School Plan Analysis of Yorkson Creek Middle School

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Yorkson Creek Middle School’s (YCMS) Action Plan for Learning (APFL) is built around Apple’s 8 Elements of Success, which are Vision, Team, Community, Measurement, Professional Learning, Environmental Design, Financial Sustainability and Student Learning. Langley School District has adopted this framework for goal setting and change initiatives at all levels of the school district. Administrators in the district were trained by Apple trainers at their annual conference in Whistler. With the adoption of the 8 Elements of Success framework the goal is for the district is to create a common language around how change and growth are initiated, implemented and measured at all levels. A huge area of focus at the district and school level is to be around utilizing the power of various teams to implement vision; in addition, engaging the community in the process while ensuring financial sustainability.

In addition to utilizing the 8 Elements of Success, the APFL at YCMS is directly influenced by and aligned with Middle School philosophy as outlined in the Middle School Pillars and Core Values. Furthermore, the APFL must align with the Langley School District’s Vision and Mission statement. In this analysis, I will unpack the components of YCMS’s current APFL through the 8 Elements of Success.

**Vision**

In the Vision section of the APFL, school leaders are asked to articulate the ‘why’ for their learning initiative. In this section, it is noted that all staff will help build and take action around the vision and goals and that they will utilize it to inform and guide their practice. The goal also needs to be clearly articulated in this section. Ultimately, this section of the action plan is intended to be utilized as the filter for decisions made about learning in the school.

The mission statement at YCMS was established through a collaborative staff process in 2016, and it has not changed since. This year, the school lost half of its population and has had an administration change, yet the mission statement was not formally revisited this year. It was informally visited through some activities during staff meetings this fall. As a staff, though, we were not explicitly told that the activities we were participating in were designed to revisit the and reaffirm the mission statement. Upon polling several staff it appears that most of us believe the mission statement to still be valid. However, there are some people who wonder if we have lost the deeper meaning around the words we initially chose, and if that underlying meaning needs to be unpacked as a staff once again.

The goal of YCMS’s APFL is “to improve student literacy achievement in non-fiction while developing a sense of belonging using the structures of the Middle School philosophy”. The vision section of the plan then goes on to state research around student engagement and sense of belonging and how it impacts student achievement. The specific researcher utilized outlines how a sense of belong has a direct correlation to an increase in student success. As such, the justification of combining of a literacy goal with a social emotional goal has been made specifically and deliberately. The original article referenced is archived with the evidence and artifacts to support the APFL.

Tracking achievement in ‘non-fiction’ versus just literacy in general was a deliberate word choice by the committee last year. We changed it from literacy achievement to ‘in non-fiction’, for one of the key data sources used to measure growth is the District Assessment of Reading Team (DART), a reading assessment where the materials used are non-fiction. This section also includes school context data, where key contextual pieces of information are noted and highlighted. A key understanding throughout the current document is that although the YCMS goal has not changed in the last two years, our population and demographic underwent a major shift last year when our student population went from 1124 students to 519, thus resetting the data.

Each school in Langley must have a literacy goal that aligns with the district’s overarching literacy goals. As a middle school, we are in between the district’s goals around primary literacy and school completion. Therefore, we are in a bridging situation where we must look at where students are coming from and where they are heading. The adoption of a social emotional goal by many middle schools has been seen as a way to continue to build literacy, while addresses the unique needs of adolescents during this stage of development.

As a district level a series of dinner sessions with Jennifer Katz, one of the authors of “Ensouling our Schools” has been set up, and each school has established a team of teachers that attends. Therefore, the inclusion of Katz’s research in the APFL was deliberate, for it ties into our social emotional goal. It also ties into the district’s goals around supporting Universal Design for Learning and Social Emotional well-being of all students in the district, which in turn connects to literacy and completion initiatives throughout Langley School District.

It is important to note that the mission statement as well as the goal align with Standard 1 of the BCPVPA standards, that “principals and vice-principals guide the development and implementation of shared values, mission, and goals to support engagement, learning, and success of all learners”(BCPVPA, 2019, p. 12). In fact, the APFL and all of the sections of the APFL are designed around ensuring that YCMS is fostering a “safe and inclusive learning environment focused on students learning” while maintaining an “inclusive process for sustaining the focus of the school and the district”(BCPVPA, 2019, p. 12).

**Team**

In the Team section, the goal is to create teams that will own, plan, and implement the learning initiatives outlined in the APFL. The hope is that teams of leaders have been selected or have volunteered, and that they represent all learners within the APFL. Each of the teams should be linked to the goals of individual learners and to the school goal. Teams meet on a regular basis to reflect and collaborate about their role and/ or initiatives connect to the APFL.

At YCMS, the current administration has done an excellent job of developing several teams to support the goal of the APFL. Currently there are eight teams listed in this section of the APFL and under each team, there is a direct connection to their role in supporting and implementing the APFL. The first key team is that of the Team Leaders, of which I am a member as the Grade 8 Team Leader. In this role, it is my responsibility to set a collaboration agenda with my team that includes sub-goals directly related to the school goal. For example, we work together to code DART results in the fall and then use that data to inform our instructional practices as a Grade Eight team. We also plan and execute Grade Eight activities that promote the student’s social emotional needs, and literacy. Team leaders meet once a month as a group and we always revisit the school goal and the initiatives our individual teams have adopted and implemented to support the goal.

The remaining teams have been developed to support the either the literacy portion of the goal – for example the Literacy Initiative Team (which I am also a member of) or the social emotional portion of the goal – for example the Ensouling our Schools Team (which I am a member of). There is obviously overlap, for the goal of the teams is to work together because the two components of the goal are meant to complement each other. In this section, two of the teams specifically focus on the equity portion of a school plan – specifically students on IEP’s and from and Aboriginal background (Resource and Support Staff Team and the Ensouling Our Schools Team). In our school, providing multiple opportunities for teachers to voice their opinions through the various teams is done well. In addition, strategies are outlined in how to help students have a voice in the planning around some of the decision making and implementation strategies. One team specifically – Where Everyone Belongs (WEB) Team is deliberately designed to include teacher facilitators and Grade Eight Student mentors. The Grade Eight mentors provide feedback and help plan initiatives to make Grade Sixes feel welcome starting on the first day of school. The Grade Eights who apply for these positions, directly influence the creation of community and sense of belonging with our new Grade Six students.

Our administration team does a great job adding the amazing ideas and initiatives teachers develop and adopt them as part of the plan. I know that this document and the artifacts attached to it are constantly being updated through the effectiveness of the teams that have been built in the school. Teams that are supported by, but not always directed by the administrators.

**Community**

In the Community section, the goal is to outline how to engage your community, so stakeholders understand and support the vision outlined in the APFL. Specifically, these plans are shared as a family of schools, and the goal is that they align within a family of schools. Therefore, through transitions from the feeder schools to the middle school and the middle school to the high school, the goals are working together not against each other. It is important that the APFL is visible and transparent and is communicated to all the necessary stakeholders, including parents and students.

This section of YCMS’s APFL includes how it is shared through posting the vision and mission on the school website and in the school planner. How updates and initiatives connected to the APFL are shared at PAC meetings, where parents are encouraged to ask questions. Parents are also engaged through student led conferences, which have been structured to ensure that learning directly associated with the APFL is highlighted. This was a huge team leader initiative this past term, where we collaboratively worked with our teams to ensure that the format of our student led conferences aligned with showcasing learning connected to the APFL.

This section also outlines how the literacy and social emotional learning initiatives are shared at Middle School Networking meetings with the District Leadership Team and other Middle School Administrators, and how this is done utilizing teacher leaders. I have been a teacher leader at three of these meetings now, so I know that there is authentic follow through on this strategy. These are interesting opportunities, because you get a sense that what you are presenting is also being utilized to help guide the plans of other schools and support their goals.

Finally, the APFL includes school wide initiatives such as the Global Read Aloud. It was deliberately mentioned here, for we adopted it as a staff two years ago to build community around literacy and a sense of belonging. The learning is shared on a communication board outside of the Learning Commons as well some classes connect globally to share their learning and broaden the net of belonging. This initiative is highlighted here as a community activity, because it also brings together several of the teams outlined in the team section.

Community building is echoed in Standard 8 of the BCPVPA Leadership Standards. This section of the APFL directly ties into these standards, particularly the “development of networks to enhance student learning within and between schools and the community”(BCPVPA, 2019, p. 29).

**Measurement**

 In the Measurement section, the purpose is to establish ways to measure your progress against the goal. The utilization of a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data is expected. Often the qualitative data helps guide the direction of the goal and the vision. The quantitative data becomes necessary, particularly for hitting district goals that need to be quantified to show measurable growth on a larger scale. The data needs to be disaggregated (ex Aboriginal, LSS, CIC) to represent all learners in the APFL.

 YCMS’s APFL in this area lists a huge number of measurement tools that have been utilized to collect data and artifacts to show evidence of growth. The quantitative data that must also be shared at the District level is the spring scores for the DART. These spring scores are also used as a marker to see trends and growth from Grade Six to Grade Eight. With the split in populations, this key set of data will reset this spring. Other benchmarks, such as the FSA’s (Fundamental Skills Assessments) and DNA’s (District Numeracy Assessment) can be accessed for individual students in MyAnalytics. Through this software, individual student progress can be monitored on collection tools that use quantitative data. Other quantitative data is collected through surveys around social emotional learning including the “Tell Them From Me” survey to all grades and the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) given to Grade 7 students every second year at the school.

Many of the most valuable measures being used at the school level are qualitative. These include looking at responses to school based cross curricular assessments using the core competencies – these student reflections, particularly around the personal and social responsibility give us valuable insight into how students are seeing the work we are doing around belonging. Teacher’s anecdotal observations around reading and writing initiatives are analyzed and discussed as grade teams, and we use these trends to guide our progress in relation to the goal.

As noted above the leaders at YCMS have ensured that “teachers are important part in data collection, analysis and dialogue about student learning.” This aligns with Standard 4 of BCPVPA standards, where Principals and Vice-Principals “have a deep pedagogical understanding and skill set to promote learning.” What is also appreciated in our building is that they ask for support in this area when they are grappling with the best ways to collect and analyze data. Of course, this standard is also reflected throughout the document, where research is used to support initiatives and teacher and student learning is supported and modeled.

**Professional Learning**

 In the Professional Learning section, the APFL needs to clearly outline how to support a culture of ongoing professional learning around the mission and goals. Research needs to be used to inform decisions about moving practice forwards, and teacher leaders volunteer to lead learning of the APFL. A plan for mentorship within the school needs to be outlined, and this plan needs to be clear on how it differentiates the support for all levels of professional learners. Professional learning plans need to be visible and connected to the APFL.

 In this section of the APFL a long list of professional learning activities and strategies are listed. One of the key pieces is the use of literacy benchmarks such as the DART to develop literacy programs in the school. Collaboration time is purposely built into the timetable at YCMS. Team leaders need to ensure that this time is partially used to work together to use the fall DART results to set goals for the year around literacy. We check in throughout the year and share lessons and strategies. As Grade Eight team leader I encourage the team to share strategies they have been using in the classroom, and we work to support new staff who may not be familiar with the structure. In addition, as team leader, at monthly team leader meetings, I report back on initiatives and progress amongst the Grade Eight group. I am also responsible for collecting some of the anecdotal/ qualitative evidence from my team for the APFL evidence.

 The APFL states that time will be utilized at staff meeting to highlight and celebrate learning opportunities. In practice this year, this has been the case. Unfortunately, there are often several members of staff not present at these meetings, and it becomes difficult for there to be true traction of actual full staff professional learning at these meetings.

In this section, many statements start with ‘continue to’. When asked about this, my administrator noted that we are fortunate to have a staff that is willing to work together and also seek out learning opportunities. Many of the staff are great about sharing their learning, and for the most part the staff is open to learning from each other. This is not always the case, but right now, that seems to be the general sense in the school. Our Learning Commons Team of teachers is also excellent about side- by-side teaching and coaching teachers who ask for support. They work with teachers to set individual goals aligned with the school goal. That team is really working hard at trying to bring in some of the more reluctant teachers, but slowly building trust with them.

Instructional leadership as outlined in Standard 3 of the BCPVPA Leadership Standards is strong at YCMS and this is evident in many sections, but particularly this one. Leaders in our building ensure that teacher “engage in purposeful and on-going dialogue about student growth” through staff meetings, collaboration time and the various team structures (BCPVPA, 2019, p. 18). They also ensure that they have created a learning environment for teacher and students where “learners are the core participants”(BCPVPA, 2019, p. 18).
**Environmental Design**

 In the Environmental Design section, the APFL needs to outline the design for infrastructure, management strategies, workflow solutions, and physical environments to support learning. Structures including timetables and schedules that reflect that of collaborative practices are encouraged. In addition, providing structured and flexible learning environment that reflect the needs of learners should be evident. Technology usage and how it will support learning within the APFL should also be noted.

 The first line of this section is “align YCMS’s Action Plan to District Action Plans for Learning.” It goes on to explain how the school was designed to allow for collaborative spaces for students and teachers, including the fact that classes are podded. We are fortunate that the school was built specifically for middle school students with a collaborative, pod structure. Teachers in our school LOOP, which means they stay with their students for Grades 6 & 7. This is tied to research around supporting the social emotional needs of students during these critical years of development.

 The school also has an advisory program, where all grades connect with a supportive adult in the building, allowing them to build connections outside of their classroom and pod. The advisory program in our school is structured around the Character Strong program, and the Character Strong team supports staff in the school, highlighting lessons and ensuring teachers feel comfortable implementing the content. The Character Strong program and advisory are designed to support he social emotional component of YCMS’s APFL.

The variety of structures listed in this section are ultimately tied back to the goal and mission statement of our school and have been set up to support the ‘why’ at YCMS.

**Financial Sustainability**

 In the Financial Sustainability section, the expected costs and possible savings over time need to be identified to ensure long-term sustainability of the initiative. Here the must align financial resources (i.e. staffing, resources, release time) to APFL. Staff wellness should also be reflected in the budgeting for professional learning, collaborative spaces and resources that can be shared.

 Here the APFL for YCMS clearly outlines that need to spend money on new resources that are aligned with the literacy goals and also aligned with the district’s balanced literacy plan. In addition, it talks about how it funds the various teams. Finally, it notes the PAC’s contributions to the goal in specific areas such as the Learning Commons and the self-regulation tools. It also notes where we have been able to secure grants for areas such as the Makerspace and how we utilize this space and these grants and align it with the school goal of belonging and non-fiction literacy through hand on learning experiences. I noted that there is no mention of staff wellness in this particular section of the APFL.

**Student Learning**

 In the Student Learning section, the APFL needs to articulate how the school is exploring and utilizing new tools and materials to enhance student learning. It needs to articulate how students show their learning in multiple ways in connection to the APFL. Furthermore, how will student growth specific to the APFL be displayed and discussed throughout the year. Finally, how is student learning personalized to meet the goals in the APFL.

 YCMS’s APFL is grounded in SD 35’s Balanced Literacy Guides and Aboriginal Principals of Learning are embedded in all literacy instruction. The DART is once again mentioned in this section as a starting point in the fall to guide interventions to be put in throughout the year. Targeted interventions through the Resource room are also mentioned, to ensure that students are receiving instruction at their level. Throughout the year, we discuss these initiatives as a grade team and my job is to report back to the Team Leader Team. In addition, the Literacy Initiative Team meets and provides lessons and ideas to support teachers at staff meetings, through emails, and through informal conversations. Schoolwide initiatives, such as the Global Read Aloud are mentioned again in these section, for the common connection to this text is used as a connecting to other learning throughout the school all year.

Highlights in this section include innovated opportunities, such as YCMS’s Exhibition of Wonder, where students are given opportunities to participate in design methodology which using their passions as the driving force. Actual qualitative data connected to this initiative and the social emotional goal will be collected this spring through my thesis.

All the Teams are mentioned in this section, and how they are working towards enhancing student learning. This section also strongly aligns with the BCPVPA Standard 3, particularly the leaders in the building demonstrating a willingness to “inspire and support innovation” in the best interests of the students (BCPVPA, 2019, p. 19). Many of the initiatives listed throughout the APFL would not be possible without this support and the “culture of continuous improvement” that the leaders in this building have cultivated.

**Conclusion**

Overall, there are a lot of great structures and teams in place at YCMS. The current administrative team is very open to input from staff and parents about how to best support students. Decisions are developed with equity in mind, and various stakeholder, including students are consulted about the effectiveness of the structures we have in place. The strength of YCMS’s teams is an indicator that school decisions are collective, and not just made to fulfill a requirement by the district. The archived evidence shows that real work is being done towards improving the lives of our students.

**References**

BCPVPA. (2019). *BCPVPA leadership standards*. Retrieved from https://bcpvpa.bc.ca/oleadership-standards-for-principals-and-vice-principals-in-bc/