**LEAP Ontario Exchange 2011 Inquiry Learning Project**

**Abstract**

**Problem Statement**

“How and in what ways do school leaders use professional learning communities to drive innovation in student engagement?”

**Methodology**

I interviewed five school principals in three providences about the establishment and the effectiveness of professional learning communities to drive innovation in student engagement in their schools. They included Kathy Siamro from Gainsborough Elementary School in the District School Board of Niagara, Melissa Nantais from Vincent Massey Secondary School in the Greater Essex County District School Board, Tim Simony from JL Isley High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Donna McKenzie from Lockview High School in Halifax County, Nova Scotia and Kevin Whitlow from Colonel Gray High School in Charlottetown on Prince Edward Island.

I had the opportunity to meet and interview three superintendents from the Greater Essex County District School Board (Dr Sharon Pyke, Dr Clara Howitt and Mr John Howitt) about the support for professional learning communities in schools at the District School Board level. I also had the opportunity to interview Shelly Duben the professional learning consultant supporting Vincent Massey Secondary School by coaching the department heads to be instructional leaders in their departments and building an understanding of the philosophy behind the “Growing Success” framework.

I attended two Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings. One at Vincent Massey Secondary School in Windsor, Ontario and the other at JL Isley High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia.. I also spoke to five department heads in various schools including Matthew Bagley (History) at Vincent Massey Secondary School, Erick Lee (Mathematics) at JL Isley High School, Barbara Davison (English) and Nancy Fournier (Mathematics) both at Lockview High School and William Morley (Mathematics) at Colonel Gray High School.

Along with Kerry Sweeney I interviewed specialists from the Greater Essex County District School Board including Dr Phil Ricciardi the Supervisor of Psychological Services – Special Education, Vickie Komar the Supervisor of Social Work and Attendance Counselling Services and Mary Guthrie the Chief Information Officer.

**Findings**

The History department at Vincent Massey Secondary School in Windsor, Ontario meet at least six times per year. Release is provided by a combination of scheduling and senior administrative relief. At their professional learning meeting I witnessed a blend of faculty organisation, presentations by faculty members and discussions around assessment for learning and assessment as learning. There was a strong focus on learning goals and the sharing of these with students as well as connecting them to assessment and evaluation. Faculty members shared their successes in regard to experimental teaching strategies and the presentation to staff was on the relationship between learning goals and success criteria. The final part of the meeting was devoted to faculty members moderating student work samples.

The professional learning communities at Vincent Massey Secondary School are embedded through the strong support and leadership from the principal. The principal strongly believes in building the leadership capacity of her executive team. Professional learning communities have been in place for at least six years. Over the last couple of years there has been support from two consultants of the Greater Essex County District School Board. “Professional learning communities create the conditions for students to succeed.” (Melissa Nantais – Principal)

The professional learning communities at Gainsborough Elementary School meet several times each year and again release is provided by the principal organising assemblies or taking groups of students. There is a strong literacy focus in the professional learning communities within the school as this is a district focus area. In 2011-12 there is additional secondment time provided by the District School Board of Niagara for three teachers to have six release days to be involved in Collaborative Inquiry Learning (CIL) focusing on literacy, critical thinking and problem solving based maths. Staff must apply through the principal to be involved.

At Colonel Gray High School in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island there are three professional learning communities focusing on teaching and learning related to SmartBoard technologies. There are small groups of teachers in the school who are driving their own innovative practices in regard to interactive technologies. The Eastern School District determined last year that there would be two school days within the year specifically for school professional learning. This has been continued for the 2011-12 school year. Any teacher in the Board can also apply to be part of the District and School Collaborative Team. There are two key questions they must address: What do you need to learn to enhance student learning and who do you need to be with? The Eastern School District has also set specific focuses for school based professional learning communities. For K-8 schools the focus is literacy and for 9-12 schools there is an individual school-based student learning focus.

The English Faculty at JL Isley High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia meet for an hour at least once per month. Release is provided by a combination of buying relief through School Board funds and the senior administration holding and supervising year assemblies with guest speakers. The school is in their second year of establishing professional learning communities. This is an initiative of the Halifax District School Board but is not being supported with specialised consultants as in Windsor, Ontario. The implementation and success of the professional learning communities is being left to the effectiveness of the principal and the teaching staff. The value that the school places in teachers allows for continued dialogue outside of school hours and teachers are excited about their work. Here again I witnessed a strong focus on assessment for learning and assessment as learning as well as strong support from the principal who believes in building the capacity of the leadership within the school. This is facilitated by faculty members sharing resources and skills amongst one another. “Happier and more motivated staff wants to work at extra times.” (Tim Simony – Principal)

At Lockview High School in Halifax County, Nova Scotia the use of professional learning communities is built into the school plan. A key strategy for both literacy and numeracy goals is that teachers will participate in regularly scheduled professional learning community teams to develop and implement common assessments that align with the curriculum, systematically collect the data and then collectively critically analyse the assessment results and plan for next steps to improve student learning. Samples of common assessments of student ability to determine a particular focus are collected twice per semester. In the English department there has been a move towards critical reflection rather than teacher conversations. This department is also examining the cultural shifts in the fundamental purpose of professional learning communities. The four main shifts have been a focus on learning rather than teaching; a fixation on what students learned rather than an emphasis on what is taught; the demonstration of proficiency rather than coverage of content; and engaging in collaborative teams to build a shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum rather than just providing teachers with curriculum documents.

**Discussion**

From the literature available through the Ontario Principals’ Council professional learning communities are an instrument for facilitating enhanced learning, teaching and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system. They also state that the principal has an essential role in the building of professional learning communities within the school. That through the leadership of the principal, careful planning and effective support practices are implemented to ensure the continued development of the professional learning communities. Successful leaders set directions, develop people, redesign the organisation and manage the instructional program.

The most effective principals are learners among learners. They model an understanding of both the theory and the practical application of collaborative inquiry and action. They have a clear understanding that professional learning communities provide an opportunity for the study of new ideas and current research. They offer teachers the opportunity to experiment with new ideas in the classroom and to monitor their success by examining student achievement data as well as encouraging the sharing of ideas and experience to collaboratively solve challenges.

In every school it was evident that the principal had built a shared vision and purpose around improving student achievement, building teacher capacity and developing leadership skills throughout the school. The principals clearly understood the importance of supporting teachers in a collaborative environment and that they were required to have professional learning plans based on their individual needs. Principals were serving as a role model by continuing to build their own personal leadership capacity and sharing professional readings. Most importantly they provided professional learning communities in their schools with the time to meet and address student’s needs and improve instructional practice.

In Ontario the document “Growing Success – Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools” (2010) is being used by principals to drive the continued effectiveness of professional learning communities within their schools. Professional learning communities are enabling teachers to adopt the new paradigm of assessment where the purpose of improving learning and helping students become independent learners requires the student and teacher to learn together in a collaborative relationship where each plays an active role in setting learning goals, developing success criteria, giving and receiving feedback, monitoring progress and adjusting the learning styles.

In the Maritime providences of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island the article “One Step at a Time” by Parry Graham and Bill Ferriter is being used as a guide to establishing successful professional learning communities. The article investigates the seven stages in developing a successful professional learning community. The authors state that professional learning teams represent a powerful mechanism for improvements in teaching and learning. That developing successful professional learning teams requires a concerted effort of teachers and administrators, and that most professional learning teams pass through similar stages. They are “Filling the Time” where teams set clear guidelines and work expectations; “Sharing Personal Practice” where teachers and school leaders can promote meaningful work by requiring team members to arrive at collaborative decisions around curriculum, assessment and instruction; “Planning, Planning, Planning” where student achievement data is used in the planning process; “Developing Common Assessments” where teachers and school leaders consider moderating difficult conversations and model strategies for joint decision-making, “Analysing Student Learning” where structures and tools are provided for effective data analysis; “Adapting instruction to student needs” where professional learning in intervention development is sort; and finally “Reflecting on Instruction” where teachers and school leaders facilitate a team’s ability to explore the teaching and learning connection.

**Conclusion**

From my investigation over seventeen days and across three provinces there is considerable evidence that school leaders were using professional learning communities to drive innovation in student engagement. The practice of using professional learning communities was embedded in general school practice in Ontario, while in the Maritime provinces of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia they were fairly recently established.

The wider implications of my findings will be to redefine the paradigm of the traditional faculty meetings at Warren Central School in 2012. Faculties across the school will become professional learning communities focusing on facilitating enhanced learning, experimental teaching and leadership capacity in a culture of lifelong learning. Teachers will be encouraged and supported to experiment with blended learning styles and regularly share their experiences and expertise with their colleagues.