

A SENSE *of*

By Debbie Donsky and Kathy Witherow

The York Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada, is moving to what Hargreaves and Shirley call the fourth way of learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), which emphasizes teacher professionalism and the importance of leadership that is responsive to student and teacher needs.


Leaders of this high-performing district knew that what took it from good to great would not take it from great to excellent. The district's early model of improvement, centered around prescribed diagnostic assessment and prescriptive professional learning, didn't ensure ownership from teachers, nor did it value the voices of students, teachers, and other stakeholders. Moreover, with increased access to social media and online professional learning tools, staff members were finding their own ways to learn.

The challenge, then, has been to personalize learning while also ensuring alignment with system and school improvement plans. Working at both the system and school level to balance the need for individual and collective learning, the district has shifted away from top-down

professional learning to a new definition of professional learning that is responsive to the local school context, embedded in practice, focused on collaboration and inquiry, and part of an ongoing iterative process. And, in this new definition of professional learning, the principal is a co-learner.

The 70:20:10 model for learning and development suggests that 70% of educators' learning comes from experience — just-in-time, job-embedded learning. Another 20% comes from mentorships, coaching, and feedback from those with whom educators interact on a semiformal basis, and the final 10% comes from formal workshops, conferences, and other learning experiences (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996). The district's new professional learning focus means that it embraces and values the 70% of personalized, just-in-time learning that involves informal structures and relationships.

As the district moves toward this culture of personalization, system leaders have had to address how to maintain clear goals for increased student achievement and



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well-being as well as support staff in their learning. They have found that the key is to balance accountability and responsibility both at the school and system level.

Debbie Donsky, principal of curriculum and instructional services and a former elementary school principal, recounts this transition at the school level (on p. 38), and Kathy Witherow, superintendent of curriculum and instructional services, describes the district's efforts at the system level (on p. 39).

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