems that:

- devote very little time to routine administrative matters in meetings of teachers and principals. Meeting time formerly used for such matters is now devoted almost entirely to professional development;
- carefully align professional development with board and school improvement initiatives;
- differentiate professional development opportunities in response to the needs of individual schools, administrators and teachers.
- provide extensive opportunities for teachers and leaders to further develop their expertise;
- provide time for collaborative work on instructional improvement initiatives. Schools are provided with the resources they need to provide this time and leaders are provided with training in how best to facilitate such work;
- align the best evidence about how people learn with all system-sponsored professional development.

Why These Characteristics?

Our story is an evolution based on the need to change our focus toward deep implementation of teaching and learning strategies. The change we have nurtured was not a linear process that was neatly completed in steps but an iterative transformation. We have implemented changes to our board and school improvement processes to move away from a disjointed process to one that is aligned, evidence-based and collaborative. The need for change was evident in the achievement of our students and resulted in renewed goals for excellence in teaching and learning. Specifically, we had experienced a trend in which the literacy achievement of our students was not optimal and required a new commitment to quality instruction, monitoring and crucial conversations in support of professional learning.

In order to support effective learning, our improvement processes needed to match our empirical evidence for achievement and the corollary need for meaningful professional learning. Throughout our process of change, our focus was placed on processes that were based on quality, informed by research and an intentional focus on achievable standards for all members of our school communities.

What was the State of the Characteristic When We Began?

Our initial board improvement process was an isolated act, where a small team of central office staff would meet, look at EQAO data and determine the goals for the year. The plan was shared with trustees and duly submitted to the ministry. The plan tended to be a rather long to-do list for the people at the table, and may or may not have been shared with school principals to inform their school improvement process. At the end of the school year, the same team would discuss the extent to which the goals had been completed. This process was mimicked at the school level. For example, principals would gather a small team, look at their EQAO data and develop a to-do list of goals, with little sharing of the plans other than for submission. The process was seen as an exercise in compliance rather than a meaningful process that would inform decisions and practices either at the school or board level.

What We Did to Improve

The leadership and involvement of the Ministry of Education was an important opportunity for us to review our focus on educational improvement. We began at the board level by looking at our lowest-performing schools. With the support of the ministry Turnaround School project, an outside evaluator reviewed the school data, completed a school inspection to review practices and created a report. Many staff members who believed that the practices they were trying to implement were not valued perceived this process as unkind. Others accepted the report and worked hard to change practices. The ministry supplied funding to ensure that we were not lacking in resources and a literacy resource teacher was provided as an additional support.

Our early plans resulted in some positive changes in the instructional practices of teachers. We then moved to imitate the process in other low performing schools. We quickly noticed that changes in teachers' practices came at a cost. Practices changed as a result of the perceived need to comply rather than a sense of purpose to meet students' needs. We found that practices were difficult to sustain and staff morale decreased significantly.

At the board level, our focus turned to developing a process that would encourage staff to see the need for immediate changes in practice but also simultaneously value all persons as professionals. We feel that the arrival of the *School Effectiveness Framework* (SEF) was a critical element to our renewed focus on improvement planning as a school system. Upon the arrival of the SEF, the indicators were shared

throughout the system as a positive tool for growth. The indicators were used as part of our school review processes and to champion the efforts already put into place. In addition, we used the SEF as a discussion point to foster meaningful changes and to focus change in the most impactful way through a culture of respectful dialogue and coaching.

Our schools were provided with funds for professional learning that allowed staff to collaborate on school self-assessments. The Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board uses a model called “Pause and Reflect” near the end of the year to discern our achievement of the indicators of the *School Effectiveness Framework*. All teaching staff are released for one half day to review the indicators in the SEF that they have been using to focus their improvement efforts. During this time, principals facilitate the discussion to review the evidence that indicates the amount of understanding and implementation of the indicators that has occurred throughout the year.

The staff collaboratively decides whether an indicator has reached sustainability within the school and can be included in their best practices, and a new indicator selected, or whether more work is needed to reach sustainability. Successes are celebrated, while areas needing continued focused are discussed and reframed. All teaching staff have input on how they are using research-based practices to impact student learning. The information drawn out of this discussion is used by the school improvement team to inform the next iteration of the school improvement plan.

What Was the Response of the Groups to the Work We Were Doing?

Our early focus on school improvement provided a meaningful opportunity for our senior team to reflect upon the implementation of school effectiveness. We feel that our early attempts resulted in positive changes to the improvement processes that we engage both with schools and at the board level. Rather than create a board improvement plan for student achievement (BIPSA) in isolation, school improvement plans for student achievement (SIPSA) were collected prior to the creation of the BIPSA and considered when creating board goals. Our new model resulted in reducing the number of goals and made them more manageable and achievable. We had found that the improvement goals did not change much from one year to the next and did not allow for a sustained focus on identified areas. Our process still proved to be rather bulky and it was challenging to see a direct impact on yearly achievement scores.

As the process evolved, we relied less and less on the trailing EQAO data and started to include more timely data (e.g. report card marks, IEP goals, reading assessment data and formative evaluations). The use of computerized data warehouses meant that this data could be collected and organized for schools to match their improvement goals and measure the impact in a timely fashion. The importance of classroom-based data, including teacher observations, reading assessment data and

on-going assessment became very clear. We found that we were able to develop a process to use reading assessment data at early and regular intervals to make decisions about the required levels of support. Eventually, with a change in professional learning, we were able to also use qualitative data to study the impact of our instructional changes on student attitudes, perceptions and student achievement. All of this now informs our improvement planning process.

Significant Turning Points

Leadership

We knew that our goals to improve the quality of our schools required a change in the improvement of the instructional leadership in our principals and vice-principals. The importance of this cannot be over-emphasized. Significant resources have been committed to supporting our principals in the transition from manager to instructional leader. One of our first initiatives supported a change in the content and delivery of monthly meetings of our principals to move away from administrative factors. Instead, we communicated managerial information via email, which enabled us to transform monthly principals' meetings to professional learning opportunities.

Our focus moved to nurturing principals' understanding of the change process, educational theory, instructional strategies and the importance of their role. Principals took on lead roles in supporting each other in their learning and are committed to continuous improvement efforts. Our learning coordinators provided information and consultation about the research in literacy, numeracy, technology and 21st century fluencies with important alignment with the goals outlined in both board and school improvement plans. We found that principals began to see themselves as co-learners and have taken a more open learning stance within their schools and with each other.

Vision and Strategic Planning

As these changes were occurring, the board leadership team recognized a need for a new way of looking at strategic planning. Since new approaches and structures were needed at the school level, changes were also needed at the board level for change to occur. A one-page strategic plan was put into place, therefore, to communicate our core literacy and numeracy strategies and demonstrate how our work had a singular focus on increasing the academic achievement of students. The enablers included Catholic faith formation, the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations, core literacy and continuous assessment processes.

In each of our core processes, we placed an important focus on using data to inform instructional decisions. Our strategic plan became less of a to-do list and more of an articulation of processes that were expected to be upheld. Resources were leveraged to enable these processes. This vision and strategy was communicated widely and often, ensuring all stakeholders were aware of their part to play.

Teacher Professional Learning

During this time, our focus on professional learning for teachers also changed. We found that professional development that used the ‘train the trainer’ model was not effective. Instead, we implemented a focus on the “professional learning community” with funding from the Ministry of Education through various grants. We were able to fund professional learning in schools for job-embedded professional learning, support the development of the school improvement plan and enable change in practices. At the same time, Literacy Resource Teachers coached primary teachers in the transition to a balanced literacy model and supported principals in their learning about effective classroom practices.

Professional learning through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) grew slowly, as facilitation of this type of learning shifted from central board staff to principals. Principals were supported in the school by central staff in a gradual release model. We found better success with the structured learning model of the Teaching Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP). We discovered that the TLCP model gave principals the structure to guide teachers through a collaborative process that focused on their school goals. This process also helped us make a quick shift in the way we viewed teacher learning so that the learning of teachers was no longer isolated from the learning of students. We had reached a point where teacher learning was matching identified student-learning needs.

The limitations of this structured process became clear, however, when whole school goals often did not match the goals of individual classrooms. Some teachers began to question the point of participating in a process that didn’t meet their classroom needs and we noticed that disengagement was beginning to erode some gains. Our focus on rooting professional learning in the needs of our students, therefore, brought forth a renewed emphasis on collaborative inquiry in some of our schools.

The collaborative inquiry process was viewed as a meaningful opportunity for success since it honoured teacher autonomy, allowed for differentiation between classrooms and aligned well within the school improvement plan goals. Our success with pilot implementations resulted in the use of collaborative inquiry in every school wherein our principals were trained to facilitate this process. We are proud of the leadership that is demonstrated by all of our principals since they are the main facilitators of the professional learning of teachers.

Current Status

We believe in the power of monitoring to honour the implementation process and inform our next steps for improved opportunities for students. We have found that an important part of our goals for alignment was to ensure that monitoring occurs. We did experience barriers with the implementation of the improvement process

since school walk-throughs were challenged by the local OECTA units. We placed an important focus on communicating the distinct differences between evaluative and monitoring strategies. Our school principals were asked to make daily classroom visits to focus on student learning needs.

Our inquiry questions moved toward, “What are the students demonstrating? What do they need?” As principals became more familiar with each student and their needs, the decisions became more focused on meeting the needs. We then proceeded to establish and align budgets to focus on students’ needs, team meetings became more meaningful, special education schedules more impactful and resources were used in a more efficient and purposeful manner.

To complete the monitoring cycle, Supervisory Officers began to make regular school visits. Each visit became intentionally focused on classroom visits and discussions with principals about their school data and improvement efforts. As Supervisory Officers became more familiar with the needs of students and each school, decisions at the board level shifted to support those needs more readily. In addition, we report on our progress three times per year to the Trustees of the Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board to communicate our transparent commitment to the achievement of students and improvement planning.

Advice For Others

We respectfully offer that positive opportunities for change can be realized with a collective focus that welcomes the insight of all members of a school community. The affective needs of students, staff and parents need to be welcomed with an open embrace of inclusion and a voice for all persons. We recommend that frequent discussions and monitoring be implemented so that all persons see that the commitments of the system are valued and supported.

We also believe that success in change stems from a comprehensive review that bases decisions on clear goals for student achievement. We believe that all improvement processes need to be ultimately based on what is good for students, wellness and inclusion. We offer that it is important to listen, learn and then lead by having clear communication and manageable goals. It is imperative that a structured approach is put in place to monitor and check not only for implementation, but also for understanding about the impact of achievement goals and the corresponding needs for professional learning. Every member of a school community should be able to identify the system’s goals and their role to influence positive opportunities for students.

Over time, we have been able to make significant changes in how we use evidence to inform our school and board improvement planning and align our processes. In addition, we have moved toward basing our decisions for the use of human resources, financial supports and professional learning on the needs that our students are demonstrating. We have also realized sustained improvement in the

achievement of our students in literacy. Our present goal is to transfer what we have learned through our improvement processes to enhanced achievement in numeracy, mathematics, blended learning and innovation through critical thinking. We feel that our improvement planning is now an informed process and collectively supports the goals of the Ministry of Education. We know that our processes are making an important impact on the achievement of our students with positive opportunities for growth.