

### Student Centric Reflections

Alberta has an exceptional academic education system and is "widely acknowledged as among the best in the world" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 4). However, thousands of Albertans have expressed a need to change the long-term vision of the educational system for their children (Alberta Education, 2010). Albertans want to develop a curriculum that is richer and more relevant to students ensuring that the next generation "will have the skills necessary to both continue the Alberta legacy and strengthen it" (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 4). The Alberta High School Flexibility Enhancement Project was intended as a guide for administrators "to develop and implement high school redesigns that suit their schools' unique contexts" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 5). Based on the concept of redesigning how education is delivered in Alberta and the benefits that students will have as a result of this initiative, Cochrane High School decided to analyze the roles and responsibilities that teachers have on initiating a successful change in a schools culture. "School leaders have significant responsibility for ensuring quality student learning, teacher practice efficacy and an effective learning culture" (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 2).

Cochrane High students were provided with a flex block where they were able to access subject teachers for additional instruction, one to one or in small groups. During this time, the students could also work independently or collaboratively in any subject area of their choice. In order for students to understand the expectations during flex time, teachers played a critical role by introducing the system redesign and creating routines for students to ultimately benefit academically and socio-emotionally.

When school leaders introduce new programming to schools, the key to successful implementation are supportive teachers "who have a deep understanding of both the reasons

transformation is necessary and why an easier course cannot be taken" (Schlechty, 2009, p. 4). Knowing the critical role that teachers have on the successful implementation of any school initiatives, the focus of the administration of Cochrane High School became the teachers. The roles and responsibilities of the teachers were clearly laid out and each teacher needed to have the technological skills to successfully proceed and move forward. The focus of administration was to support teachers in setting up the infrastructure and creating the academic tone and routine for flex block. Instructional leadership was provided to assist teachers in the acquisition of the skills needed to use and understand the emerging technologies that support teaching and learning (Alberta Education, 2011).

After three months of implementing the flex block into the timetable, Cochrane High teachers began to understand to varying degrees that "innovative and educationally sound high school redesign [would] benefit students learning and success in high school" (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 6). All teachers at Cochrane High were given a qualitative questionnaire survey to complete that collected their reflections on three areas of Cochrane High's student centric learning environment. The focus was on accountability, relationship building and student achievement. These three dimensions are imperative to improve student engagement and to make the learning experience "social, emotional and intellectual" (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 2). The data collected, based on these three areas, was essential in understanding the success and challenges of the new flexibility enhancement timetable. Once analyzed, the data was used to inform professional practice of Cochrane High as they undertook the transformation of the school culture.

The internship was successful due to the high teacher support and active participation. Teachers in Cochrane High school felt comfortable providing transparent feedback on what was

running smoothly and what was not. Administration realized that one area that required attention was the lack of consistency in procedure during flex block from teacher to teacher. Different teachers were creating working spaces that differed significantly from class to class. When a discussion took place on this particular inconsistency, it was thought that it might actually be beneficial to address the individual needs of the students. Students may want access to a variety of flex class atmospheres that work best for their independent learning styles. Having the flexibility for students to decide if they want highly academic study areas or more relaxed and stress free environments empowers learners to make decisions that will work for them. Different types of assignments and projects require choices between areas that support independent study and others that cater to working in groups.

Teachers were supported in developing leadership capacity to change the culture of the school environment. Gathering multiple perspectives from teachers on how flex was working in regards to their professional practice informed the decisions that would be made for the second semester (Alberta Education, 2011). Some of the changes planned are to dissolve two flex block student groups and assign those students to other teachers. The two teachers released from their flex block groups will supervise the gym and weight room during flex to allow students to use those areas. The learning commons area will be turned into a quiet zone for students to work independently and in small groups. Concerns regarding the grade nine timetables were discovered based on the analysis of the survey responses. Collaborative teacher discussion groups were created to figure out possible solutions. It was decided that a group consisting of two administrators and four core teachers would travel to a previously visited flex High School to revisit what their high school redesign looked like. Based on Cochrane High's three month flex experience, the visit had a specific focus on how the grade nine timetable could be modified to

meet the needs of both staff and students. The trip was enlightening and provided administration and teachers from Cochrane High with some new insight.

As Cochrane High re-crafts and improves their student centric learning environment, data will continue to be collected and adjustments made to improve the process. Through a collaborative approach and shared experiences, a deeper quality of trust within the school will develop leading to continued honest feedback from teachers expressing professional observations and feelings (Mertler, 2012). The evidence based on the analysis of the data collected should support Cochrane High as it moves forward in its endeavor to make education rigorous and relevant for students so that they become engaged in their own learning. Cochrane High endeavors to foster "a culture of high expectations for students, teachers and other staff" (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 5).

One of the strongest points learned is the importance of collaboration and fostering effective relationships when making decisions that affect the entire school community (Alberta Education, 2011). When teachers were included in the decision-making procedure and saw that their ideas were being used to tweak and improve Cochrane High's redesign, they became more actively involved and energized to be a part of the process. Planning and having a clear vision is also essential to the success of any initiative. It is important to "involve the school community in creating and sustaining shared vision, mission, values, principles and goals (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 5). The ability to explain the "why" will help guide others to understand the importance and relevance of the initiative. When change makes sense and when educators know that this will benefit their students they will more likely be supportive.

An interesting development that has occurred is the interest that other schools are having in what Cochrane High is doing. One school came to visit early in the year; two more are coming

next week as well as administrators in the Rocky View School Division. This requires further preparation of presentations, tours and debriefing sessions. Educators must not only work collaboratively within their own schools, but must work together throughout the entire province to redesign what education can look like. Educational transformation will continue to change to "foster students' capacity to think critically; be resilient, adaptable and confident in their abilities; take personal responsibility for life-long learning and collaborate to achieve a common purpose" (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 2).

## References

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