

Interview with Learning Forward BC

Nancy Bennett, Principal Eagle Mountain Middle School

LFBC: Hello Nancy, thanks for spending time with us, sharing the journey of your school. We would like to start off by asking you to briefly describe your program.

NB: Eagle Mountain Middle School, opened as a new grades 6-8 middle school in SD 43(Coquitlam), in September 2015, with an initial understanding by all staff who joined the team that we would be actively exploring innovation, especially during this time of province-wide curriculum transformation. Although just a year and a half into its journey, we like to say that we have been working on our transformation for at least five years. In middle schools all over our district, individual and small teams of teachers had been learning about and changing their practice through project based learning or inquiry based learning. That was definitely the starting point for teachers as they began to look at their work and student learning differently.

As we opened Eagle Mountain, teachers collectively acknowledged that “Learners at the Centre” was going to be our touchstone, and would be central to all decision-making. Early on we articulated our hopes and dreams for the qualities that learners would have when they left middle school. These statements, “Our Learners Will Be...” were also pivotal in keeping our fledgling plans on track and learner focussed.

We completed a collaborative inventory of new and best practices that we believed would enhance student engagement and ensure that our students would be active participants in their 30 months of learning at middle school. And, then we gave ourselves collective permission to be learners, alongside our students and create communities of learning, where the adults were learning with and from each other as rapidly as the students. Different teacher and different teams used different innovative strategies as their entry points, and added other strategies as the opportunities were right.

LFBC: Thinking about your students, what are some of the classroom practices/strategies you are using that have transformed the learning experience?

NB: In our second year, we are able to look at our lengthy list of innovative teaching/learning practices and identify the ‘pillars’ or ‘game changers’; the strategies that caused our practice to shift the most. Staff have now identified our top 5: Inquiry based learning, integrated curriculum, staff collaboration as our connecting strategy, a focus on the core competencies and enhanced practices to communicate student learning. To a person, all teaching staff at Eagle Mountain value and employ these strategies in their professional work.

Our other innovative teaching and learning strategies are also important pieces of the puzzle in our setting, but, in and of themselves, not specifically transformational.

LFBC: What are the ways that you and your students are shaping/developing the core competencies?

NB: This shift in our thinking about student growth and learning required much collaborative discussion over the last year. We knew that the traditional curriculum content was not the end game anymore, and that the core competencies allowed us to look at the whole k-12 growth of students, which fit nicely with “Our Learners Will Be...” model, but it took a while to shift the classroom conversations away from content learning to content learning AND core competencies. In the end, it was the conversations that teachers had with students, daily, weekly, that helped students stretch their view to content and competencies.

Our students prepare for in-depth three way conferences with their parents and teacher each term by completing reflections that tie their specific learning from the term to their ongoing acquisition of core competencies. With good brainstorming and facilitated conversations, students are getting pretty good at describing their learning and communicating that to parents.

This year, our teachers have also started using Freshgrade as another tool that allows students to share real-time learning, and their reflections, with parents. Parents have given us good feedback that this is almost like ‘a window into the classroom’ that enables them to be active participants in supporting their children as learners.

LFBC: What are the challenges and successes as you transform your approaches to teaching and learning?

NB: Let’s talk about successes first!

As we have hosted many visitors through our new school, and shared our learning journey, the opportunity to have our progress reflected back to us has been a powerful learning tool. Towards the end of the first year, with developing confidence, we were able to share that, as we wove together many of our innovative teaching and learning strategies, that **we were doing business differently**, and that our learners were benefitting. Last June, when many middle years students are typically yearning for summer, we observed a very different culture in our setting. Students, who had been pursuing individual inquiries, under an integrated curriculum big umbrella carefully crafted by teams of teachers, were very committed and serious about their class/team celebrations of learning. These students had developed expert knowledge status and it was their time to share their learning, with classmates and often, parents and the community.

In our second year, we see all teachers willing to share ‘their story’ of transformed learning opportunities for students. This is powerful professional learning for all staff as they articulate the benefits of our collective work.

We see our students confidently moving on to secondary school, with enhanced skill sets that have them ready to be questioners, thinkers, and producers of new knowledge. We see, in all our students, engagement and ownership of their learning and we see, in our diverse learner support model the ability to customize and personalize the learner’s experience.

And challenges:

For students there was a transition from working through curriculum for marks to using the learning experiences to develop core competencies and create their individual goals and next steps. Sometimes school seems easier when teachers owned the learning and, with good effort,

students earned the marks that pleased them and their families. However, this has been a relatively minor adjustment and now students are quite pleased to own their learning.

Staff will say that their teaching work has never been so challenging or so rewarding. It really is a significant transformation for teachers to go from being the one who plans the engaging lessons for 30, to being the facilitator of learning for 30 students who all have their own ideas, projects and presentations on the go. The new real work of the master teacher is helping students connect with each other, with the learning and with the BIG IDEAS. They chuckle about how difficult it is to create a dayplan if they will be absent. And they share proudly when student reflections reveal new depths of understanding.

LFBC: What kind of feedback have you received from parents?

NB: We learned how very important it is to include parents in the conversation about the significant changes in education underway. It was difficult, other than through notices and email during our early months as parts of our school were still under construction and we didn't have a place to meet, but once we could gather, parents were keen to share their future visions for their children, and when we saw that we all wanted the same thing, they became partners in understanding how and why the education experience needs to look different. Parents are enjoying Fresh Grade as a useful tool to communicate student learning and have been quite willing to share that feedback with us. Although it hasn't come as specific feedback, we know that parents are happy that their middle level learners are all **engaged in learning and not tuning out of school**.

LFBC: Explain how you work together as a team?

NB: Staff have identified COLLABORATION as a core value that connects us as learners in this new journey. Teachers on teams meet regularly to plan and learn together and teachers across teams find ways to collaborate regularly, too.

Early last June a visitor to the school observed and wondered, 'how can it be that over 100 students are engaged and working in small groups and the four teachers are standing in the common team area talking?' The teachers replied that they were collaborating on a new activity as students were fully engaged in their current learning.

LFBC: Next steps?

NB: We are pleased to be part of the Ministry's first Innovation Partnership group. We want to continue our journey of innovation by continuing to employ a suite of innovative teaching and learning practices and that, together, have enabled us to see a real tipping point in our professional practice and the learning experience for middle level students. We also want to delve into collecting authentic evidence that what we are doing is indeed making the difference that we believe it is. To this end, and in some ways similar to the transition to core competencies language, we have identified three access lenses that we want students, parents and teachers to hold up to our work and give us feedback. In some ways this will be like collecting e-portfolio data for our whole school. The three access lenses that staff selected include: CONNECT, WONDER and SHARE. We look forward to documenting those stories of our learning journey.