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

Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

Background

This case study details the evolution of data usage by the Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (hereinafter Conseil du Centre-Est). As mentioned in Leithwood's 2013 study entitled *Strong Districts and their Leadership*, districts that use data from diverse sources in a systematic way perform better than the provincial average with regard to student achievement and well-being. This is why he identified data usage as one of the nine characteristics of strong districts.

Data usage by the Conseil du Centre-Est goes back more than 25 years. It has gone through an evolution with four periods, each of which had its own characteristics and teachings. It is this story we will try to summarize here.

1989-1994: Emerging Needs

For decades, Franco-Ontarians have been demanding full and complete control over their schools. The creation of the Conseil scolaire de langue française d'Ottawa-Carleton in 1989, with both Catholic and public sections gave the Francophone community high hopes.

Administrators of the Catholic section had carte blanche to design a modern organization using leading-edge school management methods. In 1989, administrators set up a Research section and a Program Implementation Assessment Service. Similar services already existed in both English-language boards in the Ottawa area, as well as in some Toronto-area boards. But for Francophones, it was a first, an innovation.

The Research service was tasked with conducting research, studies and analyses on requirements identified by members of senior management, e.g. master plan, organizational environment, new initiative assessment (e.g. full time junior-kindergarten), educational projects and school mission plans, etc.

As for the Program Implementation Assessment Service, it developed tests in two subject matters (French and Science) that it administered every year, systematically, to test grades (e.g. 6th and 8th grades). The results of these tests were meant to gauge the efficiency of program implementation for school principals and superintendents, and help them to make improvements. It should be noted that there were no

individual results for these tests, only aggregate results, and that they were never communicated to school Trustees.

After less than four years in existence, the Conseil scolaire de langue française d'Ottawa-Carleton was abolished by the Government because of deficient financing and a dysfunctional governance model.

Lessons Learned

The fact that Conseil du Centre-Est managers decided to develop an analysis capacity in 1989 was considered, at the time, very innovative. The few Ontario boards with such a capacity were considered educational leaders (e.g. Toronto, Ottawa, York). It was thought, at the time, that if those in positions of authority (e.g. senior management) based their decisions on concrete data, the results would be better and school boards would be all the better for it. It was considered the way to go to improve organizations.

Without drawing any conclusions regarding the experiences of other school boards, what were the advantages for the Conseil du Centre-Est? Even though the Board produced a significant amount of data, the evidence to support a conclusion of a very positive “return on investment” was insufficient. In fact, the data produced was not used in any significant way, and here are the reasons for this:

- The analyses and research conducted were more often than not in response to the needs of a single manager, not a team; there was thus little mobilization or change in senior management as a result of the reports, nor was any follow-through with the recommendations; the results were interesting, but had little impact on decision-making (in English they would have been considered “nice to know”).
- The test results had little credibility in schools with regard to program assessment; program expectations at the time were rather vague; what’s more, since the results were only known the following year, the student cohort in the grade was no longer the same, which greatly reduced their relevance in the field.
- And finally, there was, at the time, very little talk in schools and among managers about the importance of student achievement, about a data-based process of continuous improvement, or about accountability with respect to results, all important reasons for using data.

It was nonetheless an important period in the history of the Conseil du Centre-Est as it gave rise to an internal data analysis capacity, whose efficiency would only increase over time.

1994-1997: Data on Governance

In September 1994, the Conseil du Centre-Est began anew as an independent Catholic school board, but with very limited services. As with other support services, the research and evaluation programs were abolished for lack of funds.

Many of the newly-elected Trustees were somewhat aware of upcoming changes in governance and other management methods, as with other types of organizations. At the Board table talk began to circulate about:

- Increasing the director of education's liability for results,
- Gathering more data to better govern and manage the Board, such as common tests for students, surveys for parents, annual school reports, etc.
- Making political and administrative decisions based on evidence-based data, studies, analyses, etc.

At the time, the director of education no longer had any capacity for internal research or analysis as a result of budget reductions. There was difficulty then in meeting Board expectations with regard to data availability. In 1995, the Board nonetheless adopted a series of recommendations asking the director of education to make significant changes, many of which required data collection, analysis and research.

The director of education then hired a Director of Special Projects to implement many of the Board's recommendations.

Moreover, the Royal Commission on Education tabled its report, entitled *For the Love of Learning*, in December 1994. It contained many recommendations that would have a significant impact on the use of data in school boards during subsequent years:

- That the Ministry of Education set expected results with respect to learning French, mathematics, sciences, computer science, group learning, interpersonal relationships and values, from kindergarten to the end of high-school;
- That a common provincial report card aligned with the results and standards of the current year be developed;
- That an organization independent of the Ministry of Education and Training be set up to administer and communicate standardized provincial test results;
- That this organization (temporarily named the Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability) also be tasked with setting education system performance indicators to be used by school boards and other pertinent provincial entities.

Lessons Learned

During this time, the impetus to utilize data at the Conseil du Centre-Est came from the political leadership of Trustees. Paradoxically, this push for using data came at a time when the administration's capacity to produce and use it had been decimated compared to the previous period, when the capacity was great, but the political need for it, absent.

Simultaneously, the Royal Commission on Education also recommended the collection of data, through provincial exams, in order to evaluate the education system's performance. These exams would be managed by a provincial organization established to support accountability (e.g. accountability) at the school board and Ministry of Education level.

Clearly, a new accountability was developing in education from 1994 to 1997: accountability, defined as giving accounts with respect to expected results. This need for accountability was expressed both at the Conseil du Centre-Est and at the Commission. It would lead to a second need: the need for standardized expectations with respect to student learning in the province. Thorough methods for an evidence-based evaluation of the education system's performance would also need to be adopted.

1998-2004: Accountability Framework and "Business Intelligence"

In 1998, Francophones were handed complete control of their school boards throughout the province, with a much more effective financing model. It was then that the Conseil du Centre-Est adopted Policy Governance. The Education Improvement Commission recommended this approach. It was very much a results-, evidence- and accountability-based approach, the three expectations of the previous school board.

In the summer of 1998, the Board hired a director of education familiar with Policy Governance and who was recognized for their leadership and level of comfort with accountability to the Board with respect to expected results. This director made four important and innovative decisions with regards to data usage:

- Naming a senior manager in charge of supporting accountability to the Board (and Policy Governance);
- Developing an *Accountability and Improvement Framework*, including various performance indicators;
- Creating a middle management position (chief) with expertise in measure and evaluation that would be tasked with data collection and analysis in support of accountability to the Board and school improvement;
- Asking for the implementation of a computerized business intelligence system.

This time, the Board leadership was in synch with the director of education. The accountability sought by the Board was to be supported by a capacity to produce and use data at the administrative level, but a capacity with an approach and objectives very different than during the period 1989-1994 when there also existed such a capacity.

Since then, for the sake of accountability, the Board has:

- Developed or perfected tools and performance indicators (surveys for parents and students, survey of staff on organizational climate, study of catholicity, graduation and drop-out rates, etc.);
- Produced monitoring reports in order to meet the Board's accountability requirements;
- Provided schools with various student achievement reports (e.g. boys vs. girls, ALF students); drawn from report cards to support improvement plans;
- Drawn from report cards to support improvement plans
- Provided schools a profile of their results compared to the results set by the Board in order to identify improvement priorities;
- Trained school principals and teaching staff in the correct use of data, particularly those of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO);
- Performed various ad-hoc analyses for senior management, such as producing data for setting annual priorities, program assessment;
- Evaluated and coordinated data collection requests from external organizations (e.g. universities).

At the beginning of the 2000s, information technology made huge leaps forward. The Conseil du Centre-Est implemented a large network between schools and the Board, a standardized computer report card, a centralized student database (Trillium). The director of education saw in these elements the favourable conditions necessary for the Board to adopt computerized business intelligence (BI) tools to help stimulate and improve performance in private and public enterprises.

Such tools allowed users, who were not programmers, to compile bulk data from various sources and incorporate them into tailor-made reports that were easy to understand and analyse. These reports could guide decision-making at various levels of the organization. The tools could also produce management dashboards showing various performance indicators.

In the early 2000s, the Accountability Office was tasked with the implementation of a business intelligence system. In 2006, within the framework of the provincial initiative entitled *Managing Information for Student Achievement* (MISA), the Ministry of Education asked all Ontario school boards to acquire such systems. Thanks to the leadership of its director of education, the Conseil du Centre-Est had had such a system for several years already.

Lessons Learned

Through the leadership of the organization, that is to say Trustees and the director of education, the Conseil du Centre-Est acquired during this period great capacity for gathering and using data from various sources. This capacity was necessary to respond to two new requirements: the need for accountability to the Board, on the part of the director of education, and the need for continuous improvement in student achievement in schools. Consequently, in 1998, the Conseil du Centre-Est adopted a new, clearer direction that it has maintained ever since: governance and management decisions must be supported by evidence from multiple sources.

Since 2004: Cooperating for Success, Using Data

In 2003, a new director of education was hired. The senior management team took the opportunity to take stock of the previous years in order for the Conseil du Centre-Est to continue performing well over the long haul. Here are the main conclusions:

- The data gathered was often used by the Board and senior management in taking systemic decisions and it was very much appreciated.
- Few schools used it however, even though the Accountability Office provided them with large quantities of data (e.g. EQAO, surveys of parents and students).
- Teaching staff had little knowledge of the objectives set by the Board and did not feel responsible/accountable for attaining them.
- Teaching staff mostly worked in isolation and did not use the data on their own students' learning to improve their performance.

We can summarize the situation with a metaphor: the “head” of the Conseil du Centre-Est was very well organized, with expected results and a strong use of data, but it was out of touch with the “body” that was operating on a quasi-independent basis. In order for the Board to show strong performance over the long term, the head had to be more closely linked to the body. This gave rise to the *Vision 2008* project that sought to significantly alter the way in which Conseil du Centre-Est staff worked, its organizational culture. This project had three main axes of change:

- Professional accountability: staff is responsible for the achievement of each student;
- Results-based management: staff must set measurable objectives (e.g. SMART objectives) and follow through using relevant data;
- Cooperation: staff must work in teams with common objectives.

The *Vision 2008* project brought forward the concept of professional accountability, which was strengthened through the systemic implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in all schools, communities where staff was asked to

work in small cooperation teams, using their students' learning data, in order to improve their performance on priorities set by the school¹.

Additional resources were brought in to give staff the time to meet as a team, to train in effective cooperation, to support school principals in setting limited improvement priorities, to learn how to mobilize their staff and support the implementation of cooperation teams.

This new way for staff to work on improving their students' performance, implemented gradually starting in 2004, proved successful as evidenced by the constant improvement in results ever since.

Lessons Learned

The Conseil du Centre-Est acknowledged, as early as 1998, the benefits for a school board of using data to support decision-making and manager performance. But it was also wise enough to recognize, by 2004, that there were limits to the way it could use data to improve performance. An environment rich in data from multiple sources does not, by itself, produce the climate or the desire necessary to improve student achievement. The management of such a significant change was slightly more complex... As Joan Green, then director of the EQAO, aptly put it with a bit of wry humour, "the simple fact of weighing a cow does not mean we'll be successful in fattening it up"

Senior management, under the leadership of the director of education, was able, starting in 2004, to bring the necessary resources and personnel to bear in order to bring about profound cultural change in the way individual Conseil du Centre-Est schools worked:

- accountability for students' achievement;
- work as a team, not in isolation, on measurable common objectives;
- use of a variety of data, particularly students' "real-time" learning data.

In the Background: Data from Research on Education

One potentially important source of data for improving district performance is research in education. Since 1989, through various studies and analyses, the Conseil du Centre-Est has often wanted to make its decisions based on data derived from research in education or from its own research and program evaluations (secondary school organization, the teaching of reading, special education, teaching of French, etc.). But the results have been rather mitigated. The Conseil du Centre-Est is not the only District to have had difficulty translating research into classroom practice. This

¹ To find out more about the successes and challenges of the first two years of this period, read the case study (40 pages) on the Conseil du Centre-Est published in September 2006, as part of the *Unlocking Potential for Learning* series directed by Michael Fullan. The Conseil du Centre-Est was one of 8 school boards selected for analysis because of its noted improvement in EQAO tests.

is a well-known and generalized challenge in education. In 2006, the Ministry of Education even established the Ontario Education Research Panel in order to promote research-based school practices, among other things. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat also published several excellent research-based educational documents.

Nevertheless, the Conseil du Centre-Est continues in its efforts to implement effective research-based practices. For example, an “Effective Practices Framework” was developed to support collaboration teams. While data analysis is effective, if not necessary, to determine whether change has occurred, it often provides precious few leads to better improvement strategies. We must rely on the professional judgement of staff to find better approaches, but this judgement will be all the more sound if it is guided by the teachings of the last 25 years of education research (e.g. John Hattie). Thus the Conseil du Centre-Est is putting more and more effort into promoting and encouraging the adoption of practices based on data derived from education research.

Conclusion

The Conseil du Centre-Est has had to rely on solid leadership, politically, and at the senior management and school levels, to progressively implement a culture of improvement, based on data from various sources, at all levels of the organization, from governance to the classroom. This leadership allowed the Conseil du Centre-Est to recognize, very early on, the significant value of the use of data. Decision-makers were then able to prioritize the financial and human resources necessary to develop this capacity at various levels.

The benefits are clear: The Conseil du Centre-Est is one of the strongest districts in the province. And the story doesn’t end there, as the District continues to improve the use of data to foster the success of each and every one of its students.