

Lindsay Place High School
PDIG 18396 - Final Report - REVISED
Creating a Culture of Academic, Social & Emotional Wellness

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Our Project Goal

The goal of our PDIG was to recreate and nurture a strong sense of identity and school culture that unites our diverse student body and staff. Like many English language schools, Lindsay Place has experienced many transformations over the past several years in terms of administration, programming, general staffing changes, and declining student enrolment. As a result, the maintenance of our positive school culture has sometimes been lost in the mix of so much renewal. Through this PDIG, we have tried to refocus ourselves on all of the good that is happening at our small school. Fisher, Fey & Pumpian (2012) state that, "Culture develops and grows up through an accumulation of actions, traditions, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals that are closely aligned with that vision."

Ultimately, we wanted to identify what makes gives our school its' unique spirit. This PDIG has permitted us to plan and implement events and professional development activities which aimed to get our students and staff on a common path to this goal. Our hope was that this would result in improvements in delivery of pedagogy, student achievement, as well as emotional/social well being of students & staff. We feel that we did a good job of building up some tradition and school spirit, however, it was a difficult task, and may not be sustainable without considerable effort from the same

grouping of people next year. If we were to replicate our efforts next year, we need to focus heavily on staff bonding and communication, and to ask administration for more active support that is directly related to our common goals so that we can meet more of our expectations.

Our Team

Our team was composed of six teachers with varying teachables, and contact with varying grade levels and ability in the building. Experience working at LPHS varied from one to nineteen years. Some of these staff members have only ever worked at LPHS, however, many worked at least one other school. This grouping represented roughly 19% of the teaching staff. On several occasions we welcomed another teacher as a guest so that we could get insight from her about her experience as a new staff member at LPHS. Our project plan centred heavily on running activities and professional development workshops to create bonds amongst staff and students. We believe that we were successful at this, however, we did not always follow the planned schedule outlined in our application, and we sometimes deviated from our plan in terms of how the activities were carried out and at what time of year.

Our Meetings

Our main challenge came early on in our first discussion about what our school culture and climate look like. A prominent part of our discussion was about the feeling of being lost as a staff and school due to our low enrolment. We believe that our climate is positive, as we try to run activities and divide resources as best possible, however, we admit that within our school culture staff often feel discouraged and left to fend for themselves. Due to having less human and monetary resources, there is more pressure on those who are already actively involved in extra curriculars to run more activities to meet the needs and wants of our population. This can be emotionally, physically and professionally exhausting. For example, our art department has no qualified tenured teacher. Due to a transfer, our leadership teacher and student council advisor left our building. These are big gaps to fill, and remaining staff

members are doing what they can to maintain high standards, but this is not a sustainable plan of action.

On the flip-side, we do believe that we are well regarded by the community as a welcoming school, where many students can feel safe because of our small population. Many parents report that the smaller population makes their child feel better about the transition from elementary to high school. We have also been able to offer a lot of experiences for our students including Model UN, a yearly musical, winter camp, and various other activities from sports teams to music programming.

Our meetings constantly revolved around trying to implement and maintain school spirit among staff and students. We talked a lot about trying to make students feel included. We spent a lot of time troubleshooting how to overcome having a disconnected and disengaged school community. It was difficult to deliver a consistent message to our students because our staff is fragmented when it comes to communicating a collective message.

Our Activities

We decided early on that we would work to create and maintain activities that would boost school spirit and staff morale. One of our biggest challenges was to figure out how to get our staff to “buy in” to activities that they may not have initially seen the value in. We also discussed how to better mobilize our student body. We implemented a “Wear it Wednesdays” spirit day where students and staff are encouraged to wear school gear or participate in a themed dress up day. We also increased our use of our social media (Instagram & Facebook) to advertise events and school news. This has helped a lot to spread messages, and raise awareness about what’s been happening at the school. Finally, also decided to survey our students about school spirit through the Tell Them From Me survey. The results showed that many felt that there is school spirit, but they don’t necessarily show it themselves. We need to look at how to make students feel included in the school culture of pride in the place. We will continue to use our social media to promote events and good news. We will also share this information with our

Student Leadership and Student Councils for next year so that they can plan their events accordingly.

Our main activity of the year was to plan a team building Professional Development for staff. The theme of the day was “There’s No Place Like LPHS”. We used PDIG time to carefully plan the activities of the day, and applied to our Professional Improvement Committee for the funds to pay for the day. Since we want our staff to be inclusive, we also invited all professionals, support staff, and administration. Their portion was paid for by administration. Staff assembled in assigned groups of eight. Our first activity was “The Good, The Bad, the Ridiculous of LPHS”. Each team member received 3 cue cards. They were encouraged to write down a short anonymous example of the good, the bad, and the ridiculous at LPHS. Staff were asked to post them on the appropriate board so that we could demonstrate that our experiences as staff in a school, particularly LPHS are unique. We can use these experiences to bring us closer together, because we often experience the same struggles, but we also experience the same success together. Activity two focused on what we want to see in our hallways and how to get there. To support their vision, staff used one to three sections of the Code of Conduct. In their groups of eight, staff discussed what actions we need to take to support this vision and the values identified in our Code of Conduct. They wrote their ideas on giant post-its and as they finished we posted them at the front of the room. This activity showed that each group independently identified exceptionally similar vision for our hallways/students. It opened up a wider discussion of how even though we are working independently from one another in our classrooms and various activities, we can still work towards the same goal as long as we all put in the effort. Our third and final activity was not directly related to curriculum or school. In our groups we each worked in a separate classroom. We had 10 minutes in each room to respond to a quote, and to make a painting. Once that time was up, we had to move to the next room to continue working on another groups painting. By the end of the activity, we had completed 6 paintings. Again, the activity showed that we have different approaches, but when we collaborate we can come to a common goal and conclusion. The art was displayed in the staffroom

for several months. Feedback that we gathered after this team building was exceptionally helpful. Almost all participants enjoyed the relaxed approach to talking about our common goal as a school. They enjoyed conversations between colleagues, whom they do not always have the opportunity to work with. We believe that this professional development was the biggest success of our year. We would replicate this activity again or run something similar.

Achieving our Goals / Project Outcomes

Overall, we feel that we were successful in planning several other school wide activities. These included our professional development, school-wide Bingo over the intercom, spirit days, March Madness Homeroom competition, increasing our social media engagement with students/staff/community, Pink Shirt day & video, supporting “Count Me In” assembly for students provided by administration. As we worked through this planning, we realized that we need to spend more time building up our staff’s goals and enthusiasm for supporting our student unity to enhance their high school experience.

Some of the barriers that we encountered were organizational. Events out of our control such as changes in official leadership hindered our progress because it was sometimes difficult to maintain a consistent message with staff. We feel that more follow up to the team spirit and enthusiasm garnered at our staff professional development was necessary. If replicated, our PDIG team or the administration or school leaders should follow through with more activities to support team building in this way. On that day, our staff was less fragmented. We were put in a position where we had to collaborate and we excelled. More opportunities like this would be good for staff morale.

The other significant hurdle that we constantly had to overcome was personal. The toll of carrying a lot of the school activities on a limited number of staff members was exhausting. There were times when we were ready to give up because it felt like every decision we made, even if it would benefit the school, was challenged. Despite this, we persisted. The activities went well, and we feel that the students and staff enjoyed and

benefitted from them in the short and long run. We hope that this becomes easier as we move forward.

Where we feel we failed the most was in creating student driven change and leadership within the school. We need to reexamine how we involve students in decision making, and planning of activities. This will require significant scaffolding and mentorship for our students so that they can take on a more significant role in the running of our building.

In our final meeting we discussed several recommendations that we have for our school leadership team. They are as follows: Consolidate offices to create sense of staff community - no fragmentation, Forced collaboration - cross curricular/cross grade level projects e.g. steam project, staff lunches/potluck/breakfast/etc, new teacher mentorship opportunities. Creating a culture needs buy in from staff, admin and students. These recommendations will help this change to happen.

Professional Gains

Our team benefited professionally from this PDIG because we had to examine and identify our school climate and culture. This forced us to actively reflect on our philosophies of education and how we put our values into action in our every day school life. It permitted discourse about our varying experiences within our school, and our visions for creating an welcoming and progressive school culture at LPHS through the diminishing school enrolment. We realize that we cannot stay the same as we were five years ago, because our school is a drastically different place than it was. Our team has identified that we need real and sustainable change in our organization, and implementation of all programming - official and extra curricular.

Reinvestment

The professional development that we carried out with our staff should absolutely be replicated by other staffs, including our own. The time and energy invested into planning the day was well worth the benefits. The discussion that occurred, as well as the outcomes left each of our PDIG

members and most of our staff feeling connected and motivated to move forward as team.

We would also replicate our PDIG discussions and planning of activities. The philosophical discussions that occurred about our school culture and climate are necessary but they are not something that happen naturally throughout a regular school day. Our team feels that we have benefitted because we are on the same page. The sense of camaraderie that has developed makes us feel that we can continue with the positive changes we have made this year. We know that we have several staff members to depend on when we want to run an activity, and who will support us as we carry it through.

Sharing of Product & Professional Development Workshop

In light of recent announcements regarding Major School Change we realize that we have quite a bit of work ahead of us in defining ourselves as we move forward, whether that be as an individual school or in collaboration with another school. Originally, we planned to offer an open workshop at the end of this school year to school board employees. However, based on our experiences we realize that this type of discussion may work better with particular staffs who may be experiencing similar staff/school cultures. We have decided to share our information with colleagues at John Rennie HS, and we will invite a team of their teachers to a roundtable discussion. Discussion will revolve around our individual school climates and how each of our school teams approaches building strong, sustainable cultures. We will share our team building activities, and will ask that JRHS share what they have done in the past as staff. Our hope is that both schools will be able to employ new strategies in the coming school year. These activities will be planned for the last few pedagogical days of this school year, and/or the first few professional development days of the 2019-20 school year.

One team member of our PDIG has been a part of a Professional Learning Network for the past several years. The particular focus of this PLN is for Resource Teachers and teachers who work with at-risk

youth. Though this PLN was not formally recognized by the school board this year, this group of teachers continues to meet on a regular basis to offer support, troubleshoot, and to share in successes. We often discuss school culture with regards to special needs students. This has been particularly helpful in determining how other resource teams work to improve attitudes and acceptance of students with special needs. In particular, LPHS has shared how we have tried to emphasize the importance of inclusiveness of all students in school activities (e.g students in wheelchairs in regular classes, students with high needs ASD being invited to regular school activities). This PLN has offered ideas for how to include these students in every day life within the school. Ideas range from visibility, offering adapted gym classes, asking students to eat in the Resource room with low mobility students, etc. Our PDIG team recognizes that we must be more conscious of our interactions with all students in order to model the behaviour we expect to see from them.

Conclusion

We are a group of passionate educators who want to create positive change in the environment in which we learn and work. In any situation this can be a difficult and arduous task. In a school that is facing a possible closer/merger this can be exceptionally hard. The fear that this has instilled in students and staff is a part of our culture that we have to continually rise above. We need to remember that we are resilient and need to push forward to offer our students and staff the best of what we have to offer.

Also there was a member of the team who was part of a Professional Learning Network within the school board with teachers from several other schools. Was the team able to share the information about the PDIGs developments/pros/cons at this network ?