



Job-embedded Professional Learning for all Members of the Organization

Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board

Background

The Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board provides a Christ-centred education to over 10,000 students. We employ over 700 teachers who are supported by a team of consultants, principals and administrators. Over 300 non-academic staff ensures that the best possible facilities, supports and resources are available to teachers, students and the system. The Board encompasses the broad geographical area of the City of Brantford and the counties of Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk. We are unique in that we belong to three dioceses: Hamilton, London and St. Catharines. We are located within a one-hour radius of Toronto to the east, London to the west, and Kitchener-Waterloo to the north.

Characteristics Addressed By This Case

We have focussed our leadership work on building coherence in our instructional practices, professional growth, and assessment to support our mission statement and aligning our work to our strategic plan to increase student achievement and well-being. To date much of our work in these areas has been through the work of our Principal Learning Teams, Family of Schools' meetings, our Marker Schools, and school networks with an intentional focus on the outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

To further develop job-embedded professional learning, our goal has been to align the content of professional development with the capacities needed for district and school improvements. The focus of the professional learning in the past two years has been and will continue to be on the personal leadership resources in the Ontario

Leadership Framework. Our work on these two specific characteristics of strong school districts is the focus of this case study.

Providing Coherent Instructional Guidance System

Several structures have been organized to support system capacity building. Principal Learning Teams (PLT) and School Networks have been established to support the collaboration and strategic conversation related to instructional practice and additional indicators of school effectiveness. PLT's have been organized related to specific marker school foci to ensure that collaborative work of the teams was directly connected to the identified teacher and student learning needs in individual schools.

The structure of Family of School's Meetings has provided opportunities for principals in learning teams; to come together for focussed discussions about Instructional Leadership in the areas of focus identified in their school improvement plan. These monthly sessions have been dedicated to conversations about teaching and learning. Principals are encouraged to collaborate with colleagues and student achievement support staff about issues or areas of concern involving the implementation and monitoring of their school improvement plan. Attention has been given to identifying the right learning focus for individual schools based on their needs analysis, context and culture. Part of the work and learning that occurs during Family of School sessions allows principals to utilize the skills and processes developed through cognitive coaching training to their role as school leaders. Family of Schools Meetings serve as vehicles for aligning coaching as a way to encourage constructive debate about best practice and to promote collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and well-being.

Over the past two years our Board has identified twelve elementary schools as Marker Schools. These schools are closely followed and monitored by our district's Student Achievement Team. Student learning is the emphasis of this project. The twelve schools receive additional funding to support professional learning and

release time for the staff involved. The principal, in collaboration with their school team, examine student data and identify the focus for their school. The district's Student Achievement Team supports the school in developing a plan and providing the professional learning support required to implement their plan. Each school identifies their own focus project so the professional development is very decentralized as it is based on the needs of the school. All Marker Schools are allocated a number of days to release teachers and work with the Principal and the Student Achievement Team to monitor the implementation of their plan. The principal is responsible for monitoring the progress of the student learning in their school and ensuring that the data collected and monitored matches their project. Schools involved have noted a significant shift from professional development to professional learning. The project started in the first year with six schools and has this year been expanded to twelve. The focus to date has been on the larger schools in our system so as to impact the greatest number of students in our district and build the capacity of a large number of teachers.

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Cognitive coaching

During the fall of 2012 administrators were led through an exercise at one of our Administrator Academic Council meetings to develop growth plans with a focus on the pillars of the Ontario Leadership Framework. The majority of our administrators cited competencies of the personal leadership resources as their identified growth areas; that led to us to reflect on the work we, could do to support our leaders. As a result, we are continuing to work on further developing our mentor coaches and our mentor programs for both teachers and administrators and aspiring leaders by embedding cognitive coaching strategies and skills in our practices to help mediate the thinking and learning of all staff members.

There are many variations of on this work. In the fall of 2012, we began work with our mentor coaches on the principles of cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching involves developing and maintaining trust with colleagues, building rapport, exercising active listening, paraphrasing, and perceiving and managing emotions. This work evolved through a series of sessions in which the mentors were brought together to work on and practice these skills under the leadership of two administrators from the Waterloo Catholic District School Board whom themselves had been trained in cognitive coaching. These sessions allowed mentors to question, practice and implement the skills of cognitive coaching to begin to mediate thinking in their mentor/mentee relationships. The mentors were assigned to work with our NTIP teachers and newly appointed administrators during the course of 2012-13

In order to fully incorporate the skills, principles and practices of cognitive coaching during the 2013-14 school year, our leaders and administrators went through eight full days of Foundation training in cognitive coaching. The board made this training a priority for all administrators and leaders committing the time and resources necessary to implement the training and allowing time within our Administrator Academic Council meetings to share the challenges, struggles and growth participants were experiencing throughout the process.

The initial two days of training were held in the summer of 2013, with the remainder of the training taking place on two successive days in October 2013, February 2014 and concluding in April of 2014. These in depth sessions allowed participants to elaborate on the skills and practices that were introduced in our first few sessions the previous school year and receive full training and certification in cognitive coaching. The training highlighted many of the personal leadership resources in the Ontario Leadership Framework; problem solving expertise, optimism, resilience, perceiving and managing emotions, and knowledge of effective school and classroom practices, to state a few.

Between each training module, leaders were to engage in coaching conversations back in their school communities, unique to the needs of their community/staff (i.e. implementing a new initiative, helping a staff member to identify and operationalize a learning goal, implementing change, etc.). Participants reflected on these conversations and were able to dialogue with the trainers on their own challenges and success with cognitive coaching. The training focused on the skills needed to enhance emotional intelligence in our leaders.

We intend to continue the work that was done last year by allocating time during our monthly Academic Council meetings to maintain the coaching learning focus during our meeting time with our principal leaders. These meetings will provide leaders with the opportunity to refine and improve their mentor-coaching skills, as well as seek feedback from colleagues to assist them with challenges they are facing.

Student Achievement Leadership Training

In 2012, in an effort to further embed professional development for our staff, the board began offering a leadership training series, S.A.L.T. (Student Achievement Leadership Training) to support aspiring formal leaders, instructional leaders and offer general leadership development opportunities to teachers in our system. The initial year of implementation was designed to build capacity in the areas of numeracy, literacy and teacher leadership utilizing personal resource skills in the Ontario Leadership Framework. The program consisted of a series of evenings in which participants were involved in facilitated literature reviews, whole and small group discussions and collaborative tasks followed by keynote presentations covering topics such as Authentic Engagement of Staff and Students, Deepening the Dialogue and Valuing Voice, and Celebrating Success and Sustaining the Movement.

The feedback from the evening series was overwhelmingly positive and indicated that there was an interest to participate and enhance leadership skills beyond the administrators and teacher leaders who were invited in the first year of the program. To that end, an invitation was extended to all school employees for the 2013 offering of S.A.L.T. Participating in the second year of the program were administrators, aspiring leaders, system and classroom teachers, Educational Assistants, and Early Childhood Educators. The topics in year two of the program included; Creating a Positive School Culture, Learning Abled, not Disabled, Observation as Authentic Assessment, Understanding our Students who Struggle with Poverty, and Inquiry-Based Learning. The program was open to anyone who wished to learn about current best thinking on some of the greatest challenges we face as educators in the 21st century. All participants had opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and reflect on what leadership looks like in their individual roles. Our intention moving forward with this program is to consider next steps we can take to increase our influence through practices connected to the Ontario Leadership Framework.

Conclusion

Over the past few years we have seen growth in the leadership characteristics associated with “strong districts”. In reflecting on our work on both providing coherent instructional guidance, and job-embedded professional learning, it is clear that sustaining our work in these areas needs to be a continuing effort to effectively impact leadership practices and ultimately improve student achievement and well-being, as highlight in our board mission and strategic plan.

We have utilized the Leadership Impact Assessment and Planning Tool, to gather data from three separate groups. We began with two key players in leadership development in the board, we reissued the impact tool to our Leadership Steering Committee, and finally we completed the impact tool survey with all school administrators as a large group. To our surprise the results from each round of reviews were very different and we learned that the decisions of a few, regardless of how well informed, may not reflect the needs of the whole. This experience reminded us of the need to give voice to all stakeholders in a forum that captures their ideas.

As we continue to develop our understanding of the personal leadership resources (closely connected to the five states of mind in cognitive coaching) we have also learned that our leaders appreciate the concepts of the personal leadership resources, however they have expressed difficulty in articulating what these attributes look like or how they can be assessed in an individual. We have made attempts to name and identify the resources in our selection and hiring process, but there is more work to do to understand how to give meaningful feedback on these attributes.