

Plan Pilot Project: Marie Sharpe Elementary into a Blended School

Introduction

Currently, in SD27, our six-year graduation rates for all students and First Nations students are 66.7% and 44.2% respectively (School District 27, 2015). Anecdotally, it has been observed that some students upon reaching grade 8 are inadequately prepared to deal with the level of reading, writing, and math that are asked of them. In addition, students are not computer literate and not internet literate. While many students appear to know how to utilize a mobile device for music or games, these same students have little knowledge about accessing basic office software and saving documents.

Blended Learning = Solution

In an attempt to solve these problems, I propose we pilot a blended educational model using a combination of lab and station rotations to be employed at Marie Sharpe Elementary School as a strategy to solve these issues as well as potentially increase our 6 year completion rates. The reasoning behind choosing Marie Sharpe Elementary over other schools in the district is two-fold. One, this school has a high number of First Nations students, a group that we'd like to see grow the most in our graduation rates. Second, this school is known by the community to be a less desirable school with parents attempting to enrol their children at Nesika or Cataline instead. It is my hope that a blended learning approach to education at this school will reverse the views by the community and strengthen our First Nations children education. This blended model will focus on the K-6 grade levels and students who are attending regular classes rather than those in Learning Support Unit (LSU) classes.

Organizing a Team

To achieve these goals, I would propose creating a heavyweight team representing all interested parties. A heavyweight team is one that requires a leader to be one of formal authority with a keen interest in this project's success and members who can bring potential ideas and as well as potential problems to the team (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 4). The reasoning behind using a heavyweight team over other types of teams is because this is a pilot project of one school where no significant changes to the physical structure are required and all changes will only affect the school, staff, and students attending there. A heavyweight team is well suited for designing this new educational process and will give educators and the school the freedom to fully explore this new learning model.

In accordance with this type of team, I would propose that the principal of Marie Sharpe Elementary be made the team leader and granted some budgetary freedom to enact changes at the school to successfully implement this new blended learning approach effectively in the coming school year of 2015-2016.

Case for Adapting to the Times

Historically, our education system has prided itself on finding excellent teachers who provide excellent lessons to students on a daily basis. These teachers try to control the pace, time, place, and path of student learning so that most students can make it to the finish. However, this method, known as the traditional method (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 1), just isn't reaching all of our students. Students are often struggling to keep up with the curriculum and so are teachers in their efforts to teach it. Granted, the Ministry of Education has released the new curriculum for the elementary grades and is working to release the new curriculum for

the secondary grades. However, just changing the way the curriculum is packaged or updating what should be covered will not produce significant results of success.

Giving Students Ownership of their Learning

By changing to this blended learning system, the goal will be to give students some control over their pace of learning of the curriculum as well as the path to learn it. By doing so, students will have the time to learn the material at their own pace and in an order that best suits each individual student. This will not only benefit those who need extra time for learning but those who excel as well (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 5). As students complete their modules, then after their teacher approval may then be tasked with completion of the next module. This method may result in students being in completely different areas in the curriculum from each other but so long as students can achieve the necessary requirements for their grade level by the end of the year, it will be of no consequence. It is my hope and goal to not only make learning more beneficial to our students but to also make school more fun to be at by allowing them the opportunities to progress, make new friends, and just be kids (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 5). By doing so students will buy into this new system faster and have a higher level of compliance as well.

Teacher Priorities can Evolve

Just as it is important for students to buy into the new system of learning, teachers too need to be on board with the new learning model (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 6). For teachers, their primary role won't change from delivering face to face (F2F) instruction in the classroom. However, with this new system teachers will be able to use their prep time to plan and set-up more project-based classes and incorporate real life examples into their classrooms.

Teachers will also be able to receive data in real time about how each of their students are performing while working on their modules in the computer lab and then take that knowledge and apply it in their lessons and group work (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 8). The other added benefit to this model is that we can afford to allow teachers to specialize in their fields and provide content accessible to other teachers to utilize in their classrooms as well as provide more opportunities for collaboration between classes of the same grade and across grade levels too. These things will not only increase teacher morale but also reward teachers' efforts by acknowledging their work in creating the content and sharing in that work with others to positively affect the student's experience (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 6).

Working with the Space of Marie Sharpe

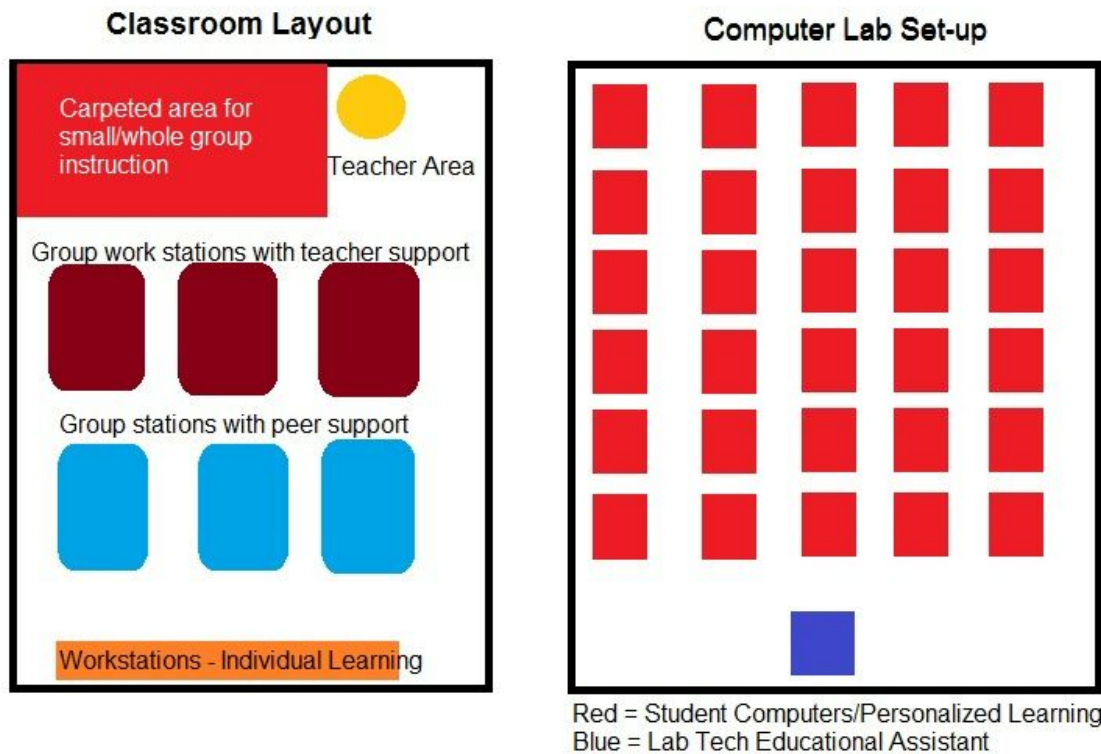
In terms of Marie Sharpe Elementary itself, it is my plan to leave the rooms and structure the way it is but adapt the way we use the rooms in the building to accommodate the new blended approach (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 7). Currently, Marie Sharpe has one computer lab equipped with 30 computers and a portable lab equipped with 25 computers. Most classrooms have 1-2 computers in their rooms as well. I would propose that we either extend/redesign the computer lab to accommodate more computers or use another room to be another computer lab. In addition, redesigning each classroom to accommodate 5 computers for students to access. In terms of software, in addition to the Microsoft Office Suite we should invest in math, reading/writing programs that are accessed online rather than installed on the systems. If we decide to utilize Google's office online software suite then we could save money there as well. The learning software should provide multiple levels of learning, K-6, provide real-time data back to teachers of their progress, and have a collaboration feature to allow

teachers to post lessons, units for students to access and work through. As such, researching what other schools are using to achieve these needs and using that will better achieve our goals than developing something on our own. The goal will be to find programs potentially from multiple providers or one provider that provides a well tested and used program that has proven its worth.

Between the new online programs and possible renovation of a classroom and investment in new devices, an early estimate of potential start-up costs could be around \$10000-\$30000 depending on labour, type of device purchased, and licensing fees.

Combination of Lab and Station Rotation Models

The intended model of blended learning that I'd propose we implement at Marie Sharpe Elementary is a Lab Rotation model combined in part with a Station Rotation Model (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 8). This combined approach of the two models will keep students moving and actively engaged in their work and allow teachers more time for small group instruction. What will this approach look like in a classroom? An example of a classroom can be seen below in Figure 1.



One can see that as students are working in the computer lab that the teacher will have time to prepare for their students. Then as students return the class will then move to a station model where students will receive their class lesson that applies to all and then begin small group instruction and may repeat this as often as a teacher sees fit for each subject. The computer row at the back of the class will get utilized for work specific to their class and allow for additional time for their individual learning if needed/allowed. A potential daily schedule that a student may be exposed to at Marie Sharpe Elementary is available below in Figure 2.

Example of daily schedule at Marie Sharpe Elementary

Time	Activity
8:28	Buses Arrive to drop students off/Computer Lab open for drop-ins
8:53	First Bell - Students make their way to class
8:58	Morning Instruction begins
10:30	Recess Break
10:45	Computer Lab Time to work on personal learning*/Group work begins
12:10	Lunch Begins/Computer Lab open for drop-ins
12:25	Students released outside for lunch
12:55	Afternoon Instruction/Group work begins
15:00	Dismissal

*Actual timing of Computer Lab time will differ for each individual class and may be day of the week dependent

As one can see this schedule provides time for teachers to prep during computer lab time, students the time to work on their personal learning on the computers, and achieve time for teachers to provide direct instruction in their classes.

Importance of an Excellent School Culture

School culture in any school is important for success on any level and creating a good culture is even more important in a blended learning environment (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 9). Marie Sharpe Elementary has a strong culture already instilled in its students and staff. However, now as Marie Sharpe shifts to a blended learning model, it will be necessary to update that culture to create a school culture that students and staff can be proud of and keep the school on track.

It will be important for the principal and staff to be consistent and develop this culture together and with their students (Horn & Staker, 2015, Chapter 9). To this end it will be important to establish a team to develop processes to solve problems as they come up during the

year and keep at it until these processes become the culture of the school. At the same time, it is equally important to recognize students as they do the right things and equally recognize those who do not with appropriate feedback for both situations that are consistent and frequent until students become the owners of the culture as well.

Some potential initiative examples could be:

Report Positive Behaviour Program - Student led & Teacher led - This would be a way for teachers as well as students to report positive student/teacher behaviour where weekly drawings would be held for both student and teacher and name the behaviour that got them submitted by someone else.

Grade Achievement Assemblies - Teacher led - The goal here is to promote student success not only in grades but in most improved, positive behaviour, work ethic, etc. This in turn would hopefully lure students to be motivated to receive recognition at these assemblies.

Big Brother and Sister program - Student led - Here the older students at the school would assist the younger students during special events, projects, and other situations that the teaching staff believes would be beneficial.

School Leadership Team - Teacher-led & Student-led - The main purpose is for the combined student and teacher team to run exciting school events to promote school spirit and make school a fun place to learn.

Budgeting for the Future

Finally, the final aspect of this proposal is budgeting. This budget will be dependent on whether Marie Sharpe will require any computer lab to accommodate the blended learning

model. Regardless, the initial investment will be somewhat larger compared to normal years over the short term as new machines are brought in, wiring, wireless, programs, and training costs are factored in. Over the long term though, costing of this program will either remain the same or see some potential savings as students will not need a qualified teacher overseeing them during computer lab time. As the program is developed actual costs will become more apparent.

In terms of funding to switch Marie Sharpe Elementary to a blended school, additional funding could be sourced from the Deferred Capital Fund and/or any budgetary surpluses from last or this year's budget. This initial investment would be a one time cost and as the school morphs over the following school year the costs of running the school will be predicted to return to normal levels and possibly see a cost savings from switching to a lab tech educational assistant to cover teacher prep time rather than a qualified teacher. These savings can then be re-allocated back into the Deferred Capital Fund and/or into the general budget as the board sees fit. Lastly, assuming this pilot project is a success and a cost savings is found in the operating costs and student success increases then the money saved from this project can be allocated to transforming other elementary schools into blended schools as called for.

Conclusion

It is my hope that you give this proposal serious consideration and make the decision that will see our six year graduation rates climb to new levels and make Marie Sharpe Elementary a school that parents want to enrol their children in!

References

Horn, M. & Staker, H. (2015). *Blended: Using disruptive innovation to improve schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

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