

STEEPED *in* STUDY

Remote Canadian school district approaches professional learning with a passion



BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Relationships and leadership. That, in a nutshell, is the vision of professional learning in the remote Northern Lights School Division in Alberta, Canada.

“We don’t go to work,” said Jimmi Lou Irvine, assistant principal of Glendon School. “We go to a place where we are involved with people we like. It’s all about relationships.”

Northern Lights has been building its capacity for teacher and leadership growth for more than 13 years. Despite a low point, a year in which the division spent no money on professional learning, it now spends about \$550,000 annually on professional learning. The division supports an extensive new teacher induction

program; promotes a highly regarded Early Literacy Cadre; enables all teachers to participate in Professional Learning Communities and work with school-based teams; brings in top names in the field of professional development; sends contingents to regional, national, and international conferences; enrolls dozens of participants in the NSDC Academy; enables dozens of others to participate in a homegrown Leadership Academy; and encourages teachers to enroll in distance learning graduate courses.

Teachers estimate that they often spend 15 to 20 hours a month in professional learning. Last year, Northern Lights teachers and principals spent at least five full days in professional learning, and some spent as much as 20 days, a situation that has some concerned that the division may be spending too much time on professional development.

Since Ed Wittchen became super-

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Photo by JOAN RICHARDSON

Second grade teachers Debbie MacQuarrie, left, and Marlene Walchuk spend most of their time working on mathematics during their weekly professional learning community meetings at Grand Centre Elementary School in Cold Lake, Alberta. Tests show that their students have difficulty with double-digit addition and subtraction. Here, MacQuarrie shows Walchuk how she uses manipulatives to make the concept clearer for her students.

intendent in 1992, participation in the NSDC Academy has been a cornerstone of Northern Lights' professional development program. Wittchen has sent more than 30 teachers and principals to the Academy, an in-depth, 2¹/₂-year professional development seminar aimed at building leaders. He spends about \$40,000 a year to support participants in the academy. No other district can match that record.

Employees who have worked elsewhere frequently say the opportunity

to learn more about their craft drew them to Northern Lights. "I was amazed and awed by the opportunities here," said Larry Marciniuk, principal of Grand Centre Senior High School, who worked in Saskatchewan before coming to Northern Lights four years ago.

"I've grown considerably since I've been here because I've been exposed to so much," he said. "It's a culture of high expectations, for staff and for students, in terms of growth."

Says John Orr, a regional team leader, "For people who love to learn, there's no better place to be. I'm in heaven here, and quite a few of us are... We're constantly exposed to new ideas. If you're at all reflective, (the opportunities to learn in Northern Lights) should impact your craft."

ISOLATION NOT ALLOWED

To fully appreciate Northern Lights' commitment to professional learning requires understanding one of its greatest obstacles: its location. Reaching the division offices in Bonnyville requires a three-hour, 250-kilometer (150-mile) drive northeast of Edmonton, past acre after acre of grassy fields interrupted only by a smattering of weathered barns and farmhouses. The 26 schools that make up a division that is larger than the state of Connecticut are located hours apart. Driving from Lac La Biche on one side of the division to Cold Lake on the other side takes more than two hours on the only highway that stretches between the two points. There is no commercial airfield in the division's 5,714 square miles.

The school division is a hybrid of old and new. Oil derricks chug in fields that are no longer planted. On the division's northern edge, a herd of buffalo ambles along, barely acknowledging the Canadian jet fighters that roar overhead. The dull silver domes of Ukrainian Catholic and orthodox churches dominate the region, a

reflection of the large immigrant population that arrived in the 19th century, drawn by the similarity between the geography of the Ukraine and northern Alberta.

The isolation of the division is both a challenge and a boon.

Bruce Joyce, who has spent weeks working with the Northern Lights staff on literacy issues, says he marvels at the sophistication of the teachers and principals. "They're like the Aussies. They always feel so isolated that they make damn sure they aren't," he said.

Because of that, Joyce said, educators in the division have an intensity about learning rarely found in American schools. Working in Northern Lights can be a draining experience for a consultant. "I worked my tail off when I was there," Joyce says with a laugh.

Morning meetings are followed by lunch meetings which are followed by afternoon meetings which are followed by dinner meetings which are followed by gatherings at someone's home. All of the discussions revolve around "the work." "They do tend to stretch the day," acknowledges consultant Rick DuFour. "They really make a concerted effort to ensure that everyone has an exposure to you in a variety of settings."

The big names of professional learning — Joyce, DuFour, Michael Fullan, Linda Lambert — are frequent visitors to Northern Lights. When they're in town, virtually every staff member has a learning opportunity with them.

Many divisions bring in outside experts. But Joyce said there's a difference in how Northern Lights connects with these experts. "A lot of places want the three 'talks.' I don't go there. I hunt for divisions like Northern Lights. I am seeking places

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that want to go into serious study. I'm looking for a place where we can have a colloquy and look at their needs and build initiatives out of those needs. Northern Lights is that kind of place."

STARTING THE JOURNEY

When Ed Wittchen became superintendent in 1992, he had no plan or vision for the division he would end up creating. One of his pressing concerns as a new superintendent was how to improve the middle grades experience. He decided that he and two other administrators would attend the National Middle Schools Association meeting in San Antonio to see what they could learn.

"It was an earth-moving experience for us," he said.

Before that, educators in Northern Lights had spent only a few days a year on any sort of professional learning and virtually no time outside the division. With no nearby major university, teachers and principals were largely on their own for any new learning.

His experience in San Antonio pointed Wittchen to his first goal.

"We had to get teachers out into the world. We had to get them exposed to ideas," he said. "I told the board, 'I can't make them leaders if they sit on their butts in Cold Lake, Alberta.'"

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The next year, the board agreed to allow 20 teachers and principals to attend the NMSA conference in Portland, Ore., because they could drive there. One school board trustee also attended. The result of that trip was a complete transformation from junior high schools to middle schools, a process Wittchen believes was made possible only because a critical mass supported the change.

From that experience, Wittchen

Northern Lights School Division No. 69 Bonnyville, Alberta, Canada

The district, in northeastern Alberta, Canada, includes schools scattered over an area larger than Connecticut.

Enrollment: 6,200

Number of Schools: 26, including one K-3, one K-6, three K-4, five K-9, two K-12, one 4-5, two 5-8, one 5-9, one 5-10, one 6-8, one 7-12, two 8-9, two 8-12, and three 9-12.

Racial/ethnic mix:

Information not collected

Limited English proficient: 1%

Language spoken: English

Free/reduced lunch: Not applicable

Special education: 19%

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discovered the value of exposing his staff to the leaders in any given area. Rather than merely reading about what others were saying, he learned the value of putting his staff together with the experts. Rather than merely thanking speakers, Northern Lights participants would grill presenters for more information. "Being backward Albertans, we didn't know any better," he said.

A second key, he said, was involving school board trustees in professional development as often as possible in order to improve their understanding of the division's needs and bolster their support for professional learning. Every trustee attends at least one major conference during his or her term of office, and at least one attends each daylong professional offering in the division.

Thirdly, Wittchen discovered the value of having a large number of staff share the same learning experience. Rather than send a few people to a lot

of different conferences, he invested in sending a larger number to the right learning experiences. Everyone needs a colleague who knows the home turf to be able to debrief learning at the end of the day, he said, and the bigger the group, the better. For example, when he enrolls staff in the NSDC Academy, he typically sends six to nine per session, thus creating both a small community within the larger Academy community and another community of Academy participants and graduates back home in Northern Lights.

Wittchen also learned that the travel to a conference several hundred miles away is as much a part of the learning as participating in the conference. "When they travel together, they talk about what they know. On the way there, they begin to share what goes on inside their buildings. On the way back, they're excited to talk about what they've learned and what they're going to do with it," he said.

Finally, he said, he learned the value of keeping the group together once they arrive at the conference. Wittchen prefers to have the Northern Lights contingent stay together away from the conference site. As much as he stays focused on the big picture, Wittchen is also attentive to many of the details of these trips. For example, he insists on making room assignments for all away trips, intentionally mixing participants to encourage new relationships.

For two or three years, that plan worked just fine. Then Wittchen read Linda Lambert's book, *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools* (ASCD, 1998), and he had an epiphany. He has carried a copy of the book in his briefcase ever since. "It's my bible," he said. "We were addressing the capacity stuff, but we weren't using it."

In other words, teachers were filling up with knowledge and relationships among leaders were strengthening.

ened because of the time they spent together in study. But, to that point, he was really not effective at getting them to deepen their understanding, and he had not yet learned how to leverage their improving relationships into leadership.

About that time, Northern Lights decided to work with Joyce on literacy issues. With no particular plan in mind, Joyce led teachers and principals through an intensive exploration about the division's needs and research about literacy. The result was the creation of a highly regarded Early Literacy Cadre and a literacy program that has made dramatic improvements in student reading. Led by Marilyn Hrycauk, the division's director of instruction, 20 cadre members have between 10 and 20 days of staff development each year. Cadre members study the literature on literacy, observe demonstration lessons, and study student learning data. They fan out across the division to provide professional development to other teachers and administrators and to lead action research by teachers, schools, and the entire division. (For more details, see "Cadres help to create competence," by Bruce Joyce, Lisa Mueller, Marilyn Hrycauk, and Walter Hrycauk, *JSD*, Summer 2005, and "District weaves a safety net," by Marilyn Hrycauk, *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2002.)

About the same time, Wittchen also discovered the NSDC Academy and began strategically enrolling Northern Lights staff to ensure they would be spread throughout the buildings in the division. "I wanted one person in every school who understood and could talk knowledgeably about staff development," he said.

All NSDC Academy participants create learning plans, and one of the Northern Lights participants focused his on creating a Leadership Academy that would be modeled after the

NSDC Academy. That homegrown academy began in 1999. The local two-year academy includes teachers who want to remain in the classroom and develop their personal leadership capacity. Aspiring principals must join the academy and graduate before being considered for a principalship. This year, the Leadership Academy has 27 participants, and all but a handful are teachers.

The Leadership Academy introduces participants to the day-to-day processes and procedures within the division and demonstrates how they relate to its overall vision. "It gives them a more global perspective than the narrow vision they have of their own school issues," said John Orr, one of the division's regional team leaders who act as coaches for the district's 26 principals.

When Wittchen wanted to deepen teachers' learning even more, he worked with San Diego State University and Royal Roads University in British Columbia to launch two distance learning graduate courses in educational leadership. During the last school year, 25 Northern Lights teachers and principals were enrolled in graduate courses. Until these courses were created, Northern Lights staff had to make the six-hour round-trip to Edmonton every week or take a year off from work.

Eventually, even that was not enough for Northern Lights. "The courses were great, but we needed a vehicle to get people together to collaborate," said Greig Christian, one of the regional team leaders.

The vehicle they found was Rick DuFour's model of professional learning communities (PLCs). After working with DuFour, the division began requiring every school to introduce PLCs, small groups of teachers organized around subjects or grade levels. The PLCs meet weekly, some during the school day, some after school,

depending on each principal's decision regarding scheduling.

The PLCs follow the DuFour model in which teams of teachers first examine data regarding student learning, set SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) student learning goals, and work together writing common curriculum and common assessments.

"I've never had as much success improving student achievement as we've had since we introduced PLCs," said Maureen Miller-Nielsen, principal of Grand Centre Elementary School.

Even the administrative team meets as a PLC and identifies its own SMART goals. "The board even tried to act as a PLC, but not everything can be done that way," Wittchen said.

To compensate teachers for the time they spend on professional development — and to make time for some of it — Northern Lights has designated eight Fridays a year as Family Fridays. On those days, schools are closed. The division created this time by adding 30 minutes to the remaining school days. Family Fridays provide teachers with compensatory time for the hours they devote to PLCs and other professional development work after school.

Some teachers and principals use these days to participate in the division's Leadership Academy or for graduate courses.

"I've given them all the tools in the toolkit," Wittchen said. "If you give someone a hammer and a saw, they can build you a house. If you give them more tools and more supplies, they can build a better house."

But even its most devoted advo-

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and schools in planning and delivering staff development that will produce the results they want for adults and students. Standards can assist with planning, implementation, and assessment of effective staff development practice. Some must agree, because many states and districts have adopted or modified the NSDC standards over the last decade.

As more and more states and districts use the standards, the Council develops tools to support their implementation. The Council offers workshops, awareness-building materials, columns and stories in publications, and web site links to many research studies and best practice cases upon which the standards were based.

The standards book included a needs assessment survey. As more states and districts became serious about using the standards, questions surfaced about the instrument's validity. States and districts wanted to know whether staff development practices in their schools aligned with the standards. NSDC viewed the increasing number of questions regarding the assessment survey as an indication that a higher-quality tool would be valued and used by practitioners. So, in 2001, NSDC contracted with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to develop an assessment instrument that schools could give to teachers to assess their perception of how well staff development aligned with the standards. Eventually, SEDL produced a valid and reliable instrument. School improvement and staff development committees now use the instrument to assist with planning, monitoring, and evaluating staff development efforts. Several states are working to make it available statewide. For example, in Georgia, every

teacher is given the opportunity to take the survey online, and teams of educators at the school, system, regional, and state levels use the results.

Sometimes the results were disappointing, and schools and districts wanted more guidance on how to improve the quality of staff development. Again in partnership with SEDL and with leadership from Shirley Hord, a scholar emerita with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and consultant Pat Roy, a team of educators developed a set of frameworks (innovation configurations) that define the various actions educators can take to move from low levels of implementation of standards to higher levels. NSDC published the first set of these frameworks in 2003 (*Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations*, available at <http://store.nsd.org> or by calling (800) 727-7288) and addressed the roles of teacher, principal, central office staff members, superintendents, and school board members. NSDC will publish the second set in 2006 and will address the roles of state department, technical assistance providers, state agency personnel, higher education professional association, and the district staff developer.

While debate and discourse is healthy for academia, a consistent set of staff development standards facilitates a common language and understanding to the field. NSDC recognizes its responsibility to ensure the applicability and usefulness of the standards. NSDC will continue to monitor the research and, when it again becomes necessary, facilitate another update. Meanwhile, NSDC continues to believe that the single most valuable way to help all adults and students to achieve at high levels is through high-quality professional learning, and we believe the NSDC standards are an effective tool to help in that process. ■

DOWNLOADS

- **Standards:** www.nsd.org/standards/about/index.cfm
- **Assessment tool:** www.nsd.org/standards/about/selfassessment.cfm

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cates acknowledge that Northern Lights may have reached the saturation point in professional development. "Balance is really an issue now," said Christian. "Sometimes, teachers are out of the building 20, 30 days a year. That's getting to be too much. The teachers who are leaders are also working all the time to keep ahead of the others. That's a lot of work. They're getting tired."

Miller-Nielsen believes the answer is a 12-month work year for teachers and principals so teacher learning is built into their work schedule in a more realistic way, she said.

"The whole idea of having July and August off goes back to farming days," Miller-Nielsen said. "At a minimum, we ought to pay to have teachers work for two more weeks every year, rather than keep taking them out of their classrooms. We need to change the school calendar so we build more staff development into their workday so kids aren't missing so much time with their teachers."

Roy Ripken, who developed and still manages the Leadership Academy, sees the danger. "There is a line that you can cross when it becomes too much. Even good things can be bad for you if you overdo them. How much vitamin C can you take

before it becomes toxic?"

Wittchen's response is predictably quick and certain. "The bottom line for me as the instructional leader of this division is that there is no such thing as too much staff development. When we stop growing, we start a downhill ride that is hard to stop. I do not want to be treated by a doctor who does not know the latest theories and practices, and I do not want my children or their children or yours to be taught by teachers who do not know the latest theories and best practices, either. When others say we can't afford to do these things for financial or time constraints, I respond with, 'We can't afford not to do them.' " ■