

# A SENSE *of*

**By Debbie Donsky and Kathy Witherow**

**T**he York Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada, is moving to what Hargreaves and Shirley call the fourth way of learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), which emphasizes teacher professionalism and the importance of leadership that is responsive to student and teacher needs.


Leaders of this high-performing district knew that what took it from good to great would not take it from great to excellent. The district's early model of improvement, centered around prescribed diagnostic assessment and prescriptive professional learning, didn't ensure ownership from teachers, nor did it value the voices of students, teachers, and other stakeholders. Moreover, with increased access to social media and online professional learning tools, staff members were finding their own ways to learn.

The challenge, then, has been to personalize learning while also ensuring alignment with system and school improvement plans. Working at both the system and school level to balance the need for individual and collective learning, the district has shifted away from top-down

professional learning to a new definition of professional learning that is responsive to the local school context, embedded in practice, focused on collaboration and inquiry, and part of an ongoing iterative process. And, in this new definition of professional learning, the principal is a co-learner.

The 70:20:10 model for learning and development suggests that 70% of educators' learning comes from experience — just-in-time, job-embedded learning. Another 20% comes from mentorships, coaching, and feedback from those with whom educators interact on a semiformal basis, and the final 10% comes from formal workshops, conferences, and other learning experiences (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996). The district's new professional learning focus means that it embraces and values the 70% of personalized, just-in-time learning that involves informal structures and relationships.

As the district moves toward this culture of personalization, system leaders have had to address how to maintain clear goals for increased student achievement and



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well-being as well as support staff in their learning. They have found that the key is to balance accountability and responsibility both at the school and system level.

Debbie Donsky, principal of curriculum and instructional services and a former elementary school principal, recounts this transition at the school level (on p. 38), and Kathy Witherow, superintendent of curriculum and instructional services, describes the district's efforts at the system level (on p. 39).

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THE SCHOOL STORY

# Focus on collaboration and inquiry

By Debbie Donsky

As a school principal, each year I consider how the school, our learning, and our improvement will become more effective. This does not happen at a predetermined start date, but rather through an ongoing monitoring cycle of implementation and reflection, refining of goals, and experimenting with efforts to build a collaborative learning culture with staff.



Debbie Donsky

The school’s leadership team, made up of representatives from across the school, meets to talk about what has gone well, what has been challenging, and where growth needs to be. We begin planning for the following year by asking ourselves:

- Have the interventions and professional learning impacted our targeted areas for growth in our school improvement plan?
- Have we continued to build a professional learning culture in the school? What are barriers to a trusting professional culture that allows for collaborative inquiry with and among staff? What has been a support to this?
- Have students responded to the changes we have focused on this year? How do we know? What is our evidence?

At the same time, informed by the district’s improvement plan, we consider the direction the system is taking:

- What are key messages being relayed through the system senior leadership team?
- What initiatives are coming from the province that will impact school operations?
- What, if any, change in legislation will guide our decision making?

The district is working to build professional culture. Through a strategic partnership with the elementary teachers’ union, we have continued to develop our

understanding of the instructional rounds process, which is collaborative and tied directly to classroom practice and student learning needs.

This process, along with recent legislation that releases teachers collecting mandatory diagnostic data, has steered the school leadership team toward supporting staff members in learning about processes that will support their professional judgment as it relates to increased student achievement and well-being.

At the school level, we grow this collaborative professional culture through structures that mirror what we expect in effective classroom practice, such as carefully designed learning teams that create cross-divisional and heterogeneous groupings similar to the leadership team. Just like a classroom, we talk about purposeful groupings and, as such, the same practice benefits learning in staff meetings.

## INQUIRY METHOD

Staff meeting agendas are designed to follow the inquiry method, with sections labeled “minds on,” “hands on,” and “reflect on.” Talk time is always on the agenda and facilitated by lead teachers. Over time, the meetings became a series of small- and large-group dialogue focused on identified areas for growth. Agendas are sent out at least three days before meetings with links to learning resources: articles, videos, and graphics that would allow for blended and flipped learning for all staff.

As principal, I had difficulty giving up control of the meeting, but I learned how important it is to get out of the way and let the learning happen. The turning point for me came during a meeting where the discussion moved to a shared dialogue among staff without the need for my voice or direction. My first instinct was to keep to the timelines set out in the agenda, but I just listened and recognized what was happening.

The staff was having a sustained professional dialogue, engaging in honest discourse based on

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## THE SYSTEM STORY

# Alignment and coherence are key

By Kathy Witherow

It took a series of events for the York Region District School Board to adapt its approach to professional learning. With the district's early success in literacy, the system approach to improvement including systemwide messages and large-scale professional development made sense.

Changes in educational policy, however, made innovative practices necessary. The district could no longer demand that all teachers use systemwide assessment tools with all students to identify areas of focus. At the same time, the district's standardized mathematics assessment showed a decrease in student achievement. We needed to re-examine not just what we were learning, but also how, when, and where we were learning.

This renewed focus took us away from activity-based professional learning and led us to examine how we assessed the impact of the work of instructional consultants. System leaders adopted John Hattie's mantra of "know thy impact" (Hattie, 2011) and realigned their work with teachers so it is embedded in schools and focused on student learning.

We developed protocols for teacher collaborative inquiry and organized the learning around the instructional core (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). System consultants now go directly into schools to work alongside teachers and principals, as co-learners, based on their own identified learning needs as outlined in the schools' challenges of practice.

Alignment and coherence were essential elements to bring about the change needed. It is important for system leaders to support schools to see how their work connects with the broader board improvement plan and the provincial direction. Greater collaboration between and among departments is key to ensuring this alignment.



Kathy Witherow

The curriculum department can no longer work in isolation. System leaders partnered with departments such as student services and leadership development to provide support at the school level.

The district also began an in-depth look into what makes professional learning effective. System leaders began by asking the district's consultant team to remember a particularly effective professional learning experience. What made it so good? While responses varied, common themes emerged: student-centered, having personal relevance, ensuring voice and choice, and opportunities for practice.

Using this feedback, we modified professional learning to allow for personalization, ongoing opportunities for practice and refinement, and support at the point of implementation with students. System leaders reviewed the literature on effective professional learning and adopted many of the ideas put forth by Guskey & Yoon (2009) and Blank (2013) in developing our own theory of professional learning.

## NEW KINDS OF LEARNING

System leaders began to embrace and support new kinds of learning using personalized web-based learning networks. In the era of social media, teachers are seeking their own professional learning and not relying on system messages to change practice. To keep up, we needed to jump in feet first.

We have a new understanding of just-in-time learning, and it involves Twitter chats and online collaboration using Google Apps for Education. The district's consultant team is now fully immersed in curating online learning in order to understand relevant content and create personalized learning networks that support teachers and school leaders as they examine practice with a new lens.

As our system continues to evolve, professional learning practices at both the school and system level inform and adapt to each other in a responsive cycle of reflection, implementation, and dialogue. There is an iterative feedback loop from school to system and back

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classroom practice and professional challenges while in alignment with school improvement goals. This has become the norm when staff comes together. We are no longer searching for the right answer, but rather asking complex questions that will in turn impact classroom practice.

Communication is key in building this professional culture. Weekly staff memos reinforce concepts tied to the school improvement plan. The structures and processes that are put in place can reinforce the learning culture within a school. In the context of an inquiry-focused learning, teachers need opportunities to explore, reflect, and question what inquiry looks like in their classrooms and among colleagues — effectively creating inquiry among teachers by making my own reflections explicit. Memos include videos, links to articles, and my personal reflections about where our learning is going, with examples from classrooms in our school and system.

Staff found ways to use these memos to personalize their learning by engaging in dialogue with colleagues either face-to-face or online. This is one example of how we have expanded our thinking about opportunities to learn.

If we only focus on learning at staff meetings, we miss the informal learning opportunities that exist in every moment of every day: conversations in the hallway, professional dialogue linked directly to classroom practice, opportunities for co-teaching and co-planning with our teaching staff, shared reading and investigation with staff, and online engagement through email, Twitter, Google Communities, and other social media tools. The learning must be pervasive, embedded, and always aligned to system and school goals.

### CHALLENGE OF PRACTICE

During last year's instructional rounds process, the school developed a key challenge of practice that staff created collaboratively based on student learning needs, which in turn led us to our staff learning need.

Simultaneously, the school leadership team developed its

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again through learning networks, system senior leadership team, and school leaders.

To support learning across the system, members of the curriculum and instructional services department are developing coaching and facilitation skills that will support the move from prescribed to personalized learning. Our goal is to serve the system and staff through reflection, monitoring impact, and checking for our own biases in what we presume are system needs.

own leader learning need that drew from the staff learning need. That does not preclude leaders from learning with staff. In fact, school leaders join staff, when invited, for professional dialogue, book studies, online discourse, and team meetings. What we then take for ourselves is the leader learning.

For example, in an effort to go deeper into inquiry-based learning in the classroom, a teacher team investigated the role of documentation for assessment purposes. Through team members' collaborative inquiry, they set specific goals for documentation, experimented with different apps, worked with a consultant from the curriculum and instructional services department, and visited classrooms throughout the system with a focus on documentation.

My role was to ensure that they had released time to do the work, create a structure for feedback and accountability, engage in dialogue about their learning, and observe the implementation of their learning in their classrooms throughout the year. But my leader learning focused on these questions:

- How do I continue to support this group and its learning needs?
- How do I build staff capacity to better understand the process these staff members have engaged in?
- How do I share their work within the system? How will their sharing in the system continue to inspire and provide support for their work?
- How do I ensure that parents understand the work so that they begin to see the benefits of such a model of learning?

My questions centered on my learning and how this learning could benefit each of the groups I serve as a school principal — students, staff, and community — and then scaling that work through the system.

So often, when school leaders have these dynamic teams, whether a grade team or an entire school, we think we have arrived at a practice that is sustainable, scalable, and repeatable, but when we go to a new location, the same strategies don't work. Leaders need to commit to investigating the culture, the processes, and pitfalls along the way to sustain staff members' energy and interest. ■

We work toward being both adaptive and responsive to school and individual teacher needs. We recognize that job-embedded, personalized learning represents 70% of professional learning. We support those who coach and mentor staff with feedback, which represents 20% of professional learning. And we understand that the 10% of formal training needs to be limited and include components of personalization through opportunities from the other two categories while capitalizing on blended learning through social media. ■