

« North East Ontario, continued

Assessment and Use of Data:

- teachers view assessment data on class profiles, allowing information for precision teaching from students' achievement baseline
- mechanisms are in place to track ongoing student achievement
- students begin to learn to self-assess through teacher modelling using real classroom experiences

Through the rich dialogue that was prompted through this CODE Regional Project, a comfortable level of sharing grew, bringing the boards of the North East together. ●

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CODE Chronicles Thunder Bay Region CODE Special Education JK–Grade 1 Assessment and Intervention Strategies Project

Colleen Kappel, Superintendent, Lakehead District School Board

Background

The Special Education branch of the Ministry of Education provided funding for the 2009–2010 school year to support the development of a framework for implementation of effective evidence-informed assessment and intervention strategies for all students in JK–Grade 1. The Thunder Bay Region includes Keewatin Patricia DSB, Thunder Bay Catholic DSB, Kenora Catholic DSB, Superior North Catholic DSB, Rainy River DSB, Superior Greenstone DSB, Northwest Catholic DSB, and Lakehead DSB.

The Project

Each school board formed a project team to investigate the strategies and interventions currently being implemented in the schools within their board. In the Thunder Bay Region, the CODE JK–Grade 1 Assessment and Intervention Strategies project began with two video/teleconferences. While our region had the advantage of having participants in the project who had already worked together on many occasions, we also faced the challenge of our vast geographic area. As a result, we were only able to meet face-to-face on one occasion. This February 24 meeting was a huge success marked by dynamic conversation and an abundant sharing of best practices and concerns.

As we conducted our investigation of best practices, we found that the boards in our region were using a variety of assessment tools to gather the same information about the students entering our schools. Different assessment tools had been chosen based on staffing and resources. For example, while some boards had access to speech and language pathologists, others were using school staff to carry out screenings/assessments.



At our face-to-face meeting, our region was able to identify several key areas of concern that we felt were paramount when conducting assessments and implementing interventions. Isolation came up time and time again. Students living in our northern communities often have limited or no experience with the

content in the different assessment tools, leading staff to question the validity of the tool for our population. Interventions also needed to be customized to match the needs and experiences of our students. Isolation also impacted staff in that they often had no other teachers with whom to have professional dialogue and discussions about strategies for students. When staff do have the opportunity to participate in professional development, they are often required to be absent from their classrooms for extended periods due to travel. Compounding this was the need to leave the students in the care of unqualified supply staff, as qualified professionals are not usually available in our smaller communities. The use of technology to address these concerns was a high priority.

Another common concern is the need for sensitivity to the First Nations culture in communicating with parents about the results of our screenings and assessments. The need to establish trusting relationships with the families and communities was felt to be essential to the success of any intervention. It was felt that building these relationships required specific education around the cultural traditions and protocols as well as consistency in staffing. This process takes time and is often in conflict with our traditional view of a timely intervention for children. The schools in our region have many strategies, including using community liaisons and participating in community events, to try to address these challenges and build relationships.

Educators in our region had key concerns about addressing social and emotional readiness for school. We felt that many of our students come to school without the typical self-regulation that is required for academic learning. We felt that we did not have a good screening tool or the knowledge and understanding that would support families and children in making the most of their school experience. This need is often compounded by the lack of social services in our northern communities.

Conclusion

The opportunity to collaborate with our regional boards and to look within our schools for best practices was an empowering and educational experience. We found that while we face many challenges, we are also implementing many effective practices that help our students to have a strong start to their education. ●

✉ Comments about this article? Email [Colleen Kappel](mailto:colleen.kappel@ednet.on.ca)

Share, Reflect, and Collaborate: Experiences of Project Leads in the Greater Toronto Region

Sheila McWatters, Superintendent, Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board

In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB), the lead board for the CODE JK–Grade 1 project, facilitated a consultation process with its participating boards. This process involved face-to-face meetings, teleconferences, and small group work among partnering boards. The key outcome of the regional project was to develop a self-reflective monitoring tool to capture effective evidence-informed assessment and intervention strategies for students in JK–Grade 1. Both the processes and the resulting outcome of this project were successful in achieving these goals. The following is an overview of feedback from project leads, through key informant interviews in April 2010, relating to the processes and outcomes of the regional CODE JK–1 project.



Processes

When participants were asked to reflect upon their discussions with other GTA boards, they suggested that there were more similarities than differences across boards in terms of JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention practices. Participants agreed that there were common goals and a shared understanding of the framework at all boards. Moreover, the overall regional process was described as “validating,” a “confirming process,” and a “confirmation of similar challenges and situations.” One participant commented that the process “affirmed that we were on the right track,” while another participant stated that she felt “confident” when returning to her board following a regional team meeting. These comments suggest that boards were indeed working towards the provincial objectives together and that the CODE JK–Grade 1 project was providing a good mechanism for boards to share ideas and collaborate with other boards in relation to JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention practices.

When participants reflected on what they had learned about their own board and other boards through the regional meetings and/or discussions with a partner board, some interesting observations were made. While the reflections were highly varied, it was clear that participants critically examined their own board's perspective on JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention practices and also considered future directions for their board to address. For instance, one participant commented that she learned a lot about experiential learning and oral language development among English Language Learners (ELLs) and observed that ELLs should be considered in all future board projects/initiatives in the early years. Another participant noted that while her board values literacy assessments, there was a need to expand and examine the “whole child” through more diverse assessments.

The strengths and challenges of board size emerged through participants' comments on lessons learned through the collaborative process. At one small board, a participant stated that her board seemed “further ahead” than other boards, while a participant at another board of similar size commented that her board was unique in that system change was possible and that Curriculum and Special Education easily collaborated. Furthermore, the latter participant noted that “it's exciting when you can see change” because of the nature of being from a small board. In contrast, a participant from a large board stated that while her board implements a wide variety of projects, “it's difficult to get things going” in a larger board because of differing belief systems, more administrative layers, and fewer opportunities to collaborate effectively with colleagues. A participant from another large board stated that it was difficult to share with its co-terminal board and community partners; however, in terms of students with special needs, collaboration among all stakeholders was much stronger.

Overall, the responses from participants about the GTA regional collaboration processes indicated that the project was successful in sharing practices and building connections among boards. Participants were able not only to reflect on their own board's assessment and intervention practices for JK–Grade 1 students, but could also identify future directions.

Outcomes

The development of a self-reflective monitoring tool to capture effective evidence-informed assessment and intervention strategies was the key outcome of the regional CODE JK–Grade 1 project. This process involved the examination of the original CODE JK–Grade 1 project documentation along with the incorporation of feedback from regional team members and board and school staff involved in local projects at DPCDSB. Through regional meetings, board representatives reflected upon the original CODE assessment template and engaged in discussions about the format and content of this template.



Participants were asked to provide some preliminary feedback on the utility and effectiveness of the self-reflection tool developed by GTA boards for their own board and for other boards. This tool was designed to assist boards in implementing the CODE JK–Grade 1 assessment and intervention framework. In addition, participants were asked to identify whether the five core elements of the template (i.e., system process/organization, instructional leadership, parental involvement/community communication, professional learning and capacity building, and assessment and use of data) were applicable to a board's context and could be sustained over time and across different populations.