

Procedural Change Challenges Organizational Values

A New Report Card

by: Miles MacFarlane

While the doors of Prairie Lighthouse Middle School (PLMS) first opened in 1990 the visionary principal had gathered a staff of innovative and committed teachers six months earlier. Together they researched and implemented an innovative approach to student-led reflective assessment and reporting in a middle school setting. PLMS teachers were subject generalists teaching all subjects to a single group of students. Switching between subjects was seen to erect artificial boundaries between subjects and, as such, no bells were ever installed in the school. Complete curricular integration within inquiry-based projects was the norm; number / letter grades were dropped in favour of descriptive rubrics. The assessment focus was on the student's understanding of themselves as learners (metacognition and self-regulation) and the degree to which students met the stated criteria relative to each inquiry project.

PLMS staff were sought out to speak on their approach and the school was widely regarded as exemplary of the middle school philosophy and one of the best schools in the province. One hallmark of this approach was the student-written report card, or "growth statement". As the school's official document for communicating progress to parents, the growth statement was one of the more visible and concrete examples of PLMS emphasis on student involvement in assessment. Considerable time was taken to help students develop the metacognitive skills necessary to reflect meaningfully on their own work and to formulate summary statements of their skills based on evidence in their portfolios. Students shared their growth statements with families at a conference night and teachers would be on hand to answer parent questions though most questions were adeptly handled by the students themselves.

While staff occasionally complained about the length of time these collaborative reports took to prepare, they saw student input as a critical element to the assessment process, and well worth the effort. The metacognitive skills developed by students were, in their opinion, as important as the required curricular content knowledge. PLMS, despite many changes in staff and administration, continued to espouse and practice the core philosophy for 20 years.

Then, at a staff meeting in 2010, the department of education mandated a common report card for all schools in the province. This report was to be written by teachers, required a percentage grade for each subject and the anecdotal portion of the report was to focus,

subject-by-subject, on outcomes achieved relative to each individual curriculum. Comments on student behaviour was limited to three pre-determined domains, reported by way of a numeric rubric, and was to be completed separately for each subject.

The staff were shocked and dismayed at the proposed change. They felt the new report re-established boundaries between subjects, segmented the child into discrete and unrelated elements, and took the child completely out of the assessment and reporting loop. Discussion was heated and passionate. How could a percent grade communicate anything about a child better than their existing report? How could separating behaviours from achievement provide a picture of the whole child? Would the teacher-assigned number grades shift the focus away from, and diminish the more meaningful self-reflections completed by students? Would this change damage PLMS's ability to continue with its' well-respected program? How much would the change affect other processes? Might staff simply abandon the growth statement and simply return to assigning a number grade?

It was clear that the school was at a crossroads and change was ahead.

Discussion Questions

- What challenges are facing the staff of Prairie Lighthouse School?
- What are the immediate concerns that need addressing?
- What behaviours may have to change to accommodate the new report?
- What beliefs and values may have to change to accommodate the new report?
- Should beliefs and values change to accommodate processes?
- How tightly integrated can/should processes be to beliefs/values/philosophy?
- In what ways are these procedural changes impacting the school's culture and identity?
- What factors should the school's administration consider in the transition to the new report?
- What elements are important to maintain? Can these elements co-exist with the new requirements?
- What new information and processes will have to be learned?
- How will that change take place?



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