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

### ***District School Board of Niagara \****

#### **BACKGROUND**

This case study describes how the District School Board of Niagara has focused specifically on two of the nine characteristics of strong district leaders, namely, provide *coherent instructional guidance* and *build school capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions*. For purpose of this case, we will focus on the role of the Elementary Superintendent and our work in our area of schools related to improving both teaching practice and student achievement related to mathematics.

#### **Restructure in Superintendent Roles and Responsibilities**

Three years ago, our Director restructured the Superintendent portfolios to allow for maximum increased time and focus in the schools by relieving Elementary Area Superintendents of responsibilities related to operations or committees that would take time away from their commitments to schools.

A second key aspect of this restructure was to identify three or four “focus schools” within their compliment of approximately 20 schools. These focus schools would be selected based on a variety of factors, including the analysis of school achievement data over time. We reviewed student achievement data (both standardized and school-based) from multiple years. Other sources of data include a review of attendance and discipline data, information about the level of parent engagement and caseloads related to students with either ELL or Special Education needs. Youth Counsellor and Social worker involvement was also reviewed. Input from Principals was a key source of information used to help determine the level of instructional capacity and leadership in the schools. Staff willingness to collaborate and share their practice was another key factor that needed to be assessed. Once these schools were identified, we were responsible for working directly with the Principal/Vice Principal in these schools to collaborate on a school improvement plan. The priority was to narrow the focus, set fewer goals and regularly monitor and review data related to the school improvement planning process. This included supporting the Principals in biweekly school-based meetings to gather and analyze data, determining the obstacles and barriers and creating professional development opportunities connected to both teacher and student need.

Beyond the focus schools, each Area Superintendent worked with their Area Principals to develop templates, frameworks for schools to consider when documenting their learning journey. While

there were a variety of samples, they all contained ways to measure and monitor the impact on teacher practice and student achievement; however, the goals were extremely varied.

## **Our Learning in Year One**

Following our first year of this approach, we dedicated the time needed to work with our principals in the focus schools. In fact, our time in all our schools significantly increased due to the restructuring of portfolios. In working closely with all of our school administrators, it became evident that a consistent platform for all schools to work from in our area was needed. In each area, the Principals determined this was important to build collaboration and capacity because they, as leaders, would support one another and their respective teams throughout this school improvement process. This common framework became the foundation for Principal network meetings, school visits, school- based PLCs, and area meetings.

The next step was to take the DSBN Math Plan developed by School Support Services that included ten pages of research-based knowledge of content and instructional strategies for K – 12 and narrowing the options. The goal was to create a menu of manageable items for schools. This Area Math strategy was developed by principals, instructional coaches, superintendents, teachers, and school support services staff. The menu included both easy-to-implement and more complex instructional and assessment practices that supported teachers in intentionally planning their instruction for all students using curriculum expectations, process skills and big ideas to engage in problem-based strategies that supported students’ conceptual understanding and procedural fluency. It was also important to support students in seeing themselves as mathematicians who have the confidence and perseverance to take risks in their learning.

While each school could enter at a different place in the strategy, the overall strategies were consistent. The key turning point here was the area goal developed from school-based data rather than solely system wide or provincial data. Our data included student achievement data as well as teacher input related to their need for professional development. A key success with this approach was staff ownership and engagement in the school improvement plan. They created the plan based on their student needs and contributed authentically to it throughout the year—rather than the Principal solely authoring the year-end goal outcomes. Also, they measured the outcome of their work and revised their goals and actions throughout the year rather than waiting for year data to determine the effectiveness of their work.

This was a great first step, especially the shift in school involvement. However, as Superintendents, we felt we could be more effective in our work with the schools. We determined that a challenge with the learning agenda being led from a system wide approach was an inability to meet the more specific needs of schools or provide “just in time” support as schools needed it. The Central team were doing their best work to support everyone, but as we were becoming more knowledgeable about our schools and specifically the profiles of our focus schools, it was deemed ineffective to continue with solely centralized allocation of supports and resources.

To achieve our desired outcome, Superintendents were allocated PLC and CIL funds to support their area of schools as well as a compliment of Instructional Coaches to assign to schools to support the school improvement goals. This meant hiring of Coaches and determining the allocation of their time to schools; their collective work was the responsibility of the Superintendent. Superintendents were responsible for allocation of release time to support school-embedded PD as well as the criteria established for schools to access funds.

## **Year Two – Movement to Area and School Specific Distribution of Supports**

With the new compliment of resources, funds, and Instructional Coaching support, we were able to differentiate support to schools related to their school improvement goals. As we moved into this new model, we were initially cautious with the degree of our differentiation. Mainly, we wanted to offer support to all of our schools; therefore, coaching time and release funds for PLC/CILs were mainly distributed based on school size and number of teachers. Without considering more information, this seemed to be the best way at the time to support the schools in a “fair” manner as well as a gradual transition to this newer “area concentrated” rather than “system wide” distribution model.

Focus schools did, however, receive more support as we were working closer with them to achieve their goals and monitor their progress. We had much more specific data to inform our allocation of funds and staffing. As an example, a non-focus school would receive release funds to support one of their CILs related to a math goal they selected from the collective area goal. They would also receive access to .33 or .25 FTE of coaching time. A focus school could receive release for an entire Junior Division to meet once in a ten-day cycle to co-plan, assess, and learn new strategies to support their students who were struggling in mathematics. They would also have at least a .5 FTE of an Instructional Coach to work with teachers and students in achieving their goals.

Another key change was the Area Superintendents having a compliment of instructional coaches to support the learning agenda and goals. This went beyond the allocation of their time and included monthly PLCs where they worked together to create support materials for all the schools. Their work was guided by teacher voice in schools and the support of the Superintendent and lead Principals to transfer their knowledge of the content and curriculum to a tool kit that supported the instructional leaders in the school as well as resources that were practical for the classroom teacher. There was an efficiency in this new delivery model that allowed for quick response to teacher need while the regularly scheduled meetings with the coaches supported consistency with area focus on the math strategy.

At the conclusion of year two, we were able to identify the progress and level of achievement at our schools by meeting with the Principals, Instructional Coaches, and Teachers to review the goals, assess the outcomes, and determine the next steps. Each stakeholder provided a very important perspective when reflecting on the effectiveness of the school improvement planning process that year.

At this time, we realized that progress in teacher learning and student achievement were not always directly linked to our allocation of funds, the coaching compliment, or the established goals. There were other sources of data to analyze before determining how effective we were being as an area with our math strategy. One example of this was a school with minimal allocation of coaching time and release funds that had made significant gains in refining their teaching practice. This was because 75% of the staff had taken the board-initiated and fully funded Math Additional Qualification courses. Their learning and change in practice was directly related to their participation in this after school but 100% board-funded professional development opportunity. The Principal also allocated funds for their CIL to allow these teachers time to collaborate on their assignments and co-teach new learnings as a result of this course. The success of this strategy and the participation in these AQ courses continues to be one of the most effective ways to improve math instruction and to build capacity in schools to lead their own learning rather than requiring an itinerant support such as Instructional Coach to lead the learning agenda.

Another example of improvement in two schools was the placement of Vice Principals who had previously been Instructional Coaches. Their knowledge of the Math Curriculum combined with their toolkit in facilitating meaningful PLCs accelerated the work in these two schools. They also had

excellent insight into how to work effectively with an Instructional Coach and could share these insights at an Area meeting so all Administrators could consider their knowledge and experience related to instructional leadership.

### **Current school year and looking ahead**

While there have been obstacles with the learning agenda this year due to job action, we also felt there was significant evidence to gather to help us further evaluate our area math strategy. Namely, what teaching and assessment practices were sustainable? What continued when we were not able to lead a learning agenda? Our Principals used this time to observe practices, seeking to understand why some practices “stuck” and others “faded”. They supported teacher-initiated requests to continue collaboration with coaches during job action but also observed if the coach wasn’t being accessed by staff. This time period in many ways provided us the perfect opportunity to measure the effectiveness of our work to date.

As we transitioned out of Job Action, Principals and Instructional Coaches collaborated on a survey that was intended to get teacher input on our next steps. Many schools also ensured student voice was included by gathering feedback on math instruction, the availability of supports when struggling, and their overall attitudes towards math. Which strategies, resources worked? Did teachers need more time learning to use them independently? If they could pick the next step as we moved back into collaborative learning, which of our area goals did they want to revisit or tackle next?

As we look forward to 2016/2017, as an Area, we are creating a “Math Profile” template for each school. The purpose of this profile is to gather multiple sources of data from the past two years related to our area goals, school-based goals, and system wide central supports that have been offered, such as sessions to support Grade 3 and 6 teachers both before and after the Mid-Year Math Assessment offered by our School Support Services team.

This Math Profile is not intended to be a portfolio of only the effective strategies and celebration of the successes. Its purpose is to give us a snapshot of each school by looking at similar data.

Most importantly in collaborating on the completion of the profile, the Superintendent, Principal, Instructional Coach, and teachers can further reflect on work to date and determine the following:

- Strategies that still require further evidence to measure our effectiveness.
- Instructional practices that are sustainable and should be less of a focus so we can move on to the next goals.
- Specific school goals and strategies with evidence to support their effectiveness can be shared with other schools in the area. This allows for efficiency when tackling the next goal and is a powerful way to demonstrate a collective responsibility in the work.
- We will learn just as much by sharing the time and effort put into goals that did not produce the outcomes we had expected.
- Areas where we have little to no evidence of improved student achievement will help us be specific with the support we need from our School Support Services team as their contributions are essential to our work.

### **Multiple sources of data/evidence in our Math Profile will include but are not limited to:**

- Student achievement data - year end assessment data by grade, EQAO results, assessment data directly related to targeted intervention strategies and small group instruction

- Mid -year Assessment for grade 3 and 6, action plan goals and follow up assessments leading up to EQAO
- Dreambox data related to lessons completed, time on task and progress made by each class/student
- Teacher utilization of resources such as DSBN Scope and Sequence, Fosnot Units, Building a Math Community unit, Math Manipulatives, Monthly Math Newsletters from SSS
- Outcome of school specific goals or PLCs
- Staff participation in DSBN Math AQ course
- School Support Services supports, math in-services and resources

## **Summary**

The next steps in this journey can and should be even greater differentiation in the support provided to each school as they work towards the same overall goals in improving achievement in mathematics. There are schools that are ready to innovate and inquire while others continue to work from a prescriptive approach to improving instruction. There will be schools with a capacity to provide their own school-based coaching model while others will continue to use the support of an Area Instructional Coach. While we collectively work on and contribute to the same overall goals related to improving math instruction and student achievement in the District School Board of Niagara, the more we know about where each school, each teacher, and each student is on this journey, the more precise we can be with providing them the exact support and resources they need to be successful.

