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Nurturing Excellence in Instruction and Leadership

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NURTURING EXCELLENCE IN INSTRUCTION AND LEADERSHIP

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This paper reports on the implementation of the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta through the lens of Inspiring Education in Canadian Rockies Schools. Evidence of the ways in which system and school leader collaborative inquiry and professional learning are mobilizing evidence-based teaching and instructional leadership to support students to become engaged, ethical, and entrepreneurial citizens is presented. With nearly half of the school system's educators engaged in one of three overlapping leadership teams, several indicators of leadership and teaching growth are evident. Early findings indicate that this innovative leadership learning initiative is beginning to have an impact.

INTRODUCTION

This paper illustrates a number of ways in which system and school leader collaborative inquiry and professional learning through the *Nurturing Excellence in Instruction and Leadership* (NEIL) are beginning to mobilize evidence-based instructional leadership (Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012), teaching (Friesen, 2009), and professional learning (Timperley, 2011) to more fully support students to become engaged, ethical, and entrepreneurial citizens. Our focus is on the implementation of the

Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta (PPCSLA) in Canadian Rockies Public Schools (CRPS) towards the realization of Alberta's *Inspiring Education* vision. We begin with a brief description of the CRPS context, followed by an overview of the mixed methods research design being used to gauge the effectiveness of NEIL. Each of four overlapping leadership teams is then introduced and the inquiry-oriented approach to collaborative professional learning is described. Early indicators of success are then presented in the final section.

CONTEXT

CRPS is comprised of six schools that serve approximately 2,000 students in the Bow Valley area, just west of Calgary, Alberta. Through implementation of NEIL and the actions toward the realization of the Inspiring Education vision, CRPS plans to undergo a profound shift in its learning culture. The new CRPS senior leadership team believes that evidence informed leadership and teaching excellence will support each student to become an *engaged thinker* and *ethical citizen* with an *entrepreneurial spirit.* The system's primary goal over the next three years is to develop a strong, identifiable and sustainable culture of outstanding leadership, exemplary teaching and excellence in learning.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Purposes

Our ongoing research study has four purposes. One purpose is to examine the ways in which iterative cycles of evidence-informed professional learning impact shared instructional leadership and teaching practices. Second, the study is investigating ways in which a systematic focus on teaching and learning impact student learning and engagement to support students as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit. A third purpose is to investigate the ways in which school and system leader understanding and application of the PPCSLA are impacted through ongoing, iterative cycles of evidence-informed professional learning. A fourth purpose is to gain insights into school and system

leader perspectives on the importance of, benefits from and challenges related to practicing educational leadership within the PPCSLA framework, with a particular focus on implementing Inspiring Education.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do iterative cycles of evidence-informed professional learning impact shared instructional leadership and teaching practices?

2. In what ways will a systematic focus on teaching and learning impact student learning and engagement?

3. How will school and system leader understanding and application of the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders (PPC) be impacted through participation in the *Nurturing Excellence in Instruction and Leadership* initiative?

4. What perspectives do CRPS school and system leaders express about the importance of, benefits from and challenges related to practicing educational leadership within the PPC framework, with particular focus on implementing Inspiring Education?

Mixed Methods Research

This study is utilizing a convergent parallel mixed methods research design. In keeping with the principles and assumptions of this research approach, qualitative and quantitative methods are being combined to provide a better understanding of the research purposes and questions than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012). The rationale for using a mixed methods approach is to gain insights from both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative online surveys are providing opportunities to gather data from participants at various points in the initiative. Qualitative interviews, focus groups, field notes and session evaluations will allow for a richer, more in-depth exploration of perspectives.

Quantitative student engagement and achievement data collected by CRPS will also be analyzed as the study proceeds.

The convergent parallel mixed methods research design places equal emphasis on the two forms of data: qualitative and quantitative. Each data source is being collected independently and is being analyzed separately. The quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated during the final stages of data analysis, following processes outlined by Creswell (2012, pp. 548-560).

Data are being collected from the following sources: individual and focus group interviews, field notes, documents, artifacts and participant evaluations of the professional leadership learning sessions, online surveys, school system student engagement and achievement data, and classroom observations.

OVERLAPPING LEADERSHIP TEAMS

NEIL is moving forward through open, transparent and collaborative planning and implementation processes. Nearly half of the system's educators are engaged in one or more of the four overlapping leadership teams described below

Education Leadership Team

The Education Leadership Team (ELT) is made up of eight principals and three system educational leaders who are focused on deepening their understanding of all seven Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders through iterative knowledge-building cycles involving case studies, learning task design and analysis, conversation, and reflection. This group meets monthly and is engaged with Galileo Educational Network (GENA) instructional leadership experts in ongoing iterative knowledge-building cycles related to the evidence informed leadership and effective teaching. Since this group is responsible for shared leadership learning within each school, its members engage in collaborative leadership learning sessions from time to time with GENA teaching and leadership consultants.

Distributed Leadership Team

The distributed leadership team (DLT) is a recently formed group of 18 teacher leaders who are focused on developing their expertise in effective teaching and developing their knowledge of PPCSLA #4 *Providing Instructional Leadership*, PPCSLA#3 *Leading a Learning Community* and PPCSLA#1 *Fostering Effective Relationships* through iterative knowledge-building cycles of reflection on and their own practices as well as mentoring and coaching colleagues. GENA teaching and leadership consultants work with this group.

Lead Learners

Lead learners (LL) make up an even more recently formed group of two to three teacher leaders per school. This group primarily works with GENA teaching mentors. To this point their work has been focused on learning task design in keeping with the learning and teaching principles of Friesen's (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness: A Framework and Rubric*. Professional learning activities provide opportunities for reflecting on the impact of their teaching on student learning and making their teaching and learning visible with colleagues.

Project Planning Team

The project planning team is comprised of the ELT and representatives of the Galileo who work with all levels to plan, implement and assess iterative knowledge-building cycles of professional learning in relation to project deliverables. Feedback and suggestions from this group and from the two recently formed teacher leadership groups are used to generate iterative cycles of inquiry that connect session learning to leading and teaching practices in school settings and then once again back to subsequent professional learning sessions. An important feature of the initiative is the steady flow of feedback and insights so that leadership is developed with participants rather than for them.

FINDINGS

With nearly half of the system's educators engaged in one of three overlapping leadership teams, several indicators of learning, teaching and leadership growth are already evident after just eight months of collaborative inquiry. Researcher reviews of data generated from year two individual and focus group interviews, observations by GENA leadership and teaching consultants, field notes, documents, artifacts and participant evaluations of the professional leadership learning sessions indicate that this leadership learning initiative is having an impact in relation to each of the research questions. Seven preliminary findings have been generated from the early analysis of data considered to the current date. These preliminary findings are listed and very briefly described below.

1. The more than forty participants in the NEIL initiative are appreciative of opportunities to participate in a coherent, iterative, and emergent program of ongoing, knowledge-building cycles of collaborative learning founded on evidence-based approaches to teaching, leadership and professional learning.

2. A model of educational leadership is emerging across all schools through the utilization of the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders and Robinson's (2011) image of leaders of professional learning.

3. School leaders, teachers, and central office report that the heightened focus on evidence of student, teacher and leader learning is generating renewed excitement, engagement and efficacy.

4. Aspects of shared leadership and teacher leadership are emerging in all schools.

5. Participants indicate that Friesen's (2009) *Teaching Effectiveness: A Framework and Rubric* provides an evidence-based way of activating the beliefs undergirding the *Shared Vision of Instructional Excellence* (SVIE).

6. The active involvement of teachers, school leaders, and central office personnel in conducting investigations, data collection and research that supports a renewed leadership model and provides encouragement to division teachers to consider future roles or careers in educational leadership.

7. The NEIL initiative is keeping student, teacher and leader learning at the forefront in an unprecedented, energizing and enabling manner.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper focused on the implementation of the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta through the lens of Inspiring Education in Canadian Rockies Public Schools. Collaborative inquiry and professional learning is mobilizing evidence-based teaching (Friesen, 2009), research informed instructional leadership (Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012), and best practice professional learning (Timperley, 2011) to support students to become engaged, ethical, and entrepreneurial citizens with nearly half of the system's educators engaged in one of three overlapping leadership teams, seven preliminary findings indicated that growth in learning, teaching and leadership growth are evident. These findings indicate that this innovative leadership learning initiative is beginning to have an impact.

References

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