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Productive Working Relationships with Staff and Stakeholders

Waterloo Region District School Board

Background

The Waterloo Region District School Board is one of the larger school boards in Ontario. We serve approximately 63,000 students in 120 schools in the Region of Waterloo.

We are located in the heart of South-Western Ontario and serve Waterloo Region, which consists of the cities of Kitchener, Cambridge, and Waterloo, and the townships of Wellesley, Woolwich, Wilmot, and North Dumfries. Within the townships, Waterloo Region District School Board operates schools in the communities of Ayr, Baden, Breslau, Conestogo, Elmira, Floradale, Linwood, New Dundee, New Hamburg, and St. Jacobs.

Our instruction is focused on developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to provide a solid foundation for living and learning. We are proud of our staff and their commitment to the learning and development of our students. Many of our staff have been recognized locally, provincially and nationally as the best in their fields.

Our students regularly achieve a wide variety of honours in academics, fine arts and athletics. Our graduates have great success as they pursue further education and rewarding careers.

We value parent involvement in our schools and welcome parents to become active in the local school council.

This case study addresses two district characteristics: productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders and a coherent instructional guidance system.

During the past decade, like many boards in the province of Ontario, Waterloo Region District School Board has focused on developing a common understanding regarding what effective classroom instruction looks like. Prior to this, it was not uncommon to have many schools focused on many different school improvement efforts with little central direction. As the Ministry of Education began working in a more centralized and prescriptive way, introducing the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat as well as the Student Success initiative, Waterloo Region District School Board followed this direction. We began shifting our focus to providing more

centralized direction and support to our schools in an effort to meet the Ministry goal of improving student achievement by raising the bar and lowering the gap.

As we reflect on our work over the past five years in particular, we know that our first priority has been to develop a coherent instructional guidance system within our district. Our focus has been on building alignment and coherence within our system leaders as we focused on the implementation of our board improvement plan as well as school improvement plans.

As a Senior Staff, we determined that it was important to articulate a vision of learning that linked a system goal with common beliefs and a system expectation. This vision was complemented by a professional learning focus anchored in the use of a learning cycle and choice of high yield instructional tools. The resulting Board Improvement Plan Synopsis served as a consistent reference point for our system for several years.

Our structure of four superintendents of education focused on supporting instruction in schools has helped us concentrate on the implementation of the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement. Furthermore, by having one superintendent in charge of leading Learning Services, as well as an executive superintendent to oversee and coordinate the efforts of this team, we have been able to integrate and align instructional supports and resources so that the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement is supported throughout the system.

At the same time, we have worked diligently at building the capacity of our school leaders through various training sessions that have focused on improved instruction. Over time, and with these capacity building efforts, we have gone through a cultural shift where the school administration teams have taken more responsibility for leading the instructional program within their buildings. At the elementary level, participation in a variety of provincial initiatives including Schools in the Middle, as well as networking clusters of our own schools, gave principals and vice principals a lead role in working through Learning Cycles as well as various aspects of effective assessment strategies. In secondary schools, our principals were engaged with department heads as they worked through a new Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting procedure focused on implementing effective assessment strategies at the school level.

Our overall goal continues to be optimizing student achievement and well-being and we feel strongly that this goal needed to be upfront when working with leaders throughout the system. The nature of the District Effectiveness Framework, a coherent instructional guidance system characteristic, is that the work is never-ending. As we work in a cycle of continuous improvement, we need to be responsive to the needs of our students and know that this is a dynamic group with changing characteristics and needs as our school communities become more diverse.

Throughout the 2013-14 academic year, our current Director of Education met with various focus groups in an effort to gain feedback from all levels of the organization. The information he gathered revealed that many people felt that leadership had become fairly hierarchical in nature and that decisions tended to be made in a top down fashion. This information seemed to contradict previous work done to bolster the instructional leader's capacity to build a coherent instructional guidance system. As the Director of Education engaged in focus groups with non academic staff, it was evident that people felt that they were not connected to the system leaders' group and could not identify themselves in the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement. Other feedback included the perception that decisions took a long time and needed several levels of approval.

During the previous year, we undertook a community engagement audit. The feedback from this audit, which included the voices of community and school leaders, central staff, teachers and support staff, was that engagement and communication needed to be an area of focus for the system and the community. The audit indicated a disconnect between the way internal and external stakeholders believed they were included and engaged in consultation and decision making at all levels of board work. As a priority, the Director of Education realigned staff in the Director's Office resulting in the Executive Officer taking on the leadership for Engagement and Communications. The Director and Executive Officer listened to over 60 groups representing internal and external stakeholders over the first year. This feedback continues to guide system priorities. An engagement continuum has been supported by trustees and is currently being implemented throughout the system and community. All working groups must be clear and articulate whether they are informing, consulting or collaborating throughout their work.

As a result of the broad consultation our Director of Education, during his first year, in the spring of 2014, was determined that we needed to focus our attention on productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders. As we examined this characteristic it became clear that we needed to focus on our internal stakeholders first. One of the turning points came about when we attended the Ontario Leadership Congress and had an opportunity to hear Ken Leithwood, Meredith Honig and Andy Hargreaves speak passionately about the importance of central staff and school leaders working together more effectively. Their messages resonated with our team, particularly the idea of "leading from the middle". This concept of the district working with school leaders to lead system change, made us think about see the way the system currently responds to the needs of schools and how we need to share leadership within the district.

At the May System Leaders' Meeting, our Director of Education shared his thinking around the importance of linking system leadership to school leadership. During that address, the Director of Education signalled that more attention would be focused on developing a better understanding of the Strong Districts research during the upcoming year. In addition, particular attention was paid to the idea that

in order to achieve our goal of optimizing student achievement and well-being, every system leader needed to be engaged in the dialogue around building productive working relationships within the district.

Our first action to demonstrate that we were working on building productive working relationships was to examine the way in which System Leaders' meetings were organized and to see if they were responding to the needs of that group. A decision was made to move towards a broader leadership emphasis that would be inclusive of all system leaders. We also looked at the organization of these meetings and concluded that they needed to be shared with the Board Leadership Development Strategy team, a group that included representatives from principals, vice-principals, senior staff, and managers from Business Services as well as Human Resource Services. A number of meetings were held from June to September to ensure that the work of system leaders meetings would come from a genuine collective leadership model and that it would focus on building productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders as described in the Strong Districts and Their Leadership research.

It needs to be noted that the Board Leadership Development Strategy team has a long history of providing quality leadership experiences within the district that are largely organized by principals and vice-principals with limited support from central office staff. This group has a tradition of volunteerism as well as strong leadership that has served the district well. This group has run aspiring Leaders and the Administrators Mentoring Programs for years and they have responded to individual needs as well as the needs of the system as they have provided support to new leaders. These two examples are part of a comprehensive leadership development program that reaches a wide range of people within the system.

As we worked through these meetings, it was important to acknowledge that there was some scepticism as we focused on building productive relationships. There was a concern raised that focusing on leadership may be interpreted as not being as precise as working on instruction. In terms of beginning this work, it was important to acknowledge and to explicitly state that the overall goal of working on building productive working relationships would improve student achievement and well-being. As well, we were confronted by the idea that we needed to address the issue of trust in order to build productive working relationships and that ideal of reciprocal communication, there needs to be a climate where individuals feel respected, valued and that there is a mutual regard for one another. Some past experiences made people feel that it was not safe to participate in discussions that were intended to be consultative in nature. The introduction of the engagement continuum has provided a support and focus to improve our communication and build trust within these groups.

Our second action was to ensure that there is consistent messaging from the Director of Education's address to system leaders in May to subsequent strategic work within the system. Senior staff is embracing this strategy and have worked to

ensure that they are aligning their messages with the system focus of building productive working relationships. At this point, we have ensured that system leaders hear a reinforcement of the message that we are working on a "service to schools" orientation. At meetings involving school and central leaders, the Director of Education has demonstrated the importance of collective leadership.

A third action is a shift in thinking around the supports offered to schools. During the past few years, as we worked to develop better alignment and coherence within the system, supports to schools tended to be initiated by Learning Services staff. These supports were offered to support the implementation of the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement. Improvement Plans and were often linked to specific initiatives that were centrally driven. This fall, in an effort to be more responsive to school needs, supports are being provided to projects that are initiated by schools as they implement their school improvement plan for student achievement. School leadership teams are leading these projects as they work together in an effort to resolve their own problems of practice and improve student achievement. This shift in thinking indicates that the central staff is working with school staff to lead from the middle instead of directing the implementation.

Within the Waterloo Region District School Board, we are building a common understanding of the Strong Districts and Their Leadership research as well as a better understanding of the Ontario Leadership Framework. For a number of years, the Waterloo Region District School Board has worked diligently on developing a coherent instructional guidance system that supports student achievement and well-being. We have focused on a continuous improvement model that provides supports to schools and builds the instructional capacity of staff. This type of work is ongoing and requires continual monitoring, as it is our core business.

It is our belief that as we broaden our understanding of productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders, we will build the capacity of our team to be more effective within our district as we continue to optimize student achievement and well-being. At the same time, we are developing a common understanding of what we mean by organizational trust and how we need to connect with one another in order to achieve our overall goal of optimizing student outcomes. By participating in a shared dialogue, we will build group norms that will help us understand our expectations of one another as we work collaboratively to deal with complex issues. We anticipate that we will engage in a productive discussion regarding the term "reciprocal communication" as we look at better ways to work together more effectively. By sharing leadership and being explicit in our pursuit of developing productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders, we believe we will become a stronger team and we will be more effective in our collective work of improving student outcomes.