

Using a Quality Learning Environment to Integrate Multiple Initiatives: AISI's Place in a Bigger Sandbox

by Lissa Steele

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Abstract

This article describes the year-long process of Chinook's Edge School Division collaborating to create an integrating framework that aligns our district's beliefs and practices around a vision for improving teaching and learning for all students. This paper stresses the importance of a side-by-side approach to developing an institution-wide vision and strategy, and suggests that fostering quality teaching is an essential, multi-level endeavor requiring support at district, school, and classroom levels.

Introduction

Over the years, Chinook's Edge School Division has focused its efforts around the importance of enhancing teacher practice, congruent with research that contends the teacher is the most critical factor in influencing student learning and achievement. While we have had a great deal of success in our instructional improvement efforts through work in the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement [AIS], we have also initiated several other projects targeted at meeting local contexts and needs. One thing we know to be true is that school systems are complex; overload and fragmentation can set in through sustained introduction of multiple initiatives and programs. Fullan (2002; 2008) refers to this as 'initiativitis' that arises when too many projects and too much fragmentation lead to lack of coherence and a general sense of being overwhelmed. In 2011, the new superintendent of Chinook's Edge posed a challenge that all educators in the district come together to identify and articulate our beliefs about quality teaching and learning, with the goal of refining and aligning our work to reduce the sense of "iniativitis" in our schools. This was the start of what would be a yearlong process to develop a framework describing the characteristics of a quality learning environment.

Purpose of the Quality Learning Environment

Westerberg (2009) suggests that if learning for all students depends on the level of classroom teaching, this necessitates in-depth conversations around the topic of quality instruction. However, in order to have such a conversation, a shared common language is important. The intent of the Quality Learning Environment [QLE] framework for Chinook's Edge School Division was to do just that: create a shared understanding of the core principles that guide our beliefs about quality teaching and learning. The framework identifies high leverage points around instruction and is based on those strategies that best impact student learning (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). The QLE framework was developed based on two primary assumptions. First, highly effective teachers are the key to student learning and success (Marzano, 2007) and, second, student learning and success can only occur when systems continually focus on improving

teaching and learning practices in classrooms (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Specifically, the development of a QLE framework for Chinook's Edge was designed to:

- bring our mission and vision to life with a focus on *all* students;
- acknowledge the current good work of teachers in providing quality instruction, while challenging growth in our instructional efforts with all learners;
- direct planning and instruction;
- guide the work of instructional leaders (principals and vice principals) in supporting teacher growth and development;
- align and refine the focus for current and future initiatives;
- capture the commitment of all teachers and administrators to use the QLE framework as a focal point for conversations and practices that promote a culture of continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

The Process of Development

Many educational partners express frustration when change processes feel mandated without consideration of local context and needs (Lam & Shirley, 2012). Recognizing this, leaders in Chinook's Edge were determined to take a side-by-side approach, engaging *all* educators in developing the QLE. Our process guidelines were meant to build commitment---rather than compliance---through authentic, transparent engagement of educators throughout the district. As well, the QLE had to be based on sound educational research specific to teaching and learning.

We wanted all staff to be part of a process that would challenge our assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning by providing ongoing, specific feedback as the framework emerged; that would make consistent reference to research on teaching and learning; and that would encourage participants to take ownership of their role in the developing the framework. A multi-layered process engaged many groups: the central office leadership team [COLT] comprising our superintendent, associate superintendents and division-level principals; our Board of Education; our school-based administrators; and key leadership groups including AISI leads, the Teachers Matter committee made up of opinion leaders from each of our schools, and our inclusion specialists. Each of these key groups explored research on teaching and learning, and provided input and feedback on the elements of the QLE. The processes used with each of these groups throughout the year were both modeled and shared through our QLE webpage (<http://cesdqle.wikispaces.com>). Our key feedback groups were then asked to implement similar processes to garner input and feedback on the evolving framework. This is best described as *bottom-up and side-by-side engagement*; that is, individuals, teams and schools took responsibility for providing comments and feedback that would ultimately shape the final product. Educators could track the influence of their feedback each month on our webpage and observe the framework as it was revised.

The development of the QLE ended up being a year-long process that touched every staff member in the district. While the framework was designed with teachers in mind, many schools engaged their support staff in the development process, working alongside teachers to create a culture of understanding around what a quality learning environment should look like in their school, thus emphasizing the important role all staff play in the school improvement process.

The result of our work was the *Quality Learning Environment Framework* that transcends singular focus on academic achievement to acknowledge the importance of educating the whole child (refer to Figure 1). This is highlighted in the framework by centrally situating the focus on enhanced learning for *all* students through developing relationships and engaging learners (socio-emotionally, intellectually, and institutionally) (Dunleavy & Milton, 2010). The academic focus of the QLE is outlined in the four key components of effective instructional practice: clearly identified outcomes, balanced assessment practices, purposeful instructional practices, and personalization of learning. These four components were influenced by research on instructional design and address the richness and complexity of teachers' work. The outside layer of the QLE framework describes four cultural conditions that reflect our district's beliefs about how we go about our work: through developing a culture of inclusion, of using research and data to inform our work, of promoting literacy and numeracy, and of valuing learning communities.

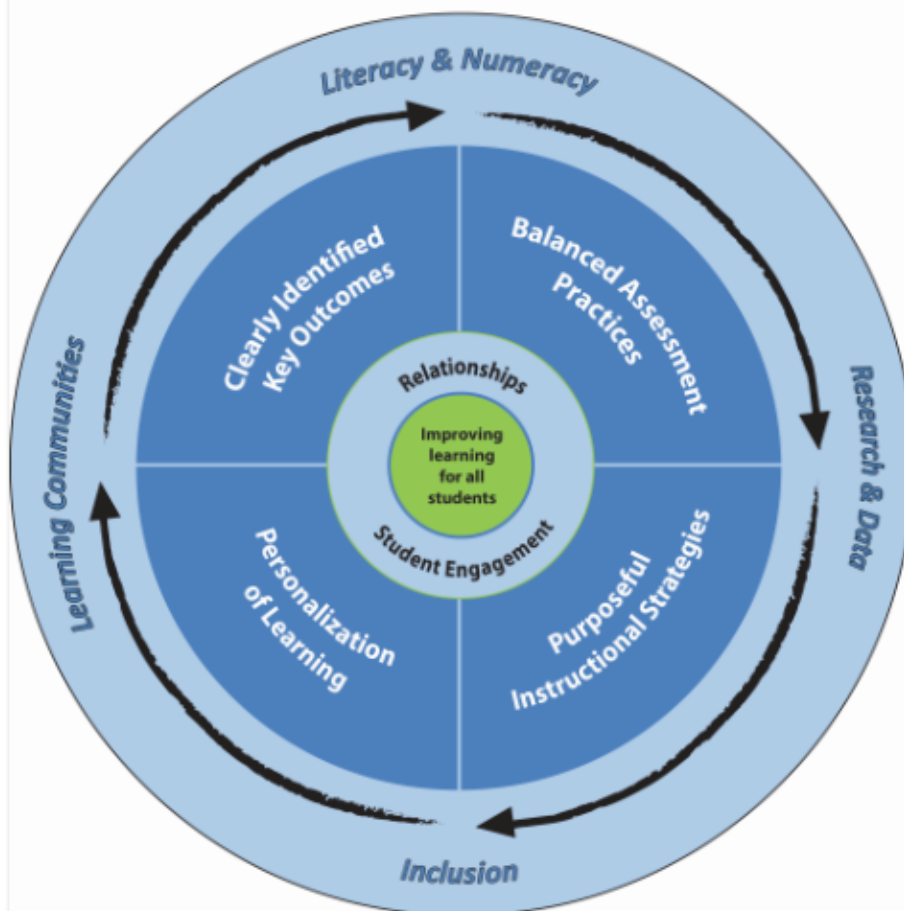


Figure 1. The Quality Learning Environment Framework.

Influence and Impact of the QLE

The intent of QLE Framework was to help our school system examine current practice, seek alignment among multiple initiatives, and purposefully define and refine our focus as a way to reduce feelings of fragmentation and overload in our schools. What has resulted is a system-wide emphasis on teaching and learning that has influenced our core structure and beliefs around AISI, our core processes as a district around planning for growth of *all* staff, and our deeply held beliefs on the important role our school-based administrators play in supporting teacher and student learning.

Figure 2 illustrates how key system structures now align, from the creation of a new district Mission and Vision statement through to development of the QLE framework. In order to move the QLE forward, AISI became the vehicle to embed structures to plan for growth. These structures included processes for identifying a school improvement goal consistent with the QLE and embedding that goal in education plans as well as in administrator and teacher growth plans. Structures were also put in place to support growth at the both the school and district levels through the use of Learning Support teams, professional learning communities and cohorts, and instructional leadership processes. As we work through these structures and systems, we reflect on our progress and adjust our strategies accordingly.

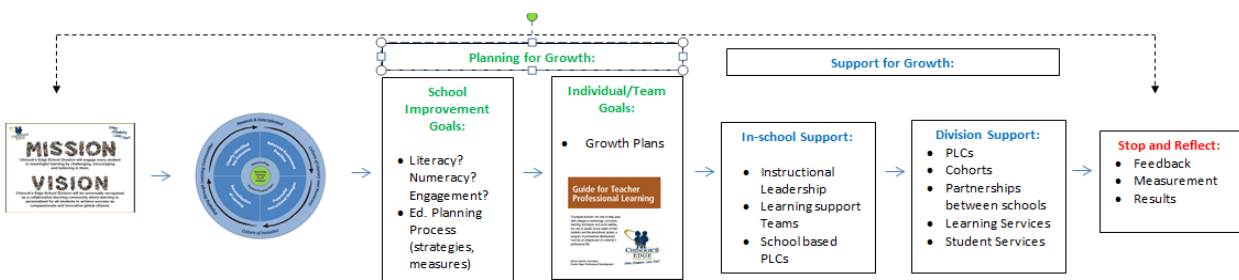


Figure 2. Alignment of work around the QLE.

Planning for Growth

Driven by the newly-created mission and vision, the QLE speaks to improving learning for all students. This, in turn, has influenced our AISI design, structure, and content. At the district level, we deconstructed Lortie's (1975) *egg crate isolation*, a situation in which each department works individually on its goals and initiatives, irrespective of their impact on schools. Our purposeful planning to breakdown silos resulted in the Learning Services and Student Services departments consolidating operations as a way to model to schools a collaborative structure. Working together as departments and alongside schools, Learning Support teams were established at each school site. They were comprised of a learning services teacher representative (formerly an AISI lead teacher), an inclusion representative (a teacher with special skills in the area of supporting students with diverse learning needs), and school-based administrators. Each team, in partnership with other members, examined data to determine areas of greatest need in enhancing the development and implementation of quality learning environments in their schools. As a result, many schools chose to focus on literacy or student engagement. These plans are now deeply embedded in school education plans, forming a core of the work to which staffs are committed.

Meetings between members of the Learning Services and Student Services departments and these teams are co-planned and delivered bi-monthly. In addition, division level Learning Services and Student Services coordinators have teamed up to regularly visit school sites to better understand the Learning Support team's challenges, needs, and strengths. This partnership has facilitated reciprocal learning among the district level departments, COLT, principals, and teachers.

At the school level, AISI has now become one important piece of a bigger picture; Learning Support teams work with staffs to determine the work that the school will undertake to build a quality learning environment. This focus has permeated the work around growth planning for all staff (refer to Figure 2). Under the guidance of researchers from the University of Lethbridge, a growth planning process and template, first piloted with our school-based administrators and teachers, has evolved to encompass all staff in Chinook's Edge School Division---including support staff, library staff, the maintenance department, and administrative support staff. In order to continue to foster collaboration within and among schools and departments, all staff members pursue both an individual and team goal, aligned with the QLE and shared with administrators or supervisors and their colleagues. These annual goals are written in the form of an inquiry question with accompanying strategies, evidence of success, and timelines. Staff members confirm they have been able to engage in deep conversations with their colleagues and administrators/supervisors around their growth goals.

Support for Growth

Supporting both individual and team growth goals is a multi-layered process. At the district level, elementary and middle school professional learning communities and high school cohorts have been established to provide an opportunity for teachers to network as they grow their practice. We have observed that, when provided the opportunity, educators are enthusiastic to share promising practices with colleagues. In addition to district level professional learning communities and cohorts, schools are also encouraged to partner and share their expertise. Groups of administrators also share their education plans with each other and garner feedback on their work. Furthermore, schools with a common focus arrange for their staff members to learn alongside one another and share resources.

One of the most promising practices to promote staff learning is our focus on the instructional leadership role of principals and vice principals. With guidance and support from researchers from the University of Lethbridge, a made-in-Chinook's Edge instructional leadership model is evolving. This collaborative inquiry explores the role of school leaders in promoting innovative and effective teaching practices. The focus on system-wide improvement through the development of administrators as instructional leaders in Chinook's Edge involves commitment at every level of the organization. Planning and leading such an effort "begins and ends with people---the support of people, the development of people, and the creation of an environment in which people feel free to express themselves as creative individuals and feel supported...." (Schlechty, 2000, p. 192).

The premise behind this instructional leadership model is that effective administrators must be able to support the learning of staff members' team and individual goals. To model this, the central office leadership team (superintendents and district level principals) along with our University of Lethbridge professors, Dr. Pamela Adams and Dr. David Townsend, visit schools each month to discuss with administrators their growth plan inquiry questions and their progress towards achieving their own goals. The purpose of these monthly visits is to model a process of quality questioning that facilitates reflective practice. Over time, school leaders will become adept at the process with their own staff who, in turn, can model such skills for their students.

Members of the COLT team and school based administrators have made a major commitment to engage fully in the work of high quality instructional leadership. Visibility in classrooms is critical as our principals and vice principals collect data requested by staff members specific growth plan goals. One critical component of this work is that the professional learning of staff members is controlled by staff members, based on goals they have established for themselves. Essential skills in instructional leadership process include the ability to ask authentic questions and be effective listeners in order to create opportunities for critical thinking and reflection for their staff members. As the skills of our school based administrators continue to develop, the use of video for instructional improvement is also being explored in many of our schools. Administrators are being asked by teachers to video portions of lessons or entire lessons. In addition, we are noting increased evidence of teachers choosing to videotape themselves as a way to help them reflect upon their own practice.

These experiences, combined with our monthly conversation with administrators, have yielded three distinctive areas of growth. First, the QLE document has played a pivotal role in helping school staffs to reflect on their areas of strength and areas in which they wish to grow. Second, the commitment from the COLT team and school-based administrators has been remarkable in not only participating each month in this evolving instructional leadership work, but in continuing to grow their own skills to the extent that leadership structures and practices in the district have been transformed. Third, the trust of our teachers in engaging with the instructional leadership process and setting goals around the QLE speaks to a high level of professionalism across the district.

Future Directions

As an integrating framework, the QLE enjoyed remarkable success in a short period of time. Its development has provided a way for the district, schools, and teachers to participate in deep discussions about teaching and learning, set goals for instructional improvement, and rally behind a commitment to instructional leadership. Nevertheless, we have more to do. One of the most critical roles for COLT, administrators, and Learning Support team members will be to sustain discussions about the intent of the QLE framework as a tool to promote continuous reflection on what we believe about quality teaching and learning. It is meant to remind us of the good work we are doing in addition to challenging our quest for continual growth in support of all our learners.

The QLE cannot remain a static document; it must be responsive to new research and new learning. Accordingly, two district steering committees made up of teachers and administrators have been charged with maintaining the integrity and relevance of the QLE. One has begun refining and clarifying the engagement section of the QLE by providing real-life classroom examples of intellectual, socio-emotional, and institutional engagement that can be shared with all schools. The second, focused on literacy, has developed a framework that provides foundational understanding of many ways in which learning of outcomes, assessment, instructional strategies, and personalization can be applied to the area of reading.

Our QLE framework has married the principles of AISI, our district's vision of instructional leadership, growth planning, professional learning, and quality instruction. Moreover, it has encouraged deep and thoughtful conversations about teaching and learning while providing support and incentive for all of us, as learners and leaders, as we strive to improve student learning.

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