



Premier's Board of Education Award

for

Innovation and Excellence in Education

October 29, 2004

NOMINATION FORM

School Division

Saskatchewan Valley School Division No. 49

Board of Education Chairperson

Mr. Harold Klassen

Board of Education Vice-Chairperson

Mr. Keith Ranger

Director of Education

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Assistant Director of Education

Mrs. Linda Tunney

Program Nominated

Enhancing Student Achievement through Professional Learning Communities

Goal of Program

Our goal is to build the capacity of our Board of Education trustees and school division staff to function as a professional learning community (PLC) in order to increase student achievement.

Description of Program

Basis of Research and Best Practice

There is a recent, remarkable convergence of theories, knowledge bases, ideas and strategies from both inside and outside of education that suggest similar conclusions about the best strategy for school improvement and, ultimately, for enhanced student achievement: If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a PLC. Over the past three years, Saskatchewan Valley School Division (SVSD) Board of Education and staff have engaged in a number of actions to support building PLCs within the school division. There has been some evidence to demonstrate a positive impact on student achievement through the implementation of PLCs by practicing collective inquiry, focusing on results and continuous improvement through collaboration, and we recognize that this is only the end of the beginning. A continued focus on analyzing student achievement information will provide the data to inform our direction.

This new model to enhance student achievement is also aligned with the School^{PLUS} Effective Practices Framework as outlined by Saskatchewan Learning. Embedded in it are the principles of continuous planning, monitoring, assessment and improvement for the purpose of enhanced student achievement. It is our collective vision that as staff develops the skills and capacity to function as PLCs, we will simultaneously work with our education partners to develop our capacity to function as learning communities.

Direct Board of Education Influence and Participation in the Innovation

The strategic plan to implement PLCs was carefully considered for the school division as a whole rather than for individual schools. Division Office administration became familiar with the concepts of PLCs as the Board supported their participation in international, national and local inservice focused on this area. The next step was to “invite” in-school administration to after school meetings to hear about the concept and help plan for administration and staff implementation. Ownership for the concept quickly developed with all in-school administrators, and they were anxious to have their staffs make the necessary changes to operate as PLCs. SVSD Board trustees, along with our in-school administrators, attended the same inservice in the fall of 2003 related to PLCs. This past September all of our professional staff attended this same inservice. The Board provided the resources for trustees and staff to attend this inservice through budgeting. As well, through supporting a sequence of professional development/planning days in the 2004-2005 school year, it was possible for all staff to attend the same inservice without the added expense of substitute costs.

Utilizing a knowledge-based governance model, the Board supports schools through their own modeling as a PLC during their meetings and on other committees in which they are involved. Their mornings of monthly meetings are spent on their own professional development targeted towards assisting them in gaining knowledge to become more effective in their planning and decision-making. During 2002-2003 one of their own goals was understanding their leadership as it relates to change and, consequently, as a Board they engaged in a reflective reading and dialogue process utilizing the book by Michael Fullan, Leading in a Culture of Change. During 2003-2004 their goal was to gain more knowledge and information regarding Board governance, and as a result governance practices utilized would be reflected upon to affirm as a practice or to determine possible areas of change. The Board utilized the book The Will to Govern Well by Tecker, Frankel and Meyer as their knowledge source for dialogue and reflection. Therefore, the Board was, in fact, practicing operating as a PLC through demonstrating collective inquiry, reflecting on their own Board behaviours and actions, and making appropriate changes in a desire to become more effective.

Innovative Nature of the Program or Project

For SVSD it is a major innovation and reculturation to be shifting our practices and our culture from working in isolation to working in a collaborative learning environment. Fullan (2001) suggests that,

“Transforming the culture – changing the way we do things around here – is the main point... Furthermore, it is a particular kind of reculturing for which we strive: one that activates and deepens moral purpose through collaborative work cultures that respect differences and constantly build and test knowledge against measurable results – a culture within which one realizes that sometimes being off balance is a learning moment” (p. 44).

We recognize that reculturing involves hard, labour-intensive work. It takes time and it never ends.

Over the past three years, our school division has utilized a strategy to improve teaching and learning. This strategy consists of a set of organizing principles about the process of systemic change and a set of specific activities related to models of staff development that focus on division-wide improvement of instruction. The organizational principles of the change strategy are as follows:

1. Positively impacting student learning is what the change is all about;
2. Instructional improvement is a long, multistage process involving collective inquiry, collaborative teams, an orientation toward action and a focus on results;
3. Collaborative efforts and shared expertise is the driver of instructional change;
4. The focus is on division-wide improvement;
5. Good ideas come from talented people working together;
6. It is important to determine what we will be tight about and what we can be loose about;
7. Positive relationships involving collegiality, caring and respect make the difference.

A number of changes have been made. Traditional professional development planning involving external "experts" has transformed toward collective ownership for professional development at the personal, interpersonal and organizational levels. It is innovative to change from an educational culture, which focused on teaching, to one that focuses on learning, and to have personnel at all levels of our school division engaged in this new culture. One of the structural changes to support behavioural change is the establishment of professional development as a collaborative learning activity within our LINC Agreement. This collaborative practice has become embedded into our professional development and planning days.

Sustainability of the Innovation within the Present System

Transforming the culture and changing the way we do things is what operating as PLCs is all about. By emphasizing needed changes in the culture of schools and the daily practice of professionals, the culture of the school division is transformed. It does not mean adopting innovations one after another; it does mean building the capacity to seek, critically assess, and selectively incorporate new ideas and education practices that positively impact student achievement. It is much easier to proclaim a structural change in policy or procedures and much more difficult for a school division to demonstrate a cultural change in attitudes or beliefs. However, in our supporting documentation we have evidence that staff behaviours, which affect attitudes and beliefs, demonstrate a cultural change has taken place. As we continue on this journey to collaborate and learn together effective ways to positively impact student achievement, this innovation is not perceived as an add on. Rather, it is a way of behaving and a way of doing.

The challenge of sustaining the change process is creating a critical mass of the learning community who are willing and able to pay attention to communication, collaboration and culture. Furthermore, sustaining an improvement initiative requires common goals, collective efforts and shared insights of people engaged in the reflective analysis of their current practice and behaviour. Our Board of Education, administration and school staffs have developed a shared three to five year vision of education for our school division. Embedded within these Strategic Directions are outcomes, actions and indicators of success related directly to improving student achievement through the practices of PLCs. Through our Strategic Directions there is support for, as well as an expectation to utilize collective inquiry, focusing on results and continuous improvement through collaboration. The Strategic Directions are provided as supporting documentation. Another positive example of staff changing their practices is demonstrated through our October 2004 Professional Development/Planning Day that has been structured to support school and division collaborative teams engaging in PLC processes.

Cost of the Innovation Related to Benefits Achieved

It is paramount to support Board of Education trustees, as well as staff, to embrace collective inquiry and focus on results through collaborative processes in order to positively impact student learning. Opportunities for personal, interpersonal and organizational awareness, practice and reflection are provided through division-wide embraced professional development activities focused on learning to operate as PLCs. This principle of “good ideas come from talented people working together” more than outweighs the minimal resources required to implement professional learning communities.

SVSD partnered with Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit to bring Rick and Rebecca DuFour to Saskatoon to have all of our professional staff attend their presentation. Both organizations benefited by offering the session to others from the province such that minimal, if any, resources from either organization were required to support the presentation.

Changing the way we do our work through PLCs is cost effective. The benefit of ownership at the school level far exceeds the costs of training and implementation. Ongoing support from the division level is also a cost that is outweighed by the benefits of schools driving the direction of PLCs according to the specific needs and goals they define for themselves. We are experiencing PLCs becoming self-sustaining and gathering momentum as they become part of our daily work and part of the way we do things.

Client Support for the Innovation

2004 Opening Institute

An important and effective strategy for shaping the culture of any organization is celebration of individual and collective accomplishments, but the challenge is making celebration an integral part of a school improvement effort. This year at our 2004 Opening Institute, where we have all employees attend and invite all district and division board trustees, we focused our theme on “Celebrate – A Community of Learners” to highlight the work of schools in their efforts to implement and operate as PLCs. Eight schools volunteered to be a part of the morning celebrations by presenting their experiences and learnings. We have included an agenda as part of our supporting documentation. The informal feedback received from in-school administrators, staff and trustees indicated that this was of great value in our journey of implementing PLCs. Furthermore, we also feel that because there was a great willingness on the part of teachers to share learnings with one another in a large public forum, the ownership for this improvement initiative has gained momentum by teachers and will, therefore, continue to be sustained.

Venture Heights School (VHS), Martensville

Teachers at VHS presented information regarding their PLC experiences. Teachers stated that:

We felt that if we're teaching the same things anyway, why not plan together. Through this process we discovered the statement: Work smarter, not harder. We have since begun a quest to work towards and seek best teaching practices. Continuous conversations and sharing of materials have made both of us more effective teachers.

Furthermore, they shared that, "When we plan together again (and we are quite excited to do this), we will have common objectives and common assessments, but we will teach in our own ways and compare the data to see how we can improve as professionals."

Stobart Elementary Community School (SECS), Duck Lake

SECS teachers reported their positive experiences implementing PLCs into their weekly schedule. Please refer to our supporting documentation.

Stobart Community High School (SCHS), Duck Lake

With a PowerPoint presentation, SCHS summarized their learnings as they worked through changing their school culture to embrace a PLC process. The staff report that:

Dealing with the changes of School^{PLUS} and PLCs has forced us to attend to the really important things in school and life like honouring the strengths and differences of all staff members; like honouring relationships – building a culture of care, trust and respect and being lenient in judgement of each other; like sharing and building our knowledge together – you know... collaboration.

In conclusion, the staff stated that "the best ideas seem to happen when we put our heads together...and when we give each other some elbow room to explore."

Administrative Council Meetings

The challenge for us is to become more effective in resolving key instructional questions and in maintaining a commitment to results through collaborative processes. For the second year, our Administrative Council is modeling collaborative processes and attending to leadership issues with a commitment to results by changing the focus of their meetings. The major portion of their full day meetings have become opportunities for administrators to engage in collective inquiry and reflection and, as a result, they utilize a small portion at the end of the day for business. We have continuously received feedback as to the increased value for administrators in engaging in these activities. The administrators then use those same "models" of collective inquiry and attention to results through collaborative processes with their staff.

Saskatchewan Valley Teachers' Association (SVTA)

As the Board and SVTA went through the process of interest-based negotiations, the new LINC Agreement included recognition for professional development as collaboration time for collective inquiry with a focus on student achievement results. The SVTA is considering having the morning session of their Teachers' Institute in February 2005 focused on "Building Learning Communities: Saskatchewan Research and Practice" with Larry Sackney and Keith Walker. They have also chosen to offer the afternoon of this day for PLC focused work across the school division.

Evidence of Improved Student Achievement

There can be no greater goal for schools than increased student learning.

Valley Christian Academy (VCA)

When staff at VCA reflected on why students may not be achieving success, they determined that incomplete homework or assignments were a common concern. They formed a team to develop "noon hour lunch labs" requiring students to attend when work was not complete. Administrators tracked student achievement results before and after attending the lunch labs. Staff report that "we saw an overall increase in student achievement. As well, teachers did not need to spend as much time encouraging students to hand in their work. For the most part, homework was finished and assignments were handed in on time." VCA continues to track student achievement and the effectiveness of their lunch lab innovation.

Hepburn School

"As the behavioural culture of the school improves, behaviour improves, academic gains are experienced, and more time is directed toward academic instruction" (Sugai & Horner, 2001, p. 5). Baseline data provides relevant and invaluable information about and insight into the cultural change Hepburn School has been striving for with the implementation of Positive Behaviour Intervention for Students (PBIS). Analysis of data shows 22 incidents of student behaviour in the 2001-2002 school year that resulted in student suspensions. This translates into 233.75 hours or 14,025 lost minutes of learning for the students involved, 1,500 lost minutes for teachers, and 75 hours or 4,500 lost minutes to administrators, impacting significantly their availability in providing leadership support to the learning community. With the introduction of PBIS and the resulting change in culture, routine and mindset, the data reflected dramatic behavioural and reactionary changes. The 2002-2003 school year recorded only two student suspensions and, obviously, significantly less time lost in learning, teaching and administrative minutes. In 2003-2004, administration recorded only a single suspension. Furthermore, incident tracking showed 70 percent of recesses and noon hours without incident. Of the incidents recorded, 22 percent were of an extremely minor nature (e.g. a student reporting another student kicked a soccer ball out of bounds of the school ground and retrieved it without first asking permission). Given this data, the effectiveness and benefits of PBIS seem to be clearly stated.

Valley Manor School (VMS), Martensville

A teacher at VMS reported student achievement results following her experiences in engaging in PLC processes. As a result of reading an article, she wanted to improve her reading instruction, collect data and see if student reading comprehension would improve.

The teacher writes that,

1. parents were commenting about how much their child was reading and liking it. Some students had read more in the last ten weeks than they had all year.
2. increased confidence in all readers especially the ones that struggle.
3. approximately 90% of the students had one year or more growth in their reading comprehension skills from the testing results of the previous year.

She also reports that “the results are exciting and things are in place to implement this fall.” This teacher has attracted the interest of school division teachers at all levels who are replicating her innovation.

We recognize that student achievement results are only valuable as trends over time. As schools continue to collect and analyze student achievement data, we anticipate a wealth of information this current school year that will guide and inform instructional practices in SVSD.