



Teacher-Led Professional Learning Communities – Ontario, Canada

A thousand miles north of Toronto, Canada, is a school district with 17 elementary schools and six high schools in a far-flung territory the size of France. Some of its schools have over 80-85% indigenous students. According to provincial records, only 53% of aboriginal students graduate in four years, compared to 88% of non-aboriginal students. Only 24% of students in Grade 6 in the district met the math standard in 2016, compared to the provincial average of 50%; and the district's students scored only in the mid-50s in writing and reading, compared to the Ontario averages of around 80%.

A tarnished history forcibly separated the indigenous children of Canada from their families, language, culture, and communities by placing them in residential schools. Today, the parents and grandparents of the district's students carry the scars of this historical legacy, often manifested in drug use, alcohol dependence, poverty, and low achievement. This historical tragedy disrupted an indigenous culture rich in arts, spirituality, wisdom, appreciation of elders, and living in and with nature.

Over more than a decade, the district has worked hard to improve learning and achievement for its young people. It has infused indigenous art into schools and school design. The floor of one of its schools is engraved with the Seven Teachings of the indigenous culture – truth, love, respect, humility, honesty, wisdom, and courage.

Teachers use examples from nature and traditional fishing activities in their curriculum. They also introduce outdoor activities like building fires and shelters to connect learning to students' lives in natural and even wilderness settings where they often learn best. There are feasts and powwows, chiefs and elders are invited to be guest speakers, and the district's leader has been to meetings of tribal chiefs from all across the province.

The district also introduced professional learning communities (PLCs), run by principals. These PLCs required teachers to share examples of their students' work, to engage in moderated marking using common rubrics to try and improve students' writing, and to post data walls of students' progress in their schools. Teachers didn't always like these at first, but in time they were able to be more open about their students' learning and have more challenging conversations about how to improve their own teaching.

Because they have often been very top-down, PLCs haven't always been popular with teachers. In a 2014 study by Boston Consulting, PLCs were one of the strategies most preferred by administrators and professional development providers, but one of the least liked by teachers. As one of the teachers in this Northern district put it, school-level PLCs in the district had been "a very top down kind of thing as opposed to collaborative, and did not support best practices." It was time for teachers to run their own PLCs.

Steve is a teacher and a hockey coach. He is part of a students' hockey academy in the district that has been made famous on national TV news for increasing engagement among students. "When you get a kid that's on that path that you're fearful of, and you can bring him back, and he's excited about it, that's why I'm here," says Steve. Steve and his colleagues noticed how students who experienced little or no success in the regular school environment could display success, motivation, and even leadership on the ice. How could they transfer that into other environments of learning, educators wondered, including those in the regular school day?

We came across Steve and his interdisciplinary team, sitting round their laptops in their workroom, trying to identify the academic and non-academic skills that students in Grades 1 to 8 were displaying on the hockey rink so that they could be made transferable into standards and rubrics for regular classroom settings. "We're linking hockey to other areas of the curriculum," Steve explained. "So in science and math, we're able to study how the skate and stick are made, how the puck comes off the stick with such velocity," and so on. "We're taking hockey, we're connecting it to the curriculum, which is engaging the students, as well," he continued.

Steve's group argued that teachers were now ready to run their own PLCs – a practice that is now a district requirement. The PLCs are teacher-led, and they concentrate on the whole student and their learning, not just academic achievement. "Asking questions about our indigenous and aboriginal student population, wondering why they are engaged in some subject areas or in some schools and not in others – that is a good PLC topic," the district's director concluded.

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