CREATING AN ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING CULTURE

PROJECT SUMMARY

Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, 2014
Jennifer LeClerc, Elaine Flett-Hurst, Jennifer McIlmoyle-Parsons, Kerry Norris, Glen Payne

THE FOCUS

The Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, is engaged in a professional learning program entitled, Building Capacity in Assessment for Learning. This program aims to enhance our professional learning and is premised on the belief that the essence of what we would be learning and doing would have a positive impact on student learning. This work is related to the effective implementation of assessment for learning (AfL).

Principals within a cross-school principal hub structure and teacher hub structure have been guided by the following Theory of Action:

If principals and teachers take an assessment for learning approach to leadership in which:

- All learners engage in collaborative learning;
- All learners embody and model the core practices of assessment for learning;
- All learners engage in authentic learning that aligns with goals and success criteria; all learners apply criteria to assess and monitor their learning;
- All learners develop the knowledge and skills to be independent learners,

Then they will create and sustain a culture of learning where all the learners can learn and improve.

THE STRUCTURE

An “instructional rounds” approach is used as the structure to achieve the goals of the project. This collaborative structure asks teachers and principals to make descriptive observations of instructional practices in classrooms and schools, to analyze evidence of trends and patterns from the observations and to determine the next level of work that should be attempted.

Principal learning in our project is based on Rick Stiggins’ assessment competencies. These competencies have been aligned with, or mapped on to, both the Ontario School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) and the Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013.

At the classroom level, teachers select specific AfL learning goals and support one another in planning for and implementing these goals to support student learning and student adoption of AfL strategies. During instructional rounds, teachers collaboratively engage in learning about AfL in their own teaching context. Participating principals are asked to consider AfL strategies as part of the leadership they provide for teacher learning associated with their school improvement processes. Principal hubs meet regularly to observe each other’s AfL-based leadership strategies. This approach to learning engages both teachers and principals in collaboratively using AfL strategies to support students’, teachers’ and principals’ learning.
Principal Learning Teams (PLTs) are composed of four to five principals within a region, and their superintendent. With their individual school improvement plans as their entry point, principal teams, championed by their LSA lead, consider assessment for learning approaches to build capacity in their own learning, implementation and monitoring of their plans. Principals engaged in this work acknowledge the collaborative approach that must be taken with their staffs in the development of their school improvement plans; such collaboration builds shared ownership of the school improvement goals and processes, as well as shared responsibility for the outcomes.

The project began when the school system invited schools to volunteer teacher and principal teams to participate. To be eligible, a school had to express an interest in pursuing, with an assessment for learning framework, something that they were curious to learn more about (the focus of learning). Teams selected for the project (four to five teachers per school, and their principal) were open to an adult learning model related to assessment for learning, and had a demonstrated commitment to being accountable to the work by hosting instructional rounds in their classrooms and school. A system facilitator supported principal and teacher teams during initial conversations about learning plans. Deeper learning related to their focus of learning and preparation for the instructional rounds process that was to be responsive to the team’s learning needs and focus.

Four key conditions have made this project successful:

- Every learner (teacher and principal) is invited to find their own entry point with a focus on assessment for learning related to his or her practice.
- Co-planning conversations have had a positive influence on both principal and teacher practices; these conversations have challenged participants to reflect on and to refine their learning and their work.
- Co-learning within principal hubs supports learning conversations in between instructional rounds and has contributed to school improvement efforts.
- Discourse with the two tiers (teachers with principals, principals with principals) based on descriptive observations from the instructional rounds has challenged beliefs and prompted changes in practice.

Teachers and principals engaged in four professional learning days related to foundational learning about assessment for learning. These days were oriented around their own focuses for learning, and the development of a learning plan related to these focuses. Learning goals included the development of rich learning goals, co-creation of success criteria and/or providing effective teacher and peer descriptive feedback. Principal learning focuses included how to engage in effective learning conversations with teachers when monitoring classrooms and conversations with other principals when coaching them through their school improvement plans.

There were approximately 12 teacher instructional rounds days for teacher/principal teams led by the system facilitator. Similarly, each school in the principal hub structure has been visited once to date led by the LSA principal.

Our experience in the project highlights three sets of challenges or opportunities in particular; these are about the readiness of participants, the trust assumed by instructional rounds and the time required for authentic change to occur.

### TEACHER-PRINCIPAL LEARNING

It quickly became evident through planning, conversation and implementation that teachers and principals are on a continuum of learning related to their own common understanding of A/L practices through the instructional rounds model. Those who had previous contact with the assessment for learning concepts and practices felt more confident in their knowledge of assessment practices at the beginning of the project. The principals within the two tiers of rounds spoke about the importance of the time and dedication required to build a supportive learning culture and how competing daily situations interfere with such efforts.
INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS

Depending on the active role of the principal in their ongoing monitoring of student learning, many teachers had to overcome their anxiety about having other educators come in to observe their teaching or to observe others before they felt that they could benefit from instructional rounds. Similarly, participants in the principal hub recognized just how important it was to develop trusting relationships with their colleagues when they worked side by side with a host principal to plan, prepare and facilitate instructional rounds.

TIME

Change takes time. Teachers and principals involved in the project believe that their AfL practices are becoming embedded into their teaching and monitoring. Principals speak about improvements in the learning culture of their schools, particularly with those teachers involved in the program and the students they teach. There is also a sense that this learning culture is slowly spreading to other schools because of the influence participating teachers are having on their peers.