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## ***Learning-Oriented Organizational Improvement Processes*** **Durham District School Board** **Background**

The Durham District School Board is responsible for public education in the rural settings of Uxbridge, Brock and Scugog Townships and the urban settings of Ajax, Whitby, Pickering and Oshawa. The Board employs 7,000 teaching and educational services staff. With 130 elementary and secondary schools and learning centres, the Board accommodates more than 66,000 regular day students and thousands more who take advantage of a wide variety of continuing education and adult credit courses. The Durham District School Board maintains a constant and strong focus on student achievement and student and staff well-being. To that end, programs are in place to meet an array of needs. Our priorities, and how we're going to get there, are clearly delineated through a regularly updated document entitled Ignite Learning.

This case study addresses two district characteristics: Learning-oriented organizational improvement processes and Job-embedded professional learning for all members of the organization.

### **Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes**

The Durham District School Board has intentionally focussed on ensuring that the organizational improvement processes are learning-oriented. We have created structures to facilitate regular monitoring and refining of improvement processes. Three specific structures are described in this study: PLT (principal learning teams), Mentor Coach Training for administrators and Durham District School Board creation of the district improvement plan. Each structure required collaboration, trust, system thinking and proactivity.

Monthly PLT meetings include principals, superintendents and administrative officers responsible for specific portfolios. These three-hour meetings include two hours of professional development (instructional leadership) and one hour of information sharing (management leadership). Principals are required to bring their school improvement plans; as well as artifacts that demonstrate learning at their schools. Table groups are arranged with cross-district principals with common foci, varying experiences and new principal mentees with their mentors. There is an expectation that school improvement plans are working draft copies and are refined monthly to reflect successes and challenges.

These instructional leadership sessions have evolved over the years. From 2010-2013 a central leadership team presented and defined the professional development

needed by the principals. The central leadership team consisted of curriculum officers and principal association representatives. In 2013-2014 Educational Officers overseeing K-6 and 7-12 learning presented at monthly meetings. In 2014-2015 a change to format includes superintendents leading and presenting during the instructional leadership portion of the meeting. The evolution of involving the superintendents, as instructional presenters will model district consistency; as well as, reinforce the fact that senior administrators are co-learners. Prior to 2010 information items were communicated to school leaders as part of the monthly Director's meeting.

It is not uncommon to have "voices from the field" share best practices; whereby, specific principals have volunteered or have been asked to share the processes they experienced to obtain a specific result related to their school improvement plan.

Over the past few years this structure of learning has developed trust amongst colleagues. When we started professional learning at our monthly meetings, a principal would never raise their hand and admit, "I don't get it!", "I'm not sure what to do." or "What am I missing?" Now, there is an element of collaboration and trust with a comfort level amongst colleagues who will publicly ask, "What am I overlooking?", "What am I missing?", "How did you involve your leadership team in that discussion?"

As we progress into the future there is an opportunity to further refine improvement processes at these meetings by varying table-seating arrangements. There are times where assigned seating is necessary for specific groups to interact, as their focus is similar. There are other times when combining seasoned administrators with recently promoted administrators is beneficial for succession planning. Other times principals are free to choose table partners which invite critical friend dialogues. Regardless of the grouping arrangement there is always next steps to consider, refine and implement before the next month's PLT meeting.

The second structure that is in place to create learning organizational improvement process is the mentor-coach training for administrators. The Durham District School Board began five years ago (2009) bringing external mentor-coach trainers from the Ontario Principal Council in to facilitate four days of intense training for small groups of administrators to learn, implement and refine their mentor-coach skills. In 2012 we moved to in-house Durham District School Board mentor coach trainers, supervised by Ontario Principal Council, to facilitate the same training. This shift was more economically feasible as well as it allowed the participants to have on-going in-house support, and personalized district scenarios. The coaching conversations allowed the mentor-mentee to focus on next steps to existing behaviours, whether it is: moving a staff member, implementing an initiative, operationalizing a goal or strengthening the learning stance of an existing school culture.

Mentor-coaches learn the following vitally important coaching principles of: co-creating the coaching relationship; holding the mentor creative, resourceful and

whole; supporting strengths, visions, core values and desired change; inviting curiosity, discovery and reflection; fostering awareness, possibilities, choice, intentionality and accountability; and only sharing mentor coach's own experiences and expertise in service of the mentor. (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

We continue to support our mentor-coach administrators by hosting coaching clinics throughout the year to help participants refine and improve their mentor-coaching skills. Our next step is to expand the mentor-coach training to educational support staff. This employee group is also required to navigate conversations with clients, colleagues and other stakeholders. Such training will further develop the organizational improvement processes. Currently we are in conversation with managers and supervisors at Manager Council meetings to operationalize what this process could look like. The mentor-coach trainers do make themselves available for coaching conversations with human resource personnel and facilities services employees as they navigate their own career paths.

Finally, the third district structure the Durham District School Board has in place is the format used to create the board improvement plan. At one time, only a small group of innovative thinkers created the entire district plan to implement with dozens of improvement goals with academic jargon that justified the existence of every department. Such plans were handed to the administrator to implement, but many were shelved.

This process has evolved to an extremely time consuming process with numerous voices at the table. The process begins a year in advance, by monitoring the existing board improvement plan, analyzing data trends and monitoring existing practices. Voices at the table include: the director, all superintendents, administrative officers with specific portfolios and representatives from our two principal associations. Even the Chair of the Board trustee has been invited and has attended various planning meetings in the past to contribute and co-learn. Six to ten working meetings are set between January and April for the creation of the district plan. Between each working meeting attendees are required to take information back to their own departments, staff, colleagues to "try on ideas", gain insight, and reflect on points made from the planning meetings.

Once a final copy has been created; whereby, all stakeholders feel they have been heard and included; the launch of the next year's plan is scheduled at the May PLT meeting by the director. This launch is videotaped for future reference; as well as for those who were absent, including vice principals and members of the school leadership teams. This allows such information to be woven into individual school June staff meetings, as the principal begins the same process with his/her staff to develop a school improvement plan that aligns with the board improvement plan. Such draft plans are submitted to school superintendents by the end of June. This time line is important because superintendents jointly moderate the plans over the

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<sup>1</sup> Sharpe, K. & Nishimura, J. (2011) Facilitator's Guide: Mentor Coach Training for Educators. Ontario Principals Council.

summer and provide descriptive feedback to principals and their leadership teams for the fall.

The common thread in these three district structures that ensure organizational improvement is participant voice, which results in increased ownership in accountability.

### **Job-embedded Professional Learning For All Members of the Organization**

The purpose of the work carried out by districts captured in this dimension is to align the content of professional development with the capacities needed for district and school improvement. To help with this alignment, the Durham District School Board's senior administration created "academic council". These monthly two-hour professional dialogue opportunities have become job-embedded conversations amongst family of school superintendents, the director and educational officers. These meetings are non-hierarchical structure; the individual who brings forth an inquiry question, data set, artifact or discussion item chairs the discussion of that particular item during the academic council session.

This in-house professional development has members of "academic council" as co-learners in the process. The "blame game" is not part of the discussion and fixed mind-sets are discouraged. These professional conversations have evolved into a learning stance of inquiry, curiosity and possibilities. Our mandate is teaching and learning; therefore, a two-hour conversation on where the system is and what could be the next step does not stop there. There is an element of accountability and "take away" commitments that need to be followed through before the next academic council meeting.

In the winter of 2014, Dr. Steven Katz joined our academic council as our critical friend to acknowledge and challenge our current practices as system leaders. Katz' concept of "intentional interruption" has refocused members of academic council as we deconstruct successes and challenges. Council members use the dialogues as job-embedded opportunities to deepen their own learning and to help advance actions based on such learning. The dialogues help members better understand the challenges they face and direct attention to the next best learning move. Before narrowing the gap of an identified concern or problem, we need to identify why there is a gap in the first place, to ensure that whatever solution we chose hits the mark.

Transferring the knowledge gained at academic council meetings to monthly district administrative meetings is important to succession planning and school improvement. Very little time now is spent on administrative matters compared to the time devoted to professional development that aligns with board and school improvement initiatives. By having members of the senior administrative team lead professional development sessions, the content is intentional, consistent and purposeful. The table talk discussions, exit tickets, *which include participants recording their reflections on what they personally have learned, next steps for*

*questions they have regarding various topics*, and artifacts that principals bring to the monthly meetings reflect authentic school improvement strategies.

As a district we are beginning to put systems in place to allow educators to try things and take risks. This allows us to identify promising practices. Once we identify a promising practice we can label it, explicitly describe it, and transfer it to other situations/context (Katz, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. The district's principal learning teams are one structure for facilitating sharing, challenging, acknowledging and celebrating the identification and transfer of promising practices.

The learning does not cease at the conclusion of each monthly administration meeting. It continues back at the school at monthly staff meetings, department meetings and divisional meetings that focus on school successes and challenges. Learning also continues during walkabouts that focus on student learning, as well as during district reviews/school self-reviews that are snapshots of real time processes. Additional budget is allocated to release teachers and administrators to deconstruct findings from such reviews and decide collaboratively on the next best move.

Over the past several years, we have learned how to refine the two characteristics of our district described above in ways that add more value for our students. Among the lessons we have learned while making these adaptations are the following:

- be extremely intentional in your next move
- encourage people to adopt a learning stance, rather than only a doing stance toward their work
- do not rush to a solution, spend time identifying the problem
- be a co-learner regardless of your position
- operationalize the conversation by creating an action plan of what to do
- acknowledge and appreciate the work that has been completed
- value the contribution of other learners
- find out what voices are not represented and include those voices
- come from curiosity, rather than judgement
- remember that it is a journey and does not have an end

The Durham District School Board continues to make progress by using the leadership framework as a tool to grow our leaders. The practices of strong district leaders identified in the framework has assisted us in building the capacities of our new and existing leaders whose core priority is student achievement and well-being while managing the complexities of school life.

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<sup>2</sup> Katz, S. & Dack, L.A. (2013) *Intentional Interruption: Breaking Down Learning Barriers to Transform Professional Practice*. California: Corwin