



Small Secondary Schools Think Tank 2016 - Desert Sands Community School

Introduction:

Desert Sands Community School (DSCS) is in its first year as a K-12 school in Ashcroft, BC, a rural community in the heart of the Gold Trail School District (SD74). This year, students and staff from Ashcroft Secondary School joined forces with those from Ashcroft Elementary School to create a new learning community for 265 students, as well as to share space with the children who attend our Strong Start and Early Learning programs. Our school welcomes students from several surrounding communities, and roughly 40% of our students declare Indigenous ancestry, as we serve multiple Indigenous communities situated in three different nations.

Within the K-12 school, 63 students in grades 7 - 9 learn through a series of interdisciplinary inquiries. Two lead classroom teachers share the reporting for all students, while several other teachers collaborate with the cohort to facilitate thinking and learning. So while students have a home group with one of the two lead teachers, they benefit from the embedded co-teaching of our Learner Support teacher, our UBCO teacher candidate, two teachers with extensive experience in multiple content areas who move in and out of the cohort on any given day, as well as multiple support staff members.

Students spend each morning in a flexible physical environment, working individually or collaboratively on integrated inquiry projects of their design. Several projects have been focused around a particular theme, such as "Where am I?," or Empathic Design; however, within those frameworks, students develop a specific inquiry question, a learning plan, and a method of presenting their learning upon completion. Beyond the projects with explicit curricular connections, students have expressed the most satisfaction when they are able to pursue independent, open inquiries of their choice. While student inquiries occasionally embed mathematical concepts within them, math instruction is provided in a more traditional, grade-specific classroom setting.

In this, our first year of interdisciplinary, inquiry-oriented learning, teachers have collaborated, adjusted, and refined their work, responding to student need and community questions. Like other teachers immersed in the redesigned curriculum, they have negotiated core and curricular competencies, debated content, and wrestled with assessment. And over the course of the year, we have seen students develop increased independence, create high-level research questions, and direct their own learning. We have also seen huge shifts in social and intellectual capital in the cohort: a multi-age cohort combined with personal inquiry has dramatically flattened the hierarchy of academic success, and it is difficult to walk into the space and identify those students who require additional support.



We have also seen that students who were highly successful in the traditional classroom setting question the validity of their learning. They, and their parents, are seeking a measurement of their success based on an acquisition of content knowledge. They have struggled the most with the equalization of the classroom because the academic respect they received from their peers and previous teachers helped to shape their identity, so they are struggling with the loss of academic prowess. We have enjoyed a high degree of trust with our school's communities over the years, and while parent respect for the program teachers is very strong, they are not confident about this learning model and are concerned about the future ramifications for their students. They wonder, *why are we fixing something that they don't see as broken?*

We appreciate the support of the Think Tank participants as we reflect upon our practice so far this year, and we are grateful for your feedback centered around the following questions:

1. How can we move forward as a rural K-12 school to sustain a structure of learning that is interdisciplinary, embeds personal inquiry, and bridges the redesigned and draft curriculum?
 - a. It will feel like a grand experiment if students who leave Grade 9 move straight into a traditional Grade 10 exam-driven, compartmentalized learning program.
 - b. Our middle school student population shifted rapidly this year, and next year's cohort of students in grades 7-9 includes 70 students, and this year's numbers have already proved difficult to manage because of the personalized interactions required.
 - c. How do we bridge the redesigned curriculum with that in the draft 10-12?
2. How do we assess and report the quality and rigor of student learning in ways that are authentic within an interdisciplinary, inquiry-oriented model?
 - a. In a time of change and innovation, how do we communicate with parents to help them understand the value of the goals of the redesigned curriculum?
 - b. How do we share a synchronous reporting of student progress with our families in a way that is respectful to those who are invested in a traditional reporting method?

Program Evolution:

The middle school model was developed as part of several years' work by staff and students in the secondary school. Like many rural schools with declining enrollment, we saw a rapid decline in our student population and were wrestling with ways to provide students who had a wide range of interests with meaningful programs that would support



their academic and personal goals. Like most secondary schools, we were also questioning our relevance to our students' lives, as we recognized the changing context of our community. While the school had a long history of pride in its athletic program, and participation in extra-curricular activities continued to be strong, students seem less engaged intellectually than ever before.

Beginning with student focus groups, we began to explore student engagement, asking students what they really appreciated about school and what was missing for them. Loud and clear we heard that school was boring - students were disengaged and desperate for some fun in their day. We were always so serious! As well, many of our senior students were very clear that they did not believe that what they were learning was preparing them for their immediate goals, which usually involved employment. Even students who were clearly university bound knew that their parents did not have the financial means to assume responsibility for their post-secondary education - they needed to work and they wanted to feel that they were receiving practical training in school.

We heard their feedback, and the responsiveness of school staff, coupled with the blanket permission of district administration, led to a rapid transition in our school, as we quickly realized we had both the freedom and opportunity to design a school that would become a real learning community, meeting the short and long-term needs of kids in our care. Initially, this meant that we created a weekly X block, where kids and staff spent time pursuing personal interests of their choice. Students continually reported that X block provided a stress-free break in their week, and they really appreciated the freedom of choice embedded within it, as well as the opportunity to interact with school staff in a less formal way. We began to explore ways to integrate that choice into content and elective areas, whether structurally, through providing a PE class devoted to basketball, or instructionally, including more student choice and independent inquiry in our classes.

Teachers felt that students' academic engagement was clearly higher when given the choice of pursuing an in-depth understanding of content rather than the surface exposure they received with a focus on coverage. Most of our staff members had worked for one or multiple years with Leyton Schnellert, PhD, in a collaborative professional network. With his expert facilitation, we worked to differentiate instruction for students with diverse needs by developing inclusive units of instruction that explored the enduring understandings embedded in the curriculum. We saw more students learning about local, national, and international issues, often with a strong social justice perspective, and kids' foundational knowledge increased as they made connections between the curriculum teachers were sharing and the world beyond our little town.

Despite this progress, we still felt that students' learning was often compartmentalized by subject areas, and we believed that our students needed to develop more independence and intellectual depth. We saw many Grade 8 students come into our school with



enthusiasm and a commitment to learn, while our senior students struggled with motivation, often completing assignments and projects in a perfunctory manner. Their engagement improved with choice and experiential learning opportunities, and we wanted to increase the percentage of time they were interacting with curriculum on a personal, exploratory level because we believed that if they pursued subject matter of interest to them, we could encourage them to be more self-directed.

The whole staff participated in researching some promising practices around the province, prompted by connections made through the Growing Innovation in Rural Sites of Learning network, or suggested by Leyton, or explored on our own. We shared what interested us, and supported by our Superintendent, we made multiple school visits. The degree of staff participation was very high, and when we returned to our school, we collaboratively decided to start in the middle years - with the benefit of the renewed curriculum and an opportunity to bridge what had been elementary and secondary classes and structures.

And thus our journey continues. This month, we will host our first public exhibition of student design projects, as we aim to build stronger connections with our community: while we have reached out for parental support, we hope to draw upon other local expertise to inspire student research. We will continue to gather feedback from students and their families, sharing the work we are doing, sharing the feedback you provide us as part of the Think Tank, and most of all, sharing the progress that we see their kids are making. Most of all, we look forward to deepening our work by continuing this collaboration and including other teachers in and out of our school who are implementing the redesigned curriculum. It's such an interesting transition in education, and we are really enjoying being part of it.