

## District Data Gathering Feedback Memo – Oakes

### Visit details

WestEd researchers conducted data gathering in Oakes Public School District #41, as part of the evaluation of the North Dakota Personalized Competency Based Learning (ND PCBL) initiative the week of January 30, 2023. The purpose of the visit was to get an understanding of the progress in Oakes around PCBL implementation to date. During the data gathering, WestEd researchers conducted focus groups with numerous stakeholders including:

- Two lower elementary educators (grades 1-3)
- Three upper elementary educators (grades 4-6)
- Seven secondary educators (grades 7-12)
- Six elementary learners (grades 4-6)
- Six middle school learners (grades 7-8)
- Six secondary learners (grades 7-12)
- Six parents

The researchers also conducted interviews with the superintendent, elementary principal/ Personalized Learning Coach, and secondary principal. Additionally, researchers conducted observations of eight classrooms including:

- One first grade classroom (ELA)
- Two second grade classrooms (ELA)
- Two third grade classrooms (ELA)
- One fifth grade physical education class
- One sixth grade social studies class
- One sixth grade science class
- Two high school science classes
- One high school social studies class

This memo summarizes observations and key takeaways from that data collection. The observations are organized by the district conditions from the [KnowledgeWorks framework](#) for implementing PCBL.

## **Summary of initial themes from interviews and focus groups**

### **Shared Vision**

- Vision was the strongest condition observed by researchers and described by participants; the educators are much more unified in their vision about PCBL and a Portrait of a Graduate than in previous years. It's clear that the shared vision of the district is mastery of and engagement in learning for students.
- There is still a lack of alignment among leadership and educators about how best to achieve the vision. Secondary leadership and parents are still hesitant about some aspects of PCBL, particularly the practice of standards-based grading rather than letter grades.
- During the classroom observations, researchers noted that many of the elementary and secondary classrooms had the district Code of Collaboration posted on the walls along with the three school wide commitments: respect, genuine relationships, and growth mindset.
- There were Portrait of a Graduate posters in some classrooms, though when learners were asked about it, they were not able to articulate what it meant or in some cases, that it was there.

### **Culture**

- Culture was the second strongest condition observed and described by the educators. With new leadership, trust has been restored among the adults, mostly because of the leadership style, and a culture of support and risk-taking has been reestablished.
- There is a visible culture of growth mindset at the school. In both elementary and secondary classrooms, the classrooms displayed motivational posters and language about reframing negative thinking.
- Some teachers awarded paper badges when learners met standards. In one class, learners' school photos were posted in their proficiency level on the board.

### **Equity**

- The superintendent described a learner written and run school play in which the gender of the characters was ambiguous. Leaders discussed potential responses from the community and determined that the play should remain as written because it was learner generated and the learners demonstrated leadership, responsibility and advocacy.
- The reading program in third grade contained books with diverse characters.

### **Agency**

- Most of the learning observed was teacher centered, with some learner centered instruction, mostly at the elementary level. Learner centered instruction was observed in a P.E. class as well as in a third-grade class and two sixth grade classes.
- When asked why they were learning something, learners were generally unable to provide a response.

- Educators shared that they felt more instructional agency overall this year; they expressed a sense of support to take chances in their lessons and try new things. They also spoke of feeling safe in asking colleagues for help with their instruction. One participant said they “feel like a family again”.
- Learners have some choice in when they complete assignments, i.e., in what order, or where (in the space) they learn. Much less choice in what and how they learn was observed and described by learners. In general, there was more choice observed at the elementary level, with some secondary classrooms providing some choice for learners.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

- At both the elementary and secondary schools, it was common to see academic learning targets posted in classrooms; there was no evidence of social emotional learning targets.
- There was no evidence that learners were grouped according to formative assessments, but in some classes, learners were able to select where they would sit depending on what kind of instruction they preferred (full group, small group, independent).
- In many classes, learners progressed through learning targets at their own pace, moving onto the next activity or worksheet once they showed the educator their progress. Usually, this was in the form of worksheets.

### **Assessment**

- Many educators administered pre assessments before a unit to help determine the standards on which to focus. This practice informed instruction and pacing.
- Parents and learners shared some confusion and frustration resulting from a lack or incomplete communication from the administration about the practice.
- In many classes at both elementary and secondary levels, learners were able to determine when they would be assessed based on their level of readiness.
- The junior high is in early stages of administering standards-based report cards. There have been some communication gaps leading to frustration and confusion among parents and learners.

### **Professional Development & Learning**

- Educators appreciated the choices offered in their professional learning opportunities.
- Educators spoke about the value of the visits to Northern Cass and other districts to see how others were implementing PCBL; several educators spoke about the value of the PCBL cohort and the relationships that were built as a result.

### **Leadership Development**

- Educators spoke about instructional leadership opportunities, such as participating in the instructional rounds and learning walks.
- There is a newly developed principal’s cabinet for learners at the secondary level. Examples of learner leadership opportunities include learner-suggested policy changes to locked locker rooms and having access to drinks in class.

## **Reflections/Key Takeaways**

The change in leadership in Oakes, i.e., the elementary principal committing to the role of Superintendent and the PCBL coach moving into the elementary principal role, has created a major shift in the culture of the district, exhibited by the change in the attitude of educators. Trust has been restored and a culture of support and risk-taking has been reestablished. As a result, culture and vision were the two conditions of PCBL with the most progress this year. This shift has influenced teachers' willingness to take risks with the curriculum and instruction, illustrated by posting of learning targets and in more flexible grouping.

PCBL practices were widely practiced/observed at the elementary level. Indeed, several educators shared they would not go back to "traditional" teaching. There was some evidence of dabbling or trying PCBL practices at the secondary level. Secondary educators and leaders shared some hesitancy about whether PCBL "works" or is possible at the secondary level. Parents shared some concerns about standards-based grading and PCBL practices at the secondary level. They were more supportive of PCBL at the elementary level, though still had some misunderstandings (e.g., no deadlines, all online).

Elementary learners were eager to tell researchers about their learning experiences, sharing stories of specific class practices. Middle and secondary learners were less enthusiastic about school in general and shared very little about what makes school enjoyable. Growth mindset still permeates the classrooms, with quotes and signage abound, as well as an emphasis on where learners should be and are in their learning.

The educators and leaders spoke of a need for a structured PCBL onboarding process for educators new to Oakes. They are grappling with how to balance supporting new educators, particularly those new to the field, with an appropriate amount of information about PCBL in their first years. Educators and leaders value the work of the PCBL coach in both leading professional learning and supporting implementation of PCBL practice at both the secondary and elementary levels. There was wide agreement that the current dual position of PCBL coach and elementary principal is unsustainable and that they will need a continued instructional coach to continue the PCBL work.