

Teamwork that matters

Improvement ideas from BC's Network Learning Communities

by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

When the Network of Performance-Based Schools was first developed, we strongly believed that teams of teachers and principals working together with powerful forms of classroom assessment could have a positive impact on learner confidence. Many teachers and principals agreed with us that learning gains were more likely to result from active use of thoughtful formative assessments at the classroom and school levels than from additional use of external forms of assessment.

Now, seven years later, we are more convinced than ever that we are moving in the right direction. Our personal experiences and professional beliefs are increasingly supported by compelling research evidence – evidence that suggests we can move much more quickly in making a big difference in the learning lives of each and every student we serve. This difference, however, will only be made if



Members of school teams actively engaged in inquiry.

we work together.

First, let's step back and consider the personal roots of our interest in this work. Both of us come from a long line of teachers. Judy's grandmother taught in rural Scotland. Linda's parents both started their teaching careers in one-room schools in rural Alberta. Part of the strength of small rural schools historically grew out of the necessity of working with large multiage groups. Rural teachers enlisted the help of older children to tutor and coach the younger ones. Creative teachers relied on the expertise within the group of learners to

provide as rich a learning experience as possible.

In our own teaching, spanning three decades in BC, we have worked in a wide range of schools – urban, rural, suburban, large, small, affluent and less so. We have seen the struggles and the loneliness of teachers working in isolation. We have also seen the energy generated by compelling ideas and supportive forms of teamwork. On

occasion we have observed the negative impact of 'teacher proof' forms of curriculum and rigid adherence to scripted programs. Much more often we have seen the positive learning impact created for struggling learners by the enthusiasm and intellectual teamwork of teachers who are passionate about learning and teaching.

The development of the Network of Performance-Based Schools has evolved out of a shared personal and professional desire for teamwork across roles on behalf of learners. The collaborative spirit of our country's



Linda Kaser, in Prince Rupert, encourages thinking that identifies powerful improvement questions.

earliest and best rural schools can be found in this work. As we examined our own family teaching roots, our experiences in teaching and leading in BC schools and districts, our research work with 200 schools involved in the Network, and our study of international school improvement practices and leadership, we have identified five key ideas that we believe can inform Canadian school improvement work.

These concepts are evident in BC schools that approach learning improvement work with a spirit of inquiry, the use of strong formative assessment practices as a daily discipline, respectfully shared and networked forms of leadership, an internal sense of accountability, and a belief in and practice of sustainable improvement.

Learning Improvement Ideas Developing an Inquiry Focus Matters

Approaching school improvement with a spirit of inquiry is different than approaching improvement through the adoption of a specific program or strategy. There is also a difference between developing a question to research and setting a goal. We believe that the thinking involved in identifying a powerful improvement

question creates curiosity and builds commitment in learners of all ages. Kyza and Edelson (2003) underline the importance of inquiry by arguing that our educational world is full of ill-structured, complex, and interesting questions — and that the pursuit of learning through questions is motivating.

Network schools are encouraged to develop questions that are right-sized, evidence-based, linked and important in one or more of four initial areas of interest – improving student citizenship/social responsibility, writing, mathematical problem solving or reading. These initial starting points are based on our experience that a clear inquiry focus in an important learning area helps create both immediate and long-term results while building capacity in the school for lasting learning improvements.

Network schools that sustain their work over time are now examining additional areas of inquiry including science, active health, oral language, imaginative learning and the arts. Over time, an inquiry mind set “ripples” out to inform school action research into other critical areas of learning.

Shared Leadership Must Be a Way of Life

One of the guiding ‘rules’ for the Network is that participants metaphorically “leave their formal roles at the door” when they attend meetings. By working as teams across roles, we are seeing leadership shift from one defined primarily by role to one defined much more by contribution and expertise. The research work of Jim Spillane, Alma Harris and Anne Lieberman is making a significant contribution to the understanding of researchers and practitioners about the importance of developing new frameworks for thinking about this style of leadership at the school level.

We also know from the work of Daniel Muijs and Alma Harris with schools in challenging areas in the UK, that teachers working in isolation, no matter how determined they might be, will not be able to attain lasting learning gains for their most vulnerable learners. No serious change effort can be sustained without intellectual and emotional support for those doing the core work of learning and teaching.

If our vulnerable learners are to make genuine gains, then we need educators who are prepared to work as professional teams to serve them. Determined staffs working together over time in Network schools have been able to reduce the number of learners in the “not yet” category by half or more. This is a critically important result that more than justifies the commitment to a more networked style of leadership – both at the school and district level.

Over our seven-year experience with the BC Network, we are seeing evidence of changes in relationships among teachers and principals as well as new conceptions of school leadership. With the help of graduate students at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria,

we hope to gain a deeper understanding of how involvement in the Network impacts the ideas and practices of formal and informal leadership.

Formative Assessment

(assessment *for* and *as* learning)

is a Critical Component of a Learning System

Our work has been deeply influenced by the research of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in the UK as well as that of Lorna Earl in Canada. In a recent article, Wiliam identified five broad strategies that are powerful for teachers of all content areas and grade levels. These strategies are clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; co-designing effective classroom discussions, questions and learning tasks; providing feedback that moves learners forward; engaging students as the owners of their own learning; and engaging students as learning and teaching resources for one another.

Effective teachers using older students as tutors in one-room rural schools were certainly engaging their senior learners as teaching resources for the younger ones – a key strategy identified by Wiliam and his colleagues. The advantage we have today is that we have access to an understanding of the power of all five strategies working together. In BC we also have access to quality classroom performance standards developed and used by teams of teachers over many years.

Fundamental to Network learning is the commitment by school teams to use the performance standards to help determine areas of strength and areas requiring focused coaching and instruction. This year our challenge to all schools is to include parents more in understanding the connection between assessment and learning – and to use the performance standards on a regular daily basis to have learners’ coach themselves and their fellow

learners for improvement.

As we work to build and share a learning-teaching repertoire around the broad formative strategies that Earl and Wiliam have identified, we will be on our way to becoming one of the first learning systems in the world to help individual learners on a daily basis become stronger and more confident metacognitively.

Strong Internal Accountability Leads to More Thoughtful Public Accountability

It is difficult to find anyone who does not have an opinion about our public schools. What educators and involved parents find distressing is that the opinions expressed — whether in the media or at social functions — are often long on judgment and short on knowledge. At the same time, the public wants and deserves to know that they can be confident in our public institutions, whether it is the safety of our water supply, the efficacy of our health system in dealing with a potential flu pandemic or the effectiveness of our public schools in helping to develop strong, capable future citizens.

Richard Elmore (2003) argued that internal accountability by educators is critically important when he argued “high internal agreement is the best

defense against uninformed external pressure” (p. 10). Our observations of the work of the Network schools over time support the view that the stronger the internal accountability system (shared assessment measures), the more open schools are to making productive use of information from external measures.

This year one of the key goals of the BC networked learning community is to actively share the quality criteria educators have developed in key learning areas with parents. We believe that this focus is long overdue and has important implications both for strengthening internal accountability systems and also for extending parent knowledge about how to help their own learner productively at home. As Network schools work to include families more directly in their improvement work, we intend to feature the work of these schools on the website (www.npbs.ca) so that all interested schools can benefit from this intensified focus.

Sustainability Must Guide Improvement Efforts

The observations of David Hopkins and David Jackson (2002) who identified the importance of networks during times of change are useful. They wrote, “In the past most

Cover story

Our cover (“Double, double, toil & trouble”) artist this month is Tanya Wendland, a grade 11 student, at Rossland Secondary.

Our thanks to Tanya, her English teacher, Maureen Fenner, her art teacher, Joost Winckers, and vice-principal, Karen Lavender.

Our learning network is committed to building on our shared history until we we have improved the life chances of every learner in our province

school systems have operated almost exclusively through individual units – be they teachers, departments, schools or local agencies. Such isolation may have been appropriate during times of stability but during times of change there is a need to tighten the loose coupling, to increase collaboration and to establish more fluid and responsive structures.” (P. 233)

The world we learn, teach and live in is changing rapidly. Many schools have been buffeted by changes in enrollment, in staffing and in leadership. Our annual reading of the case study reports from Network schools helps us to appreciate the quantity of changes experienced by young people, their families and educators.

We have also had the opportunity to learn some important reasons for the need to shift to a sustainability perspective in our rapidly changing environment from Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan. Most BC educators intuitively understand the importance of developing thoughtful changes that last long enough to genuinely assist learners in meeting their individual learning and citizenship goals.

Hargreaves points out in his latest book, *Sustainable Leadership* (2005) the seven key sustainability concepts that formal and informal leaders need to keep in mind:

1. *depth*, the learning has to matter and lead to deep understanding;
2. *endurance*, the learning has to last and create a deep learning system;
3. *breadth*, the learning has to spread productively to other areas of learning;

4. *justice*, the learning has to “do no harm” to the surrounding school environments;
5. *resourcefulness*, the learning has to draw on the energies of educators without burning them out;
6. *diversity*, the learning has to simultaneously promote variety, develop quality and at the same time avoid negative forms of standardization; and
7. *conservation*, the learning needs to honor the past and use wisdom to create the future.

Internationally, networked learning communities are discovering that these principles of sustainability can be used to guide improvement work.

As researchers turn their attention to understanding how networked learning communities work most productively over time, we are seeing new forms of knowledge being generated. In our work in BC we have been able to draw on the research and evaluation knowledge of Lorna Earl and Stephen Katz, two Canadian scholars who have been contracted to study the network learning communities in the UK over a three-year period. As a pilot part of the study, BC Network schools had the opportunity to be involved with the network survey de-

velopment and to engage in developing research questions with scholars from Canada and the UK.

The examination of networked learning communities has found evidence for seven key features: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability and capacity building and support. (Earl & Katz, *Learning about Networked Learning Communities*, in press, 2006). Evidence suggests that schools that sustain their networked inquiries over time make gains in all these areas. Active participation in an external assessment of the work of the BC Network schools will, we believe, be helpful in deepening and sustaining the learning for understanding that we are committed to developing together – with schools, on behalf of all schools, for the long term, and for the benefit of each and every one of our learners.

Conclusion

Unlike our family colleagues who worked alone in small rural schools, we feel fortunate that we can do this learning together with the hundreds of interested teachers, parents, vice-principals and principals who are actively creating a new form of knowledge community in our province. Members of BC learning networks are committed to building on our shared history and sustaining the work until we are confident that we have improved the life chances of every learner in our province. This is teamwork that matters. ■

Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser are school, district and provincial educational leaders and co-leaders of the Network of Performance-Based Schools. Their work in developing the school leadership program at the University of Victoria has been informed by the international leadership research base, by Canadian and international leadership theories and by case studies of learning oriented leadership in BC K-12 schools. They will be co-chairing the International Congress of School Improvement and Effectiveness, which will be held in Vancouver in 2009. Judy can be contacted at jhalbert@telus.net and Linda can be reached at lkaser@telus.net.

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