

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

Issue #5 March 2011

Moving to Public Practice

The Question:

“We know that, as a staff, we need to move more to public rather than private practice. How should we get started?”

The Answer:

Here are five Tips for Success:

1. Assess the collaborative learning culture in your school
2. Develop shared responsibility for student learning
3. Lead with teacher emotions in mind
4. Start small
5. Celebrate successes and learn from failures

1. ASSESS THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CULTURE IN YOUR SCHOOL

One of the Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs) is “Promoting collaborative learning cultures.” Read [Ideas into Action: Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures](#) to learn more this CLC.

Use the [School Effectiveness Framework](#) to identify key aspects of a collaborative learning culture. Then, think about yourself and/or survey your staff to learn more about how collaborative your current environment is.

Here are some elements within indicators from the SEF:

- 1.4 (page 14): Assessment tasks are ...collaboratively developed by teachers and ...resulting demonstrations of student learning analyzed to ensure consistency...
- 2.1 (page 17): School improvement planning involves all staff (planning, implementing, monitoring and refining)
- 2.4 (page 19): Time to meet and talk and common planning time are provided to promote collaboration
SEF, 2010

“To promote collegial relationships in the school, someone has to make relationships among adults a ‘discussable’. Someone must serve as a minesweeper, disarming those landmines. I can think of no more critical role for any school leader.”

Barth, 2006, in Ideas into Action, Bulletin #3

2. DEVELOP SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Engaging in vision-building activities is a powerful way to develop a sense of shared responsibility for the learning that takes place in your school. See the [Ontario Leadership Framework](#), domain #1, “Setting directions” to see specific practices that support this work. For example, the principal:

- ensures the vision is clearly articulated, shared, understood and acted upon by all
- works within the school community to translate the vision into agreed objectives and operational plans....

Many principals have used their professional learning communities (PLCs) to foster discussions about shared responsibility, but, as one Congress 2010 participant noted, “It is painfully obvious that simply bringing people together does not produce better outcomes. There is a need to go much deeper than just conversation. Accountable talk related to actual student work samples ... and instructional approaches must become common place.”

“When educators consider lots of data, both positive and negative, they are more likely to reach a decision that everyone can live with because everyone has access to the same information. Nothing is withheld, and everyone has to stop and think about how their ideas fit with the data.”

Earl & Katz, 2006



Building a strong data culture in your school will contribute to better conversations in your PLCs. You can strengthen data culture by ensuring that it is a focus of conversations, providing training as needed for data analysis, and using technology to make the work more efficient.

3. LEAD WITH TEACHER EMOTIONS IN MIND

We resist change that we don't understand, don't value or whose demands we don't feel we can meet. So be clear about what you mean by opening up teacher practice, provide evidence of its proven value (for both students and teachers) and offer supports for meeting the demands of this change.

Research shows that:

- teachers feel more confident about tackling new ideas when their principals set a positive tone by “exuding awareness and appreciation of the complexity of successful teaching at the same time as they model curiosity and inquiry about the craft.” (Leithwood and Beatty, 2008)
- collaborative practice is the main mechanism for improving teaching practices and making teachers accountable to each other in school systems that are moving from great to excellent. (Mourshed et al, 2010)
- The biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching. (Hattie, 2009)

4. START SMALL

Making practice public can start with small changes in teaching practice that allow teachers to learn their way forward and feel less threatened by what may be an uncomfortable change. For example, public practice can begin with:

- a simple exchange of assessments between teachers of the same grade or class
- one colleague visiting another's class to observe a lesson
- a small group of teachers of the same subject co-planning a unit of study.

You can support these early steps by offering release time, fostering follow-up conversations and inviting teachers to share their experiences with the whole staff. Early adopters can then be encouraged to expand these first steps to include:

- co-designing assessments among teachers of the same class/grade
- moderated marking after assessments have been administered
- debriefing of classroom observations between colleagues.

5. CELEBRATE SUCCESSES AND LEARN FROM FAILURES

Building on the small steps described above, you will have opportunities to celebrate successes in whole staff settings. Make sure to invite teachers to talk about what they got out of the experience and how they thought their students benefited.

Even more powerful, though, than successful experiences are those that have an element of failure or disappointment for the participants. If teachers are willing to talk about what went wrong in their first tries, and what they did next to improve, this may encourage more reluctant teachers to experiment, especially if your reaction is supportive.

“You don't build confidence by throwing people into the deep end, with something they've never done before. You ease them into the water, and give them a lot of support, so that they're not traumatized by the effort.”

Leithwood, 2010, in In Conversation, II(2)

Remember that these five tips are meant to get you started. There is a lot more to learn in *Ideas into Action: Bulletin #3* and by consulting the original sources listed below. Add your own thoughts by joining the Ontario Education Leaders network:

<http://ontarioeducationleaders.ning.com>

REFERENCES

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