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Job-embedded Professional Development For All Members of the Organization

Waterloo Catholic District School Board

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board is located in a largely urban area in the heart of South-Western Ontario. The Regional Municipality of Waterloo (population 507,000) consists of the tri-cities of Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge and the surrounding townships of Woolwich, Wellesley, Wilmot and North Dumfries.

Approximately 30,000 elementary, secondary and adult students receive a "quality, inclusive and faith-based education" in the board's 46 elementary, five secondary and two Continuing Education (adult) sites.

The Board's first schools, St. Agatha Catholic Elementary School (St. Agatha, Ontario.) and St. Boniface Catholic Elementary School (Maryhill, Ontario.) opened in 1836, predating the Catholic Diocese of Hamilton by some 20 years.

The Waterloo Catholic District School board employs approximately 3,000 full and part-time staff and has an annual budget of more than \$214 million dollars. The Board of Trustees is comprised of nine municipally elected trustees and two high school student trustees elected by their peers.

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board has a longstanding history of engaging in community partnerships with various community and Catholic community organizations, social service agencies, charities and other educational institutions. Waterloo Catholic District School Board continues to nurture many partnerships that provide the Board with the opportunity to enrich curriculum, improve student achievement and assist with the social/emotional and spiritual growth of all our students.

This case describes how the Waterloo Catholic District School Board has gone about enhancing the conditions of two of the nine characteristics of strong districts: Creating learning-oriented organizational improvement processes and providing job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organisation. These two characteristics describe the work we are engaging in across the system and demonstrate the instructional practices and involvement at all levels: senior administration, school administrators, consultants, literacy/numeracy coaches and classroom teachers.

Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Learning-oriented improvement processes, evidence suggests, are created or further enhanced when system leaders:

- Require improvement processes to be evidence-informed
- Set a manageable number of precise targets for district school improvement
- Include school-level leaders in decisions about district-wide improvement decisions
- Create structures and norms within the district to encourage regular, reciprocal and extended deliberations about improvement progress within and across schools, as well as across the system as a whole
- Develop and implement board and school improvement plans interactively and collaboratively with school leaders
- Create structures to facilitate regular monitoring and refining of improvement processes
- Acknowledge provincial goals and priorities in district and school improvement initiatives
- Allow for school-level variation in improvement efforts

Job-embedded Professional Learning for all Members of the Organization

Strong Districts and their Leadership paper indicates that job-embedded professional learning practices contribute to the development of strong districts by:

- Providing extensive professional learning opportunities for both teachers and school-level leaders most of it through some form of learning community or on-the-job context
- Using internal system networks as the central mechanism for the professional development of school-level leaders
- Aligning the content of professional training with the capacities needed for district and school improvement priorities
- 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 of school improvement plans

Why These Characteristics?

We want to engage and include leaders (system, school administrators and teachers) in the instructional improvement work, building capacity in developing an understanding of research-based intentional, responsive instruction for students. We are moving from a systems instructional rounds model to a school-based instructional rounds version where teachers own the process of instructional

rounds through collaboration, and syntheses of their own school's problem of practice. The instructional expertise belongs to the staff in the school and we want to work on demonstrating "in-classroom" leadership. We provide job-embedded professional development through school-based instructional rounds as system instructional rounds demonstrated gains by means of capacity building with school administrators and focused dialogue regarding improving student achievement. Similarly, we want to align the work of instructional rounds directly with classroom practices by creating opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice and come together as learning communities to build capacity and increase student learning. Through school-based instructional rounds we are embedding processes that allow teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice. As is the case in the classroom, it is very difficult to isolate variables that promote professional learning for teachers. Both these conditions; creating learning-oriented organizational improvement processes and providing job-embedded professional learning, create the foundation for opportunity for teachers to become reflective practitioners. Both characteristics work seamlessly in tandem as we move our learning from system instructional rounds to school-based instructional rounds. Our intent is to involve all leaders as key leads in facilitating successfully and consistently the process of instructional rounds in their schools alongside their staff in an effort to provide a coherent approach to school improvement. This learning and practice will help support the foundational knowledge which will complement the capacity building component by putting the learning into action. The implementation of school-based instructional rounds will contribute to the development of a common vision and understanding of what effective classroom instruction looks like. This will in turn serve as an effective learning model for all staff. The work of instructional rounds will provide strategies to hone our precision with respect to the instructional core; curriculum content, teaching strategy and student learning need, providing a foundation upon which every child in every classroom benefits from research based effective instructional practices.

Job-embedded learning happens with supervisory officers, principals, consultants, literacy/numeracy coaches, and classroom teachers. All are part of the process and dialogue and have a shared responsibility and voice in the instructional rounds process.

What We Did

System instructional rounds were supported by sending a diverse leadership group to Harvard over the last two years (2011-2013). The teams brought the learning back to develop district support models based on Elmore's work in *Instructional Rounds in Education* as it relates to instructional rounds processes. Most recently (May, 2014), we sponsored a team from Harvard to Waterloo region to provide a two-day workshop to all administrators, consultants, and literacy/numeracy coaches on facilitating school-based instructional rounds. Currently, four pilot schools have implemented school-based rounds and ten other schools are in the process of doing so this school year.

Through Catholic learning communities, principal learning teams, and differentiated networks for administrators and teachers we build capacity through the rounds process on identifying meaningful problems of practice that are rooted in the instructional core. Problems of practice are the focus for instructional rounds in the classrooms. Within the participating schools, teams of teachers receive specific instructional rounds training facilitated by school administrators and consultants. During this collaboration much time is spent on developing a common concrete understanding of the purpose of instructional rounds, as well as ensuring a collective understanding of the school's problem of practice. A myriad of resources, including Ministry monographs/ DVD's, are selected to support the identified and agreed upon school-wide or division-wide problem of practice. Staff self-assessment tools are used to help identify, and record professional learning needs. Teachers are involved in network sessions with other schools from across the board. The benefits of networking with other schools not only include additional professional dialogue and strategy sharing, but also the opportunity to focus on building next steps collectively. School improvement teams with the support of literacy/numeracy coaches work on building capacity with staff in the identified learning needs area; this allows teachers to confidently actualize theory of action statements in their classrooms. The theory of action statements is measured through teacher moderation of student work, and the learning evidenced in the classroom. After much collaboration with teachers, building meaningful relationships and trust through the work, and ensuring a common understanding of language and process, the "classroom instructional rounds" can begin. Afterward, the debrief session is integral to the learning and the process wherein teachers share their classroom observations and as a group challenge each other to identify their next level of work. Specifically, identifying next steps required to "solve" their identified "problem" is the crux of the discussion. Much of the discussion is based on what teachers need to do to move student learning forward and identify student learning need, which is often a natural extension of teachers' needs. All dialogue and discussions are recorded and used to drive the final report findings for the school. The administrator is a facilitator in the process and the teachers make up the "support team".

Principal learning teams are connected and aligned to the instructional rounds process in a fashion that supports their own capacity building. The principal learning teams meet regularly and follow a consistent protocol as they collaborate on each other's presented problem of practice. Critical to building principal capacity within the Catholic learning community is ensuring that meeting norms and protocols are established and consistently applied. Vital to the success of the work is monitoring how the process will directly impact the classroom through student work and overall achievement. It is important to implement diagnostic measures/improvement target check-ins along the way in order to measure how we are doing. Supervisory officers are directly linked to the learning communities and follow up with school teams on the identified level of work.

Significant Turning Point

Initiatives over the last few years have been designed in their very nature to improve student achievement and enhance teacher practice. The School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) is a great tool for this purpose. Our turning point was actualizing the SEF as a teacher tool during the rounds process and getting “buy in” from all stakeholders. The four pilot schools that began the work in school-based instructional rounds reported staff buy-in and a more effective use and understanding of the SEF document in the process. The work became meaningful to teachers versus being simply viewed as an “event”. In an educative context, the effective implementation of research-based practices translated into positive implications for students; school based rounds served as a vehicle for educators to reflect on these practices as evidenced in their classrooms.

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

The response of school leaders was positive and receptive as they saw the potential in supporting all schools within their own context through the instructional rounds process. All involved welcomed the notion of learning about and participating in instructional rounds through an asset model. The entry point for schools was based on their understanding of the learning conditions of their school not on the expectations of the learning conditions of the system. As a system we recognize that the instructional rounds work will look different at each school; the process is similar but the outcome matches the needs identified by each school. All involved recognize that it is their collective individual responsibility as school leaders to ensure that in light of the different phases of teachers’ professional development we provide a vehicle to not only develop capacity but to sustain capacity. Through the instructional rounds process we demonstrate a willingness to collaborate in moving the teaching and learning forward, working and learning side-by-side with teachers. It is about building school cultures that embrace an environment that allow teachers to learn from and with one another and similarly allow administrators to learn from and with one another. The repetition of the instructional rounds process allows for a constant school-wide focus on the importance of adopting sound pedagogical practices rooted in our Catholic Graduate Expectations. School-based instructional rounds further allow school communities to focus on teacher expertise and celebrate the fact that each teacher is a leader who can enrich their knowledge base by sharing their challenges and successes.

Instructional rounds continue to spread and gain traction as more schools embark in the process. At the school level, more teachers are becoming actively involved in the learning and are volunteering to participate in school-based instructional rounds. This is a direct result of school administrators understanding the process and its benefits after participating fully in system instructional rounds. The instructional rounds process is much more meaningful at the school level.

Current Status

Waterloo Catholic District School Board currently engages in both district support instructional rounds and school-based instructional rounds. All schools are on a system rotation and schools volunteer to engage in school-based rounds rather than system rounds. Last year, four schools successfully piloted the implementation of school-based instructional rounds and have shared their journey with the system. This year we have ten schools engaged in school-based rounds and eight schools participating in system rounds. It is our intent to move completely away from system rounds in the next two years. The discussion and learning that principals engage in within their learning communities will be key in moving all schools forward. Support will be differentiated based on the needs of the learning teams and on the school-based action plans developed.

Advice For Others

The greatest learning from working through this board-wide initiative was discovering that much time needs to be spent on developing a common understanding of what instructional rounds are and what they are not and as such, engaging in system instructional rounds and building capacity with school leaders in this area is a critical first step before embarking on school-based rounds. Similarly, ensuring the identified problem of practice is rooted in the instructional core and is based on school data is an area that constantly needs to be revisited. The problem of practice has to connect to school improvement planning and has to be actionable and observable. This is an area, again, where an inordinate amount of time must be spent building capacity and establishing consistent practice in how to identify a school's problem of practice. Dedicating and aligning professional resources to support the dialogue in the debriefing sessions is integral to ensuring all have a common foundation and understanding of evidence-based practices. Structures and norms within the learning team need to be in place in order to encourage regular, reciprocal and extended deliberations about improvement within a school and move away from simply discussing the "niceties" of classroom observations; move from "great discussions" to "focused learning conversations". Ensuring that all staff are held accountable for applying the new capacities by monitoring the implementation of the school improvement commitments is imperative to the process. It is important to include all stakeholders in the process – ownership of the process by all is key to overall success.