

Continuous School Improvement

The Transition from School Accreditation to a Learning Community Approach for School Improvement

What has changed?

INTRODUCTION

The transition away from school accreditation to a learning community approach for school improvement is a response to feedback from the system. Educators, leaders in public education, and policy makers have asked for changes to the provincial School Accreditation Program. We see this as an opportunity to streamline and indeed strengthen how we approach school improvement initiatives in Nova Scotia.

We also see these changes as an evolution of our school improvement journey. In many respects it will be a continuation of successes from the past, a change in emphasis, and the introduction of some new ideas. This new approach is intended to allow for more flexibility and innovation, and allow for schools to be more responsive to their individual needs and contexts. The intention of these changes is to bring school improvement processes together with learning community practices focused on increasing instructional effectiveness. This powerful combination will benefit students first and foremost in terms of increased student achievement and success in our schools. It will also create rich, respectful and collaborative working environments for educators.

Three groups were instrumental in leading these changes: the Guiding Coalition for PLCs, School Accreditation Coordinators at the board level, and the many principals who participated in feedback sessions during Principals in Focus. Hopefully this narrative captures both the spirit and content of their ideas for the way forward.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These guiding principles reflect the thinking and beliefs that need to motivate and direct our collective behaviour throughout this change process, as we transition to the new school improvement framework and work to embed learning community practices into the everyday work of schools.

1. Deep and ongoing teacher collaboration is critical to the success of school improvement and professional learning communities.
2. We must always maintain respect for staffs in our schools who have a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience to contribute to school improvement.
3. Building trust across the system and within school communities is critical to successful collaboration.
4. There needs to be a balance between centralized direction and school autonomy in terms of how we address our priorities.
5. It is very important to continue building capacity in the system through professional development and providing resources and support.
6. We need to systematically consult with and engage our communities and all organizations that support public education in school improvement planning.
7. Effective school leadership from principals and teachers is fundamental to continuous school improvement.
8. We need to ensure that our actions related to this learning community approach are consistent with what we know about research-based best practices or promising change strategies.
9. Political and public support for successful change initiatives in education cannot be underestimated.
10. Student learning, student achievement and instructional improvement must always be the primary purpose of learning community and school improvement work.

11. Provincial and school board leadership that guides, monitors and supports this direction is critical to the systemic improvement of our system.

A Description of Changes and Transitions For Principals September 2012

WHAT WILL STOP?

1. We will no longer use the term "school accreditation", and there will no longer be a School Accreditation Program in Nova Scotia. The new adapted process will simply be referred to as "continuous school improvement" and all school boards will adopt this new framework. There are essential pillars to school improvement planning and our intention is to structure the plan and process in a very simplified and manageable form.
2. You are no longer expected to collect data to the same extent as directed in the former school accreditation process. This means no binder filled with student marks and lists of learning opportunities across all grades and all curriculum. You will still need to collect and analyze data before identifying your school improvement goals, but the process will be significantly streamlined. The Department of Education will be providing further guidelines for the fall of 2012 that will help to guide your planning and data collection.
3. You will not need to establish co-chairs to lead the school improvement process. We do recommend you form a small school-based group to help school administration guide and monitor school improvement. This is not mandatory.
4. There will no longer be External Review Teams and School Accreditation Teams visiting your school from outside your school board. There will still be teams visiting your school, for different reasons, from inside your board. There is a description of the purpose and structure of these teams in the next section.

WHAT WILL CONTINUE WITH ADAPTATIONS?

1. Funding for schools will be continued to assist with this work. During the 2012-13 school year the funding formula will remain the same as will the funding amount you would have received under the School Accreditation Program. In 2013-14 the funding formula will be adjusted to redistribute resources to match our streamlined approach to school improvement and to support learning community practices.

2. When your school is collecting evidence to help determine your school improvement goals, focus on data from the following sources:

- common assessments administered across grades and curriculum content
- provincial assessments administered in math and literacy
- surveys collected from parents, students and teachers (DOE surveys, *Tell Them From Me*, board surveys, other school-based surveys, where appropriate)
- classroom assessments administered by teachers that are common or shared within a learning community
- board-based assessments
- data sets related to graduation rates, drop out rates, attendance, etc (if appropriate)

We are recommending that your school continue to use the DOE surveys. There will be correspondence from the Department's Evaluation Services Division about how the survey process will work with the move away from the defined five-year cycle for School Accreditation. Planning has begun to make the DOE survey more responsive to school needs, such as electronic delivery and more flexible timing options.

3. The adapted school improvement plan will include:

- a one page background description of the school and school context
- the school's data collection and analysis process (one or two pages)
- school improvement goals that can be school-wide, within grade levels, department-based in high schools, or curriculum-based across grade levels

(i.e. goals need to be measurable and focused on improvements in student learning)

- strategies for each goal over a one-year timeframe
- a short explanation (one page) of how the school will collect data and measure results over time.

We anticipate that the school improvement plan will be 8 to 10 pages in length. Templates will be provided by the Department to help guide the planning process.

4. We are recommending that consideration be given to establishing two teams within each school board that will provide feedback, additional support as needed, and a cumulative review of progress and achievements for schools. Members of these teams will be typically selected, as needed, from principals, teachers, and board-level leaders. The School Assessment Team may have representatives from the Department of Education if the principal or superintendent requests these members.

Peer Review Team - This small team will visit the school periodically to give formative feedback on how the school improvement plan is progressing. There may be times when a peer review team will be asked to provide additional support to a school. The purpose is to collaborate and strategize with staff to map out the way forward. The superintendent may schedule these teams or the principal may invite a team into the school at critical points.

School Assessment Team - This small team will visit the school to lead a cumulative review of progress and achievements, and assess the extent to which growth or improvement has occurred. The team will then recommend special recognition for the school if evidence of significant growth has been presented.

5. Schools are still expected to write an annual report but the format will be simplified. There will be a short provincial template provided by the department describing a four-page report that can be circulated widely throughout the school and community. It is important for schools to engage in collective reflection

about their school improvement efforts and to write about their experiences in order to capture and communicate the school's journey and story.

WHAT HAS NOT CHANGED?

1. Principals are still expected to consult with and give updates to their School Advisory Councils (or like body) about the school improvement plan and processes.
2. All schools are expected to develop a school improvement plan and all teachers are expected to participate in the development and implementation of the plan.
3. Data to inform goal setting and to support changes in instructional practice to support student achievement will remain a core focus of school improvement planning.

WHAT'S THE NEW FRAMEWORK?

There will be a new simplified framework for continuous school improvement developed for Nova Scotia schools. The intention of this framework is to describe how the school improvement planning process and plan, learning community practices (to enhance teacher capacity) and classroom instructional improvement are interrelated. Current professional literature, research on school reform and our experience suggest that these three processes need to be working simultaneously and effectively in order to significantly increase learning and achievement for all students. Each of these components strengthens or weakens the other. A school needs a coherent and focused school improvement plan to give direction and to establish priorities for the school. Learning community practices frame how teachers are going to learn together and collaborate within a team structure to move changes forward. Best and promising instructional practices identify the teaching strategies and methods that will most likely have the greatest impact on student learning and achievement.



As educators work together to create and sustain a professional learning community within the school, these three processes provide the content for what staffs need to work on and how they need to work together to implement changes and make improvements stick.

The new framework for continuous school improvement, instructional improvement and collaborative learning teams is intended to be a guide for school boards and schools as they work to create a learning community culture throughout our public education system. The framework will be a working document that will change as we gain more knowledge and experience over the years. The plan is to develop and circulate a framework document in the fall/winter of 2012-13.

To support schools as they transition to the new continuous school improvement approach the following provides some specific suggestions depending on what stage your school is at in the former School Accreditation Program. All schools will transition to this simplified and more responsive process in 2012-13.

If you are in Year 1 and just beginning the process ...

1. Consider forming a small school-based group to help school administration guide the process for using data to establish goals and strategies as well as to monitor school improvement.
2. Work with the group and staff to determine if the school improvement goals will be school-wide, within grade levels, department-based (for high schools), or curriculum-based across grade levels.
3. Access data sources that will inform your focus for goal-setting. Goals should be measurable and focused on improvements in student learning, and supported by data and evidence.
4. Develop a school improvement plan and consult with your School Advisory Council or parent group.
5. Seek peer review support and feedback from your school board when you have developed your school goals.
6. Continue to provide time for your groups to share, plan, innovate, analyze results, and make mid-course corrections as needed, in pursuit of the goals.
7. Report to the school community on an annual basis regarding the progress of school improvement.

If you are in Years 2, 3 or 4 of school improvement planning ...

1. Examine and discuss the progress your school has made in achieving your school goals during the initial year(s) of implementation.
2. Make a determination as to whether or not your process and goals are still relevant, responsive and manageable in relation to your school needs.
3. If the goals are no longer relevant or have been achieved, consider forming a small school-based group to establish new goals for the school as described in the previous section. Take time to celebrate past successes and the achievement of student learning gains.
4. If the goals are still relevant and responsive to school needs then continue working on the strategies that seem to be having a positive effect. Continue working to embed collaborative processes (professional learning community practices) to help achieve your school goals. Explore ways of integrating other DOE, Board, or school initiatives into the school improvement process.

5. Consult with your board staff to support decisions on the best course of action for your school.

CONCLUSION

A final word about change

When organizations or institutions engage in any change process, people who are impacted by the changes typically experience a transition period. During this time of transition they will need to let go of past practices and enter a period when the changes can seem confusing, messy and at times, frustrating. As they learn more and have opportunities to experiment and try some of the changes, the new ways become clearer and, in time, their thinking and behaviour changes. These transition periods are expected and normal and, depending on the individual, can take varying lengths of time to move from the old way to new thinking and behaviours. We anticipate that this will be the case as we move through the transition away from the School Accreditation Program to a learning community approach for school and classroom improvement.

Our goal in moving forward with these changes is to create and sustain a culture of highly effective professional learning community practices in every school in Nova Scotia. This next stage of growth and development (that many Nova Scotia schools have already entered) is a natural evolution. It is built on the good work and focused attention of many people over the last ten years. Their contribution has helped to build our capacity to improve the quality of education we are providing for our students in Nova Scotia.

September, 2012