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School Improvement Journey: Turning the Ship Around
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> This is a story about one principal of a small rural school leading her staff and its community on an improvement journey. It's a journey that begins with the principal working in collaboration with staff and parents to engage in school improvement to raise EQAO scores in math and literacy. This story is a dynamic illustration of the leadership practices and Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) in action.

When I arrived at Valley three years ago, I was perplexed at the school's extremely low achievement scores. Attendance was excellent. Community demographics included predominantly median incomes and two-parent families who spoke English as a first language. We scored at the 95th percentile or higher in all six Early Developmental Index (EDI) domains.

Our school
Our small rural school of about 220 students is located about 15 kilometres south of the northwestern Ontario city of Thunder Bay. Our community is vastly spread out and reaches all the way to the United States border which is approximately 35 kilometres south.

Our students and our staff
Because of our unique location, a number of students with special needs choose to remain with us rather than travel to special classes. Most of our students are bussed in which creates significant challenges to parent engagement and developing a sense of community in the school. Ours is a mature teaching staff with 11 years the average length of tenure and several who have been teaching for over 20 years.

Student achievement and increased enrolment
Over the past three years we have turned around our achievement scores, moving from 31st out of 33 in the city to first place in EQAO scores. This includes 100% in grade 3 Math, and 63% in grade 6 math, representing a 44% and 46% increase respectively over three years.

> 1.1 Building a shared vision

During these same three years we also dreamed of and built an exemplary outdoor learning space and classroom. As word got out in the community about our success, we experienced our largest JK enrolment ever for 2020-2021 as well as an increase in overall enrolment.

1.3 Creating high expectations

Taking stock

Observation, e-scans, and several conversations with staff and students quickly yielded some initial answers. Data driven instruction was absent and student achievement data, of any kind, were almost non-existent. School improvement goals were not based on data and had remained the same for several years. The School Improvement Planning (SIP) progress was not tracked and it was not shared with the school community. Despite board mandates, daily 80-minute math and 100-minute literacy blocks, these were not happening daily. Finally, all classroom doors were closed, and collaborative teaching and learning were not evident.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

Getting the structural house in order

The first actions in turning around our school were simple and structural. We reorganized schedules to include the board-mandated math and literacy blocks. We established timelines for baseline data collection in literacy and math. In our first professional learning community (PLC) session we critically analyzed our EQAO results. Guided reading, writing, and math groups had to be evident in classes. From there, the School Improvement Team (SIT) drafted our first targeted SIP goals in literacy, math, and school climate. We established a math and literacy data wall for the whole school. This would later become the foundation around which our teaching shifts were centred.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

Focusing on parent engagement

I began an open dialogue with school council about our SIP and the steps we were taking to achieve it. I established a School Improvement Bulletin Board that clearly stated our SIP goals and posted student work as evidence we were moving towards them. I also required student data walls in classes, the use of student work as exemplars, and math strategy walls. These were co-created as a staff.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents

Building a shared vision

At our first professional learning community (PLC), I focused on "the why" we were in education and expressed my vision of education through a sharing circle. I wanted to refocus the staff on why they were there and capitalize on the hopes and dreams they started with in education. In short, I wanted to revitalize their commitment and enthusiasm for teaching.

For the first time, I shared with them their Early Development Instrument (EDI) data and contrasted it with their EQAO data. It presented a stark picture. I left it with them to reflect on while we continued to get our structural house in order.

I knew we had some experienced teachers who had a lot of expertise and could help us move forward. I focused on showing them models of data driven instruction, particularly the use of data to inform improvement plans and next steps. I shortened planning blocks to six weeks with data collection, plans, action, and reflection clearly demonstrated. Some teachers embraced the moves and I began to see changes and increased competency.

By our January PLC, we were ready to ask difficult questions and confront realities; that is, that attitudes about learning needed to change and our instructional practices needed to evolve.

1.1 Building a shared vision

Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – Perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity, and character

Building collaboration by drawing on teacher strengths

In January I began putting teacher voices front and centre at the PLC. I asked key staff to share their practices and the progress they were seeing as a way of encouraging others. I adopted a learning stance with staff.

Then, to create an environment of accountability, I required our divisions to use the Teaching and Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) process. Although the TLCP was not a new approach since our board had used TLCP years earlier, I am a firm believer in layering teaching and learning tools as need requires, rather than discarding the old for the new.

The TLCP requires teachers to plan pathways divisionally based on an initial task, teaching "moves" in between, and ending with a culminating task. It also requires teachers to publicly collect data and moderate student work to establish next teaching steps. It is highly effective in helping students to make progress, building collaboration, demonstrating the power of intentional teaching, and building staff collective efficacy.

4.2 Providing instructional support

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge, and systems thinking

By year's end, teachers knew that they could bring about improvements in student achievement when they were focused on student needs and were intentional about targeting their teaching practices. This provided teacher leaders with a place to showcase their strengths and reluctant teachers with the evidence they were seeking to make a change.

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity

Reach for the moon in year one
Our work paid off in our first significant increases in EQAO results in August. That year I moved staff around to positions that would benefit from their strengths. I also created the SIP in collaboration with the entire staff instead

4.1 Staffing the instructional program

of developing it only with the SIT. I shared with staff my process for deeply analyzing EQAO data and demonstrated how we could drill down to the specific skill, process, and expectations that our students struggled with the most.

From there we identified goals using the language from curriculum and EQAO expectations to construct a meaningful, targeted SIP that we could assess and revise throughout the year. This process invested staff in the SIP and created ownership. As attitudes changed, staff began

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

to revise and reform the data wall into a useful school-wide tool. We invited parents to view our school improvement wall and demonstrated the teaching practices and strategies we were using. We began to focus on giving feedback and using feedback loops, providing students with opportunities to improve on a continuous basis using co-created checklists and success criteria.

Our school council shared its dream of creating an outdoor learning space and classroom. We engaged our newly established Experiential Learning Academies for grades 7 and 8 in the design and construction. These new teaching and learning spaces figured heavily into our year two SIP goal related to problem solving.

Problem-solving became something we continuously emphasized throughout the school day through free exploration, play, and construction in our outdoor space and in student-to-student interactions. Instead of the adults solving problems for students, we started asking them what steps they had taken to problem solve and facilitated their skill development. By the end of year three, students and

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – Problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge, and systems thinking

parents had co-designed and constructed a five-metre-wide, fully accessible pathway though our one-hectare wood lot and students had crafted rabbit trails throughout for exploration.

Materials from clearing the spaces were left to use as construction and play materials for students, which led to unexpected leaps in problem-solving skills. Through collaborative fundraising and grants, we constructed a new outdoor classroom adjacent to the space. We began harvesting the wild fruits consisting of high bush cranberries, saskatoons, and making jams and preserves in class.

By year three, teachers were leading PLCs and collaborating on improved practices, data collection, sharing insights into student needs. Class data walls reflected feedback loops in student work. Our EQAO results and enrolment soared. Our outdoor space and classroom brought our community together. And we are ready for the next steps!