

Moving *Forward*

Without Leaving Anyone Behind

Literacy initiatives over the last few years have been designed in their very nature to improve student achievement and enhance teacher practice. The premise that every student can learn requires the commitment of all stakeholders. In an educative context, the effective implementation of research-based practices translates into positive implications for students. While we are all familiar with the *No Child Left Behind* rhetoric of our American colleagues, I propose that we consider an alternative discourse; namely, our collective individual responsibility as school leaders to ensure that we are not only moving our students forward, but just as significantly, moving our teachers forward without leaving any one of them behind. In light of the different phases of teachers' professional development, this discussion applies to teachers and their application of research-based strategies and best practices.

Moving teachers forward begins with building strong relationships. This does not happen overnight. It is imperative that we demonstrate a willingness to collaborate in moving forward, working side-by-side with teachers. It is about building a school culture that embraces an environment that allows teachers to learn from and with one another. At St. Elizabeth Seton Catholic Elementary School, we pride ourselves in being an active Catholic learning community where ideas, dialogue and best practices are always shared. There is a constant school-wide focus on the importance of adapting pedagogical practices rooted in our Catholic graduate expectations. In all classrooms, meeting each student's unique needs and ensuring a positive learning experience for every child is always a priority.

Similarly, as a school community we focus on teacher expertise and celebrate the fact that each teacher is a leader who can enrich our knowledge base by sharing their challenges and successes. Teachers at St. Elizabeth Seton nurture these learning communities by being mindful of professional learning purposes. Grade partner planning and moderating have been instrumental in bringing along and improving the skill set of all our teachers. St. Elizabeth Seton also has a literacy/numeracy itinerant teacher assigned to the school on a weekly basis. This individual has a key role in assisting with the implementation of all literacy/numeracy initiatives, from creating instructional pathways with teachers to modeling how to provide meaningful descriptive feedback for students. The literacy/numeracy itinerant teacher is particularly instrumental at accommodating teachers' varying levels of professional development.

To understand how we navigate our values throughout our Catholic learning communities, it is imperative to acknowledge the process of teacher engagement. To begin, teachers first identify their professional learning needs through the school support team leaders (one lead teacher per division). Then as a team, we target and cluster their needs and decide how to best meet them. At times, this includes scheduling professional learning sessions during the instructional day. Every monthly staff meeting has a professional learning component that is often lead by teachers who are genuinely viewed as curriculum leaders. Teacher leaders introduce, facilitate and demonstrate successful strategies and then appropriate support is developed and provided such as, co-teaching, observing other teachers' classrooms or further in-servicing if necessary. All teachers benefit from staff expertise and work together to successfully implement new strategies in their targeted interventions classrooms.

The process of moving all teachers forward necessitates that they buy in to this professional learning culture. The impetus for this investment is the school improvement plan (SIP) whereby every teacher has input into its development and understands the rationale of establishing school goals. Once goals are set it is important to maintain a school-wide focus and implement diagnostic assessments along the way in order to measure how we are doing. Divisional meetings, staff meetings and Catholic learning community gatherings are just some of these opportunities.

Consider too that at the beginning of every year we have an item analysis day that includes two or three teachers from every division as well as the special education resource teacher (SERT). During this strategic meeting, we examine the EQAO data alongside our SIP goals from the previous year to decide on our focus for the current year. At the same time, we align our goals with those that are outlined in the board improvement plan. Much of the discussion is based on what teachers need to do to move students forward and improve student learning, which is always a natural extension of teachers' needs.

The SIP is then presented at divisional meetings, and at a staff meeting where key areas are identified, discussed and highlighted for teacher professional learning. Key teachers are selected based on their expertise, to support different parts of the SIP. They are given the responsibility to present it at a school council meeting and to be the liaison of that section along with a council parent. Thus, council goals are consistent with school goals, keeping everything interconnected. Parental engagement for improved



Grade 7 teacher, Anna Blaszczynska, engaged in teacher moderation with same grade partner and Halton Catholic DSB Literacy/Numeracy Team members



Grade 8 teachers, Pat Aniol and Brooke Zutt (on the laptop) involved in creating instructional pathways with Literacy Itinerant Teacher, Wendy Ramirez (center)

student learning, as we know, is best achieved when everyone is working toward the same goals.

Literacy walk-throughs are another example of an ongoing and effective practice that helps teachers reflect best practices and receive support where needed. Often a redirect or a simple conversation with the teacher suffices. All subsequent dialogue occurs with teachers in order to assist them in providing the best instruction possible. Every classroom meets the requirements of a balanced literacy classroom from timetabling to the organization of the classroom. A considerable amount of time is spent in early September creating uninterrupted blocks of time for literacy and numeracy. We extended the morning by 20 minutes for grades 1 to 8 in order to maximize instructional blocks. This has proven to be very successful. Making our *Focus on Faith* theme connections to instructional pathways has also allowed for cross-curricular reinforcement of literacy initiatives in other subject areas.

This year, our staff is very excited about participating in network sessions with other schools from across the board. The goal is that all staff will have a chance to partake in at least one network session. These sessions are specifically designed to give teachers the opportunity to share their instructional pathways, as well as, moderate student work with same grade teachers. The benefits of networking with other schools not only include additional professional dialogue and strategy sharing, but also the opportunity to affirm that what we are doing at our own school is successful. The frequent, informal exchange of strategies expands the teacher's own repertoire of skills. This professional learning translates to an enthusiasm and desire for the teacher to test their new skills, which in turn develops confidence among teachers to share their challenges and successes at subsequent network meetings.

Working from the belief that all teachers want to come to work and do a good job, as school leaders, we need to ensure teachers have the resources and skills to be instructional leaders in 21st century classrooms. In so doing, no child is left behind. At St. Elizabeth Seton, we approach our focus areas as a team. There is a formula, per se, in working towards moving all students forward. The school

improvement team continuously reviews all data. Then, in consultation with the principal, next steps are determined, including interventions for students as well as teacher strategies. Meetings are scheduled to discuss lower achieving students, allowing teachers to describe the strategies they are using and identify areas of need. This allows the school team to give further direction/strategies for the teacher to implement. After a pre-determined time, we meet again to discuss the progress made.

Teachers are accountable for moving students forward. At meetings, we discuss all data; board benchmark data as well as classroom data. We embrace every opportunity that is offered to teachers to better their practice: workshops, *Teacher Learning and Leadership Program* (TLLP) initiatives, as well as support programs that offer capacity building for teachers. We run an after school program for students who require intervention to proceed to the next level. In this program, students are invited to attend a 12-week session with one of their parents. A teacher facilitates the program. Although this teacher has exceptional expertise in this area, the program is supervised with another teacher alongside, learning and making a difference for students (lateral capacity building). The goal is to teach the parents literacy strategies to reinforce with their child at home.

Finally, when I think of moving all teachers forward I think of a task that cannot be done in isolation. Taking advantage of the many resources available, including; school consultant, literacy/numeracy itinerant teacher, assessment team, school program team leaders, colleague expertise, as well as staff expertise, is critical in bringing this to fruition. Together we are well equipped to meet teachers at their entry point and move them along. While we see the need and are very good at differentiating for student learning, we must conscientiously strive to differentiate and support the learning of our teachers so they too, maximize their potential. This in turn translates into greater success for our students. To improve student learning, school leaders must accept responsibility for engaging teachers to move forward without leaving anyone behind.

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