

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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Making Better Use of Research

The Question:

“In our professional learning community (PLC), we regularly discuss using different teaching strategies in a purposeful way that will maximize student achievement and well-being. What are some tips for embedding research and best practice in these discussions?”

The Answer:

Here are five tips for success:

1. Create a culture of professional learning and inquiry
2. Strengthen awareness about evidence quality
3. Build research capacity
4. Provide links and access to resources
5. Embed research to strengthen your PLC.

1. Create a culture of professional learning and inquiry.

Why is inquiry important? Inquiry is the basis of reflective practice. It allows for a professional to reflect and make decisions about teaching and learning, school improvement, or any other decision, based on an informed way of thinking. Inquiry also helps answer the question: How do I know that? What evidence do I see that makes me say that?

A principal who recognizes inquiry as an organizational value and promotes a culture of professional learning and inquiry:

- Involves others in interpreting and engaging with data
- Stimulates an internal sense of urgency
- Makes time
- Uses critical friends (Earl & Katz 2006).

A principal can reinforce the need for collection, analysis, and use of data from student work and teacher practice and provide opportunities and time for staff to interpret data and research. This can be done by encouraging, facilitating and mentoring staff in order to transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to support student achievement and well-being. A principal can also consider having someone with research expertise support the team – both from within the school and from outside.

In “*The research engaged school*”, Handscomb and MacBeath (2003) identified strategies for principals to promote a learning culture in schools. Principals:

- Ask people about the evidence behind their assertions, why they think something is so
- Make space for professional dialogue, e.g. staff meetings
- Encourage staff to share and reflect on their practice
- Demonstrate the value of research, e.g. refer to research findings and show how evidence is being used
- Make a commitment to listen to and act on the results of research, even if it challenges existing views and practices.

“There is constant questioning and searching for answers. ‘That’s the way it’s always been’ or ‘We tried that three years ago, and it didn’t work’ represent the old culture. The culture of professional learning is one of inquiry.” (Easton, 2008)

2. Strengthen awareness about evidence quality.

A principal develops, with staff, a shared understanding of what constitutes good evidence and how to strengthen the evidence used to support decisions.

Evidence comes in many forms, including, but not limited to: research syntheses and summaries; data analysis; pilot studies; surveys and focus group findings; program evaluations; analysis of student work; expert and practitioner knowledge; teacher collaborative inquiry; student and parent feedback.

Consider the following definitions:

- Good practice – ‘we’ve done it, we like it, and it feels like we had an impact’;
- Promising approaches – some positive findings but the evaluations are not consistent or rigorous enough to be sure;
- Research-based – the program or practice is based on sound theory informed by a growing body of empirical research;
- Evidence-based – the program or practice has been rigorously evaluated and has consistently been shown



to work. Perkins, 2010 in Nutley, 2013.

Generally speaking, the more ‘evidence-based’ the practice, the more confidence one can have that it is effective. In addition, multiple studies and bodies of knowledge typically constitute a stronger base of evidence than single studies.

“It is argued that systematic reviews allow researchers, and users of research, to go beyond the limitations of single studies and to discover the consistencies and variability in seemingly similar studies. This, in turn, allows for some degree of cumulative knowledge of educational research that is often missing in the absence of systematic reviews.”
Davies, 2000

3. Support staff to build research capacity.

As a school principal, how do you:

- Value research, encourage questioning and share research findings?
- Model evidence use in your own decision-making?
- Encourage staff to investigate key questions to improve teaching and learning?
- Use inquiry to guide staff development?

Other considerations:

- Are there teachers on staff doing collaborative inquiry or action research who could share their research?
- Could staff members engaged in graduate studies or PQP courses address priority questions through a research study or practicum?
- Could a group of teachers, a division, or department take on a collaborative inquiry about their practice?
- Does the board have a research department? If so, can you engage them in your school’s work?
- Are you aware of existing partnerships between your board and a local university?

The School University Research Exchange (SURE) network has developed a series of professional learning videos to support teacher engagement with research. For further information, go to: <http://www.surenetwork.ca/>.

It is about so much more than data. It is about finding a way to allow every student and every educator to fulfill their potential. (Boudett & City, 2013)

4. Provide links and access to resources.

Here are a few sites that provide information on research-based promising practices:

- Teacher Learning and Leadership Program: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/tllp.html>
- EduGAINS: www.edugains.ca

- The Ontario Education Research Exchange: <http://oere.oise.utoronto.ca>
- What Works? Research into Practice: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html>
- Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research: <http://www.knaer-recrae.ca/>
- MISA/PNCs: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/research/pnc.html>
- Research Supporting Practice in Education: <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/rspe/>

5. Embed research to strengthen your PLC.

A school that is research-engaged uses that engagement to sharpen its focus on school improvement and improve teaching and learning. Boudett and City call this ACE Habits of Mind.

“A” stands for shared commitment to *action, assessment, and adjustment*.

“C” stands for *intentional collaboration*.

“E” stands for *relentless focus on Evidence* and includes:

- creating a culture where people make decisions based on specific, objective, and descriptive statements about a wide range of sources of evidence
- making factual statements about what is seen rather than making inferences about why it is seen.

The K-12 School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) is a tool and an opportunity to engage staff in deep and purposeful dialogue about their school and students. The process of school self-assessment provides a rich foundation for collaborative action for the sake of all students. (K-12 SEF 2012).

You can learn more by reading the original sources listed in the references below. Add your own thoughts by joining the Ontario Education Leaders network: <http://ontarioeducationleaders.ning.com>.

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