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# **BETTER TOGETHER: FOSTERING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS FOR AUTHENTIC LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS**

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*Educational leaders need to consider the necessity of effective collaboration in complex educational networks. The Campus Calgary/Open Minds model allows students to directly benefit from complex relationships between educational districts within Calgary, community learning sites, funders, and educational supports. In pursuit of personalized, inquiry-driven learning, intentional relationships can help foster approaches for meaningfully incorporating contemporary teaching and learning best practices together.*

Keywords: Experiential Learning; Instructional Leadership; Communities of Practice; Partnerships; Interdisciplinary Learning

Campus Calgary/Open Minds (CC/OM) brings the entire community together to meet the unique learning needs of today's students. The Calgary Board of Education (CBE) and Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) lead an innovative educational model that has celebrated over 24 years of excellence in education, alongside corporate Calgary and local community venues. Creating personalized and flexible learning programs for each student, CC/OM provides a dynamic learning experience by taking students into the community and connecting them to experts who are passionate about experiential learning and able to connect with each class's big idea in a unique way (Kydd, 2004). We have come to understand first hand the necessity of effective collaboration

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in complex educational networks and the importance of this to be considered by all educational leaders. When partnering with both school districts, engaging all types of school communities within the city, partnering with the community in a variety of unique and effective ways, we see how a variety of people are better together for the benefits of students and education. Having this leadership at the front end within and across organizations, teachers alongside classes are then able to access a complex and ever evolving network as needed in a way they would be unable to achieve on their own.

In the 2016/2017 school year, over 230 teachers and nearly 6,500 students in Calgary are participating in the program for a year of inspired learning that centres on a week of experiential programming in various intellectually rich community settings. The partnerships that CC/OM has developed over the years with various community sites and funders enables CC/OM to provide opportunities for students throughout the city that may not otherwise be able to have their classrooms ‘moved’ for an immersive field study week. In addition to this being a rigorous and meaningful experience for students, it is also transformative for teachers who choose to work in these ways (Kydd, 2004). Authentic learning and intellectual work allows students to acquire information and operate necessarily to be able to accomplish problems and tasks that they encounter while working in the disciplines (Doyle, as cited in Ritchart, 2015).

A dedicated CC/OM Operations Team is comprised of three educators: one from the CBE, one from CCSD, and one funded by school participation. Opportunities for professional development are provided through CC/OM: working alongside experts, developing relationships with various stakeholders including the site coordinators and the Operations Team leads teachers to deepen their pedagogical understanding and to benefit from being part of a connected community.

A CC/OM week is a time for students to ask questions, work alongside experts in the community, to slow down and reflect, to document, journal and to sketch, and to move learning deeper through the unique opportunities that an immersive week provides. It is not a week in isolation, but rather a week that brings all classroom learning together and is part of the year's work (Kydd, 2004). Campus Calgary/Open Minds looks at meaningful and authentic ways of planning, addressing, and implementing strategies for contemporary contexts with long-term visions inclusive of incorporating current district strategies including: Indigenous ways of knowing, development of literacy and numeracy, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) learning environments, and the development local Citizenship with global Worldviews.

### **CAMPUS CALGARY/OPEN MINDS' UNIQUE PARTNERSHIPS**

Campus Calgary/Open Minds focuses on complex relationships between educational districts within Calgary, community sites, funders, and educational supports. Representing both Calgary school districts (CBE and CCSD), the CC/OM Operations Team informs and supports the educational integrity of the program. These two school districts are also able to accept participation from all Calgary schools beyond both major districts. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the CBE and CCSD for CC/OM is unique in that it provides avenues for all Calgary teachers to have opportunities to take their students to community sites. The MOU also allows the two school boards to work together to ensure that the educational integrity of both boards are represented and thrives in this valuable and unique partnership.

CC/OM Advisors are made up of community members who have various backgrounds related to program needs and to CC/OM's three pillars: education, funders, and community sites. Having this expert volunteer group allows CC/OM to understand the needs of the community at large and draw from their expertise with various backgrounds. Just as students and teachers learn from

experts in the field, Advisors are experts for the Operations Team, supporting CC/OM in better understanding the complexities of the teaching, learning, and leadership work.

With the leadership and support of system executive sponsors, Superintendent of Learning (CBE) and Superintendent of Instructional Services (CCSD), the program as well as Advisors can remain confident that it can continue to ensure optimal learning from the program by implementing actions designed to meet program goals and ensuring the program philosophy is preserved and aligned at all participating sites (Fullan, 2007). The Operations Team works with two specifically allotted Advisor portfolios within the Education pillar: the System Assistant Principal of Corporate Partnerships/Global Learning (CBE) and a Supervisor of Instructional Services (CCSD), having ongoing discussions regarding programming, supporting student needs, and meeting the expectations of both school districts.

Funders establish long-term partnerships with CC/OM. Meeting community investment goals by supporting a community site is the beginning of a valued relationship. Funder voice contributes to the strategic plan and evolution of the program, and employees of the funding organization are often invited to bring expertise and to work alongside the students. A sense of broad impact comes from qualitative and quantitative data, including a comprehensive Social Return on Investment (SROI) study completed by Chevron for the Open Minds sites. In 2014, Chevron Canada embarked on a study of Campus Calgary/Open Minds. The social return on investment (SROI) results show that for every dollar invested into the program, whether by funder or the school boards, the benefit to the community averages \$3.76. This aggregate benefit demonstrates the lasting impact of professional teacher development, increased job satisfaction and increased use of inquiry-based learning in the classroom (CC/OM, 2016). Another indicator of success of interest to current and potential funders is the oversubscription—currently 100% oversubscribed—by interested teachers.

Community Sites operating as CC/OM classrooms are acknowledged as a source of leadership and expertise, and this increases employee pride and satisfaction. Working with teachers as they leverage a custom-designed week benefits site personnel as they look at the spaces and experts in and around their venue in a new way. Site Coordinators are resources for their sites. Communicating the varied educational opportunities at the site will increase utilization and can lead to access by a broader audience. The result is a symbiotic relationship where community sites and school districts can continually learn from one another (Kydd, 2004).

### **AUTHENTIC PERSONALIZATION THROUGH STRONG RELATIONSHIPS**

Personalization of the weeks on site is critical for ensuring that community site experience best suits the needs of the learners and the vision that the teacher has for his/her yearlong inquiry. Creating flexible learning programs for each student, CC/OM provides a dynamic learning experience by taking students into the community and connecting them to experts who are passionate about experiential learning.

With classrooms embedded in vibrant community settings around the city, these behind the scenes continual and intentional efforts result in authentic and interdisciplinary experiences, with an emphasis on literacy development. Through the use of journals for reflection and thinking routines (Ritchart, 2011), teachers take a more active role team-teaching with coordinators because of efforts in preparing both. Instructional rounds throughout the year, within each of the 230 weeks of programming, maintain the integrity and rigor of the program (City, et al., 2010). Alignment to the Alberta provincial Ministerial Order Competencies and high school redesign, allows for congruency throughout CC/OM programming, as teachers can see their School Development Plans and Teacher Professional Growth Plans as part of their CC/OM work. The relationships created amongst all of these entities allows for students to have authentic and real-world

disciplinary/interdisciplinary experiences to link directly the work happening at their schools and in the community at large (Lent, 2016). When students know and see their learning and their work alive in the world, they are better able to understand the importance of their learning and their place(s) within the world.

## **RESPONSIVE TO CHANGE**

As Friesen (2009) states in the Teaching Effectiveness Framework, teachers improve their practice in the company of their peers. CC/OM's shared work with teachers, their students, site coordinators, a community advisory group, and community stakeholders, gives teachers opportunities to work alongside an array of disciplinary and interdisciplinary experts to help push their practices, leading to authentic and community-rich learning experiences. Fullan (2001) describes relationships as essential to leading through change and remaining responsive.

While some coordinators are certificated teachers and others are not, regular coordinator meetings prioritize professional learning. Time with coordinators is modelled on both Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice. Getting beyond administrative discussions, student work is at the heart of discussions. This year, a professional book study has also framed discussions. The Operations Team alongside coordinators chose Perkins Future Wise: Educating our Children for a Changing World (2014). This provided opportunities for a shared vocabulary and common understandings for pedagogical and curricular interactions.

Understanding that education is continually growing and changing, CC/OM is a flexible and adaptive program that stays true to its key elements and is responsive to community needs at large. Research that has been essential has included learner-centred communities of practice (Timperley, 2011), importance of relationships and continual complexity of the educational networks (Fullan, 2001) and the importance of having personalized life worthy student work at the centre of all that

we do (Perkins, 2014). Keeping evidence and research at the core of all that is done within communities of practice, with site coordinators, participating teachers, and the CC/OM Operations Team is essential to keep abreast with the continually evolving nature of education.

Campus Calgary/Open Minds' mission and vision reflects the importance of relationships and having a connected community. The CC/OM mission is "to transform teaching and learning by increasing student engagement through community, funder, and educational partnerships." This mission highlights CC/OM's three pillars and the importance of many entities coming together for the betterment of learning and students. The CC/OM vision continues along the same vein, "each student experiences personalized learning within a connected community," leading to many opportunities for engagement by multiple stakeholders. The mission and vision were co-designed by the Operations Team and Advisors.

Throughout the work of CC/OM there have always been elements that have found their way into the work, no matter what the grade or which site. Through its 24 year history, the program has come to know these as some of the formalized foundational aspects of CC/OM now known as the key elements. Each of these key elements grew out of a deep understanding of effective teaching practice. As Friesen (2009) states, "First and foremost, effective teaching practice begins with thoughtful, intentional designs for learning – designs that deepen understanding and open the disciplines to genuine inquiry" (p. 33). CC/OM enables students and their teachers to come to know and experience the importance of experiential learning. Teachers participating with CC/OM have opportunities to recognize and reflect on these elements often realizing they are already alive in their work.

Effective relationships are integral in all that is done in Campus Calgary/Open Minds. It is through the development of these diverse relationships that students are ultimately able to pursue life



worthy (Perkins, 2015) and life changing experiences. Stakeholders continue to celebrate looking ahead to the program's 25th anniversary next year, to a vast alumni network acknowledging 100 000 students through unique sites, as well as to the programs historic roots right here in Calgary, seeing the program grow to other cities across the country, such as Edmonton and St. John's, and world, for example in Michigan and Singapore, these sites are catalogued on the Beyond the Classroom Network website and updated regularly (Kydd, 2016). The network meets every two to three years to co-consider growth and sustainability and experiential pedagogy. When students know that their work matters and exists in the world, outside of just the four walls of their classroom, their experiences with education and the world around them can be transformed. The continued challenge, recognizing that we are better together, is to steward and shepherd this work with recognition of the complexities of a program so dependent on the relationships within a vast and diverse network. Countless behind the scenes conversations allow new opportunities to begin each week as busses across the city are filled with students ready to begin new learning adventures propelled by community of experts.

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**APPENDIX 1:**

Table 1: Mission, Vision, and Key Elements of Campus Calgary / Open Minds

Campus Calgary / Open Minds Mission:
To transform teaching and learning by increasing student engagement through community, funder, and educational partnerships.
Campus Calgary / Open Minds Vision:
Each student experiences personalized learning within a connected community.
Campus Calgary / Open Minds Key Elements:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Teachers as designers, in collaboration with a site coordinator and education coordinator, co-constructing learning</li><li>-Work alongside experts</li><li>-Engage in hands on activities and experiential learning</li><li>-Slow down and go beyond the obvious</li><li>-Explore, discover, reflect, and share</li><li>-Build strong relationships</li><li>-Inspire ownership and stewardship</li><li>-Maintain high standards for quality learning experiences for all students</li><li>-Inquiry driven interdisciplinary approach</li><li>-Develop action and awareness</li><li>-Personalized learning opportunities to meet individual needs</li></ul>