LEARNING-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

UPPER GRAND DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Leadership Characteristics: Creating learning-oriented organizational improvement processes that include a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development (Areas of Focus: #4 and #7).

While we have focused our case study on characteristics 4 and 7, we have experienced first-hand how the nine characteristics of strong districts impact each other.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can we create an aligned, focused culture within the Upper Grand District School Board, provide a venue through which best practices can be shared among schools and simultaneously build capacity so administrators can lead the learning in their buildings?

IDENTIFICATION

The former method of providing program support to elementary schools and building capacity had been compared to a game of Whack-a-Mole. Due to past work sanctions, individual teachers had been able to choose what topics they wanted in-service on and, perhaps even more importantly, what they didn't want in-service on. With contract negotiations completed and upcoming labour peace anticipated, the time was right for change and the Five-Year Cycle of Support and changes to the District Support Visit process for both Elementary and Secondary schools were developed.

INITIAL CONDITIONS

Data collected during District Support Visits suggested that across our school district, pockets of exemplary classroom practice shone in each of our elementary and secondary schools; however, high impact strategies were not as widely spread as our annual School Self Assessments suggested. While many teachers were attuned to the current research in education and the changes required to impact student learning, the variability within schools was considerable, as Hattie suggests. At the Secondary level, there was also large variance in the implementation and sharing of best practice. We opened discussions at one school with the administration and members of the school Leadership Team to explore a process for improving alignment and sharing successes. Moreover, focused discussions between the District Support Team and the school Leadership Team provided greater clarity to the "real" nature of teacher practice than was evident in the School Self Assessments. Our urgent need as a system was to increase the spread of proficiency and expertise of teachers in the use of best practices. To do this, we needed to tear down the walls between classrooms, to break down the doors between schools and to share the exemplary practice we saw happening in our schools.

THE BIPSA

Our focus was on moving a system from compliance to engagement by aligning these new initiatives with the Board Improvement Plan and District Support Visits. The what, why and how format of the BIPSA provided a structure and a means to model coherence between the new initiatives proposed and current practices.   In both elementary and secondary panels, specific examples illustrating why the current District Support Structure was not working were shared with administrators, as were suggestions as to how this process could be improved. Data from the previous year's District Support visits and School Self Assessments, a commitment to focus on student learning, and initiatives to continue, as well as interventions to stop, were outlined. The goal was to ground the work in evidence and to seek out multiple sources of data to inform our decisions, one of the nine recommendations put forth by Leithwood in Strong Districts and Their Leadership. At this point in the process, the ideas presented in Hattie's article, "What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise" were seminal to our process and a commitment to "One year of teaching = One year of learning" was introduced to the cycle, as was the idea of identification of "Urgent Student Learning Needs."

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The intention was to build an aligned, focused culture within the Upper Grand District School Board and change the model of curriculum support delivery. The goal was to create a venue through which best practices could be shared among schools and between the elementary and secondary panels and provide support to administrators so that they could lead the learning in their buildings. In the plan, elementary schools were grouped into years one through five. Each year had a specific learning goal to work on and a menu of support services and opportunities available to them based on their year in the cycle. School teams led by their principals in each year of the cycle would identify the "Urgent Student Learning Needs" in their school. Support and professional development was provided to administrators at P/VP meetings and further supported through Principal Learning Teams. This support: 1. explained the what, why, how, and next steps of identifying Urgent Student Learning Needs, 2. how to collect data and 3. how to implement strategies to improve student achievement.

At the secondary school level, a pilot "responsive School Self Assessment" was initiated. The School Self Assessment was driven by the Professional Learning Teams in the school, and their area of focus. In these teams, teachers in all subject departments linked pertinent School Effectiveness Framework indicators to research questions for collaborative inquiries. Specific feedback on focus, direction and next steps was provided to each team by the SEF Lead and Program Department. The feedback was grounded in evidence of student learning and best practices contained in the SEF. For example, Indicator 4.3, "Teaching and learning in the 21st Century is collaborative, innovative, and creative within a global context," prompted the Inquiry Question, "How do we inspire innovation to better prepare our students with STEM backgrounds for a rapidly changing world?" This Big Idea question led to the development of "essential questions" which propel teacher actions such as "To what extent have our purposeful and intentional strategies had an impact on: 1) Teaching and learning that includes critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration; and 2) Students connecting and challenging beyond the world of the school,

using a variety of learning technologies. PLTs have focused their collaborative professional learning since March 2016 on addressing these questions. Evidence of impact is continually reexamined and will be shared with the District Support Team in November.

LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Throughout the year, discussions with school administrators on how to identify urgent student learning needs, collect data and implement effective teaching practices became part of our P/VP meetings. Elementary and secondary curriculum staff, special education teams and the psychology department delivered focused and aligned messages. Each meeting built on the previous message and mirrored the work school staff needed to take back to their schools. Principals came to understand how identifying Urgent Student Learning Needs reflected the professional learning needs in their building. The collection of data and the importance of the triangulation of this data (including observations, conversations and student process and product) remained an important integrated message throughout the process. Evidence-based, high impact teaching strategies and the constant evaluation of their effectiveness are at the forefront of how we are learning to address identified urgent student learning needs.

The intent of the Five-Year Cycle of Support was stated clearly in the form of essential agreements between educators. Feedback on the "Can We All Agree?" suggested that principals and teachers found it motivating. During the journey to develop school improvement goals based on the urgent learning needs of students, principals and their teams were encouraged to keep the following five tenets front and center:

- Students deserve the very best education we can offer.
- Students come to us with different levels in their understanding.
- Analyzing student work together helps us to understand learning needs.
- It is difficult for educators to meet the diverse needs of all learners.
- Educators, working collaboratively to analyze and respond to evidence of urgent student learning needs, have the greatest impact on learning.

Knowing that collaborative educator expertise makes the difference, we engaged many of our strong school leaders in modelling the sharing of best practice at our monthly P/VP meetings. Substantial time at each meeting was set aside for collaborative learning by our principals on topics responsive to their identified principal learning needs (e.g., kinds of data, protocols for collaboration, high impact strategies, challenging conversations, as outlined in: Five Year Cycle and Supports at a Glance).

GOING FORWARD

As Leithwood states, if a district has a broadly shared mission, vision and goals and a coherent instructional guidance system, it will move from good to great. With this in mind, we intentionally included administrators in the work from the beginning to illustrate that this centrally directed change was work that was owned by all. By creating a culture of trust and collaboration, our intention was to begin to break down the isolation administrators and subsequently teachers often feel. As we move forward with our plan, the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement remains at the core of our work and

the Five-Year Cycle of Support and the District Support Visits have become a commitment to excellence and a philosophy that we strongly believe in. One year of work equaling one year of progress isn't just about students. One year of work equaling one year of progress is about teachers, administrators and system leaders coming together and aligning their work to raise the achievement bar, close the achievement gap and support student wellbeing and achievement. It is about the work we need to continue to do each and every day.