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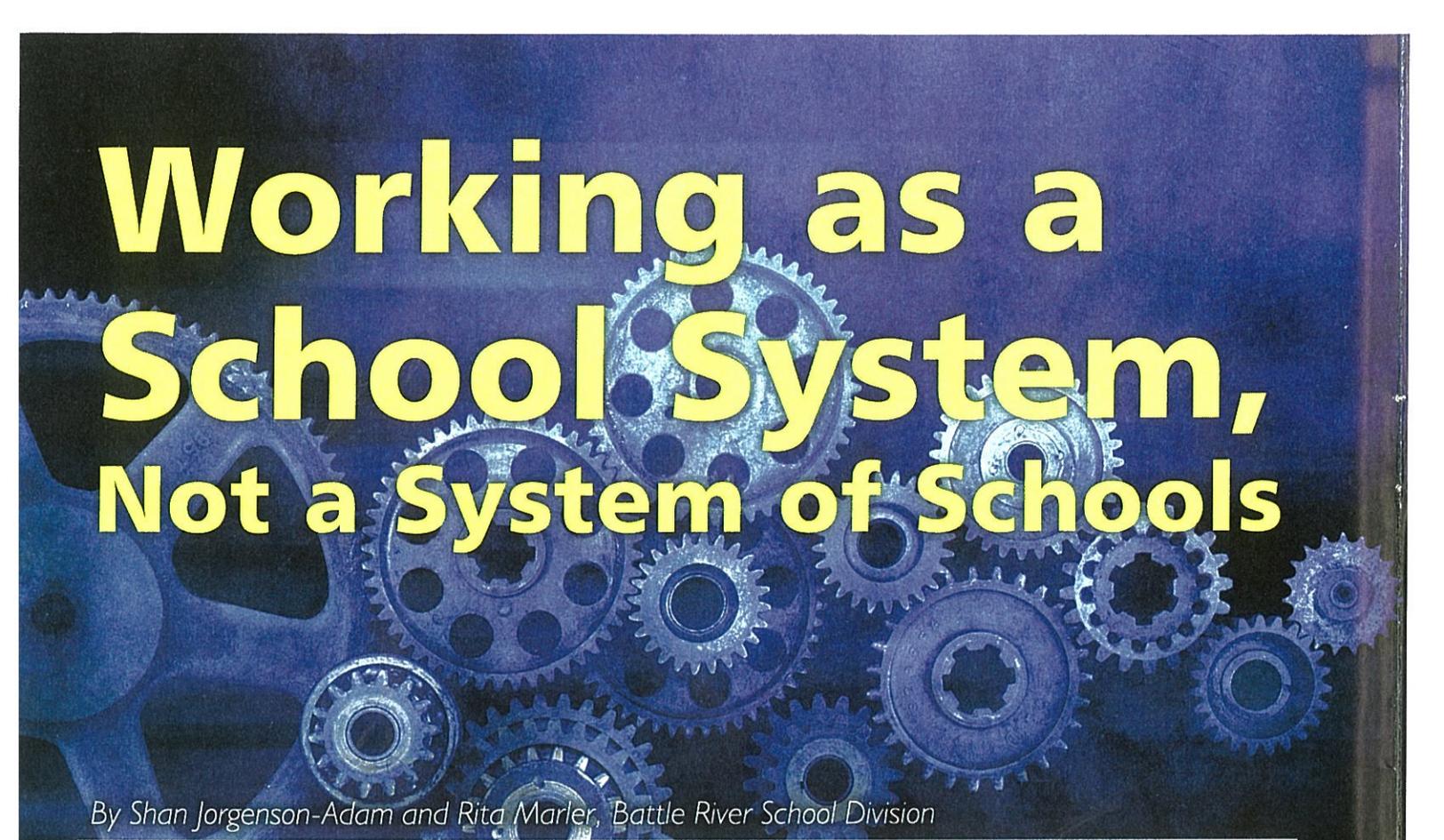
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**Strong System
Leadership =**

Student Success





Working as a School System, Not a System of Schools

By Shan Jorgenson-Adam and Rita Marler, Battle River School Division

“I feel like Battle River School Division is on the cusp of greatness.”

– BRSD Principal, Start Right Conversations, 2017-2018 school year

A rewarding comment and reaffirmation that we are doing the right work and moving in the right direction. This is the third year of our Start Right conversations, where we spend 30 minutes with all our principals, vice principals and division leadership.

When we first began these conversations, it was with the goals of deepening relationships and gaining feedback on the work being done throughout the division to plan moving forward. Now, in year three, these conversations have continued to support our goals. They are an affirmation, that the work we set out to do after our first round of Start Right conversations, is gaining momentum and making a difference.

Year one (2015-2016) of these conversations provided us with the data, that as system leaders, we had made progress in building relational trust. Leaders felt supported and were pleased with how lines of communication had

been strengthened. However, it was very apparent that, for the most part, we were a system of schools not a school system. Principals and vice principals knew what they wanted to do in their respective schools and with their staff, but there was a definite lack of clarity around our work as a school division.

As the system leadership team, we gathered all the feedback provided from these conversations. We set out on the road of moving schools from being individual schools (islands), to a united, interdependent and successful school system. We spent the year revisiting both our division vision, “Every student, Every Day a Success” and our division-wide priorities, “Every Day Four: Welcoming and Caring Environments, Numeracy, Literacy, and 21st Century Learning and Teaching.”

We knew that we needed to create a common understanding around what these should look like, sound like and feel like across our

division. School based leadership and their staff needed to understand why our vision of “Every Student, Every Day a Success” was necessary, and they needed to understand how we would do this work together to ensure its’ achievement.

In planning for the year, we dedicated a large portion of our “Leading and Learning” sessions—where we get together regularly with administration and division leadership staff—as time for us to build clarity and focus in relation to our vision and Every Day Four. In addition, we regularly visited schools and met with administrators. We added two education technology positions and sought feedback from all stakeholders regarding our work, to determine where we needed to provide additional resources, professional learning and support.

By the end of this year we had a new professional development model, a new literacy focus, knew where we needed to focus in relation to

educational technology and a draft numeracy framework. As research by Hattie (2012) and Robinson (2011) demonstrates, teachers have the biggest impact on student success. We knew that our greatest avenue to teachers were our administrators. We knew that the time with them during our Leading and Learning meetings was not enough. We needed more.

In planning for the next school year, we budgeted so that our principals would not have a teaching assignment. We would plan to have them meet with us six times over the year in what we call "Principal Academy." We also changed the format of our Leading and Learning so that it would be only a half day for both administrators with vice principals remaining for the afternoon in a "Vice Principal Academy."

For the second year (2016-2017) of our "Start Right Conversations" we asked administrators and division leadership to come prepared to discuss three topics: Battle River School Divisions' positive core; what opportunities for growth does this "Start Right" process create for BRSD; and what supports they would need individually and for their staff to achieve our vision, "Every Student, Every Day, A Success."

From these discussions, several key themes arose including being student-centred, everyone being on the same team, continuous improvements, and having a strong and cohesive leadership team. We found opportunities to grow, as well, including focusing on what's important, being open to recommendations, ensuring team members were being validated for what they were doing and where they were going, and building personal connections and trust. Finally, when we asked how we could support our staff and students, ideas such as mentoring, making regular contact, learning how to properly use data, and building on what we had already started to create, arose as key themes.

Much of what we had planned for the year spoke to the themes that surfaced in these conversations. One of our key tasks was to ensure that staff understood that we were not doing more, but that we were going deeper. We were working harder to ensure that ALL had the same understanding of our purpose and our "why" (Hierck and Williams, 2015).

We believed our Principal Academy, our new Professional Learning Model (Timperly, 2011), Leading and Learning, and the Vice

Principal Academy would be key ways in which to accomplish these goals and address the themes from the Start Right conversations. We also undertook a full Inclusive Education review in support of our work in "Welcoming and Caring."

In addition, as a division leadership team, we broke into pairs and made regular visits to our schools. During these visits, we met with the school administration team and discussion focussed on ensuring student success. Principals were required to make regular classroom visits and provide teachers with feedback in relation to their teaching strengths, areas for growth, next steps and how they could support them.

School data was examined and learning services support staff worked with administration and teachers in building capacity in all the areas of our Every Day Four. We brought in award-winning educator, author and consultant, Charlie Coleman, to spend three days in the division to work with school teams and administrators in the area of school culture and creating positive learning environments.

During this year we used a number of books to focus and deepen our work: *The Principal 50: Critical Leadership Questions for Inspiring Schoolwide Excellence* by Baruti K. Kafele (2015); *Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most*, by Peter M. Dewitt (2016); and *Using Data to Focus Instructional Improvement*, by Cheryl James-Ward, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and Diane Lapp (2013).

We covered a lot of territory during the year. However, it was not until we were three quarters of the way through the year that we began to see our principals being more vulnerable with one another and reflecting on their own strengths and areas requiring growth. We knew one year of this work wasn't enough. Consequently, when budget discussions for the following year began, finding a means to continue this work was a priority.

As the 2016-2017 school year drew to a close, we reflected on the progress made, the recommendations coming out of our inclusive education review, and feedback from our professional learning series and Principal Academy. We began to plan our work moving forward.

The end of the year found us planning another year of professional learning series, moving to a more centralized budgeting and

staffing model, creating division wide numeracy cohorts, providing more individual literacy support to teaching staff in planning, instruction and data analysis, adding three school-based collaboration days to our calendar and planning for and enhancing another year of Principal Academy.

After seeing Tom Hierck present at the fall CASS Conference, and having spent a year working on school culture with his colleague Charlie Coleman, we knew he was just what we needed to support us in our work with our principals. As a result, we partnered with him to work with us during the upcoming 2017-2018 school year. Momentum was building!

Having just completed a third year of "Start Right" conversations and reflecting on those from the previous two years, we know we have accomplished much. The themes arising from this year's conversations mirror much of what was shared in year two. However, leadership were much more open in regard to where they still needed support. Conversations were framed around two things: "Continue and Consider." If participants had suggestions for us to consider we also asked them to provide a plan of action to address it.

We are keenly aware that there is still much to do. Are we fully a school division and not a district of schools? No, but we are certainly closer. We believe there is clarity around both our purpose and our why, with both BRSD division and school based leadership. However, there is still work to be done in supporting our administrators to build this clarity with our teachers and support staff.

We agree with the principal whom we quoted at the beginning of this article. We are on the cusp of greatness! We look forward to our continued journey in achieving our vision "Every Student, Every Day, A Success." ■

Shan Jorgenson-Adam is the Assistant Superintendent-Learning, Battle River School Division. Rita Marler is the Superintendent of Battle River School Division.

References

References for this article are available by contacting Editor-in-Chief, Shannon Savory, at ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net.