



Helping Keewatin Patricia
District School Board put
Students' Needs First

Pearson Efficacy Review CASE STUDY

“
All stakeholders create a culture of learning so that students come first.
”
—KPDSB Vision Statement

Students Come First with Efficacy

The Challenge

In 2013, when Sean Monteith became Director of Education of the Keewatin Patricia District School Board, he felt—through his experiences within the Board—that there were many challenges facing his students and staff.

But he also saw many opportunities for great success with the help of his passionate staff.

He believed that system change in KPDSB would be more readily accepted if the district engaged with an outside, critical expert, such as Pearson, as

opposed to following one person’s view of the organization.

KPDSB is a small, remote district with 5180 students (about 43% of whom identify as Aboriginal) spread out across 75 000 square kilometres. Mental health and social issues are part of the daily struggle for many of these students. Often government and community support services are so overwhelmed that waitlists for help are grievously long.

In addition to student challenges, many of KPDSB’s 1330 full- and part-time staff were also struggling.

- Teachers were “working in silos.”
- Many academic performance measures were declining.
- Senior staff seemed disconnected from school administration, classroom teachers, and Special Education staff.
- Genuine communication was lacking between school administrators and frontline classroom staff. As a result, teachers felt administrators simply delivered messages from a senior administration team that was perceived as removed from the reality of schools.

Background

In 2013, Keewatin Patricia District School Board staff and students felt that they required help to achieve learning goals and to create a sense of interconnectedness and community.

Goals

KPDSB wanted to assess, from an external and objective perspective, how it was doing in its efforts to put students first and to create a unified culture across this remote district.

Implementation

KPDSB underwent an Efficacy Review with Pearson Learning Services. Then the Board was able to create a new district culture where a servant-leadership model is widely accepted and students’ needs are at the center of all decisions. As a result, students now always come first, students and staff are succeeding, and the district is therefore making progress towards achieving its goals.



Efficacy Defined
“Efficacy means delivering meaningful progress for learners through encouraging stakeholders to invest in an organization and its reform process..”

“I felt that we were a Board that was incredibly incoherent,” explains Monteith. “We spent more time telling each other how coherent we were with our priorities when, in fact we had so many projects, focus areas, and plans, it was no wonder that our academic performance measures were going down. It was no wonder that people were feeling isolated. Even when I was Superintendent of Education, I felt confused as a member of Senior Administration about the direction we were taking.”

To Monteith, this was out of sync with the district’s vision statement, *“All stakeholders create a culture of learning so that students come first.”*

“We weren’t going along swimmingly; we were headed down the wrong track; and as a person who had come up through this very system, I saw many things that were inconsistent with putting kids first,” explains Monteith.

Solution

Before accepting the role of Director of Education in 2013, Monteith knew

he wanted the district to undergo an Efficacy Review.

Designed by Pearson’s Chief Learning Advisor, Sir Michael Barber, an Efficacy Review

- Looks at the current state of an organization
- Finds the barriers to success
- Offers an evidence-based model for change
- Creates an open and transparent discussion leading to a specific outline of actions necessary for an organization to create lasting positive change

“An Efficacy Review was the vehicle that I felt we needed to mobilize the serious and substantive structural changes that needed to occur within the Keewatin Patricia District School Board,” explains Monteith. *“We could assess, from an external and objective perspective, how the district was doing in our efforts to put kids first with every decision we made or needed to make.”*

In June 2014, after serving his first year as Director of Education, Monteith initiated an Efficacy Review with Pearson Learning Services.

Monteith and a team of teachers, administrators, and senior staff met with internationally recognized efficacy experts from Pearson Learning Services, ready to begin a week-long self-assessment. Additional stakeholder interviews in schools were conducted to further validate findings and to point to solutions from the field.

Using Pearson’s Efficacy Framework, designed to help systems analyze the effectiveness of their strategic plans, the team focused on one critical question: **What is the current state of efficacy of the Keewatin Patricia District School Board’s vision and strategic plan?**

“We basically asked, ‘Are we really putting kids first in the decisions we make?’ What we found out was that many people purported to be putting kids first in our Board, but they really weren’t: they were putting the needs of adults first,” explains Monteith.

From Daunting to Achievable

Shannon Bailey, Principal of Evergreen School, has been heavily involved in efficacy at KPDSB since June 2014. She explains that the Efficacy Review helped open everyone’s eyes to the struggles at KPDSB. The review took problems that once seemed daunting and broke them down into manageable steps forward.

“Until we began this process, I didn’t know what the outcomes could be,” says Bailey. *“I wasn’t aware of deficiencies, because this is something that our Board has never taken on before. It’s been through the review process, and with the action that followed, that we’ve realized the areas where we were struggling.”*

Three of the major change initiatives that resulted from the review include

- Flattening the organization and giving teachers a stronger voice in district decisions
- Understanding and addressing the needs of the whole student

- Creating a culture where everyone understands and implements the “kids come first” vision

The day the review ended, KPDSB staff began working to create major changes across the district, with the help of three-, six-, and twelve-month check-in sessions with Pearson.

Flattening the Organization

Monteith’s first step after the review was to start the work needed to convert the current top-down leadership model to a servant-leadership model. He spent three months traveling across the district, speaking with every staff member about the goals of efficacy, listening to their concerns, and answering their questions face-to-face.

He then formed a Teacher Efficacy Working Group, consisting of teachers from across the Board. The group met monthly to provide feedback, raise concerns, and ask questions about everything from plans to purchasing new technology to student mental health issues. This group eventually changed to include staff from all departments across the district and is now a 35-member group called the Staff Efficacy Group. Members of this group now participate in regular Senior Administration and Board meetings.

Monteith and his staff proclaim that the new servant-leadership model and the resulting efficacy group are significant. They have led to changes that have helped to flatten the organization, give teachers a voice, and change the culture at KPDSB.

Bailey says that creating the teacher group led to huge changes in the way decisions were made across the district.

“We were used to a culture where decisions were made at a top level and then disseminated down through the ranks,” she explains.

“For instance, in the past senior administration would make decisions on behalf of the organization, deliver that information at a principals’ meeting, and then principals would deliver the news to their staff. Now we’ve tipped the pyramid

What Is an Efficacy Framework? Pearson’s Efficacy Framework is a tool that helps systems analyze the effectiveness of their strategic plans

upside down. The first piece of information for consideration when making a decision is down at the grassroots level. Often teachers are now the first to have a voice, as opposed to the last.”

Arin Boyko, a Special Education Resource Teacher at Lillian Berg Public School, says teachers now feel empowered and believe their concerns are truly heard, considered, and supported.

“Our teacher voice is strengthening because we’re sitting at that table and we’re part of conversations that maybe we haven’t been privy to in the past. Our teacher voice is being valued and considered when big decisions are being made. I also think the student voice is being strengthened, because we are advocating for our students, and things are changing for the better for our students.”

Addressing the Needs of the Whole Student

While KPDSB has academic expectations for their students, they have always known that not all students come to school in a physical or mental state that is conducive to learning. Students often need more than academic support when they may also be dealing with concerns such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder, experiences with

suicide, foster care situations, or the need for clothing, food, or rest.

While staff have always done what they can to support students’ non-academic needs, the stronger focus on both academic and non-academic support has helped the district come together to find ways to work on internal and external methods of supporting the whole student. From meetings with the Ministry of Education to working closely with community agencies and mental health experts, KPDSB staff have gone above and beyond the call of duty.

For example, Bailey sees efficacy work being done to support students’ mental health. “We’ve connected with some amazing supports throughout the province, such as distinguished psychology researcher Dr. Stuart Shanker. He is working with our Board as of this year because we have identified that self-regulation is a really huge need for our students and not just at the early childhood stages. We have many kids who have experienced suicides in their family, or who have been removed from their homes for a variety of reasons, including abuse. We have kids who come to school to be fed, and who rely on the school to meet their basic needs.”



Putting Kids First

Before the Efficacy Review at KPDSB, there was a feeling that the Board office structure was too big, and tended to put procedures, policies, and processes ahead of putting kids first. *“As the director, I think it’s safe to say that many of those policies and procedures that were perceived to have been barriers to putting kids first have been smashed,”* says Monteith.

From flattening the organization to focusing on the whole child, changes such as creating the Staff Efficacy group are ensuring that the needs of children are considered in every single decision. The “Kids Come First” vision is pervasive and top-of-mind in every meeting and in every classroom and hallway discussion.

As Boyko explains, she sees her colleagues working to put kids first every day. *“Efficacy is helping to strengthen the resolution that kids come first. Sean is constantly saying, ‘Think about what you’re doing. If you can’t tell how or why this is putting kids first, then you need to think about it and change it and make sure you’re always putting kids first.’”*

“When we have a conversation about anything—for example, about whether or not we should choose Chromebooks for our laptops—it’s not about how much money it’s going to be, it’s about what is the best tool for these kids. Are we putting kids first?”

“The students-come-first stance is a living, breathing Magna Carta for us,” explains Monteith. *“That’s who we are. People mean it, they believe in it, it’s been a rallying point, and there is an empowerment and a pride in this organization that I have not seen before. That was part of the efficacy goals: that we are about kids, we are not about Board office structure.”*

The Results

A strong-willed but humble leader, Monteith is quick to point out that KPDSB’s efficacy success is a result of the difficult and often challenging work done by many people.

“I have my own views. They’re strong, but I’m not an expert and I’m not doing this alone. I’m also working with my frontline folks every month—my teachers and efficacy group members—and I’m being coached by the Vice-President of Efficacy with Pearson Learning Services, which is a very respected organization. Together we feel very good about where we’re going.”

This hard work has led to countless successes and improvements, some of which include

- The largest increase in enrolment in one year in KPDSB’s entire history—as a result, the Board hired more teaching and Early Childhood Education staff and has been able to expand more programs and bring more new opportunities to students and those that work with them everyday
- Securing funding for a brand new \$30-million state-of-the-art high school in Sioux Lookout
- The launch of Hockey Canada Skills Academies in four communities—giving students a reason to come to school (and maintain their grades) when many did not see a reason for attending classes and doing school work
- Improvements in all student achievement measurements in Grades 3, 6, and 9
- Installing video-conferencing equipment in every school, thereby keeping staff off the roads and in classrooms and schools

While the list of accomplishments is long, Monteith and his staff know there is still plenty of work to do. *“If you were to put this on a sliding scale, I would say 70 percent of the heavy lifting that required change in this organization has now been done. And some of that 70 percent was of the most difficult and challenging caliber. But we still have lots to do.”*

Of course these changes have not come without a cost. Monteith explains that efficacy is challenging for everyone, because change is challenging.

“Efficacy has not been easy for some people in this system,” explains Monteith.

“And I’m unapologetic for that because we are in the business of supporting children. In Northwestern Ontario we have more severe cases of high-needs kids than anywhere else in this country. So I would say the urgency is even greater; the stakes are even higher.”

Despite the challenges, KPDSB staff are proud of their accomplishments.

“We have received national recognition for our work, and frequently are called upon to share our success stories with provincial leaders and other boards because, as we have often identified, our work and our achievement, when you look at where we start with our kids, is truly nothing short of heroic. We are where we are because of our staff and the school leaders that work for them; and both of these groups work for kids—all of our kids,” says Monteith.

“I’m incredibly proud of what has happened in this organization and the fact that maybe I had a small part in it.”

—Sean Monteith,
Director of Education, KPDSB

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—Sean Monteith,
Director of Education, KPDSB

“I think the Teacher Efficacy Group it is a powerful venue for teachers to be able to talk with the Director about the things that are going on at the classroom level and the challenges they face.”

—Chantal Moore,
Principal, Ignace School

“The beauty of it is that the director has a direct connection with the people who are working with the children. He has a better understanding of what’s going on in classrooms, and what the needs and struggles are in our classrooms and what our struggles are in meeting the goals for our students.”

—Chantal Moore,
Principal, Ignace School