

theme / SCHOOL-BASED



Creating

A CULTURE OF CHANGE

BY DEBORAH PATTERSON AND CAROL ROLHEISER

When groups of teachers, working hand-in-hand with school administrators, commit to changing the culture in their schools, they get results. In the Edmonton (Alberta, Canada) Catholic Schools District, teachers and administrators working together on school leadership teams to build collaborative school cultures have been a powerful conduit for change. Through the Assessment for Learning initiative, colleagues are talking, teachers are changing how they teach, and students are achieving more on the elementary Provincial Achievement Test (PAT).

Although the test score rise may not be the result of the initiative alone, the district saw an 11.5% improvement from 1999 to 2001 in the district's compar-

Ten strategies
for developing
an ethic
of teamwork

ison with the province's mean scores. In 2001, students met or exceeded the provincial mean in 14 of 21 curricular fields, adding another six areas for a total of 20 in 2002. These gains are significant considering that more district students on average take the test than the provincial average at grades 3, 6, and 9. The improvement in student achievement has sparked interest in the district's strategies from other districts and from the Provincial Ministry.

The Assessment for Learning (AFL) was a grassroots initiative begun in 1998 by a small group of teachers, principals, and consultants who saw the potential for change in their district, which they believed had become fragmented as a result of diverse provincial and district priorities. A steering committee was formed of representatives from all levels and consultants from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Total district involvement not only fostered coherence, but also ensured that teachers and administrators would consider the work a priority and would find a similar mind-set even if they moved to a new school.

The goal was to reculture, or to develop a culture of change, where ongoing assessment, reflective dialogue, and collaboration contribute to continuous learning and changes in

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TEAMWORK STRATEGIES

1. Learn about change.
2. Commit to change and reculturing.
3. Establish a safe, caring environment.
4. Be open to possibilities and take risks.
5. Choose a meaningful focus.
6. Encourage professional discussion.
7. Model collaborative work.
8. Build capacity for shared leadership.
9. Have high expectations and take responsibility for colleagues' learning.
10. Value a strong collective cognitive and skill base.

practice. To reculture a district, people must change how they think about doing business. They must collaborate and share leadership, use data to make classroom, school and district decisions about teaching and learning, make teaching practices more transparent, and think about what their outcomes are.

FORMING LEADERSHIP TEAMS

The district asked each school to form a leadership team made up of all administrators and at least one teacher per 100 students. Each school was responsible for the selection, focus, and function of its leadership team. Teachers volunteered for the role, but in many cases, colleagues or administrators encouraged particular teachers to be part of the team. The teachers had to agree to serve for one year and take part in districtwide team professional development.

In the first three years, teams took part in six to eight days of professional learning spread over the year,

including a summer institute. Four to six full-day sessions have occurred during the school year in the last two years. The group of about 300 team members districtwide was divided in half for smaller sessions. In the sessions, teams looked at research connecting professional learning communities to improved student achievement, case studies, and literature on assessment and change. At each session, they discussed successes, challenges, and planned next steps for strategies they were trying in their schools. The networking and discussions helped them solve problems specific to their school.

Teams supported peers in developing school goals. Staff learned how to collect and examine student data and use data to set improved learning targets.

Team members were asked about the barriers and supports affecting their AFL work in a recent qualitative study (Patterson, 2003). During interviews with 60 district participants at the beginning and end of one school year, teachers said working together with colleagues on school-based leadership teams is a powerful support that helps them assume leadership, build a collaborative culture, and make a difference for students. They gave specific conditions that support learning teams — and the absence of these conditions hindered meaningful change.

CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

1 Learn about change. Members of the leadership teams spent time studying assessment and learning about change. Specifically studying the change process helps increase the chance of sustaining change initiatives (Rolheiser, Fullan, & Edge, 2003). A typical professional development session included opportunities for leadership teams to discuss and plan their

schools' change efforts. In one session, for example, facilitators shared a research-based framework of five ideas to build professional learning communities. Teams watched a video case study of a school working on these ideas and then discussed actions they could take in their own schools. The sessions used various learning strategies such as cooperative groups and graphic organizers, modeling what leaders could do in their own schools to encourage teams to share experiences and analyze problems.

2 Commit to change and reculturing.

The district steering committee had clear goals for reculturing. Most school leadership teams began to share those goals as they saw how the goals related to work at their schools. Team members began to see themselves as agents for reculturing. Many teachers began trying out new practices and sharing the results with school colleagues. Teams studied change concepts, such as dealing with resistant teachers, during districtwide sessions. They targeted teachers more reluctant to change their practices by sharing their own successes with new strategies. They also modeled strategies during staff meetings and encouraged classroom observations. With persistent expectations and ongoing mutual support, leadership teams began to see energy for the change initiative grow.

3 Establish a safe, caring environment.

Successful AFL schools had teams that made a conscious effort to establish a safe, caring environment. Leadership teams facilitated team building using cooperative learning strategies in school professional development sessions. They asked teachers to share work at staff meetings or grade team meetings and helped set up rotating classroom observations to

Edmonton Catholic Schools Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Number of schools: 51 elementaries (K-6); 11 elementary/junior high schools (K-9); 11 junior highs (7-9); one elementary/junior/senior high (K-12); one junior/senior high (7-12); and six high schools (10-12).

Enrollment: 31,008 students

Staff: 1,680 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix: Not tracked

Limited English proficient: 5%

Languages spoken: English, French, Spanish, Slavic languages, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Chinese, and others.

Free/reduced lunch: Not tracked

Special education: 13%

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foster professional discussions and mentoring. Teams also established structures, such as shared planning time for grade teams and interdependent teaching roles where team members worked with colleagues in class. As staff learned more about each other as people and as teachers, colleagues trusted and respected each other more. "Some of us who were on opposite sides of the fence learned about each other, understood each other a little better, accepted each other for who we are, and had respect for each other that we didn't have before," one teacher said. Teams then were able to identify individuals' strengths and use local expertise for each other's professional learning.

4 Be open to possibilities and take risks.

The AFL initiative focused on collaborative work. However, as teachers and administrators in leadership teams worked more closely together, they were more vulnerable. They needed to feel supported and

valued. Leadership teams learned more about each other in district sessions where they shared their values and were encouraged to tell personal stories, building relationships and trust. That trust helped them take more risks at the school level. The team used many of the strategies they experienced during district sessions in working with school colleagues. For example, having teachers share their practices in small cooperative groups was safer than having them share in front of all staff in a meeting. As teams internalized change concepts, they became more effective in deciding what strategy to use, when to use it, and how to use it with staff members to maximize support and encourage risk taking.

5 Choose a meaningful focus.

Leadership teams must take ownership for the initiative in their schools by choosing a specific school focus for their assessment work — for example, literacy — and making decisions about schoolwide professional development. The teams that believed themselves most successful had colleagues discuss the school's goals, beliefs, and values before the team established strategies to achieve specific school goals. Teams said that the flexibility to choose a meaningful school focus based on student data made it easier to get colleagues' commitment. For example, when provincial achievement results indicated that student writing needed attention, one school team decided to use portfolio assessment and student self-evaluation as strategies for improvement. Teachers were willing to work together when they saw how the strategies directly related to their classroom and results with students. As teachers became excited about the work, they were willing to spend more time talking about teaching and learning. One teacher leader said, "It was neat to watch the dialogue go from the staff

meeting ... to the staff room to the classrooms after school and the hallways.”

6 Encourage professional discussion.

Using data from students in their schools and professional reading, teams got teachers talking about their own assessment strategies and solving problems. Leadership teams planned some of this work to be done during staff meetings. Other times, the work was done during specifically designed grade-level planning sessions and classroom visitations. Staffs began to reach consensus about what they felt was important for their students and to examine and question existing teaching practices. The more that leadership teams concentrated on team building and building trust, the safer teachers felt, and the more the discussions were open and productive. The leadership teams then talked together about problems, issues, and actions at district sessions. “This brings a level of accountability, pressure, and support,” one school team member said. Both the school-based and districtwide dialogues were key to creating change.

7 Model collaborative work.

Modeling and practicing collaborative work strategies at district professional development sessions helped teams in their role as school-based professional developers. Teams changed how they approached and planned professional development, from depending on whole staff sessions to developing multifaceted approaches such as study groups, grade team planning, intervisitations, and coaching. They modeled research-based instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning, mind mapping, concept mapping, and inductive thinking (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001) and built-in opportunities to discuss research, share

expertise, and observe teaching. Colleagues recognized that team members were successfully learning new instruction and assessment strategies and began to understand the synergy of collaboration.

8 Build capacity for shared leadership.

By establishing leadership teams, the district showed it accepted teachers as potential leaders. All schools rotated membership on their leadership teams, giving others opportunities to lead and making it more likely that new strategies and reculturing efforts would be sustained in the face of attrition and changes in personnel. Successful teams shared leadership and decision making equally between teachers and school administrators.

9 Have high expectations and take responsibility for colleagues' learning.

Leadership teams with high expectations for their colleagues and a sense of responsibility for peers' learning were more successful at building collaborative cultures and helping staff focus on student learning. One teacher leader explained, “There's some accountability that's created because we are helping each other and looking out for each other's learning. It's kind of the expectation that you're going to come along as well.” Successful teams included all colleagues in the initiative and expected total involvement. They ensured that colleagues understood the new strategies and supported individuals in their efforts.

10 Value a strong collective cognitive and skill base.

Collective knowledge and skills are more important for membership on the leadership team than an individual's expertise. Teachers not usually considered for

leadership positions felt comfortable joining the teams, knowing they would have the support of colleagues and ongoing professional development. New teachers could share expertise and their understanding of best practices from their recent experiences in teacher education programs. One teacher leader said, “We are building a culture of collaboration. It's the ethic of teamwork. As individuals, we bring different knowledge and skills to the table. Pulling all together, we can come up with stronger ways of assessing and working with the students.”

CONCLUSION

Developing deep changes in the culture of learning and establishing schools as professional learning communities requires planning. Professional dialogue between colleagues must be encouraged at all levels, and teachers must be supported in collectively building on their knowledge. As a districtwide initiative, AFL has focused on change that impacts the culture of every school in the district. It is the strategic planning, dynamic interaction, and collective energy of teachers and administrators leading together in the AFL change effort that is making a difference.

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