

**Reflections on Continuous Improvement:
Meshing System Wide Goals with Individual Teachers**

Scott D. Fulton

University of Regina

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Over the course of the last few EADM classes, we have had the opportunity to hear perspectives from two high profile administrators, on how to improve curriculum and assessment in Saskatchewan schools. They emphasized the need to coordinate division-wide policies using the Continuous Improvement Framework (CIF), along with Learning Improvement Plans (LIP). On February 28th, Laurie Gatzke, Vice Principal of W.F. Ford school shared her perspectives regarding the importance of the CIF in conjunction with establishing data driven goals that are specific to her school as part of the LIP. One week later, Jan Chell came in and discussed the Strategic Plan 2006-2010, also known as the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP), that has been established and put into practice by the Prairie Valley School Division (PVSD). As my internship experience was completed in my hometown of Fort Qu'Appelle, which is situated within the PVSD, I have a particular interest in exploring and reflecting on the potential impact(s) of striving to meet the mandated goals of the PVSD's Continuous Improvement Plan. This paper will review the PVSD's Strategic Plan, reflect on the potential challenges and benefits of meeting the goals set for by the CIP, and will also examine the roles that teachers, students, and Professional Learning Communities, (PLC's) will play in determining the ultimate success of improved learning outcomes for students in this province.

It is obvious that the CIF is currently living up to it's "common strategic planning method" when you consider that both the Regina Public School Division, (RPSD) and the PVSD have both identified the CIF's 4 priority areas as the main

areas to focus in each of their Continuous Improvement Plans. Under the “Division Priorities and Strategies” section of the PVSD’s Strategic Plan 2006-2010, they have matched their 4 priorities with the 4 provincial *Pre-K-12 Renewal Priorities* set out by the CIF, which strive for:

- *Higher levels of literacy and achievement;*
- *Equitable opportunities for all students;*
- *Smooth transitions into and through the system; and,*
- *Strong system-wide accountability and governance* (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 1).

What distinguishes the PVSD’s Strategic Plan, is the clear vision and prioritization of how PVSD plans to meet the goals mandated by the CIF. For instance, within each of the 4 renewal priorities mandated by the CIF, the PVSD has identified priorities within each of these areas, and has established specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals within each of the 4 areas.

Under *higher levels of literacy and achievement*, the PVSD has established a SMART goal of having “85% of students reading at or above grade-appropriate levels” (PVSD, 2007, p. 10). Within this area, PVSD has also made it a current priority to look into “renewing curriculum and instruction approaches” (PVSD, p. 9). On November 2nd, 2007, during my internship, a professional development (PD) day was set aside to focus on how we were going to meet this SMART goal within our school and within the division at large. We were first arranged into subject area PLC groups in the morning. My cooperating teacher and I were seated with the other Social Studies teachers from Balgonie and other predominantly middle-class “white” schools around the division. Two concerns came up during this meeting. Firstly, there was concern that the current SMART goal of having 85% of students reading

at or above grade-appropriate levels is too lofty a goal for our school to meet because of major differences in demographics and reading levels of students in our school compared to that of students in other schools across the division. Secondly, there was concern that the current PLC groups would be better formed if Fort Qu'Appelle teachers were able to meet with Balcarres teachers, whose student demographics and challenges to literacy achievement are much more similar than demographics and challenges in a school like Balgonie. In the afternoon, when we met as PLC's with teachers from our own school, our vice-principal clearly announced that with the PVSD's CIP, there is a built-in strategy to "disaggregate data around First Nations student reading levels" (Ibid), meaning that the division recognizes the differences in reading levels among our First Nations student population. We spent the afternoon in PLC groups outlining some teaching strategies and assessments for learning that we could implement as a staff to improve literacy levels among our students. The progress made by these proposed strategies and assessments was to be checked on in January, but as my internship was completed at the end of December, I was not around to see the follow-up process.

Under the second major priority area of the CIF in striving to provide *equitable opportunities for all students*, the PVSD has emphasized a priority on "improving participation and outcomes for First Nations (FN) & Métis students" (Ibid). Along with striving to enhance formal partnerships with each of the 14 First Nations within the boundaries of PVSD, the school division is also striving to create "safe, effective, caring and respectful schools/classrooms that ensure equitable

opportunities” (Ibid). I can say that this was given a deep concern and priority within our school as Bert Fox has struggled to meet the needs of our Aboriginal student population. My cooperating teacher conducted a school wide student survey on their perceptions of school climate. She also conducted a workshop during our PD day on Dec. 7th on “A Time for Significant Leadership” (ATFSL), which attempted to address the current inequities that many of our Aboriginal students face within our school and society at large. I whole-heartedly agree that addressing the inequities within Bert Fox Community School should be a priority. I often struggled with the notion that 60% of our students were of Aboriginal descent, yet only one 4-5 members of the entire staff were of Aboriginal ancestry. I also experienced conflicting thoughts about how the Native Studies courses are often taught by teachers throughout the division who have not been immersed in First Nations or Métis cultures and are thereby at risk of perpetuating and presenting a Eurocentric attitude towards Indigenous cultures. So, how can striving towards creating equitable opportunities for our students be legitimized when the reality of the staffroom make-up shows an overabundance of white, middleclass, heterosexual teachers? Now don’t get me wrong, this is a great goal to strive for, but in my opinion we’ve got a long ways to go before this priority can be achieved. We live in an inequitable world, and the fact that two of the four SMART goals are not yet in place under this priority area seems to indicate that this is still in a very pre-mature stage of development at the moment.

The third major priority area focusing on helping students make *smooth transitions into and through the system* sees the PVSD continuing to focus on

ensuring positive experience(s) for students from First Nation schools. There is a strategy in place to “work with First Nations to support Head Start programs on First Nations and to develop capacity on First Nations” (PVSD, p. 13). There has also been a youth justice program that has been implemented in Fort Qu’Appelle this year, but it is yet to be determined whether this new program has made a significant positive impact to the school’s culture and community at large. On a positive note, Bert Fox Community School has established a store-front school in recent years that operates in much the same way the Adult Campus operates here in Regina, with students picking up credits by completing curriculum modules through an individualized learning program.

The last major priority outlined by the CIF deals with achieving *strong system wide accountability and governance*. This priority is probably the most important in ensuring the relevance and success of every school division’s CIP. I do believe that the establishment of CIP’s is a good idea and that it keeps the system striving to improve the educational opportunities of the students. However, for improvements in our education system to ultimately be successful, it has to start with willingness on the part of teachers and ultimately the students to want to improve the school community cultures in which they work. Whereas the PVSD outcomes seem to focus on the efforts of the school board, the director/superintendants, as well as the School Community Councils, I’m not sure that any of these goals will be achieved without the full support and cooperation from teachers and students.

When you consider that CIF has been mandated by Saskatchewan Learning, and that each school division implements a Continuous Improvement Plan based on

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the priority areas of the CIF, it makes one wonder whether this top-down approach will have much impact on improving student learning outcomes. Certainly there are some good ideas and a good plan that has been brought forth by the PVSD in its CIP, but I think it ultimately comes down to teachers' and students' willingness to fully cooperate in these lofty endeavors. Establishing PLC's among staff members can be a great way to coordinate improvements in professional practice, but when those PLC's are mandated by the division to meet division wide goals, it can certainly put the PLC's at risk of becoming poisonous entities that work to undermine the CIP because of the lack of perceived power and control over what the PLC can focus on. And, although teachers are given power and in integral role in developing the Assessment for Learning Program, another concern is that a school's LIP, as Laurie Gatzke pointed out, is usually based on data-driven goals. However, in order for these goals to be achieved, the assessments used by teachers must strive to be consistent at all times and across an entire school division. This can be an incredibly challenging mandate to effectively meet and verify when assessments can vary from teacher to teacher and from school to school. Perhaps the most challenging obstacle facing the ultimate success, (or lack thereof), of the CIF and CIP as laid out by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Learning and the school divisions lies in convincing teachers to place their hearts and minds into wanting to achieve these specific outcomes. For this to happen, teachers will need to have the time to investigate the relevance of these goals and take it upon themselves to work collaboratively with teachers, students, and administration to ensure these goals are met. It is an enormous challenge indeed!

References:

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