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2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Submission

Opportunities for Effective Professional Learning

Improving Teacher Quality and Student Outcomes

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E-Exchange participant during 2021 with:

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As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields. This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

# Introduction

This e-exchange took place between Olivia Petre, Assistant Principal at North Rocks Public School (NRPS) and Meike Thomsen, Principal of Colonel Walker School. North Rocks Public School is a large 870 student K-6 primary school situated in North-West Sydney. Along with mainstream classes, NRPS also offers both a Support Unit and Opportunity Classes. Colonel Walker School is a K-6 school of approximately 120 students close to the centre of Calgary.

Despite the obvious difference in size, demographics and the fact that Colonel Walker has a single administrator, whereas NRPS has a large leadership team, what was paramount was the commonalities in teaching practices and challenges faced especially during this COVID period.

This fascinating opportunity to compare our educational systems, as well as develop a relationship with an overseas counterpart was what drove us to participate in this e-exchange.

# Focus area – Opportunities that exist to provide effective professional learning

Effective teacher professional development has been identified by Hattie (2008) as one of the most significant influences on student achievement. The NSW Educations Standard Authority, *Principles of Effective Learning* promotes the professional learning practices shown through research to lead to changed teaching practice and improved student learning. NESA (2021). In particular,effective professional development includes the principles of sustained duration, supporting active collaboration, and supporting opportunities for feedback and reflection.

Whilst we initially spoke on a broad range of topics, we ended up narrowing down our focus to compare the opportunities that exist to provide effective professional learning to staff in our contexts.

Both North Rocks Public School and Colonel Walker School recognise the value of providing targeted professional learning focused on system-wide goals, school-based targets as well as individual teacher needs. Through regular discussions and sharing of resources including professional learning timetables, professional learning structures, and information pertinent to our relevant Departments of Education we hoped to learn and share best practices in providing effective professional learning opportunities to staff.

# Significant learnings / Findings

At Colonel Walker School, each Friday, students finish school at 12:00 pm. From 12:30 pm to 3:00 pm, this time is set aside for staff professional learning. To accommodate this, there are longer school days from Monday to Thursday. This totals 31 Fridays or 77 1/2 hours of dedicated professional learning time which is allocated during school hours. Presently at North Rocks Public School, an hour each week is timetabled after school for teacher professional learning. This totals 40 hours for professional learning. In both contexts, there are interruptions to these times throughout the year.

In Calgary, there are a number of other professional learning days set aside. Each year there are two or three system professional development days where the Calgary Education Board offers a range of professional learning options from which all staff choose-mainly in the areas of reading, numeracy and wellbeing.  At the start of each year, a mandatory 2-day Teacher Convention offers international keynote speakers and workshops based around the system wide targets.

At Colonel Walker School there are another three school-based professional learning days where the school Learning Leaders deliver the professional learning. On these days, Colonel Walker School joins with two other schools. This provides opportunities for colleagues to work with staff from another school, in areas such as programming, data analysis, and consistent teacher judgment. At North Rocks, there are five Staff Development Days timetabled for professional learning opportunities throughout the year.

Within Colonel Walker School there are also School Champions. These are teachers who are trained in a particular area, e.g., Literacy Champion, Numeracy Champion and Well-being Champion. These Champions are then given 4x half days throughout the year of mandatory training provided by the Calgary Education Board on specific topics. It is then the School Champion’s responsibility to disseminate this learning back to the school.

At Colonel Walker School, their weekly school-based professional learning involved a cycle of analysing the research or the data, delivering the professional learning through a variety of cooperative learning strategies, and then setting an action or deliverable which would be required to be completed by a certain time so that it could be reflected upon in a later professional development session. This is exactly where North Rocks is headed in terms of our professional learning delivery.

# Conclusion / Recommendations & sharing

We know that quality teacher professional development is vital in ensuring the best student outcomes. Dedicating more time to professional learning that is delivered consistently to all staff across all schools is something that I would love to see more of in my school and in NSW.

When comparing the amount of professional learning opportunities at Colonel Walker School to North Rocks Public School’s one hour a week of school-based staff professional learning that comes with several interrupted weeks and our five staff development days a year, I can see how this increased amount of dedicated professional learning time could be used to build the knowledge and skills of teachers to improve the outcomes of our students. It would create a true collegial approach by facilitating opportunities for active collaboration, feedback and reflection as well as provide the time to drive and gain traction with the strategic directions of our School Improvement Plan.

The idea of School Champions and Learning Leaders who attend mandatory training and professional learning in their chosen field and then whose responsibility it is to disseminate this learning to all staff, is a concept I am interested in sharing with my staff at school.

We often live in a school bubble, so the opportunity for all our staff to learn alongside teachers from other schools and to hear firsthand the same consistent professional learning as well as experience the enthusiasm, excitement and passion for teaching that is generated from attending a Teacher Convention would be amazing. This is something that I feel is done on a smaller scale in NSW but would love to see it on a larger scale and available to everyone.

# Acknowledgements

1. Meike Thomsen, Colonel Walker School, Calgary Education Board, Alberta, Canada
2. Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible Learning - A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Routledge.
3. NSW Education Standards Authority. (2021). *Principles of Effective Professional Learning*. <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/teacher-accreditation/professional-development/information-for-providers/professional-learning-principles>