

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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Using EQAO Data

The Question:

“Some teachers at our school are questioning the validity of using EQAO results to inform classroom instruction. Are there supports to help us tackle this challenge?” (Elementary principal)

The Answer:

Yes. Here are five Tips for Success:

1. Check staff readiness for change
2. Lead for change
3. Get the facts
4. Six questions to ask
5. How are others handling this?

1. READINESS FOR CHANGE

When asking teachers to change their practice, it is helpful to first assess their readiness for change and the aspects of the school culture that might inhibit or promote this readiness. No matter how good leaders' pedagogical knowledge and problem-solving ability may be, their ability to effect change and improvement will be compromised if relations with the school are characterized by a lack of trust.

It is important to understand teacher emotions, how they influence student achievement and what principals can do.

Principals have a significant positive effect on teacher beliefs when they:

- help to clarify the reasons for implementing the policy
- empower teachers to participate in decisions about how the policy will be implemented
- provide resources to assist such implementation and make available opportunities to acquire the new skills necessary for policy implementation.

Leithwood and Beatty, 2008

Many leadership challenges are “adaptive” in nature; i.e., the solutions lie not in technical solutions known to experts, but rather in the people themselves.

What leadership qualities or behaviours engender trust?

- Respect for others
- Personal regard for others
- Competence in the role
- Personal integrity.

Of these, the most basic is respect.

Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009

Guidelines for tackling adaptive challenges:

- Don't do it alone. Enlist partners to build political power on the basis of personal relationships;
- Keep the opposition close. Work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters, and don't forget the uncommitted and the wary people in the middle who will often determine your success;
- Acknowledge their loss. You may be asking people to close the distance between their espoused values and their actual behaviour;
- People need to know that you realize that the change you are asking them to make is difficult.

Heifetz and Linsky, 2002

2. LEADING FOR CHANGE

If we are leading for improvement, we are inevitably leading for change and can expect some degree of discomfort, disagreement or resistance along the way. Open, authentic, truthful dialogue in an atmosphere of trust and respect is the key ingredient that makes meaningful change possible (*Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010*). You may need to engage in “courageous conversations.”

Another resource available is the Ministry of Education's “Conversation Starters,” developed to support principal mentoring and appraisal. It includes a section (2.5) on engaging in courageous “open to learning” conversations, which can be tailored for use with and by teachers.

It starts by asking:

- What do you need to know about the person before starting the conversation?
- What other perspectives or interpretations of the situation might you want to consider?
- If you were the other person in the conversation, how would you like this to be handled?

Ideas into Action (Winter 2010, see “References” below) provides a wealth of helpful resources and thoughts around this core leadership capacity - why it is essential, why it is difficult and how to engage in such conversations effectively.

3. GET THE FACTS

Sometimes it helps to have some quick facts at your fingertips that provide the research base for the case you are making:

Check out the EQAO frameworks (see “References”) for the test(s) you are discussing. They provide a handy chart that outlines differences between large-scale and classroom assessment. The frameworks show the unique contribution that EQAO results make to the larger issue of analyzing student achievement. They also acknowledge the importance of teacher-made assessments. This will help you to make a balanced case for the inclusion of EQAO data as part of the conversation.

Ken Leithwood, professor at OISE/UT, provides a helpful perspective on the use of EQAO tests in the discussion. He confirms that, internationally, EQAO tests are considered highly valid and reliable and, while they shouldn't be the only assessment considered, they ought to be the minimum.

4. SIX QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What percentage of my school's students have met the provincial standard in reading, writing and math?
2. What has the school's trend been in each of these subjects over the past five years?
3. If there is no clear trend in my school's results, is it because only a small number of students are writing the test each year?
4. How do the trends and current results of my school compare to those of my school boards and the province?
5. How do my school's demographics compare to those of the school board or the province?
6. What is my school's improvement plan for reading, writing and math?

EQAO, 2009

5. HOW ARE OTHERS HANDLING THIS?

Principals who attended the Principal Congress 2010 were asked to write about a change in instructional practice that had been difficult to bring about and to try out a theory of action for how to do bring about the change. Here are some of their thoughts:

“I believe that if teachers recognize that focussed instruction and reflective practices through assessment, dialogue, moderated marking and increased teacher support impacts student achievement directly, then there will be openness to change in instructional practices, engagement in divisional dialogue and authentic professional learning. If teachers feel supported with resources and a team approach, they may be more willing to accept help and initiate change in their programs.”

“It is important to place strategically and mentor those teachers who are committed to be leaders in their division and see the value of changing instructional practices. They are the go-to teachers who will embrace change. Find your teacher-leaders and let them lead others. Teacher-directed and -led initiatives are more sustainable and have a greater impact.”

REFERENCES

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