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Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Algoma District School Board

Algoma District School Board serves approximately 10,000 students in 35 elementary schools, 8 secondary schools and 2 JK-12 schools. The geographic area in which the board is located encompasses communities along the north shore of Lake Huron from Spanish to Sault Ste. Marie and along the east coast of Lake Superior from Sault Ste. Marie to Wawa and includes Hornepayne, Chapleau and Elliot Lake, for a total of more than 72,000 square kilometers. As the board's website notes, Algoma District School Board:

> *offers quality of life particularly for outdoor enthusiasts. Surrounded by water and trees, this four-season playground provides immediate access to magnificent scenery. The area is rich in history with sites of ancient native significance and travels of the voyageurs. Creative arts and culture are important components of our communities with many active theatre groups and internationally acclaimed artists.*

This case study describes how the district has gone about enhancing the condition of two of the nine characteristics of strong districts: a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on an ambitious image of the educated person; and learning-oriented organizational improvement processes. In particular, this account stresses the practices of senior leaders that are effective in enhancing the two characteristics.

Learning-oriented Organizational Improvement Processes

Learning-oriented improvement processes, evidence suggests, are created or further enhanced when senior 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.

Why This Characteristic?

With the appointment of a new director of education in the academic year of 2012-2013, our school improvement planning processes underwent significant changes. Using system feedback, a new Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA) and School Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (SIPSA) template were developed to support a strong emphasis on evidence-informed decision making for schools and system planning. Board improvement planning was completed after the submissions of the SIPSAs. This was a change from prior years where the BIPSA was the driver of school planning. The new BIPSA captured system strategic priorities under the categories of achievement, well-being and engagement.

At the onset of our work we recognized that school improvement planning processes were somewhat disconnected from central office and schools. System administration and school improvement planning teams were asking for more

ownership on a plan that made sense for their students and teachers. They were asking for opportunities to identify learning needs as evident in the student work. Principals voiced the opportunity to rethink our current school improvement planning processes. They wanted a process that had a 'life' in their classrooms on a daily basis. Although job-embedded learning was well established, there was still a lack of deep ownership – a sense that some still felt the work was for "the system (i.e. the Board) rather than for the school and its students and teachers.

What We Did

In the spring of 2013, a team of administrators (director of education, 3 superintendents, and 6 principals) attended the Instructional Rounds learning session at Harvard University in Boston. In August of 2013, the principals who had attended the rounds training worked with principals and vice-principals to provide the Instructional Rounds theory and some concrete examples of observing practice. We saw potential in the Instructional Rounds process to push the next level of work to improve the instructional core within our schools and across the system. Frankly, we saw that Rounds had the potential to transform School Effectiveness Visits (external) by embedding the ownership and data-gathering at the school level (internal), and providing external eyes and observations (colleagues, network partners within and across Families of Schools) to support school improvement. Stefanie Reinhorn, a colleague from Harvard, has supported our school teams in developing an understanding of the theory and application of the Instructional Rounds process.

Instructional Rounds is a disciplined way for educators to connect three common elements of improvement: classroom observations, improvement strategies and networks of learners. The Rounds design is a practice that is woven into and supports the ongoing improvement work of a school and a network, thereby supporting the collaborative inquiry process. The specified protocols during a rounds visit ensure that it is fundamentally descriptive and analytical. Instructional Rounds is *not* evaluative of individuals or schools. The round visit turns traditional

"learning walks" or other types of school visits upside down and inside out. In other words, the problem of practice and the improvement plan that have been defined by the host school community (especially the teachers) drives a Rounds visit. The visitors and observers at the host school are co-learners, observing and learning side by side with their hosts, to contribute to the school's learning journey.

The Family of Schools' superintendents were "hands on" working closely with their principals and vice-principals to review their achievement data and to ask probing questions. The newly revised 2013 SIPSA template guided the school data teams through a collaborative inquiry framework (a theory of action consisting of a series of if and then claims). Schools developed their own theories of action based on a defined problem of practice that teachers identified after careful analysis of their school data. The main task of our school data teams was to identify a 'learner-centred problem' – a problem of understanding or skill that was common to many of their students and underlies their performance on student work and assessments. Data collection moving forward was in support of the theory of action as identified within their SIPSA. Teams monitored their progress using clear short, mid-course and long-term goals for students. The ongoing monitoring of the SIPSA was layered into the Family of School professional learning conversations. The superintendent facilitated regular monitoring of the problem of practice and superintendent and principal field visits offered regular reflection and an opportunity to fine tune school improvement planning.

Professional learning has been differentiated and personalized depending on the needs of the Family of Schools. There were a variety of adult learning considerations to accommodate. Sessions focused on developing non-judgmental observations and the role of the facilitator during a rounds visit. To keep our learning transparent, Family of Schools were encouraged to share their work through an on-line portal. Schools posted their school improvement-planning journey (i.e. SIPSA revisions, PLC minutes, resources to support improvement planning and Family of School minutes). Norms and protocols were used for our Principal Learning networks

within each Family of Schools. District Principals' Learning sessions were revamped to include an intentional focus on school improvement. The needs and wants of the network are essential to planning the Family of Schools' agenda. Principals and vice-principals were encouraged to provide feedback when identifying their professional learning needs. The 'For Learning' monthly agenda item at district principals' sessions routinely included School Improvement Planning processes and kept learning at the forefront.

Collaborative inquiry (CI) has been embedded within our school improvement planning as a professional learning model for K-12 continuous improvement. We recognize that this structured approach to improving instruction makes it easier to ask questions, provides a platform for examining data, and determining how to support teachers and students. Collaborative Inquiry is being used both at the school level and system level, and is clearly evident both in the SIPSA and BIPSA.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been implemented within our schools for a number of years. Principals have asked for an opportunity to review exemplary models within our board. We will be revisiting our current practice with the intention of a sharing best practice and reflecting on the impact with our students and teachers. Administrative Council as a professional learning community collectively reviewed the feedback provided by Family of Schools Superintendents and their work within their Family of Schools.

Budgetary considerations in the spring of 2014 acknowledged provincial goals and priorities in the district and school improvement initiatives. Instructional Leads (K-6), implemented in September 2014, will provide a focus on literacy, numeracy and assessment. In previous years our Literacy Success Leads supported literacy initiatives but, given provincial and district priorities, we knew we needed to expand this role to cover more of the instructional core. Secondary schools have adapted a similar model, Instructional Support Teachers, in response to a K-12 learning continuum. The work of the instructional supports is to align with the actions outlined in the BIPSA and SIPSA.

The director of education and members of the senior administrative team led an administrative summer session in 2014 that was attended by principals, vice-principals and mangers and that team, provided a strong message about participating in and growing a culture of feedback as a learning organization. The BIPSA and SIPSA template has descriptive feedback at its core. We know and understand the impact of formative assessment on learning because assessment has been a focus in the district for the past four years. We must now, as a system, embed formative assessment as routine practice.

Using the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (OLF) *Personal Leadership Resources,* our principals and vice-principals participated in a system-wide administration of the EQ-i 2.0 and EQ360. Principals completed the on-line EQ-i 2.0. This tool assesses the interaction between a person and the environment in which he or she operates. Level of emotional and social functioning is based on the individual's responses. This opportunity provided a measurement on the individual's emotional intelligence. Using a reliable and valid measurement tool energized our conversations with our administrative team. Our focus for these coaching conversations was to increase principals' self-awareness of their interaction with others and to support their overall personal leadership development. Principals worked one-to-one with their Family of Schools superintendent to debrief the results of their Leadership Report to consider a series of questions (e.g., Which subscales would have the greatest impact on your leadership?) Superintendents then generated a Group Leadership Report, which contained the three highest subscales and the three lowest subscales for the principals within their Family of Schools cohort. This data provided coaching questions for a rich dialogue for developing personal leadership resources within each Family of Schools. This strategy has enabled us to think bigger than our 'own' school and to broaden our system thinking conversations.

Similarly, vice-principals completed the EQ360 on-line. The EQ360 provides more of an in-depth analysis by having those who work with the administrator provide

information when compared to a self-report. The EQ360 provided a gap analysis in a visual representation of the rater's responses directly compared to the responses of the nominated raters. Leadership conversations focused on noticing gaps, strengths and areas for growth. This information will support learning plans moving forward in September 2014.

The director of education, supervisory officers and the manager of Human Resources completed formal training and certification in the fall of 2013 by an authorized external provider to be able to conduct the assessments. Thus, the certification provided access to the EQi 2.0 and EQ360 assessments and coaching resources through an on-line portal. This intentional focus is to support our culture of feedback and to develop the capacity of our principals, vice-principals and all people within the organization to give and to receive feedback … the power of modeling and learning together.

Significant Turning Points

Our first and most significant turning point was having the SIPSAs inform the BIPSA. There was a collective ownership for school improvement and a renewed energy. Another significant turnaround was prompted by a series of school improvement host site visits in both elementary and secondary. Collectively, we have further developed our observational practice in identifying patterns and trends over a variety of classrooms. Visits used the problem of practice as a guide to the observation. Colleagues JK to 12 worked together laterally to identify and leave the host school with their next level of work. Host school teams included the school improvement planning team; they participated in the observation, debriefing and supported the development of the next level of work for their school. This work requires a culture of feedback and the use a non-judgmental lens. The Family of Schools organization also has been a turning point because it has provided a structure within which superintendents and principals have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of co-learning and what it truly means to be a learning organization with a 'soul'.

Current Status

Currently, our Family of Schools model is more personalized on the needs and wants of the network with a strong focus on developing the problem of practice and theory of action. Instructional supports are assigned to schools in need as identified by school achievement data. Our work and planning involves the continued support of Stefanie Reinhorn. We are committed to growing our capacity in school improvement planning processes. We are reviewing our protocols for School Effectiveness visits. Principals are taking the lead at Family of Schools learning sessions, contributing to the agenda, forming smaller groups for site visits using observation and the problem of practice to continue learning the process. Conversations within the Family of Schools sessions are respectful and we have come to engage in challenging conversations through the use of protocols. Our learning will continue to focus on how to differentiate support to schools while maintaining system areas of focus.

One other area of growth is to identify how best to maintain our focus on literacy, numeracy and assessment. Some schools have identified that since their problem of practice may focus on one area (e.g., literacy or numeracy), they are wondering how to maintain a focus on the other areas. Thus, we are wondering how best to do this, as we don't want schools to focus on too many targets. We believe that if the problem of practice is focused on instruction, we must be able to transcend all learning … this will be our next level of work.

Advice For Others

Based on our experience in further developing learning-oriented organizational improvement processes, our advice to others would be:

- 'go slow to go fast'' ensure a deep understanding of the theory and application of school improvement planning processes;
- the deep learning opportunities are in the work – learn to do by doing;
- student work is the best evidence of learning;

- include all stakeholders – ownership for learning and teaching is essential;
- have a concrete plan to keep a close eye on monitoring measures;
- senior leaders, acting as co-learners, reinforce the message that "we are learners and we are all learning the work together";
- let go … school-based ownership, combined with system support and directions, does result in the ability to improve schools from within;
- the role of the facilitator is significant in pushing the thinking of the team – develop questioning and personal leadership skills – instructional relationships are nurtured using the Ontario Leadership Framework's *Personal Leadership Resources.*