



From the Heart of the Jane-Finch Corridor A Community Effort to Improve Student Learning

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The opportunity to develop a high level of literacy is contained within a narrow window of a child's life. As educators, we must make a concerted effort to develop deep and meaningful experiences within this narrow window of opportunity. Literacy is defined as the ability to use language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically about ideas. It is a complex process that involves building on prior knowledge, culture, and experiences in order to develop new knowledge and deeper understanding (*Junior Panel Report 2004*). Literacy is the most important outcome of schooling. It is the key to success in school and beyond.

From the heart of the Jane-Finch Corridor, in the north-west end of Toronto, our community is committed to improving the literacy skills of our students. At St. Francis de Sales, we focused our efforts on staff development, improving our classroom practices and galvanizing our community to assist in achieving our goals. This article outlines our journey to develop our professional learning community, examine data to drive our instruction and create community partnerships.

Who We Are

The Jane-Finch Corridor is an area with a rich cultural diversity of various languages. Many of the students live with their extended families, which provide them with strong social and emotional support at home. Parents in our community are interested in their child's education yet, there are sometimes challenges that act as barriers to their full participation in their child's learning. Many parents are new Canadians, having lived less than four or five years in Canada. Parents are sometimes limited in their ability to help their children with schoolwork. Language barriers, the transient nature of the community, long working hours and community safety concerns create challenges that impact student learning. To alleviate some of these challenges, our staff has implemented both social and academic support. We support students socially by holding clothing drives, offering a snack program, having child and youth workers available and providing programs, which directly address social issues. The students are supported academically through small class sizes, modification and accommodation of programs, flexible timetabling with uninterrupted literacy blocks, availability of educational assistants, providing students with new experiences

and fostering a strong home-school connection. These programs help meet the needs of our students so they are better able to focus on learning.

Our Professional Learning Community

Our professional learning community at St. Francis de Sales is based on decentralized administration, allowing staff to make decisions concerning resource allocation, professional development and target setting. An important part of the shared leadership in our school is its sustainability. Regardless of staff changes, our literacy initiatives continue from year to year, because of the shared ownership and commitment of all team members. Staff organizes themselves into committees; home-school connection, volunteer program, data wall management, resource management and professional development. These committees are continuously maintained and developed.



Daily interactions between staff members drive our literacy instruction. As a professional learning community, we base our decisions on sound research practices. The research is teacher driven, teacher embedded and conducted through jigsaw activities. Resource teachers from the board are invited to present workshops according to the request of our staff. In-services on assessment, EQAO, and shared reading are some examples of our teacher-driven research. As a staff, we also share our own particular areas of expertise through classroom demonstration lessons. A teacher with expertise in guided reading conducted demonstration lessons in various classrooms. Our staff also attends board-wide in-services to enhance classroom instruction in literacy. Cross-curricular integration was ensured when our team attended the Orff workshop. Following the Japanese model of developing collaborative lesson plans, we were given time to research, create, and test the efficacy of the lessons with our teaching partners. The data gathered while delivering these lessons, helped to inform and improve our practices. During our staff meetings, we read professional texts, dialogue about our own professional learning and commit to implementing ideas learned in our own classrooms. We use jigsaw activities to explore professional learning materials. We then bring examples of our work to the next meeting, where we deconstruct, synthesize and realign our thinking.



Data-driven Instruction

We share the common belief that all children can learn. This helps to create meaningful instruction, differentiated programming, and innovations to meet the needs of all students. We start with the premise that data can inform our practices. This data is gathered through running records, standardized tests, classroom observations, examples of student work and teacher-student conferences. Although information from running records helps us to analyze phonemic awareness skills, it is the deep comprehension of meaning and its relevance in the lives of students, which is our prime target. We utilize running records to target the strategies students need to advance their reading skills. Standardized tests help us specify areas of success and deficiencies in student comprehension, which in turn helps drive our instruction. Classroom observations allow teachers to assess a student's knowledge, learning style and intelligence. Student work is a prime indicator of a student's achievement level. Teacher-student conferences give teachers an opportunity to gather data on other factors that affect student learning. All this data when viewed collectively gives our team a broad perspective and allows us to inform our instruction.

Much of this data is displayed on the Data Wall, and helps drive a collective and collaborative discussion regarding each child. The highlight of our meetings is the celebration of student success. This energizes us further to create a plan for focused intervention and modification for those students still at-risk. As a professional learning community we are committed to teaching students to think, speak and write at higher levels. These include inferring, making connections, predicting, analyzing and synthesizing information. Students are taught to participate in their own meta-cognition, by identifying strategies they use and drawing meaningful connections to their own lives. As a staff, we speak a common language, use consistent terminology and work on common goals.

Community Partnerships


It would be erroneous to assume that significant gains in student achievement can be realized without the commitment of our community partners. Communication with parents is an integral part of the home-school connection. The Mothers Club is a forum

for Spanish speaking parents to meet and discuss the needs of their children. Community Literacy Links is a collective of agencies that assists parents. Children are asked to draw on their own life experiences in order to make meaning of what they read. Therefore, we provide meaningful experiences like Scientists in the Schools, motivational speakers, author visits, Toronto zoo links, and our twinning project with Mary Jane Naveau Memorial School in Mattagami to enrich their background knowledge and schema.

Our volunteer reading program is one of our great successes. The volunteer team recruited candidates from local colleges and universities. These trained volunteers worked on specific skills and strategies with our students at-risk. This single intervention resulted in a marked improvement in students' literacy skills. As well, students developed a personal attachment to their mentors and built relationships, which raised the students' confidence and improved their self-esteem, in turn raising achievement levels.

Our staff is a community of dedicated professionals, who deeply understand the importance of literacy and the creation of life-long learners. Everything we do socially and professionally is centered on student improvement. Grounded in research, we labour together as a cohesive team, sharing our expertise, reflecting on our best practices, rooted in the knowledge that every child can learn. We have moved from "my students in my classroom" to "our students in our community".

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