

Educators' Notebook

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

Leading Excellence in Assessment Practice

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This *Notebook* presents the journey of the School District of Mystery Lake in its **Leading Excellence in Assessment Practice Project** (LEAP). The purpose of the project is to explore and discover best practices in assessment through research, and guide implementation of common strategies across the District. The implementation included the creation of a District Assessment Committee, group led professional readings and discussion, networking with other educational leaders and working with assessment experts. This initiative received the support of the Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education.

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Leading Excellence in Assessment Practice

A District Priority

The Leading Excellence in Assessment Practice Project (LEAP) was developed by the Leadership Council of the School District of Mystery Lake. The Council included the School Administration Team and the Senior Administration Team. It was formed in the fall of 2007 to create a common understanding of the strength and issues in the District schools while setting direction for innovation in instruction and planning improvement in learning. The Council agreed that in order to influence improvement, a solid foundation of the reasoning for change in assessment practice needs to be imbedded within. To build trust in staff, and lead the way through modeling and guidance, leaders needed to develop their own competencies in best assessment practices. Therefore the project included specific goals regarding leadership training in assessment for school administrators:

By June 2010, the District will adopt a common set of assessment strategies based on best practices for student learning and instruction.

The project was divided into 3 stages:

Stage 1 (March-August 2008)

Introduction to Assessment for Leaders

Stage 2 (September 2008-August 2009)

Strategies for implementation

Stage 3 (September 2009-August 2010)

Implementation

Introduction to Assessment for Leaders

Stage 1 included training by Damian Cooper (2007), author of *Talk about Assessment: Strategies and Tools to Improve Learning* in the spring of 2008 for the School Administration and Senior

Administration Teams. As a follow up, copies of the document were purchased for each school leader and it was used to continue the training during the Fall Conference in stage 2 of the project. We also explored the Manitoba Education documents: *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* (2006) and *Communicating Student Learning: Guidelines for Schools* (2008). School administrators used some of the materials to lead staff training sessions in their own schools, modeling best practices and developing common language for assessment.

In order to expand the training and involve the District's teaching staff, a District Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting Committee was created in the fall of 2008. The goals of the Committee were to develop an action plan which would include data collection and analysis, a divisional professional development plan, a document containing our vision, guidelines, expectations, tools as well as a divisional policy. The Committee members committed to sit on the committee for at least 2 years and agreed to attend full day meetings 6 times in the current school year. The Committee was composed of teachers, District personnel, specialists, school administration and senior administration.

In stage 2, a Leadership Team was created and replaced the Leadership Council. It expanded the leadership capacity of the District by including divisional support personnel such as special services and curriculum specialists. The Leadership Team continues to meet once a month and works on leadership related topics.

Strategies for Implementation

In the spring of 2009, Sandra Herbst, co-author of *Leading the Way to Making Classroom Assessment Work (2008)*, facilitated a 2 day workshop for school administrators, District personnel and the 10 new Department Heads of the high school. Each participant received a copy of the book and explored ways to lead the new District initiative.

A divisional workshop template was developed by members of our Pedagogical team which included training on the 2 MECY documents: *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind (2006)* and *Communicating Student Learning: Guidelines for Schools (2008)*. Members of the team led 10 divisional grade group workshops for all teaching staff. Schools created their own committees to continue the dialogue between colleagues, analyse data and promote best practices in Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting.

Since September 2009, there have been several training sessions on Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting to support personnel groups through the new team structure. All School Administrators, District specialists (coordinator, support teachers, clinicians, consultants, etc.), Resource Teachers and cohort members (teachers following post-bac training with U of M) have received training about the 3 assessment documents already mentioned and are asking for more. R.D Parker Collegiate created its own Assessment Committee and the District purchased copies of Damian Cooper's new book *Talk about Assessment: High School Strategies and Tools (2010)* to support their efforts in leading pedagogical conversations between high school colleagues. Elementary schools asked for copies of Anne Davies' book *Making Classroom Assessment Work (2000)* for each of their classroom teachers.

Implementation

We are now in stage 3 of the Assessment initiative. On September 25 2009, the Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting Committee organized a District workshop for teachers on developing criteria, led by MECY consultants.

In the fall 2009, our 3000 students (K-12) participated in Student Involved Conferences. Brochures developed by the committee were sent to parents to inform them about the new initiative.

A District wide in service took place on January 15, 2010, prepared and led by the District Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting Committee Members. Grouped by grades and Departments, teachers received support in implementing best strategies in assessment such as developing common criteria and rubrics at the high school level and how to use Portfolio assessment in the Elementary schools. Each Elementary school received a copy of Cross, Marion. (1995). *How To?s in Getting Started with Assessment & Evaluation Using Portfolios (Across the Curriculum)*. The Thompson Teacher Association Professional Development Committee invited Wayne Hulley, renowned expert on assessment, to lead a District in service on February 24, 2010.

The District committee has also started the process of reviewing the divisional report cards and developing a new model in line with the Education Department's guidelines for communicating student learning. This process will continue in 2010-2011 when classroom teachers will be able to meet with colleagues of the same grade and identify the key learning outcomes on which they would like to report. Those collegial dialogues are very important as they offer teachers the opportunity to identify the essential skills they want their students to learn. It is through conversations that teachers can get engaged in creating

meaningful changes to their teaching practices. As Margaret Wheatley (2005) suggests, “As people engage in the difficult and messy processes of participation, they are simultaneously creating the conditions- new relationships, new insights, greater level of commitment-that facilitate more rapid and complete implementation” (p.89).

The School District of Mystery Lake will continue to support teachers in their learning journey about assessment through powerful professional learning opportunities where teams of teachers work together to problem solve and create new solutions. The District goals will continue to reflect a commitment to **Leading Excellence in Assessment Practices.**

References

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.