

A FRESH APPROACH *for* FRESH FACES

**CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS ADOPT
STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT NEW TEACHERS**



By Suzanne Molitor, Dina Burkett, Allison Cunningham, Cheryl Dell, and Anna Presta

In Ontario, Canada, supporting new teachers and mentors as part of new teacher induction is a mandate for all 72 districts within the province.

The Ontario Ministry of Education established the New Teacher Induction Program in 2006, ensuring that new teachers in the province receive orientation, mentoring, and continuous professional learning in their first year. Through this program, districts receive funding and opportunities to support mentors and respond to the needs of novice teachers in their first and second year.

The Peel District School Board embraced this mandate as an opportunity to be intentional, adaptive, and responsive to the learning needs of mentors and beginning teachers. Serving 153,000 students in 206 elementary and 37 secondary schools, this growing school board is the second largest in Ontario.

The New Teacher Induction Program educational reform context, together with current knowledge about effective professional learning, has affected how central office staff think about the design and implementation of professional learning according to Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

District leaders have adopted new strategies and processes for performing their work. Roles have shifted as central leaders adopt conceptual and interactive roles, including designers of evidence-informed professional learning, facilitators of teacher professional learning, and instructional coaches developing teacher leaders. The program supports differentiated learning for novice teachers and mentors.

CENTRAL LEADERS AS DESIGNERS OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

As designers of new teacher and mentor professional

learning, district leaders understand that professional learning is an intentional, ongoing, systemic process (Guskey, 2000). Recognizing the limitations of one-size-fits-all professional learning, the district has developed a differentiated model of professional learning that fosters relationships and develops future leaders.

For instance, beginning teachers have choices in ongoing learning opportunities in a variety of formats and content areas (full-day release sessions, after-school networks, school-based mentoring, co-planning, co-teaching, and co-debriefing). Mentors, too, have opportunities to learn about the role, about conducting learning-focused conversations, and developing leadership skills in coaching, collaborating, and consulting (Lipton & Wellman, 2003).

District leaders (instructional superintendents, coordinators, consultants, and school-based administrators) create conditions and develop structures (Fulan, 2001) to support daily job-embedded learning for beginning teachers and mentors.

Peel District School Board leaders developed a framework that allows for intentional and informed decision making and invites multiple voices for teacher professional learning. (See diagram on p. 55.) With guiding principles at the core, this iterative process for planning, implementing, reflecting, and redesigning builds mentor and new teacher capacity at many levels through professional learning that is differentiated and responsive.

Continuous reflection by district staff and steering committee administrators throughout the school year enables ongoing revision and redesign of professional learning guided by this theory of action: "If we provide new teachers and their mentors with collaborative, differentiated professional learning to build relationships, confidence, and efficacy in their practice, then they will be able to transfer best practices to support student success."

Data gathering is a constant, yearlong process to evaluate effectiveness of professional learning (Guskey, 2000) and to inform decisions about future designs. Gathering feedback in the form of exit tickets, electronic survey systems, verbal feedback, observations, and focus groups helps the district create professional learning that is responsive to teacher needs.

Coordinators and consultants participate in an ongoing collaborative inquiry process as they gather a variety of data from



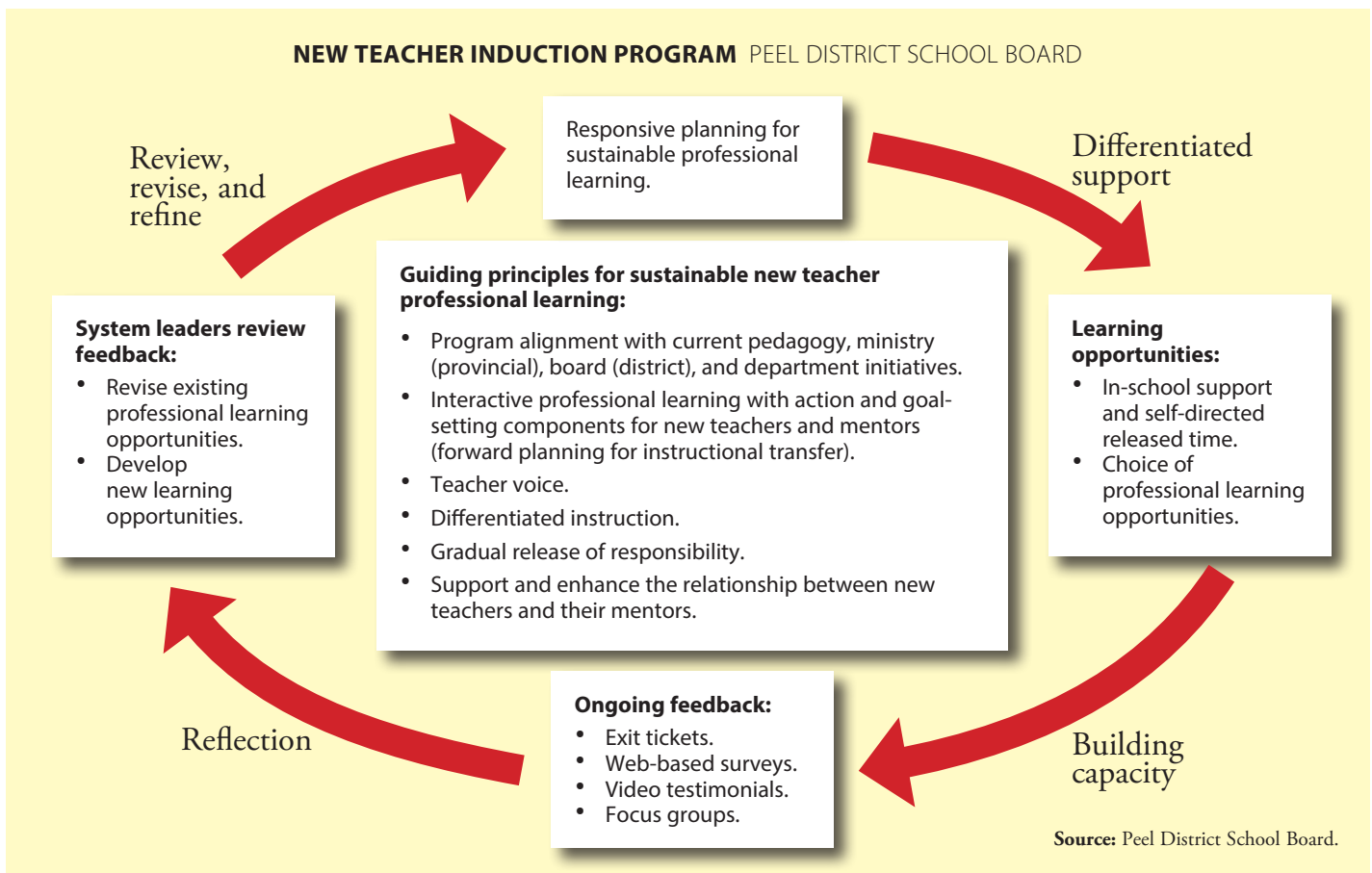
Heather Taggart and Amy MacRae of Beryl Ford Public School created this poster display to illustrate their collaborative inquiry work, which focused on creating a classroom environment that reflects students' cultural diversity.

the mentees and mentors to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher professional learning. The process includes the combined perspectives of district leaders with the voices of the mentors and novice teachers.

These data help central leaders see what is working, gauge the usefulness of resources provided, and understand what type of professional learning inspires teacher confidence. This, in turn, supports improved teacher efficacy and ultimately promotes student success.

CENTRAL LEADERS AS FACILITATORS OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

As facilitators of teacher professional learning and as co-learners, the district team aligns district priorities and pedagogical focus to teacher needs by providing practical instructional



and assessment strategies that build capacity and improve teacher practice for student success.

Coordinators and consultants collaborate to plan and lead professional learning that provides teachers with a menu of choices, including the topic focus (assessment for learning, classroom management, differentiated instruction, literacy, numeracy) and format (full-day, after-school, or cohort sessions).

For instance, coordinators of assessment, literacy, numeracy, new teacher induction, English language learners, and equity collaborate to build system capacity together. They pool content-specific expertise, share resources, co-plan, and co-facilitate new teacher and mentor professional learning in targeted areas such as how to create learning experiences that are culturally responsive, scaffold instruction to support English language learners, and embed formative assessment practices.

During the initial session, district instructional leaders model and explore practical, high-yield, research-based strategies for assessment and instruction that are grounded in provincial and district initiatives and are theoretically sound. Mentees and mentors learn together, commit to try a new strategy, and return with evidence of learning in the form of observations, conversations, and products to share and reflect on with their colleagues.

Recognizing that sustainability is difficult if teachers do not commit to implementation, central leaders engage teachers in collaborative reflection, planning, and goal setting. As a result, novice teachers report a high degree of transfer of instructional and assessment strategies and a high degree of instructional confidence.

At follow-up sessions, teachers share artifacts and collaboratively reflect on student and teacher learning and the impact of the strategy employed. With this authentic, job-embedded component, professional learning focuses on real classrooms, with real implementation, in real time.

CENTRAL LEADERS AS INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES DEVELOPING TEACHER LEADERS

A yearlong collaborative inquiry project for Year 2 teachers and mentors engages central leaders as instructional coaches and developers of teacher leaders.

Central leaders have devised a process to support novice teachers and mentors in identifying a challenge of practice based on student needs to develop a theory of action and adapt instruction in response (Donohoo, 2013). Content-specific professional learning, coaching, dialogue about effective in-

WHAT TEACHERS LEARNED IN YEAR 2

"The collaborative inquiry project ... is an absolutely wonderful opportunity for us to take a look at what is happening in our classroom, to examine what is working, things that we are curious about, and question what is not working so well. There's something we can do to make that change."

— Jeannie Sroka, mentor and teacher librarian, Shelter Bay Public School

"Working with my mentee, we devoted professional attention to knowing our students' learning styles and multiple intelligences, establishing learning goals, co-constructing success criteria with students and providing specific feedback throughout the process. ... Students demonstrated increased enthusiasm and engagement in learning activities. They felt genuine success when they were

given choice. By providing the feedback to the students, they could revisit the success criteria, make improved revisions to their work, and meet their own individual goals."

— Cathy Witten, mentor, grade 6 teacher, Alloo Public School

"The collaborative inquiry process has made me a more reflective teacher. I am able to look at my practice in a different light and see where I need to improve and what I need to do in my classroom to really speak to the individual learners in my room."

— Vanessa Zahra, Year 2 teacher

"When we provided students with scaffolds for talk (graphic organizers, prompts) to generate strategies for improving learning skills, they were more intentional about learning skills, setting goals, and choosing their own learning

strategies. We learned that it is useful to maintain a visual reminder of student goals for the term and for us as teachers to revisit the goals at least once a month."

— Lana Parker, grade 8 French immersion integrated arts teacher and mentor, and Nicole Fenech, Year 2 teacher and mentee, Earncliffe Senior Public School

"My participation in the Year 2 collaborative inquiry empowered me to focus and strengthen my practice to make the most of my time with my students. It helped me create more moments in the day that students willingly and capably took charge of their learning by authentically engaging in meaningful learning. The strategies I learned helped me to help my students give me their best, and I hope these skills will become part of their tool kit for lifelong learning and success."

— Milissa Sannes, grade 2/3 teacher, Sir Winston Churchill Public School

instructional practices, professional resources, and collaborative support are all part of the process.

Teachers receive an iPad and professional learning about purposeful use of technology as a tool to document observations, conversations, and products to illustrate their learning and the impact on student learning.

Through this job-embedded learning process, district leaders offer beginning teachers a sustainable, evidence-informed model of instruction that is based on assessment for learning and teacher adaptation of instruction. They also nurture teacher leadership, scaffolding, and encouraging novice teachers to go public (Lieberman & Miller, 2004) with their practice and their learning. Mentors, as informal teacher leaders, also participate in and model a transparent inquiry stance moving theory into praxis.

LESSONS LEARNED

An explicit collaborative inquiry model supports district leaders in creating a well-coordinated process for teacher professional learning. Both mentors and Year 2 teachers report that intentional, focused instruction through partnerships in collaborative inquiry has had a positive impact on teacher practice (see sidebar above).

Collaboration and participation of coordinators, consultants, and instructional coaches results in a responsive system format, deep teacher professional learning, and emerging teacher leadership in novice teachers.

Beginning teachers and mentors have learned to attend to the instructional core, understanding the connection between

the teacher, the students, and the curriculum content as a result of their theory of action exploration.

Professional learning impacts teacher practice if teacher choice and collaboration guide the learning process.

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