

SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH INQUIRY AND GENERATIVE DIALOGUE: A MODEL FOR SCHOOL SELF-APPRAISAL

Medicine Hat Public School Division

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I. Background

A team of school leaders and teachers, together with the superintendent of schools, worked through the academic year 2023-2024 to draw together a process for school self-appraisal with a clear focus on growth. In addition to aligning with MHPSD Administrative Procedure 104, Jurisdictional, School and Program Review, their work was informed by recent review processes designed and implemented in two of the jurisdiction's schools. In creating a review process suited to their particular contexts, members of these school communities relied on the *School Review Process Guide* (2008).

In June 2024, Dr. Sharon Allan was invited by the superintendent to work alongside this team. Her role was to include offering support in the development of this review process, and gathering ideas generated by the committee to create a draft document for their response and modification in later August 2024.

II. Rationale

A series of questions will structure this preliminary section of the document: first, to briefly identify research supporting school self-appraisal; second, to outline the ways in which a process focused on school development and growth is aligned with established values and foci of MHPSD.

Why does school self-appraisal matter?

In a rapidly changing world, the role of schooling continues to become increasingly complex, and fundamentally important. Alberta Education (2024) states that students will “gain the skills, knowledge, and competencies they need to live fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 1). The responsibility for ensuring student learning to support this vision relies on responsive, reflective, and committed teachers and leaders. Together with individual professional reflection and growth, school self-appraisal is a powerful process for becoming aware of and responding to the changes that characterize our classrooms by supporting the building of collective efficacy.

What is collective efficacy?

Donohoo (2017) defines collective teacher efficacy as “the perceptions and judgement of a group of educators regarding their ability to positively influence student outcomes” (p. 102).

Emerging from work focused on human agency and self-efficacy, collective efficacy - in particular, collective school efficacy - was identified by Bandura (1995) as instrumental in creating environments conducive to student learning. He observed that teachers and leaders operate within an “interactive social system, rather than as isolates” (p. 20) and when they collectively assess themselves capable of promoting successful learning, they “imbue their schools with a positive atmosphere for development” (p. 21).

In short, when teams of educators share the belief that through their unified, concerted efforts they can overcome challenges and influence student learning and success, they are acting with collective efficacy.

How is collective efficacy cultivated?

Donohoo, Hattie and Eells (2018) identify the role of evidence in building collective efficacy:

The primary input is *evidence of impact*. When instructional improvement efforts result in improved student outcomes that are validated through sources of student learning data, educators' collective efficacy is strengthened. Evidence of collective impact, in turn, reinforces proactive collective behaviours, feelings, thoughts, and motivations. (p. 42)

Confidence in each other's abilities and an unwavering belief in the impact of their shared work, reinforced through evidence of student achievement, are foundational to establishing a school culture characterized by collective efficacy.

In what ways does a process of school self-appraisal support the development of collective efficacy?

Donohoo and Katz (2019) describe "mastery moments" as essential in building collective efficacy. When teams of educators come to believe that through their combined efforts they can accomplish future goals, they raise their collective expectations for future success.

Four processes support the conditions encouraging the development of instructional mastery:

- learning together to identify and collaboratively address challenges rooted in their students' learning needs.
- engaging conversations explicitly exploring cause-and-effect relationships related to student learning. In other words, frequently examining evidence of student learning and ensuring conversations interrogate the impact of teacher action/interaction while looking for patterns supporting student success.
- goal-directed behaviour focused on acquiring new skills, trying to understand their work, and improving collective capacity.
- purposeful practice together with feedback from a variety of sources, of which the most important source of feedback comes from the students they are serving. As feedback is used to make purposeful adjustment in practice, "learning is enhanced, improvement is realized, and efficacy increases" (p. 28).

Our model for school self-appraisal reflects all four of these processes and, in doing so, supports the cultivation of collective efficacy.

How are the values we hold as a division reflected in this model for school self-appraisal?

Four core values - compassion, honour, curiosity, and courage - together with a mission to provide an inclusive, progressive learning community through trust, courage and collaboration, shape the ways in which we work together in MHPSD.

Our model for school self-appraisal relies on a process of inquiry designed by the New Zealand Government: Department of Education (2024). After considering various structures and processes used in other provinces of Canada and parts of the world, we found that the values our division holds are clearly embedded in this work emerging from New Zealand. Their documents identify the key focus of self-review to be about nurturing a way of thinking and acting in order to build a culture of inquiry:

Ongoing school self-review is a strategic process of inquiry. It enables schools to systematically find out about successes and challenges in teaching, learning, and school operations.

Specifically, this strategic process of inquiry is characterized by:

- a focus on development and improvement;
- professional and organizational learning;
- seeking and being open to feedback from all stakeholders;
- open and respectful communication;
- collecting good evidence; and
- evidence-informed decision making.

Built upon structures and processes outlined by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2024), this school self-appraisal model reflects our shared values and mission to provide an inclusive, progressive learning community for students, teachers, leaders, and stakeholders.

In what ways is our model for school self-appraisal aligned with processes and structures already in practice in our division?

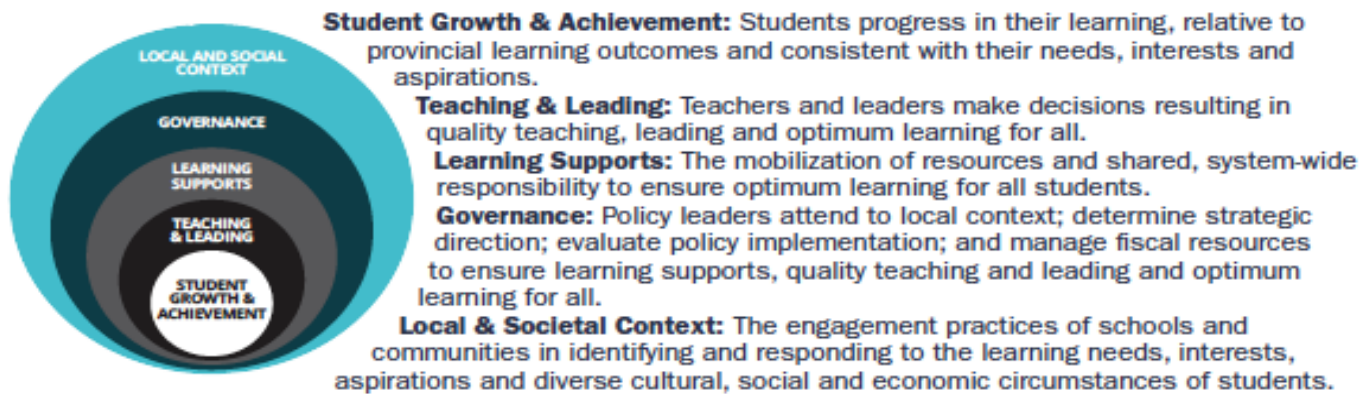
Over the past years we have worked together to contextualize, design, and refine structures and processes that support teachers and leaders as they focus on what is most important for the learning of all students.

This work has included:

- building Optimal Learning Environments (OLE) for all learners, in all settings and communities through leveraging digital tools, developing intentional learning design, nurturing an engaged learning culture, demonstrating impactful instruction, and collecting quality evidence of learning (MHPSD, 2023)
- establishing a continuum of supports and services plan in every school based on the Alberta Government document, A Resource Guide for School and School Authority Leaders (2022).

- creating and participating in Collaborative Team Meetings (CTM) based on a Collaborative Response Model (CRM).
- establishing structures and processes for supporting Individual Professional Growth through Inquiry and Generative Dialogue.

All of the above initiatives place student growth and achievement as its core focus; in addition, elements of each initiative can be located in the four circles radiating from this core as graphically represented below:



(MHPSD, 2023, p. 5)

As a natural extension of the processes and structures already in place to support student growth and achievement, and explicitly mirroring our individual teacher and leader inquiry process, this model of school self-appraisal will provide leaders and teachers with a straightforward, familiar, and collaborative tool for reflecting on school growth and nurturing collective efficacy.

III. School Professional Growth through Inquiry and Generative Dialogue: A Model for School Self-Appraisal

This model for school appraisal and growth has been fundamentally shaped in two ways. First, current work emerging from the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2024) provides a conceptual framework that describes school self-review as:

- a way of thinking and acting;
- a key tool for school improvement and meaningful change; and
- a systematic approach to identifying priorities, asking good questions and taking action based on relevant evidence.

And second, by relying on processes and structures already in place in our division to support teacher and leader professional growth through inquiry and generative dialogue, this tool should be seen, essentially, as offering a process to prompt a shift in focus from individual to school growth.

In what ways does action research shape our processes of inquiry?

These two models for professional growth (individual and school) fall within the broad educational research category of action research. Described as relevant, dynamic, systematic, and collaborative, the purpose of action research is to:

. . . develop reflective practice so that educators can effect positive change within their own educational environments; simply put, action research is research done by teachers for themselves. (Mertler & Charles, 2005, p. 247)

Action research is cyclical and iterative. Teachers and leaders are involved in four stages of the research process: identifying a need, designing a response to the need, monitoring its implementation, and finally, identifying strengths and shortcomings of the initiative to determine action for the future.

Its most valuable attribute is that action research is embedded in learning, teaching, and leading and is designed to engage contextualized challenges. Simply stated, action research is the formalization of what teachers and leaders do every day in their classrooms and schools.

How does generative dialogue support our school self-appraisal process?

Generative dialogue facilitates reflective action and has become a key component of our individual professional inquiry cycle. Initially, school leaders engaged in generative dialogue with teachers to prompt reflection on their professional inquiries; however, over time this set of skills was recognized for its ability to build trust and support growth in a variety of contexts.

Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) describe generative dialogue as:

. . . grounded in active listening; avoiding criticism and judgement; nurturing trust and reciprocal respect; patiently practicing Socratic reflective questioning; and, ultimately, adopting an ethos of usefulness in achieving professional goals. At its best, the generative dialogue promotes reflection-on-action, which, in turn, leads to shifts in perspective, purposeful growth, and enhanced competence. (p. xvi)

The value of generative dialogue in this school self-appraisal process is two-fold: first, it is a mindset and set of processes already in use in our division. Second, because the skills taken up within generative dialogues have, at their core, reflective action and purposeful growth, they are well-suited for driving an inquiry cycle focused on school development.

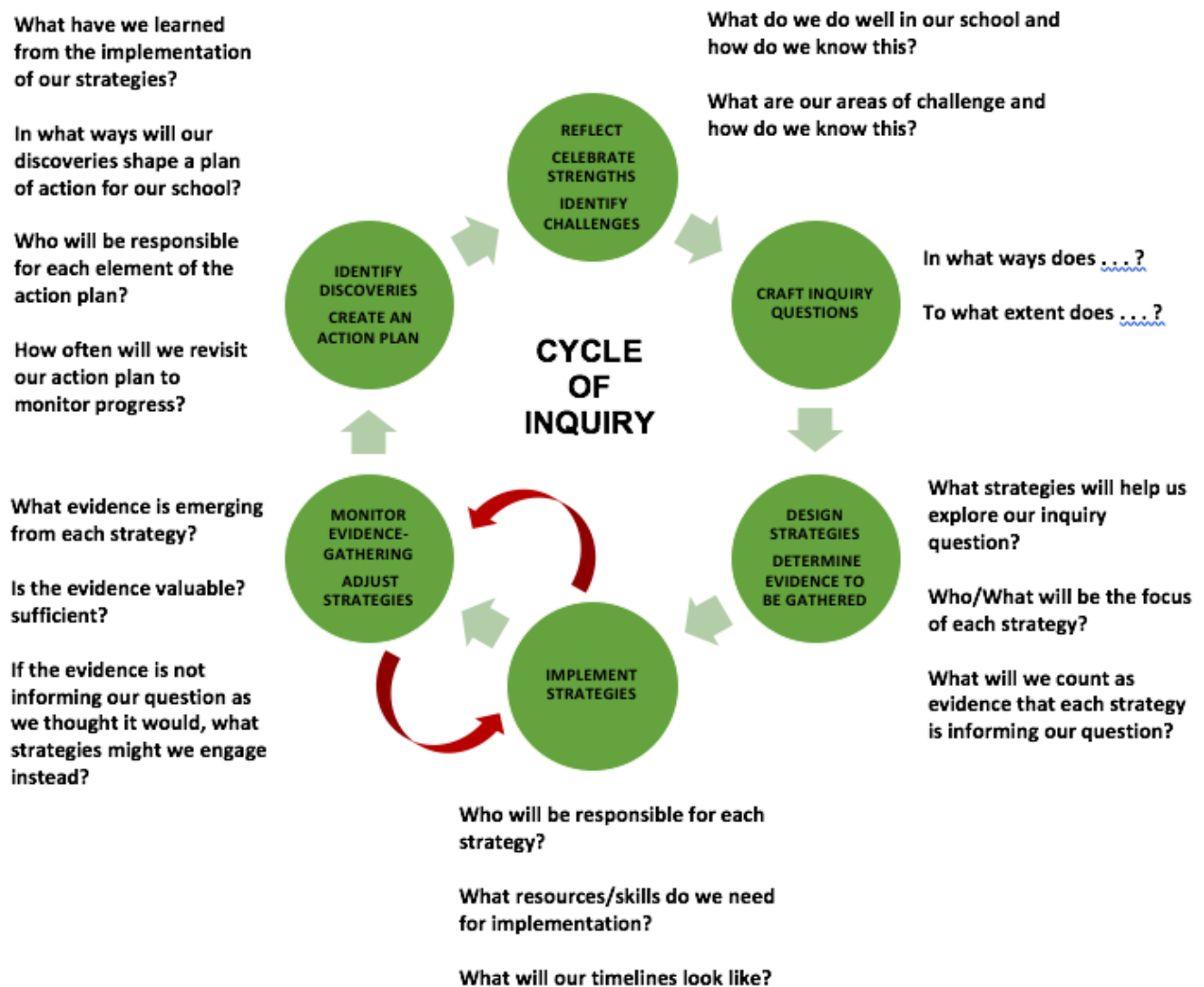
What are the components of our inquiry cycle focused on school professional growth?

At its best, professional learning is a collaborative process of growth prompted by authentic curiosity and supported by a culture of shared responsibility (Allan, Adams, & Mombourquette, 2022). Over the past several years, we have seen how cycles of inquiry,

together with generative dialogue, have engaged us in thinking deeply about our individual professional growth and encouraged us to act upon what we have learned through inquiry.

Now, with this shift in focus from the individual to the school level, teachers and leaders will be offered the opportunity to collaboratively reflect on school-based strengths and challenges; identify areas for school growth and craft inquiry questions; design and implement strategies to explore questions; determine what will count as evidence that strategies are resulting in enhanced student learning and achievement; and identify what has been discovered and learned in order to prompt purposeful action. These unified, concerted efforts to influence student learning and success at the school level, will further nurture our collective efficacy.

The following visual model outlines the six components of the inquiry cycle and, at each stage, offers preliminary questions to guide thinking and action.



Please note the red arrows placed between the two components: Implement Strategies and Monitor Evidence-Gathering, Adjust Strategies. During this stage in the inquiry process it is necessary to look closely and honestly at the strategies and ask: Is the evidence we are gathering valuable and sufficient? It may be that adjustments are required; hence, the red arrows.

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