

Learning for All: Supporting Students with Significant Disabilities A community of practice for district leaders and consultants

Final Report (June 2015)

Background

Alberta Regional Professional Learning Consortia (through the Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium), in collaboration with Alberta Education, hosted a one-year community of practice for district leaders and consultants who are supporting teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. This project built on the work of the 2011—2015 *Literacy for All, Numeracy for All* and *Peer Mentoring to Support Students with Significant Disabilities* communities of practice, *Learning for All Summer Institute for Teachers of Students with Significant Disabilities*, as well as ERLC-sponsored professional development with international experts Erik Carter, Caroline Musselwhite and Karen Erickson.

Participants

Invitations, coordinated through the regional consortiums, were sent to all school authorities in the province. Jurisdictions were encouraged to send a team of three participants. Nine school authorities participated:

- Black Gold Regional Schools
- Edmonton Catholic Schools
- Edmonton Public Schools
- Elk Island Catholic Separate Regional Divisions
- Elk Island Public Schools
- Fort McMurray Catholic Schools
- Northern Lights School Division
- Medicine Hat Catholic Board of Education
- Pembina Hills Regional Division

Goals of the community of practice

This community was organized around principles, research and practices that promote and support inclusion, accessibility, and literacy and numeracy learning for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Participants participated in an online community of practice from September 2014 to June 2015, with the members-only website remaining available until December 2015.

The three goals of this community of practice were to:

1. Collaboratively develop, collect and share information and strategies for building district, school and teacher capacity to better support students with significant disabilities.

Results:

- *Through the final survey, 53% of participants strongly agreed that we met this goal, 37% agreed, 10% somewhat agreed and no participants responded with a "disagree".*
- *The thoughtful detailed plans for local capacity building activities that were shared and discussed during the wrap-up day are strong evidence that this community has developed the knowledge, skills and attitudes to plan and implement effective professional development strategies for building system capacity.*

2. Explore and share best practices related to creating meaningful learning opportunities and effective supports for students with significant disabilities.

Results:

- *Through the final survey, 53% of participants strongly agreed that we met this goal, 47% agreed, and no participants responded with “somewhat agree” or “disagree”.*
- *The research summaries, webinar content, participants’ reflections, and conversation guides developed throughout the year are strong evidence of the sharing of best practices throughout this project. This quality content will be repurposed and migrated to a public website so other educators in the province can benefit from this learning.*

3. Explore ways in which learning opportunities and supports can better address diverse learner needs, including how technology can change ways in which students engage in their learning.

Results:

- *Through the final survey, 53% of participants strongly agreed that we met this goal, 42% agreed, 5% somewhat agreed and no participants responded with a “disagree”.*
- *Throughout the webinars, and through reflection activities during the wrap-up days, participants shared and discussed changes in practice they had observed in classrooms across their districts. This is strong evidence that the community has been actively exploring new ways of creating learning opportunities and providing supports so that students with significant disabilities are more engaged and successful learners.*

Key components

Components of this community of practice, managed by a contracted facilitator and supported by a senior manager from Alberta Education, included:

- Two-day face-to-face orientation session in September 2014
- Distribution of two professional learning resources to all participants
- Creation of online space for participants to share and access research, information and resources through the year <http://learningforallab.weebly.com/>
- Four one-hour interactive webinars (October, November, February, March)
- One-day face-to-face wrap-up session in May 2015
- Data-gathering activities during webinars, wrap-up session, and through final survey
- Local capacity building activities to be completed by participating jurisdictions before October 2015

Legacy plans

- Research summaries, webinar content, participants’ reflections, and conversation guides are being migrated to a new online professional development resource *Learning for All: Supporting Students with Significant Disabilities*, to be posted on Alberta Professional Development Consortia website, September 2015
- Sample professional learning activities and information will be incorporated into the new online professional development resource *Creating Communities of Practices*, to be posted on Alberta Professional Development Consortia website, September 2015
- Each of the nine participating jurisdictions are planning a related capacity building activity in their district, to be completed by October 31, 2015

Appendix: Local Capacity Building Activities Plans

- **What Every Principal Needs to Know:** Blended professional learning activities combined with guided school and classroom visits (Black Gold Regional Schools)
Objective: Administrators will become familiar with best instructional practices for students with significant disabilities and be better able to operationalize Black Gold's Principal Quality Standards related to Inclusive Education.
- **Community of Practice for High School Teachers Supporting Students with Significant Disabilities** (Edmonton Catholic)
Objective: Teachers will develop practices that enhance educational and life skills opportunities for students with significant disabilities in high school.
- **Emergent Literacy 101 for Administrators:** two half-day seminars with presentations and hands-on learning opportunities (Edmonton Public)
Objective: School Administrators will know what it "looks like and sounds like" when emergent literacy strategies are successfully and consistently implemented.
- **Literacy Instruction for Students with Significant Disabilities:** one-day summer workshops for grades 2 to 6 teachers (Elk Island Public Schools)
Objective: Teachers will be introduced to the Student Support Services consulting team and will increase their understanding of a variety of literacy strategies and resources for students with significant disabilities.
- **Learning for All Google Group:** Web-based learning group for teachers working with students with significant disabilities (Elk Island Catholic Schools)
Objective: Teachers will enhance their professional practice through sharing and discussing new research and resources, and mentoring and supporting others in implementing new strategies.
- **Building Relationships Through Peer Mentoring:** Train-the-trainer model for teachers and education assistants who will support peer mentoring through an option class (Fort McMurray Catholic)
Objective: Junior high students and staff will be able to create authentic opportunities for social interactions and friendships for students with significant disabilities.
- **Teaching Emergent Writers:** One-to-one coaching for teachers and educational assistants in using the First Authors' Writing curriculum resource (Medicine Hat Catholic)
Objective: Teachers gain confidence and skills in using writing assessment, planning for instruction and supports, identifying type of alternate pencils for students who need them, and designing engaging learning tasks.
- **A Guided Book Study and Conversation of Quick Guides to Inclusion:** Four sessions embedded into regular SST meetings. Follow up activities and information embedded into a Google classroom. (Northern Lights)
Objective: Participants will explore and share best practices related creating meaningful learning opportunities and effective supports for students with significant disabilities.

- **Language and Literacy for Students with Complex Communication Needs:** Coaching a team supporting one student and then sharing learning from this experience with RtI lead teachers and administrators (Pembina Hills Regional Division)
Objective: RtI leads and school administrators will gain an understanding of evidence-based literacy and communication intervention strategies available for students with complex communication needs.

Participants have committed to sharing a number of components (e.g., workshop materials, slide decks, agendas, results etc.) of their capacity building activities and these will be compiled in October and posted on the members-only site until December 2015.

More information on the structure, activities, sample tools, results, participants' feedback, and budget for this project will be available in the case study *Learning for All: Supporting Students with Significant Disabilities, A Community of Practice for District Leaders and Consultants* that will be including in the new online resource *Creating Online Communities of Practice* (available on the Alberta Regional Learning Consortium website September 2015.)