

Laying the Foundation for an Effective PLC

By Gloria Baxter and Susan Manning, Toronto District School Board

When our improvement journey began four years ago, we started with the basic premise that all students could learn and that, indeed, all of our schools would improve. We believed that if each school demonstrated it could establish a culture of evidence-informed decision-making, geared toward reflective practice and an unrelenting commitment to improvement, then student achievement would be a reality. Who would disagree with what we are espousing? We realized, however, that more than rhetoric was required to ensure that a culture of continuous improvement was born.

North East Five (NE5) is a family of schools (FOS) grouping that consists of 18 elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools. Each school possesses its own unique demographic profile, achievement levels and ways of doing everyday business. Each school performs differently and experiences various degrees of improvement over time.

While the administration was building a FOS plan, it was important to connect the schools, especially since it was clear that students in the elementary panel transitioned to the middle schools and ultimately became graduates of the secondary schools. In essence, NE5's student body is the underlying connection among the schools, making each student the responsibility of all NE5's educators.

Therefore, the journey was based on ensuring that each school and the FOS, as a whole, experienced year-over-year improvement. Establishing some common beliefs and ways of doing business as a FOS was an important beginning. Commitments included:

- Collecting common and consistent standardized data elements to allow for comparisons across schools, longitudinally over time.
- Reviewing a wide range of data to identify FOS needs and areas of similarity and differences across the schools.
- Identifying key achievement issues across the FOS.
- Establishing specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (SMART) goals designed to target and close the achievement gap.
- Identifying gaps in teacher practice.
- Establishing a common plan of action to close the achievement gap.
- Implementing FOS committee structures that ensure the participation of all administrators and key teachers.

- Tracking and monitoring the implementation and its relationship to improved student outcomes.

So far, this sounds like a textbook version of a typical improvement journey. What textbooks describe and what plays out in reality, however, are often not the same. By now, it should be apparent that we did not begin the journey with the intent to establish professional learning communities (PLCs). We did acknowledge that to build an evidence-based decision-making culture, it would be necessary for professional dialogue to occur. Initial concentration, however, focused on culture and people change management.

We began by creating dialogue networks through a series of FOS meetings. The dialogue networks served two key purposes:

- To learn about the needs of students and parents in NE5.
- To learn from one another about how we were meeting the needs of NE5 students.

Data were critical to begin the process of candidly examining our student and parent community. In the beginning, data were provocatively presented to school administrators to help them discard their entrenched beliefs and to help develop a sense of urgency. Schools were identified as stuck, moving, cruising or sinking in terms of how well they were addressing student-learning outcomes. This initial information, while unexpected in some cases, created a baseline for the family—of not only the gaps that needed to be closed but also, more importantly, in echoing a loud and clear message throughout the FOS. Teaching and learning were no longer going to be isolated and private events behind classroom doors. Rather, it was going to be transparent and something for which all staff in NE5 would share responsibility.

Ah-ha moments

The data helped create the cognitive dissonance in the minds of NE5 staff members between what they believed to be true about student needs in relation to performance and what the data actually indicated. These ah-ha moments helped engage staff in a self-reflection process and create a sense of urgency to learn more about how to bridge the teaching learning gaps.

Therefore, while the first year of the journey was devoted to learning about the students and how each school was trying to meet student needs, the second year shifted focus away from learning from one another to learning *with* one another. At this point, staff was prepared to openly and honestly identify the issues with total candor and to map the issues across the K-12 spectrum. Administrators and teachers from all three panels worked collaboratively within their committees to analyze and review their current teaching practices and identify areas of need.

They also examined current research-based practices that would help them to better target their efforts and close the achievement gaps.

Staff recognized the importance of leveraging capacity and capitalizing on economies of scale, not only in terms of resource use but also the work effort required to make the significant changes in practice. More importantly, staff recognized that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts and closing achievement gaps required the collective wisdom of all. Hence, committee structures moved away from building the action plan to focusing on implementing practice and monitoring of effectiveness.

A number of past practices and initiatives were selectively abandoned in favor of one to two strategic directions that would be implemented in every classroom, kindergarten through grade 12. The FOS wisely capitalized on ministry funding for professional development by holding joint professional development across the family of schools. These days were aimed at common messaging and communication of strategic direction. The expectation was that school administrators would provide the necessary scaffolding and infrastructure at the school level to reinforce the ongoing job-embedded learning provided to implement the necessary changes in practice.

It was evident, however, that the magnitude of change required was such that it would not merely happen on its own. Focused and intentional leadership was necessary. When Helen Bochar, director of Beyond-the-Basics Education Consulting Inc., spoke to Toronto District School Board principals during the 2007-2008 school year, she identified that various leadership styles are required throughout the duration of any change initiative. The beginning of the journey is marked by an authoritative and legislative leadership style, followed by a collegial and selective style. Initially, a top-down approach in terms of establishing non-negotiables and clear expectations was established in key areas, including the collection and use of data to inform instructional practice for programs.

Not only was this data guide practiced across the FOS, it also established the direction within each school and grade team meeting. Other FOS structures were used to support and reinforce the non-negotiables. For example, the principal performance appraisal process supported the continuous improvement journey by providing opportunities for focused conversations to ensure alignment between the family of schools' SMART goals and strategic direction, and each school's SMART goal and strategic direction.

It was evident as the journey progressed that a collegial and selective leadership style needed to be adopted. It was important that responsibility move toward shared ownership. The degree of success in terms of committee structures functioning as learning communities

depended on the strength and knowledge of the co-chairs. Initially, the journey allowed individuals to self-select for participation as a committee co-chair. However, there needed to be selection of key leaders with existing process management skills to ensure that implementation moved beyond the FOS to permeate the learning culture within each school. These key leaders needed to mobilize, target and intentionally guide their committees through focused dialogues, process implementation and progress monitoring.

While the superintendent is the formal authority figure necessary for setting and ensuring fidelity to the course of direction, it was evident that playing the role of a single point person would be extremely challenging from a variety of perspectives. This included the scope and breadth of the initiative or being too close to the initiative, potentially obscuring objectivity. Therefore, the superintendent collaborated with organizational development staff who provided support for the change process and acted as a critical friend. Central staff members was also essential in providing program leadership in the areas of literacy and numeracy in terms of monitoring the degree of implementation.

The journey goes on

As this change journey continues, a key factor to its success will be the ability to manage the dilemmas associated with accounting versus accountability. While both are required, an overemphasis of completion of numerous forms and templates to demonstrate fidelity to the process takes away from the rich dialogue required to move the journey forward. Real accountability resides in teachers' and administrators' everyday behaviors and actions that demonstrate commitment to improved teaching and learning. This accountability is evident in the ongoing conversations, practices, joint planning and delivery of lessons, critical review of practice and conversations leading to refinements and modifications of strategies. Authentic accountability comes through individuals taking not only responsibility for their own professional growth, but also for their ability to promote ongoing organizational learning. Their moral purpose is to leave their teaching and learning environment better off.

Key to this continuous improvement journey has been the ability to move beyond the rhetoric by turning information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom, thereby promoting organizational learning and improvement. PLCs cannot simply be mandated, and they do not emerge overnight. An effective PLC is only as good as the information being brought to the table and, more importantly, the group's ability to interpret and make collective sense out of the information, to grow our knowledge about teaching and learning.

As Peter Senge notes in *Quality Quotes*, “The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization.”

Reference

1. Helio Gomes, *Quality Quotes*, ASQ Quality Press, 1996.

Gloria Baxter is the superintendent of education for the Toronto District School Board. Susan Manning is the senior manager of the district’s organizational development department. For more information on the school district, visit www.tdsb.on.ca.