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Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

York Catholic District School Board

This is a story about the development of a 21st Century Learning initiative implemented across all elementary and secondary schools in a district. The story focuses on two critical characteristics of Strong Districts, namely, learning-oriented organizational improvement processes and job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization. Consistent with the details of a learning-oriented organizational improvement process, the goal was to engage stakeholders in understanding the parameters of 21st century learning, setting clear direction for improvement in this area, focusing professional learning and allocating resources, to align with the direction and monitoring implementation.

In this initiative, every school sent a four-educator team to six workshops, over the course of the 2013-14 school year. Each workshop focused on the pedagogy of 21st century learning and the technical learning that would enable teachers to use technology to enhance classroom learning. This unusual format for professional learning advanced the attributes of job-embedded professional learning, throughout the system. The case study report shares the story and highlights how these two characteristics have been strengthened in the board, by relating the story to key descriptors within each of the two characteristics.

The following is the story of how the 21st Century Learning Team Initiative, fondly referred to as 21C, evolved and grew over the course of the 2013-14 school year. The conditions for the story had actually been created the previous school year, beginning in January 2013. Schools had been funding technology purchases, individually, through GSB purchases, and through the initiatives of Catholic School Council fundraising. Principals had always sought advice from the technicians assigned to the school when they were planning technology purchases for their school but new products were being developed at an ever increasing rate and superintendents and principals felt unsure of best directions or practices. Board staff needed alignment of purchases, in order to maximize their ability to provide technical support. It was evident that information needed to be gathered and shared amongst these stakeholder groups, concerning the acquisition of classroom technology and the best practices for its use, to enhance student engagement and learning.

The 21st Century Learning Team Story

Beginning in January 2013, a Journey Toward 2020 Committee, including representatives from elementary and secondary school principals, teacher association, superintendents and information and communication technology (ICT) staff, curriculum, special education, plant, planning, finance and human resources, investigated the current state of 21st century learning and technology, at York Catholic District School Board. Facilitated by the superintendent of curriculum and a senior manager of (ICT), subcommittees investigated six technology topics, namely, Interactive Whiteboards, iPads, Google Apps for Education (GAFE), Desire 2 Learn (D2L), wireless connectivity and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD). Each subcommittee assessed their topic, in view of the following parameters: professional learning, pedagogy that best integrates technology, equitable access, technical support, infrastructure needs and funding requirements.

The groups shared their findings and gained consensus for next steps. iPads and later Chromebooks would be supported by the system. In order for the board to provide equity of access to technology for all students, a central plan to begin slowly funding some technology purchases was needed. All purchases are now made following a consultation with the senior manager of software.

Having researched the work of leading educational thinkers, including Michael Fullan, the committee agreed that the hallmarks of 21st century learning are captured in the pedagogy of the 6 Cs, namely, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, Catholic character and citizenship. It was decided that technology should not drive 21st Century Learning, but enhance it, seamlessly and invisibly, in the classroom. All students should have equity in access and opportunities to learn.

This vision set a clear direction and in order for it to be achieved, it was evident that we needed an understanding of what the 6 Cs would look and sound like, in our Catholic classrooms, a plan for professional learning for 21st century pedagogy and technology training, and a board direction for technology purchasing, in the system. To this end, a committee of educators drafted the York Catholic District School Board descriptors of success in each of the 6 Cs and vetted them with school staffs on a School Improvement Planning professional activity day. A shared understanding of the 6Cs, the place of technology as a supportive invisible enhancement to 21st century pedagogy and the need to support schools in making technology purchases empowered the group to become the champions of the implementation plan.

The implementation of 21st century learning became the primary school improvement goal for 2013-14, with a particular emphasis on critical thinking. The September professional development day included a video session with Garfield Gini-Newman on critical thinking.

Teachers needed and sought professional learning in both the technical skills to use technology and the pedagogy of 21st century teaching and learning. The first proposal was to begin with a pilot school in each area of the board but, after much deliberation by the committee and with equity in mind, beginning with a 21st Century Learning Team, in every school, was the decision. Later, this decision will be highlighted as a critical event in the implementation of the initiative and the growth of the Strong Districts and Their Leadership characteristics.

In September, 2013, every Catholic elementary and secondary school was invited to create a 21st century learning team, called 21C, that included one administrator, one classroom teacher, a non-classroom teacher, who was often a special education teacher and the teacher librarian. The board would cover the cost of two iPads for team members, and the school would need to supply two iPads for the other two team members. The board would also cover the release cost for the classroom teacher to attend workshops. All four members, with their iPads, would attend a series of six workshops over the course of the school year.

All 104 schools created a team and approximately ten schools, mostly secondary, were able to fund an additional classroom teacher to join their team. The project involved over 500 people, including the 21C teams from all schools, and the central staff from curriculum, special education, information systems and senior administration, whenever they were available. Each workshop was offered 8 times, to accommodate the numbers within available space at the Catholic Education Centre.

There were three workshops in the fall, one in the winter and two in the spring. Each workshop addressed pedagogy for 21st century learning skills and technology training for one or more of the following: iPad apps, Google Apps, Desire 2 Learn, and Interactive Whiteboards. Information about infrastructure, BYOD, Digital Citizenship and one new iPad app, was inserted into each workshop.

The first three workshops were designed for whole school teams, with secondary and elementary schools both in attendance, for several purposes. In this arrangement, the administrator took a learning stance, learning with the staff team. The workshops were interactive and the teams spent time working together, to apply the new learning. For example, teams each made an iMovie trailer, at the end of the first workshop, sharing what they had learned about the iPad and iMovie, with the other teams. Teams from elementary and secondary schools could see how issues such as Digital Citizenship impacted both panels and the vision for K to 12 learning was evident to everyone. Secondary teams were also able to support elementary teams, to get started initially, as secondary teacher librarians often had a significant content knowledge base already.

Following workshop three, a Google Form was used to survey all team participants to gather their degree of consolidation with the pedagogy and the technology content knowledge, along with application in their teaching practice. Results

showed a tremendous range. Some teachers were fully applying the workshops' content in their teaching and were eager to move forward. They were also offering Lunch and Learn sessions, after school workshops and other support to their colleagues at school. Other teachers were enjoying the workshops but felt that they had no time to practice with the technology and were not yet ready to work with their students. A few provided their input by email as they were not confident to use the Google Form to share their self-assessment.

The facilitator team had begun as a small central team but by the third workshop, approximately 25 teachers had come forward from schools, volunteering to support the work in any way that would be helpful. Each was highly skilled in 21st century pedagogy and technology and very willing to assist with the project.

The team used the survey data to differentiate the last three workshops. For workshops four and five, the schedule was changed to place all secondary schools in one group session. The other seven sessions were elementary schools. At the beginning of workshop four, individual teachers signed up to either review previous topics or move on to new topics. Separate sessions were held for the administrators, in which the topic was an open discussion about strengths and concerns regarding technology purchasing, classroom application and opportunities to include more teachers in the initiative, etc.

Workshop six was a culminating activity, involving a guest speaker and a board wide Sharing Fair. This workshop was conducted in only two sessions, using a banquet hall to accommodate the numbers. Will Richardson, the guest speaker, shared his insights into the future of educational technology and inspired the teachers to see the need to prepare our students for their future, not ours. Teachers from the central team and some school staffs shared their learning at the Sharing Fair and feedback from the day was very positive and exhilarating for the presenters. The Sharing Fair was an excellent way to spread the learning and develop leadership capacity within the system.

Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

The 21st Century Learning project has directly advanced York Catholic District School Board's development of learning-oriented organizational improvement processes, particularly in terms of the implementation of a coherent approach to improvement with a narrow focus on a very few related goals. There were also opportunities to build the capacities needed by school staff, with the principal as the lead learner.

Simultaneous with this initiative, York Catholic District School Board was involved in a Strategic Planning Process and although it had not been completed in the 2013-14 school year, direction was clearly being shaped and the board wanted to prepare students for their future. The 21C initiative consistent with that direction began with a focus on critical thinking, with classroom practice enhanced by technology.

This narrow focus for board and school level goals created coherent language and activity, throughout the central teams and the schools. Beginning to work with technology in the classroom was inspiring for some and anxiously exciting for others but motivating for all. 21C became everything and everything became 21C!

Every elementary and secondary school had a team and the workshops became a topic of conversation at the Teacher Librarian meetings, Special Education meetings and Principal meetings. Special education teachers had been using Assistive Technology to support individual student needs for some time and 21C brought their knowledge and skills into focus for classroom teachers and the curriculum team. Lastly, resourcing technological infrastructure and devices is costly, and providing equitable access for all staff and students will be a long-term goal. Even getting started required alignment of board resources and a coherent approach from all stakeholders. This reality helped to focus efforts in one direction, thus increasing our ability to progress, having a meaningful impact on learning.

Equity of access to technology-enhanced learning will be an on-going challenge. Some schools have good opportunity to provide students with technology, due to parents' interest and ability to fundraise. For other schools, this avenue is not available. Centrally, as part of the 21st Century Learning initiative, two schools received ten iPads, in two Tech Tubs, for teacher and student use. Eight other schools received five iPads in a Tech Tub, for the same purpose. Moving forward into 2014-15, this practice will continue, aiming to close the widest gaps in available technology, between our schools, to support equity.

The fact that the 21st Century Learning teams were created in all schools and not just a few pilot schools, as is the common practice with new initiatives, was pivotal in the enhancement of learning-oriented organizational improvement processes. One administrator was present on every school team, learning about classroom practices that would enhance critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication, supported by competent and confident use of technology.

The central and school administrators, with very few exceptions, had had quite low content knowledge about enhancing classroom practice with technology, when the workshops began. Principals quickly realized that they were the lead learners on the teams and that the content knowledge, for both pedagogy and technology skill, built from one workshop to the next. They rarely missed a workshop, and working with their teams, many built a cohesive core learning-oriented group within their school.

To further support staff capacity building, schools had four teacher release days that they could use at their school. Some schools used the days for the 21C team, to consolidate their learning and plan implementation in the classroom. In schools where some 21C team members were confident to share, the days were used to begin to spread the learning to other teachers in the school. A third group of schools, largely elementary, worked with the E-learning contact, who facilitated a D2L session for teachers who were ready to begin using this tool. These professional

learning opportunities began to spread the initiative more widely than the four-educator team, honoured adult learners in their need to self-direct their learning and contributed to learning orientation in our schools.

Job-embedded Professional Development For All Members of the Organization

The realities of the 21C team experience also reflect growth in job-embedded professional development for all members of the organization. Professional learning in the 21C workshops was aligned with the 21st Century learning goals, differentiated to meet participant needs and planned using the best understanding of how adults learn. The initiative also included opportunities for 21C team members and other educators to consolidate and extend their learning.

Although the 21C workshops were facilitated centrally and not in individual school classrooms, they were designed to build the capacity of school teams to implement 21st century pedagogy in one classroom initially, at the rate at which they were ready. The classroom teacher on the team might have been an FDK teacher, an intermediate teacher or a grade 11 chemistry teacher and teams found other schools with which they had commonality and planned applications. Following a workshop, at the elementary level, the classroom teacher often tried a lesson with the support of the special education teacher and the teacher librarian. This gave the group four iPads and three teachers to support the innovation. The implementation of lessons had a unique look, in every school. Some schools, in which the team had at least one confident member, were able to offer Lunch and Learns and after school workshops to other interested teachers, to spread the learning beyond the first classroom.

Initially, the same workshop experience was offered to all teams and all team members. Following workshop three, acting on the feedback from team members, the central planning team began to differentiate. This required many more facilitators, who eagerly and graciously came forward from schools, willing to help by sharing their expertise wherever it was needed. From then on, some workshops revisited previously offered content to support consolidation, some supported teachers to move forward with their specific interests, and separate sessions for administrators gave them a forum to strategize about moving the initiative in their particular school context. Administrators also spent more time with the ICT senior manager, gaining understanding of the infrastructure requirements for technology expansion and BYOD.

When the concept of the teams was introduced to schools, originally, there was no mention of an iPad being made available to the team members. Hopefully, those who came forward were intrinsically interested in this initiative and a desire to move their classroom practice forward. Later, when the workshops began and the momentum within the schools grew, there were some schools, especially secondary schools, in which staff lined up to participate. Fortunately, central team budgeting was able to slowly provide a few more devices to each school throughout the year. A

spring purchase provided three Chromebooks and two additional iPads per school. At the end of the school year, principals knew that the 2014-15 school year would begin by providing two more iPads and three Chromebooks per school. This slow but steady technology growth within the school has helped to sustain the momentum of the initiative and support spread but in a controlled manner that staff training can facilitate. It is also supporting teacher leadership within schools, as peers share their ideas and their learning.

Educators, in all schools, had an opportunity to experience the 21st Century Learning initiative by attending Google Saturday, in February 2014. Approximately 200 staff, including teachers, educational assistants and early childhood educators came out for the Saturday workshops, which were facilitated by teacher volunteers from various schools. The workshop quality was excellent, demonstrating clearly that content knowledge for 21st Century pedagogy, technical skill and leadership potential are growing exponentially, through this initiative. Central staff, is offering Webinar Wednesdays from 3:45 – 4:45 on Wednesdays, on requested topics. Teachers just need access to a computer at school to access the webinar. These have just begun to gather audiences. This is another opportunity for teachers to engage in timely professional learning on a topic, as they need it. It is also another vehicle for teacher leaders in 21st century learning to facilitate the learning of their peers and cultivate their own growth in classroom pedagogy and leadership.

Going forward into 2014-15 at York Catholic District School Board, 21C workshops will continue with four central workshops and two school based consolidation sessions. The 21C team in each school will expand to have two additional teachers on the team, who will become the D2L leads for the school. Student technology teams will also join the initiative for the coming school year. They will be trained at an education technology day in September, so that they can partner with teachers to enhance student learning in their classroom.

In 2014-15, the plan is to stay the course, further developing our understanding of 21st century learning or deep learning and recognizing the role that technology plays to support students with this learning and the acquisition of basic skill fluency, as well. The board improvement goals will stay on the focused course, spreading the opportunity to use technology to enhance student learning in more and more classrooms, for increasing numbers of students, throughout the year. The learning orientation of the organization and the opportunities for job-embedded professional learning will continue and grow.