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# Teachers Helping Teachers Pdig 2019/2020

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**St. Thomas High School**

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## PDIG 2019/2020 Final Report

### 1. Project Description

I have long held the belief that in order to ensure continued professional growth there needs to be some sort of enrichment plan for teachers past those early years of rapid growth that tend to characterize the careers of most competent educators. To be fair, the school boards and the teachers unions do offer a fair amount of professional development (PD) workshops intended to help us continue to grow but they tend to be 'one-size-fits-all tips-and-tricks-of-the-trade' type presentations and rarely (if ever) have they met my needs. I have given some of these workshops myself so I know just how hard it can be to meet specific needs when you are expected to deliver to a diverse group that you rarely know anything about. You are not actually tasked with trying to make better teachers, simply to share what has worked for you in the past in a specific situation. It is very much 'hit or miss'. It is for this reason that my colleagues and I have been creating our own tailored PD over the past several years.

In order to make use of the valuable wisdom that each person possesses, you must be open to listening to other ways of doing things without feeling like what you are doing is less than. It seems so easy when written down but is much more difficult in practice. I believe that the most efficient way you can know what you are lacking as a professional is for someone to actually point it out to you. But that means letting someone (other than your students) actually witness what you are doing. We accept it readily as student teachers, so what changes?

I believe that because teachers tend to be alone a lot of the time in their classrooms and can develop a sense of 'dominion' in what they do and how they do it that does not lend itself easily to scrutiny. When you are isolated it is easy to be resistant to critique – a condition that I believe only becomes more pronounced the longer you teach and the older you get. This is not unique to the teaching profession of course. It is human nature to be wary of criticism. Once you get used to doing things your own way and having no one to see it, it can be very difficult to give up that freedom. Whether you are overly confident in your abilities and not really open to change or insecure about your abilities and reluctant to let anyone see that you're not doing a 'good job' it can be equally unappealing to open up your teaching 'fiefdom' to another teacher or, heaven forbid, an administrator. It is ironic to me that the solution to helping teachers continue to grow seems to involve simply getting out of our own way and drawing on what is readily accessible.

This year, nine out of the ten tenured teachers in the math department at St. Thomas High School signed up for this sort of professional development. This was the first go-around for only one of us. The rest of us had been involved in at least one other Pdig over the last few years. The non-tenured teachers weren't known to us when we applied for the grant in April of last year so they weren't

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initially part of the group. We did, however, manage to bring them in when two of our original members went on maternity leave as of early January. We also changed Principals (Marie-Josée Coiteux) at the beginning of the school year so our Project Supervisor changed also.

We started meeting once a month as a group of nine different, but like-minded math teachers to discuss 'best practices' and how to achieve better results for our students. The money we got from the PDIG was used to pay for substitute teachers to cover our classes so that we could meet formally once a month throughout the school year. We were fortunate to have a specialist in professional development for teachers helping us out, if only peripherally. We had created our very own Professional Learning Community or PLC.

In a nutshell, we met and discussed the broad topic of Assessment (this year's chosen topic). We worked on developing innovative forms of evaluation together and embraced the sense of collegiality and support that emerged. As we start to understand what good teaching can look like and how that compares to what we actually do in class, we can start to tailor our existing skills to be more effective. Collectively, each one of us seems to be progressing at a rate that is appropriate to the individual. Our goal is not to become carbon copies of each other but to acknowledge what we do well and then add to that in order to better serve our varied students' needs.

I would say that overall, this year was a success. We did meet right up until a few weeks before the world went on lockdown. As in previous years we had some really fruitful discussions that continue to bond us as a department seven years after the very first time we started doing this kind of work together. As our VP, Dan Maag ( a former math teacher) told us, "we have an exceptional success rate with our students test scores and yet we are still actively trying to help each other get better." I would also say that this was perhaps our least productive Pdig (only partially because of the early shutdown). With no real PD leader guiding us we did not have as clear a vision of our end goals throughout. I tried my best to offer that sort of leadership but it is not my strength. The four times we met were only loosely tied together by our focus with no real underlying thread throughout that we could come back to.

*"Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal – or keep them from learning at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating these conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the sources of both the intent and the act."*

*Parker J. Palmer (1998)*

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## 2. Project Goals

As mentioned in the previous section, our focus this year was on assessment, as many of us felt that part of what we are doing hasn't kept up with some of the more innovative things we currently do in class (largely from previous Pdigs). It was an area that we have tended to just do what we have always done. It seemed to us as though traditional forms of student evaluation (assignments, quizzes, tests, exams) often don't fully reflect what is going on in our classes and, in some cases, may inhibit learning by creating barriers for some of our more vulnerable students. That was the central thought at the heart of this year's work.

We all agreed that, as a department, we do a good job of using assessment as a 'sorting' tool. By that I mean as a method of classifying students as either struggling, regular or advanced and to use that as a means of targeting the greatest needs effectively. However, we all felt, to varying degrees that this was limiting in the scope. In a 2006 article written by Dan Meyers (included with this report) he posited that many students see assessment as punitive rather than helpful. Furthermore, for students that do poorly it has the effect of reinforcing negative self-images and shutting down any hope of improving. We all respect Dan Meyers as an educator so we kind of used this article as the 'jumping off point' of this year's initial meeting.

As I write these Project Goals it occurs to me that these were not entirely clear in my head from the beginning of the school year. It is difficult to be successful when your goals are not laid out explicitly from the beginning. ***That being said, this year's project goals were:***

- A. **Our very basic goal was to meet 6 times this year** – *this goal was not met due to unforeseeable world events. We were only able to meet 4 times but had 2 more scheduled.*
- B. **Our next goal was to develop some alternate forms of assessment** – *this goal was met but I don't know that they really improve on what we already do. (I have included some examples with this report.)*
- C. **We also wanted to add more voices to our ongoing teacher's conversation** – *this goal was met as we added 2 other tenured teachers that had never been a part of this type of group. All, in all we involved 11 out of the 12 teachers in our department.*
- D. **Our final goal was to change the way we think about assessment** – *this goal was only partially met as the goal itself is too broad to be achievable. We did have some very good conversations but fundamentally I don't think anyone is doing things very differently.*

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### 3. Project Outcomes:

On a 'macro' level, it is my strong sense, that a Professional Learning Community such as this can be, not only the solution to any challenges in my continuing growth as a teacher, but for anyone truly willing to resume their own journey towards mastery of the craft. I strongly feel the positive effects the experience of meeting regularly with my colleagues has already had on me. I feel more confident and even excited about what I do on a daily basis. It reminds me of the feelings I experienced when I was straight out of the Early Childhood program and everything was new and exciting. In many ways, it seems that way to me again and I credit the four years of close collaboration through a Pdig with my colleagues. I believe that my coworkers have undergone similar growth and a renewed sense of fulfillment in their own professional lives.

I have often been struck by the many parallels between what our group is trying to institute within our classrooms for our students but also in our staffrooms amongst ourselves. We all want classrooms that are open and collaborative in nature to make learning more meaningful and more permanent. It is what research says has the greatest chance for student success. (Broad and Evans, 2006). We also want the same thing for ourselves as we meet and discuss that very issue. Again, the research says that is a strong method for achieving success in professional development. (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2007). Another parallel that stands out is that for both students and for ourselves, the real gain in what we have achieved does not seem to be in the final outcome (better grades) but in the shared experience of discovery learning.

What I learned from my colleagues during the course of all four years was that effective professional development involves more than improving or adding on to what teachers do well. It must be blended with what they already do to be beneficial and lasting. PD is the continuous learning that must happen over the course of a teaching career in order to keep up with the rigorous demands of an ever evolving clientele and world. Every article or book I read explained quite clearly how important effective PD is to both student success and to teacher morale. My colleagues all sensed that there were strong signs of growth from their students as a result of the work we have been doing. Also, there is unanimous agreement that working together had been valuable to them when they were doing it regularly and was missed when we were not. On this grander scale, everything we did in the four weeks together was a success.

On a 'micro' level, this particular year I feel, brought the least overall gains for me as a teacher. In informal discussions with my close colleagues that seems to be the consensus – it was good and it was valuable but it wasn't as good as previous years. The fact that we were only 2/3 of the way through when we were shut down was only part of the problem. The biggest impediment to greater success was the lack of our PD leader, Megan Webster. Megan had been with us the three previous years and

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has been an amazing resource to stretch and grow for all of us. She is very adept at guiding meaningful conversations spurred by meaningful pedagogical research.

When it became clear that we wouldn't be able to afford Megan this year, we did meet with her and she gave us some guidance and research to work with. The problem was that, with no one really being an expert in what we were trying to do it quickly became leadership by committee that lacked cohesive vision about where we wanted to go. In previous iterations of the Pdig I always walked away with a clear sense of what we had accomplished because each monthly meeting was closely related to the previous month. We did it three years in a row and each year seemed to build upon the previous. This year, with a 3 year hiatus since our last meeting, that continuity wasn't there and never fully developed. A good leader, as in sports, can make all the difference in a group endeavor. We were all kind of the leader so no one was really the leader. In retrospect, it almost seems as though we had four different PD sessions over the course of the four months rather than one continuous and connected session as in previous years.

Another drawback to the lack of an actual PD leader was the lack of planning that set us up for difficulty right from the get go. The three of us who started this seven years ago did meet early in the year but, as I have mentioned, time is a precious commodity in a fast paced school year – especially with extra-curricular activities mixed in. All of our project goals (as mentioned in the previous section) were loosely set. We had no clear vision about where we wanted to be as a group by the end of the six sessions. Part of that falls on the breadth of the topic and part on our lack of preparation. Arguably, we would likely have pared down the topic if we had spent more of our early days really fleshing things out. Also, preparations really should have started in the spring rather than the fall for the best chance for success.

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#### 4. Reinvestment

I believe that what was achieved over the course of the four years that we have worked together was not an anomaly. We are certainly not unique in our success in this type of setting. Furthermore, while I respect my colleagues greatly, I do not think that we are an exceptional group. This type of PD can occur (almost) anywhere if the motivation is there. The leadership came from several sources and, while we definitely benefitted from strong pedagogical help, I do believe that with everything else being the same, we could have been more successful had prepared earlier and better in the spring rather than shortly before we were to begin meeting. This is well thought out, effective PD that is inclusive, gives teachers both a sense of connectedness and valuable insight into what good teaching should look like. It truly helps professionals develop their skills and feel like a part of a community.

The key, I think, in making this a viable alternative to the PD offered right now involves 'selling' the idea gently to both administrators and teachers alike. The model has different attractive features to both groups. For teachers the selling points would have to be in increased time and more ideas to help them grow. I don't think it could be mandated because it would likely be treated with suspicion and even reluctance. Instead, it would need to spread slowly. First through a school, department by department and then to other schools interested in trying what we have started. Last year, the science department at our school took on the model and worked with it for most of the year. I believe that other departments within our school would be open to trying it also. From there, it would be plausible that other schools, interested in what we are trying, try it also.

#### **With that in mind, the changes that I will make for next year are:**

- Start planning in the spring rather than the fall
- Have very concrete goals in mind before we start, even if they need to be adjusted as we go
- Find the funding for our PD consultant

#### **Respectfully Submitted:**

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**Lars Nyberg, Project Leader**

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**Marie-Josée Coiteux, Project Supervisor**

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## 5. References:

Broad, K., Evans, M. (2006). A review of literature on professional development content and delivery modes for experienced teachers. Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Meyer, D. (2006). How math must assess. Scotts Valley CA.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.

Vescio, V., Ross, D., Adams, A. (2007). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24 (2008) 80–91.

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## 6. Appendix attachments:

- ATL Skills Sheet
- Effective Effort Rubric
- Linear Functions Skills List
- How math must assess by Dan Meyer