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**Student Management Systems;
Data to Support School Improvement Planning;
and Accountability Frameworks**

An analysis of the February 10th conference proceedings

A report prepared for the
Toronto Region MISA Professional Network Centre
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Introduction

As part of the Toronto MISA Professional Network Center (PNC) implementation strategy, a mini-conference was held on February 10, 2006. Designed to support ongoing PNC research around evidence-based decision making, the conference focused on examining the following issues:

Strategies

- a) What strategies are boards employing to promote classroom and school-wide instructional improvement through data-based decision-making?
- b) How do these strategies work?

Influential Factors

- a) What are the constraints to board efforts to promote data use for classroom and school-wide instructional decision-making in literacy and numeracy?
- b) What are the enablers to the same?

Role of Professional Network Center

- a) What role can the Professional Network play in influencing board efforts to promote data use for classroom and school-wide instructional decision-making in literacy and numeracy?

The conference began with a key-note address by Dr. Lorna Earl of Aporia Consulting Ltd. who discussed issues around promoting classroom and school-wide instructional improvement through data-based decision-making. Dr. Earl's address was followed by Sharing Practice workshops that examined issues of assessment, accountability, and student achievement at the level of the classroom, school, and system. For each of the three areas, a panel of four practitioners shared experiences from their own board, and this stimulated subsequent small-group discussion facilitated by volunteer York Region District Board administrators¹ around data literacy and best practice at each of the system, school, and classroom levels.

¹ School administrators from the West Innovative Network Group (WING) were trained as facilitators and recorders by Aporia Consulting in advance of the mini-conference.
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Presentations

Although addressing issues at the level of the system (supervisory officers), school (principals), and classroom (teachers), the panel presentations touched on common themes:

Supervisory Officer Presentations

Board culture

Across Ontario, select boards continue to deal with the challenges brought about by legacy issues. While it is widely recognized that different boards have different board-wide cultures, some boards formed through amalgamation experience difficulties in creating consistent procedures, processes, and culture across departments. For example, some boards find that legacy practices have left them with significantly different amounts of historical data and different attitudes towards data collection and data use.

Within boards, diverse communities also pose challenges to board-wide practice, and consideration of school context is recognized as an important part of understanding and responding to local school needs. The differing cultures of elementary and secondary teaching were also discussed, and the particular challenge of secondary school teachers focusing more (and sometime exclusively) on subject-specific competencies was noted.

Also discussed were differences in culture between the “business” side and the “academic” side of board operations. Building capacity and lines of communication were seen as ways to overcome or minimize such differences.

The need to build capacity

The challenge of training staff to work with data in a rich and meaningful way was noted by presenters. A lack of data is not the problem, but rather it is a lack of deep understanding. Data collection appears to be less problematic for some of the presenting boards to manage than the next step which is rich data analysis and interpretation in support of program improvement. Indeed, there remains a need to build capacity among staff as to how data can and should be used to support student learning. Varying levels of skill and understanding amongst principals and teachers is seen as an area to be addressed, and a number of strategies for capacity building were put forward.

These strategies included but were not limited to:

- Inviting principals in Families of Schools to develop projects that are data driven
- Pairing school administrators to act as critical friends
- Creating ties between schools and panels through Family of School projects and initiatives
- System-wide focus for professional development in the areas of leadership training and data management
- Lobbying the Ministry for more principal training
- Aligning Board and Ministry principal training initiatives
- Using a “train the trainer” approach – sending one principal to the Ministry and then bringing them back to the board to solidify their learning, followed by sharing sessions with other principals
- Providing principals with pertinent professional readings
- Establishing a committee to plan a research symposium
- Bringing groups together to talk and formulate a plan for Year 2 of their MISA PLC

Approaches to Information Technology

Emphasis was placed on the role of technology in supporting board-wide goals. Keeping a student orientation focus with respect to technology, and ensuring that the display of data highlights its relationship to student learning and particularly to classroom learning was seen as important.

Approaches to planning

Presentations emphasized the importance of school effectiveness plans and discussed the benefit of developing plans that are teacher-driven rather than principal-driven. Central to school plans around student learning were the questions: “How do we know if they’re learning?” and “What do we do if they’re not?” Drawing from a number of sources was described as an important way to gain an understanding of how data comes together to form a complete picture of student learning.

In helping schools plan, it was suggested superintendents think very clearly about who can and should contribute to the planning process. Also noted was the importance of collaborative and cross-departmental planning.

Helping schools work with data

Determining how best to help schools work with data appeared as a major area of focus. In particular, using data effectively to identify students at risk was seen as an area of need. It was suggested that Grade 6 reading scores are predictive of performance on the Grade 10 literacy test, yet secondary schools report that elementary schools identify the wrong students as ‘at risk’, focusing more on behaviour rather than performance.

Emphasis was placed on the importance of helping schools focus more on classroom data. Also noted was the use of perception data about the school learning environment (what people think about the school, parents, staff, students, etc.). Helping principals see the real connection between data and individual students, staff, and parents was seen as one way to create a sense of urgency around and commitment to school improvement initiatives.

Also noted was the need to have schools use data to support funding proposals and understand how data facilitates their relationship with the board when discussing school or program needs.

Approaches to data

“We were a process board. We processed everything to death. Could we tell you whether we were making a difference for kids? No.” This comment by one of the presenters reflects the challenge many boards say they face in learning how to work effectively with data.

Suggestions for change around data use included:

- Questioning why so much data is kept if it isn’t useful
- Getting rid of collection processes that are not essential
- Keeping school effectiveness plans down to 2 or 3 goals
- Aggregating target setting for each classroom within the school
- Working with statistical neighbours
- Learning what the practices are of successful statistical neighbours

EQAO

There appears to be general consensus regarding the need to put EQAO data in perspective. Some participants believe that EQAO results are given too much weight, and advocate instead for a more balanced use of multiple performance indicators in the assessment of school needs and the development of student improvement plans. Participants also stated that accountability agendas are far too important for boards not to engage proactively with all stakeholders. As such, boards must be prepared to enter into the public debate on information and data and accountability. It is the sharing of responsibility in driving forward the accountability agenda that has become the hallmark of education in Ontario.

Collaboration

The need to foster collaboration across boards and within schools was a major theme. Sharing from others so that they might share with you was seen as a way to work effectively. Learning from other jurisdictions was also regarded as an important part of building a culture of collaboration. In this process, change was seen to be constant and continuous, supported by long-term thinking.

Constraints

Time figured strongly as a constraint to system improvement. In particular, presenters made mention of a lack of time for professional development, time to look at data, time to meet, time to reflect on information, and time to really work collaboratively to develop strategies.

Principal Presentations

Principal presentations emphasized the following themes and topics of discussion:

Creating a vision

Principals described the need to develop and support a strong central vision within schools. Goals must be shared and school focus must be maintained through acts of leadership and processes that involve all staff. Strong leadership around school purpose and focus can help to change school culture and push schools (and teachers) forward when they are “stuck”. Leadership and vision are needed to overcome teacher resistance to change and to counter any tendency on the part of some staff to “blame” external forces (e.g., students’ abilities, ESL issues, composition of the test, etc.) for low student achievement.

Building collaboration

Collaboration was seen as the keystone to creating and sustaining momentum within a school. Staff must be given opportunities to work together, and collaboration must become part of school culture. Drawing on outside resources and supports creates ties amongst schools and helps to foster board-wide collaboration.

Seeing students in the data

Helping bring students and their achievements to life through the data was seen as essential. Principals commented that when teachers realize that abstract data represents real students in their classrooms, their willingness to engage with the data increases.

A number of strategies were mentioned to help schools engage with data:

- Establish a public data wall
- Record data on silhouettes to convey “humanness”
- Track suspensions by length, type, gender, special needs
- Track student attendance
- Track office contacts
- Track in-school suspensions
- Track parent contacts
- Track EQAO results

- Examine report card mark distribution

Learning to work with data

Participants described in various ways the challenge of the data journey – both for themselves and for their staff. They discussed learning to work with information such as DRA, PM benchmarks, and EQAO data, and asking questions such as, “Does this information match report card data?”, “What does this really mean?”, “How can I use this information to drive classroom instruction?”

The challenge to principals is seen as two-fold: Many of them are personally faced with a steep learning curve around data literacy. At the same time, they are required to be data experts for their own staff, able to support, guide and oversee teachers through the data-driven decision-making process. The age-old problem of “not knowing what you don’t know” was mentioned as an area of difficulty for some principals.

Building Capacity

Building personal and teacher competencies, and creating a sense of empowerment amongst staff was mentioned during the principal presentations. Principals discussed the importance of building the capacity of teachers, and noted the significant challenge of finding both the time and the resources to achieve this.

A number of strategies for building learning and sharing were described:

- Identify and agree upon school-wide performance indicators
- Identify both existing practice and successful practice. Ask how they compare?
- Make use of exemplars
- Link teacher performance appraisals to teachers’ proficiency in using assessment data
- Develop common assessments that identify indicators of learning
- Facilitate release time during the instructional day for teachers to plan and evaluate work together
- Facilitate grade level or departmental planning
- Make use of staff meetings to review progress
- Revisit school plan on a regular basis

- Develop consistent language and common understanding throughout the school

Constraints

Difficulties in finding time to support personal and teacher learning was mentioned by principals as a major constraint. Also noted were possible teacher federation restrictions on the delivery of professional development during staff meetings.

Teacher Presentations

Teacher presentations emphasized the following themes and topics of discussion:

Understanding the reason for change

Whether it was a mandated response to low EQAO scores, a concern over boys' literacy or a school-driven initiative to support ESL students, teachers need to understand and be a part of the reason for change. They need to be involved in creating the vision for the school and actively participate in the development of new initiatives. Putting data into context – making sure that teachers see the connection between data and classroom instruction and student learning outcomes – is important if teachers are to use data in an active and meaningful way that supports student learning. Having the understanding and skills necessary to participate in this process is essential to overcoming teacher resistance.

Learning to develop an inquiry habit of mind

Teachers are increasingly familiar with data collection (e.g., DRA, PM Benchmarks, EQAO) but need to learn to ask the follow-up questions, such as, “We have the data, now what?” Teachers need to be supported and encouraged to think through the relationship between classroom instruction, classroom assessment and student learning. Data is only the impetus for beginning this journey of investigation. It is the “What does this mean?” part of the journey that is the challenge.

It was noted that teachers too often jump from the data directly to the teaching strategies. Instead, teachers need to learn to use the data to identify specific areas of student need. Only when student needs are more fully understood can teachers move their thinking to teaching strategies. This process begins a continuous cycle of data collection, need identification, and differentiated instruction that drives improvements to student learning.

Possessing the skills and abilities

Knowing where you want to get and knowing how to get there are two different things. Teachers require the instructional skill and professional understanding to support student literacy and numeracy and improve student learning. Teachers need to understand and have the skills to undertake differentiated instruction and classroom assessment. In addition to defining what skills students need to succeed, we must also define the same for classroom teachers.

Collaboration, communication and capacity building

Teachers require the support of board staff, administrators, and colleagues as they work to increase their own levels of competency. Meaningful professional development, opportunities to plan with other teachers, time to work with data, adequate resources, and the support of board experts were seen as essential to teachers. A culture built around collaboration and communication was also regarded as beneficial to building a willingness amongst teachers to take risks in their own learning.

Creating classroom environments conducive to student learning

Teachers recognize the importance of creating classroom environments that respect students. Fostering risk-taking and inquiry amongst students is seen as essential to improving student learning. Students must be encouraged to be active participants in the data journey, whether it is through the use of student portfolios or other strategies to increase student engagement with the learning process. Creating levelled classrooms or learning groups were discussed as one way to create safe learning environments for student of all abilities.

Putting school supports in place

Classroom teachers need to be supported by school supports. Reading Recovery teachers, early literacy team leaders, resource rooms, professional libraries, lunchtime reading clubs for boys, and strong home-school connections were just some of the practical supports put in place in schools. Making student achievement a school-wide or collective responsibility and understanding the improvement process as a continuum were seen as vital to sustained student success.

Findings

The following findings summarize the small-group discussions held by conference participants. Five groups of approximately 8 participants were led through a guided discussion of strategies, enablers, constraints, and PNC network potential around the promotion of classroom and school-wide instructional improvement through data-based decision-making. Group discussions focused separately on system-level, school-level, and classroom-level initiatives, and findings are divided into these same categories. Group facilitators produced written summaries during the discussions, and these summaries provide the basis for the following findings.

System Level

Strategies:

Participants identified the following system-level strategies:

Communication

Rich, broad discussion where people “speak the same language” was noted by participants to support improvement across the system. Also identified was the need to spend time on developing and promoting a shared vision and a set of common goals across the board, from the supervisory officer, to the principal (school), and teacher (classroom).

Collaboration

Participants first and foremost pointed to the value of shared commitment across boards. Specifically, they noted the need for alignment of language and understanding across boards. They spoke of the value in finding commonalities across schools, but not necessarily across whole boards. There was agreement that system-wide initiatives would benefit from increased coherence through commonly articulate school improvement plans. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were noted to facilitate collaboration amongst administrators and superintendents.

Capacity building

The need to have both effective pressure and support mechanisms was identified as a key component of developing capacity across the system. Participants also noted the benefit of creating a sense of urgency that spirals upward and results in the creation of agency across multiple stakeholders. Capacity

building, particularly in the area of literacy development, is seen as necessary across the system, from supervisory officers through to principals and finally down to teachers. The importance of staffing and of hiring the right people was noted as one factor affecting the extent to which capacity can be built.

Support for teachers

Participants expressed their belief that specific supports must be put in place for teachers. In particular, professional development focusing on needs of classroom teachers was seen as essential to the realization of improvements at the system level.

Support for administrators

Specific support was seen as particularly necessary for administrators. While participants noted the need to “hand hold” principals while they developed new skills, they also identified the necessity of acknowledging and supporting principals in their role as curriculum and staff leader, and of allowing principals the time and space to grapple with new learning in their own local context. Participants saw this “fine balance” as key to creating support for school improvement and transferring knowledge across the system. Principal training programs or leadership development programs were believed to be important component parts of system-wide development.

Implementation supports

Many participants expressed the belief that even strongly articulated visions and clearly set goals are often hindered by difficulties around implementation. They spoke of how specific process-related strategies and monitoring mechanisms can support implementation efforts. They discussed the utilization of improvement by design and of change management strategies.

Decision-making & planning

Participants pointed not only to the importance of the School Improvement Plan, but more specifically, to the importance of encouraging schools to make decisions and develop short- and long-term goals with the School Improvement Plan in mind. Of equal importance was the need to establish a critical planning process that draws on relevant, reliable, and current data. System-wide support for the developers of these plans was determined to be a key component to planning success.

Information & data

Access to information and understanding of data were seen as key to the school improvement process. Specifically, participants mentioned the value of data walls and classroom level data. More generally, they discussed how perception data was required to filter or mediate EQAO data, which many believed was figuring too strongly in school profiles. They mentioned the value of embedded research models and the need to revisit how leadership data is understood.

Processes

Participants volunteered a variety of board and local school processes that they believed were effective in promoting data-driven decision-making for improvements in student achievement. Specifically, participants mentioned:

- Have schools think in a January to January cycle rather than a September to June cycle, thereby creating greater ownership of students across grade levels. This moves teachers out of the “they’re only my kids for 1 year” mentality and fosters transition planning.
- School Improvement Plan was now a “School Effectiveness Plan”, emphasizing the ongoing dialectic between data collection, achievement, and improvement.
- A focus on developing plans from September to December and implementing plans from January to June.
- Improvement by Design goals that are simple and concise.
- Attaching a budget to evidence of need.
- Determining which initiatives might be overlapped in order to work more efficiently.
- Keep school-wide goals focused and manageable. One school, for example, required teachers school-wide to focus on one literacy, one numeracy and one faith component each term. Students, therefore, are exposed to many learning strategies over the course of their years at the school.

Enablers:

Participants identified the following system-level enablers:

Leadership

The need to build the capacity of system leaders was frequently mentioned by participants. They suggested the development of principal training programs built on a “train-the-trainer” model. This was seen as one way of allowing principals to share within their families of schools. Leadership around succession planning was also identified as an enabling factor.

Collaboration

Collaboration was seen, not only as a strategy, but as an enabling factor in the school improvement process. Superintendents’ supporting each other was one way that collaboration was seen to be expressed. Participants also noted that collaboration can support positive attitudes on the part of teachers – something that was believed to have a significant impact on student learning.

Capacity building & resources

While participants spoke in general terms about necessary resources, they pointed to the importance of resource support for School Improvement Plans. Also noted was the need for professional development for administrators, particularly in the area of data management. Professional development focusing on professional and personal growth for administrators was also seen as important.

Approaches to data

Evidence-based decision-making was identified as essential to student success. Participants believed that supervisory officers sometimes put significant amounts of time and money into improvement efforts without the supporting data. Likewise, participants saw instances where requests for resources and supports were submitted without supporting data. Fostering the effective use of data in the planning, implementation and resource-gathering process was seen as important. Looking at statistical neighbours and not just numbers was also seen as important.

Processes & tools

A number of specific processes or tools were identified as possible enablers:

- Design of a system-wide monitoring and implementation cycle that would provide boards and schools with standard supports (e.g., a tool kit system)
- Cognos data gathering at the board level for all schools
- Data driven projects (funding provided) at the elementary and secondary levels for regional areas and families of schools
- Process guide for school improvement planning
- The development of “tools” that focus at the level of the classroom and individual students
- Data handbook

Organizational structures

It was widely acknowledged that the wider system needed to relieve some of the pressure from individual schools around the collection and interpretation of data. Participants also believed that administrators needed to be encouraged or required to go into classrooms on a more frequent basis.

Inquiry habit of mind & board culture

Participants mentioned the importance of a system-wide culture that fostered an inquiry habit of mind. Specifically, they pointed to the need to make data-driven decision-making a part of board culture across the system and spoke of creating and sustaining board foci that are driven by inquiry. Allowing school goals to be driven by teacher inquiry, and encouraging schools to pose questions such as “How is this going to impact on student achievement?” were seen as examples of inquiry-minded practice.

Planning

Consistency in planning both from year to year and across boards was believed to be an enabling factor. Participants also indicated the need for a planning process that holds principals accountable for goals, and encourages them to think long-term.

Vision

Participants believed in the importance of strongly articulated and clearly defined goals for boards and for schools. They also noted the need to move away from “school improvement” towards “school effectiveness.”

Ministry of Education

Many participants believed that continuity and consistency within the Ministry was an enabling factor.

Constraints:

Participants identified the following system-level constraints:

Research related issues (process, understanding & knowledge)

Participants believed that many smaller boards do not have adequately staffed research departments, and in some cases may not have any dedicated research staff at all. They also pointed to different levels of understanding within and between boards, and noted that very few individuals have a deep and rich understanding of data collection and analysis. The need to understand data is, they suggested, a very new requirement for principals. As a result, they believed that some boards don't necessarily know how to use data effectively or don't understand what data supports student improvement.

Participants also noted that it was challenging to identify which students were truly at risk, and wondered if boards were investing resources wisely or "missing the mark." Many believed that there is an absence of data at the school level, and that human resource data is needed but not readily available.

Furthermore, some participants cautioned that achievement data can oftentimes hide problems or be affected by other problems, particularly in low-income schools where other issues (poverty, language, etc.) are impacting outcomes but not necessarily being addressed. They saw this as a case of winning the data battle but not really looking at the cause of the achievement war.

Finally, many participants cautioned against focusing too much on EQAO data, and likened it to the "tail wagging the dog." They argued for a balanced use of EQAO.

IT related issues

Difficulties of note included a lack of money and the high cost of data mining systems. Smaller boards were often seen to have fewer staff that held a deep understanding of data system requirements. Some boards reported finding it difficult to get older or existing data warehouse systems to meet current data needs in an effective way.

Capacity Building

Participants regarded capacity building and issues of succession planning as very important to school improvement initiatives. They saw a need to create a continuum of experience, and questioned how to foster and support this. They pointed to the need to address difficulties of greater inexperience amongst principals and supervisory officers due to a demographic shift in teaching population. On this same note, they identified the need to train principals, and regarded a principal candidate pool that is becoming increasingly younger and less experienced as one of the most significant challenges facing boards. They added that principal hiring practice has traditionally looked at other skills sets than those now required, and expressed their belief that governing bodies overseeing principal training must consider this new set of skills when developing principal qualification programs.

Planning was not seen as a constraint in the school improvement process, whereas implementation was identified as an area of difficulty. Participants noted the challenge of translating knowledge into action and of having knowledge cross boundaries. They believed that we're not making in-roads into the classroom, and that "all this talk" is staying at the level of the system and sometimes the school, but that the system needs to figure out how to translate this into meaningful action for classroom teachers. They saw capacity building as equally important at the grass roots (i.e., classroom) level.

Board and school culture

Diverse board cultures and the differing school cultures of elementary and secondary settings were identified as constraints to the improvement process. The issue of differing cultures across boards was seen as an occasional impediment to collaborative projects. Additionally, it was noted that some boards were still challenged internally by inconsistent or even conflicting legacy board issues resulting from amalgamation.

Secondary schools were seen as still largely departmentalized, and participants noted the greater challenge of creating a sense of ownership of the problem of student achievement and school improvement amongst secondary school teachers, many of whom appeared to see their responsibilities as bounded by subject area. Teacher resistance and even principal resistance were also seen as constraints within some high poverty or high ESL elementary settings where a culture of deficit thinking

led staff to believe that their students were not capable of achieving high standards despite the best efforts of teachers.

Board culture was also mentioned in relation to the use of data in school improvement initiatives. Participants noted that schools are still asking for money without the data to support their request, and emphasized the need to create school cultures that are data driven. There is, the participants noted, an urgent need to “get our schools to understand this.” One group further added, “We’ve focused so much on what’s wrong, that ‘successful’ schools oftentimes cannot identify their important but subtler needs or identify why things are right.”

Size and capacity of board

Smaller boards were seen to have different challenges than larger boards, often around fewer resources and capacity building. Also mentioned was a lack of sufficient infrastructure within some boards to support the school planning process.

Ministry of Education

Without doubt, participants held strong views of the Ministry of Education. Many viewed Ministry requirements as too prescriptive. Others recommended that the Ministry get rid of its “flavour of the year” approach to creating new initiatives, and felt as if “something was always being put forward by the Ministry.” There was, they argued, too little time for boards and schools to work with existing initiatives before new ones were handed down. Participants also believed that as new ministry initiatives are parachuted in, many schools go along because they are desperate for funding, but that the process becomes a huge distraction that takes some schools away from focusing on established, long-term goals. In other words, participants believed that many ministry initiatives and requirements, however beneficial, also sidetrack many schools and boards.

Nature of teachers’ work

Participants mentioned the unique nature of teachers’ work, typified by individuals working within largely isolated classroom settings, as a challenge to creating a sense of system-wide ownership of the problem of low student achievement. Some participants pointed also to the difficulty of creating momentum past June (traditionally seen as the “end” of the school year), and of school improvement

plans often being started from scratch each year, rather than being built upon prior experience and learning.

Intensification of work

The difficulty of boards taking on too many initiatives and of schools trying to do too much was noted as a constraint to system-wide improvement. Participants believed that boards and schools had to learn to “let go” of old initiatives when taking on something new.

Vision of the network

Some participants felt that the Greater Toronto Area PNC was hampered by the fact that certain boards were further along than others, and that certain boards appeared less interested in the sharing process. They were uncertain as to what direction the PNC could take if it was unable to achieve equality of representation and investment.

Time

Both a lack of time and unreasonable timelines figured strongly in the constraints noted by participants.

PNC Potential:

Participants identified the following system-level areas where the PNC has the potential to make positive contributions:

Capacity building

There is a need for more professional development, particularly for supervisory officers. There is also a need for mentoring tools for all levels of administration, as well as for new and existing teachers.

Collaboration & relationship building

The PNC has a unique opportunity to provide guidance around the sharing of information. What information should be shared, how best to share information, how to standardize and coordinate the information sharing, and how to make continuous information sharing an accepted part of board culture, were specific areas identified by participants as worthy of further consideration. Participants recommended the creation of small special interest groups to ensure that “we’re not reinventing the

wheel.” They noted the possible use of district councils, of leveraging existing forums to develop opportunities to share common practices, and of creating networking opportunities to share. They pointed to the value of increasing the level and depth of dialogue across the PNC, and acknowledged the value of forums such as the mini-conference.

Investment in infrastructure

Participants believed that the PNC could play a role in the development of infrastructure. Specifically, they pointed to the need for business intelligence tools, a tool kit, and support for IT groups.

Support for policy changes

Participants believed that the PNC has a role to play in communicating with the Ministry of Education, and lobbying for policies that accurately reflect board needs. They noted the need to change from top down mandates to greater collaboration in the policy development process.

School Level

Strategies:

Participants identified the following school-level strategies:

Information and sharing of data

Participants indicated the benefit of making the data visible within schools. They spoke of “taking the data out of the box” and of conveying to all staff that “data represents students.” Some suggestions for bringing meaning to the data included an assessment wall, a data wall, and a reading/writing wall. They mentioned the use of visuals to show the levels and progression of student achievement within the school (e.g., vertical tracking board, use of photos, use of student silhouettes) and the value of watching students move as a “display” that can even be colour-coded. For some participants, issues of public accessibility to tracking walls and student confidentiality were of concern.

Participants also discussed the value of school aggregated data, and the importance of drawing on data other than EQAO. They specified the value of data around safe schools, of reading attitudes surveys, of a common “test” in each grade level to address discrepancy from teacher to teacher, identifying the “bottom 15%” of students, of tracking students through transitions, and of tracking office referrals.

Processes

Participants made mention of specific processes that schools used to support student achievement. They described using the “take a kid to work day” (i.e., the absence of grade 9s in the school) to pair up teachers in order to examine data together. Some schools provided release time (1/2 day) once a term for teachers to plan together. Another school coordinated a school-wide focus on literacy strategies, identifying two per term to be taught school wide, so that students are exposed to multiple strategies over the course of their schooling. Other strategies mentioned included a lunch-time and after school homework club and the establishment of a committee for at-risk students (defined as all students below a 59% average on their report card and all students failing the Grade 10 literacy test).

Communication and collaboration

Participants believed in the value of school-level conversations around accountability. Collaboration between Families of Schools and PLCs was deemed beneficial. Specifically, one strategy included the dividing of teachers into subject areas (7-12) or into community learning groups with the provision of common planning time.

Decision-making & planning

Participants recommended focusing staff meetings on issues of learning and of supporting focused inquiry initiatives within the school.

Enablers:

Participants identified the following school-level enablers:

Organizational structure

Participants believed that certain school organizational structures or positions of responsibility support student learning. These included a literacy intervention teacher, Reading Recovery teacher, grade partners, and literacy lead teachers able to train other teachers. They also noted that having a small staff helps create collaboration and a sense of ownership of student achievement across all departments and subject areas. Smaller settings were also seen as promoting easier transition between grades for staff and students.

Approaches to the data

Approaches to working with data that participants saw as enabling included use of a data wall that allowed staff to watch students progress through various levels, promoting and modelling active inquiry amongst staff, and a system-based data collection using key performance data that is pre-determined. Participants stressed the need for schools to have their questions answered regarding EQAO data, and suggested that schools and boards needed to be asking more questions of the government around the reliability and validity of EQAO results.

Processes

Enabling processes included common planning time, joint target setting, meeting with receiving school staff through transitions, and office referral information being shared between schools.

Resources

Participants pointed to the value of school based resources. These included a “tool kit” or “some sort of process” to help schools work with data. Required resources also included a data interpretation handbook, electronic support, Cognos, and adequate hardware/software.

Collaboration

Collaboration was identified as essential to student success. Teachers talking to each other (e.g., teachers asking one another what students needed to know in moving from Grade 2 to Grade 3) was seen as an important enabling factor. Collaboration was also seen as an important part of supporting teachers in their understanding of school and student data.

Board & school culture – creating an inquiry habit of mind

Participants strongly believed that an inquiring school culture is critical to the success of schools using data in a meaningful and successful way. The enculturation of an inquiry habit of mind needs to be facilitated by administration but grown within teachers. Participants believed that establishing such a culture is fostered through active inquiry, celebrating successes with staff, involving staff at all levels, increasing student engagement, and allowing teachers to feel a sense of agency around the data journey.

Vision

The importance of creating a vision that combined “urgency, energy and agency”, all spiralling upwards, was seen as a necessity. The value of creating a common vision and getting all staff on board and interested in the process was also mentioned.

Leadership

Support and knowledge of data by administrators was deemed essential to the school improvement process.

Constraints:

Participants identified the following school-level constraints:

Research related issues (process, understanding & knowledge)

One of the school-level constraints identified by participants is a basic mistrust of data. Schools are asking “Is it valid? Is it reliable?” particularly when results contradict administrators’ and teachers’ common-sense understandings. There is also a disjoint (whether real or perceived) between EQAO scores and other assessment tools (e.g., CAT, running records, DRA, etc.). While such discrepancies create opportunities for conversation, participants questioned why (in their opinion) validity always comes down on the side of EQAO. They noted the value of classroom based assessments and other standardized tests and expressed frustration that schools are supposed to “take it on faith” that EQAO is the best accountability measure.

Participants also noted the difficulty of measuring improvement over time, particularly in schools with transient student populations. As well, they noted that the subtleties of working with data are oftentimes lost on principals, many of whom have only the most basic of understandings. They cautioned that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” and expressed concern that data is not always being understood or appropriately used at the local school level.

Resources & people

Some concern was expressed that staff within schools may not have the skills, interest or experience to provide the leadership required for various board and Ministry initiatives. They pointed to the ongoing need for professional development, although cautioned that the issue of release time and Federation constraints weigh heavily on PD initiatives.

Nature of teachers’ work

Highlighted both at the system and school level, the nature of teachers’ work was identified by participants as a constraining factor. One principal of a secondary school described in detail how staff analyzed data and then developed strategies to meet needs, but only for their department. This example perhaps best sums up how departments resist ownership of how a student is doing in anything other than their own subject areas. Participants expressed concern that no one is taking overall ownership for at-risk students, particularly at the secondary level. They noted a common complacency amongst staff, and

a frequent litany of excuses as to why things “can’t” be done differently or better. They felt that there is a sense of disconnect between the system, school, and classroom levels, and the urgency felt at the top (board) is not being felt at the bottom (classroom).

Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario

Participants noted the difficulty faced by elementary schools as a result of ETFO’s restriction on professional development at staff meetings. They felt that the collective agreement worked against the culture many boards and schools were trying to establish, and felt frustrated at what many saw as a limit on teachers’ professionalism.

Time

In discussing the local school level, considerable concern was expressed by participants over how to give both teachers, and to a lesser extent, principals and vice-principals time for professional development, group planning, and working with data in a supported setting. Participants stated their belief that teachers feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new information being given to them and the speed with which it is presented. The timeframe from introduction of initiatives to learning to implementation has, in their opinion, become too compressed for true learning to take hold.

Local school context

Participants believed that local school context sometimes drives other concerns and creates focus on other initiatives that may not be reflected in changes in test scores. Such site-specific concerns were also seen to conflict in some instance with board or Ministry mandates. Differences both between and within boards were believed to create different priorities and areas of focus.

IT related issues

Participants believed that schools required a better inventory of meaningful, reliable tools (e.g., pre-approved tool kit).

Intensification of work

The problem of teachers being asked to do more in the same amount of time was a topic of concern for participants. They expressed their belief that administrators and teachers are overloaded by the imposition of too many strategies, programs, changes, etc. They noted that the need for creative

timetabling and flexible scheduling is sometimes resisted by schools, perhaps out of fatigue, frustration, or lack of understanding.

PNC Potential:

Participants identified the following school-level areas where PNC has the potential to make positive contributions:

Research support

The PNC is regarded as a potential source of research support for schools. Participants believed that schools could be helped to identify which tools to use when examining different areas. They cautioned that there is “too much data floating around” at present, and saw a role for the PNC in providing schools with data exemplars (e.g., what does a good student profile format include? What are the best indicators for a school profile?). Participants believed that the PNC could help build data tools to allow schools to work with greater independence. Also noted, was the opportunity for the PNC to lobby for consistency of reporting.

Professional development

Participants believed that training needs must be addressed in the early career years to allow future administrators and supervisory officers the time and opportunities to consolidate their skills and learning.

Communication

The PNC has an opportunity to increase dialogue amongst boards and schools to create a common way of understanding, and to build knowledge and capacity for the future.

Classroom Level

Strategies:

Participants identified the following classroom-level strategies:

Information, data & resources

Classrooms benefit from specific diagnostic tools to promote student learning and proper instructional focus. Teachers are helped when “faces were put to the numbers (data)”. Other specific strategies mentioned include itemized EQAO reports, comparing report card data to EQAO data, developing class profiles, and helping teachers use data to determine student need before moving into instructional strategies.

Processes

Participants identified the following processes as effective strategies in the classroom:

- The use of Ministry writing exemplars
- Action plan designed at school level
- Reading Recovery teacher goes into kindergarten to provide literacy support and model for teacher
- Curriculum modification and accommodation
- More and better literacy choices for boys
- Examination of at-risk students in the intermediate level
- A reading profile template
- Intensive support math classes with a low student: teacher ratio
- Development of individual student profiles
- Honest, responsible reporting
- Time for PD and team planning during school day
- Teachers focusing on school-wide teaching of agreed upon strategies (2 per term)
- Mandatory reading periods school-wide every week, followed by a school-wide activity
- Math teachers analyse data as a group from gr. 7-12
- Differentiated instruction teacher available for any student who is ‘at-risk’ – this is in addition to special education teacher

Communication & collaboration

Teachers benefited from sharing of data and discussion of at-risk profiles as students transitioned from one year to the next.

Leadership

Participants stated that classroom teachers are supported by strong leadership with a clearly articulated and consistent direction, along with sufficient resources. They noted that new teachers, in particular, require guidance from administration and other senior teachers. They emphasized that it is the principal's job to guide and support school improvement, not dictate or direct it. Staff buy-in and active involvement was regarded as essential to the successful implementation of school improvement plans.

Decision making & planning

Establishing a school-wide focus according to literacy needs, and targeting specific skill sets through the use of various teaching strategies was seen as supporting student achievement.

Enablers:

Participants identified the following classroom-level enablers:

Organizational structure

Participants felt that classroom teachers are supported by having time to meet together and share information with colleagues. Divisional team or departmental meetings are one such example. Teachers also were seen to benefit from collegial initiatives such as Literacy Learning Teams, and instructional initiatives such as homogeneous student groupings for different levels. Some school structures, such as Grade 7-12 schools, were believed to allow for easier tracking of at-risk students through transition periods.

Processes

Participants listed the following processes as potential enabling factors:

- “Just in time” timetabling
- Uninterrupted literacy block enforced school-wide
- Use of a literacy leader

- Reading bags – connection with home
- Newsletters

Collaboration

Collaboration between classroom teachers, educational assistants, parents, and other volunteers is seen as important. Providing teachers with time to dialogue with other staff and colleagues, and networking opportunities for teachers across the board was also mentioned by participants. Creating opportunities for teachers to visit other schools and programs is seen as a powerful way to generate teacher learning in support of student achievement.

Board & school culture – creating an inquiry habit of mind

Participants believed there to be a culture of professionalism, especially amongst young teachers, that can be built upon to foster an inquiry-minded classrooms. They pointed to the value of creating a reflective school culture that translates into reflective classroom practice. Participants stated that classroom teachers must be made to feel a sense of ownership over school improvement plans, and given the freedom and flexibility to act according to the individual needs of their students. Establishing safe school environments that support teacher (as well as student) learning, is seen to important in creating momentum for change and improvement.

Leadership

Participants believed that leadership in support of classroom initiatives is vital to the success of school improvement. There was some disagreement as to how much specific support classroom teachers required around implementation of initiatives (i.e., do they need general guidelines or specific instructional strategies). All participants agreed, however, that boards and principals need to provide teachers with the necessary resources to do their jobs well.

Approaches to the data

Participants noted the need to respect teachers' professionalism and abilities to contribute to the data analysis process, and of the benefit in creating a common culture of "comfort" with data. Teachers are best supported when they have access to data that is relevant to their classroom and helps them track student progress. Drawing on multiple sources of data, having administrative support to work with data, and being encouraged to use data to drive instruction is also seen as beneficial.

Capacity building & resources

In-house training or “embedded PD” specific to the needs of teachers are seen as enabling factors. Having easy access to resources such as professional libraries, professional literature, classroom materials to support literacy and numeracy, and board consultants or itinerant teachers is also seen as important.

Tools

Participants made note of specific tools to support classroom teachers, including:

- Mid-term assessments designed by consultants
- Technical programs to support working with data
- Report-Net (Cognos)
- A data base of at-risk students
- Growth plans

Constraints:

Participants identified the following classroom-level constraints:

Individual classroom context & teacher resistance

Related to local school context, participants noted the challenge created by individual classroom contexts. They mentioned that Grade 3 classes could vary significantly within schools and that just as all strategies don't work in all communities or schools, neither do they work in all classrooms. As such, they believed that consistency of results is difficult to achieve across schools and within schools. Furthermore, participants discussed how classroom management skills impact teachers' abilities to teach effectively. While professional development may address the needs of teachers to develop skills around data-driven decision making and assessment for learning, many other teaching skills are needed to create classroom environments that are conducive to learning. The challenge of working in classrooms with highly transient student populations was also noted.

While the challenge of working with ‘at-risk’ student populations was acknowledged by participants, they cautioned against teachers using school demographic profiles as explanatory factors for low student achievement. Participants believed that teachers have great influence over the learning outcomes of all

students, and expressed frustration that deficit constructions of students can sometimes result in teacher resistance to school improvement initiatives.

Participants also noted that “buy in” amongst staff is difficult to achieve even under the best of circumstances, and recommended that data be made as relevant as possible for classroom teachers.

Issues with data

Participants regarded difficulties with data as a major constraint for many teachers, and noted that the “data journey” needs to be continually revisited with staff. They also noted the problem of inconsistency between DRA, benchmarks, report cards, and EQAO, and acknowledged that the conversation around such inconsistencies left some classroom teachers frustrated and confused. They also stated that new EQAO data is not disaggregated as much as it used to be in math, and is, therefore, seen as less helpful than in previous years. Participants also commented on the problem of differences in understanding amongst teachers regarding the appropriate use of exemplars, standards of assessment, and interpretation of data.

Time

Time was considered to be a significant constraint at the level of the classroom. Participants believed it is difficult for teachers to find adequate time for professional development, consolidation of new learning, implementation of new strategies, and collaboration. Teachers are seen to have little time to plan, assess and reflect.

Need for deeper understanding

Participants regarded professional development, opportunities for collaboration, and time to work with data as difficult to find but essential for creating a deeper understanding amongst classroom teachers. Many felt that teachers are being asked to move too quickly from interpreting data to implementing responsive teaching strategies without true understanding or adequate tools (e.g., strong ability to use differentiated instruction). This lack of deeper understanding is seen as one reason that teachers tend to focus on summative rather than formative assessment.

PNC Potential:

Participants identified the following classroom-level areas where the PNC has the potential to make positive contributions:

Professional development

Participants believed that the PNC is well positioned to support professional development for classroom teachers and to encourage mentoring opportunities.

Resources & tools

Classroom teachers would be supported by access to various resources, such as a “tool kit”, mid-year assessments, and mid-year exemplars developed through MISA research.

Collaboration & cooperation

Participants regarded the PNC as well positioned to foster a culture of collaboration and cooperation amongst boards that would ideally filter down to the classroom level. Creating opportunities to share expertise, ideas and resources, to generate focused dialogue, and to ensure a diversity of perspective across the system are also seen as contributions the PNC could make.

Future direction and support for a vision

The PNC is seen as well positioned to build a system-wide focus and purpose that can spread to schools and classrooms. Participants described this as the creation of a culture around data that encourages (and even expects) classroom teachers to raise questions about data, to identify their own data needs, and to work proactively with data to improve student learning.

Summary

The February 10th Professional Network Centre Conference provided leaders and participants with opportunities to share and discuss existing practice, future goals, and strategies for improvement at the system, board, and classroom levels. It is one example of how conditions for conversations across districts and PNCs can be created, and how the sharing of vivid examples of practice can deepen understanding and promote learning across the network. Creating future network opportunities to continue this process has the potential to support ongoing professional development of PNC members and build capacity across districts.

In considering these findings, it is worthwhile to note the consistency of themes expressed in the conversations across the three levels. In particular, participants note many common constraints at each of the board, school, and classroom levels, as well as a high degree of commonality around board, school, and classroom level strategies and enabling factors. It is also important to note that participants were mostly board-level personnel, with some representation from administrators and significantly little representation from teachers. This must be factored into any understanding of participants' perceptions of what goes on at a level they themselves do not represent.