

Re-Imagining Learning Structures in a Rural Secondary School Through Teacher Collaborative Inquiry Teams and Cross-Curricular Student Inquiry

What is our context?

Pemberton Secondary School (PSS) is located in Pemberton BC. The total population is approximately 5,000, which includes the town of Pemberton, the rural outlying areas, and Mt Currie. Pemberton is located 30 minutes north of Whistler, BC.

Pemberton Secondary School is a diverse and unique school comprised of 40% Aboriginal students (non-status First Nations, Metis and Stl'atl'imx Nation – N'Quatqua, Lil'wat, Samahquam, Skatin, and Xa'xtsa7 Bands). It has an active student population, students with diverse artistic interests, a growing international program, children of long-time Pemberton residents, and students that are new to the area. Specialized programs currently offered at PSS are:

- Outdoor Education Program for grade 10
- Ski Snowboard & Bike Academy (SBBA) for grades 11 and 12
- French immersion 8-12
- Ucwalmicwts Language Program

Although we are geographically a rural school, and a unique school in our Sea to Sky District, our student enrolment is impacted by the proximity of other school choices. Because of Pemberton's relative proximity to Whistler, families may choose to enroll their children in either the Waldorf School or Whistler Secondary School, which runs both a hockey and soccer academy. In the Pemberton region, there are also two other programs that operate on Lil'wat Territory in Mt. Currie. The Northern Outreach Program is a small outreach program (part of SD 48) that runs out of the Ts'zil Learning Centre located 15 minutes from Pemberton. Lil'wat Nation also runs Xetólacw Community School (K-12), located 30 minutes away, open to students from Lil'wat Nation and other surrounding communities.

Our enrolment in September 2013 was 307 students. Our projected enrolment for September 2018 is 228 students. This declining enrollment may be due to multiple factors, including our proximity to other programs of choice, and a real estate market that is causing young families, renters and people living in the lower income range to move from the community. We have, however, increased our number of international students over the past 5 years.

Where have we been/what led us here?

Our **Theory of Action** within our School Learning Plan states:

“If our students are confident, then they will take risks, be critical thinkers, and have the perseverance to graduate and experience life success.”

We believe that a middle school program within our high school will best support our younger learners and prepare them to be confident students in the 10-12 graduation program.

This Theory of Action is based on our **school goals**:

- provide purposeful and authentic learning opportunities for staff and students;

- create a positive and powerful learning environment for all staff and students; and
- create a school community of critical thinkers.

This Theory of Action and our school's goals were created with the teachers over a three year period, with input from our parents and students. We need to find ways to get more input from parents and students.

Our District Strategic Plan and BC's new curriculum have given us the opportunity to embed student and teacher inquiry and competency-based learning into our instruction.

Pemberton Secondary has been primarily a traditional grade 8-12 high school with a rotating block, two semester system. In 2007-08, staff focused on improving transition for grade 7's from Signal Hill to PSS, and created a 'grade 8' program, taught by two teachers. These Grade 8 students stayed attached to their two teachers for the majority of the day versus rotating with the grade 9-12 students. This emerging middle school program continued for approximately three more years. In the 2013-2014 school year, we created our current middle school program that now includes grade 8 and 9 students. Students are organized into colour pods, and when possible, French Immersion and non-French Immersion students are blended in exploratory blocks and PE. Our intention is to improve student - teacher connections by keeping the grade 8 and 9 students in pods with their teachers in a year-long structure, and enable teachers to better support students' learning needs.

Data collected for numeracy and literacy levels of our students led us to focus on effective, in-class collaborative teacher support for our middle school students so that they would be successful in English 10-12, and not have to take Communications 11 and 12 (due to low literacy confidence and skills) or take Math 10 and 11 AW versus Foundations and Pre-Calculus. We want students to do better than 50%. We want students to believe they are "good at math". We believe that better supports for middle school learners in mathematics during these two years, would also increase the number of students enrolling in Foundations and Pre-Cal level math courses, thus opening more doors for them in their post-secondary pursuits.

Related goals include reducing streaming that occurs because of programs of choice, and increasing student confidence. We are concerned about the lower literacy and engagement levels represented in our non-French Immersion classrooms, and the streaming of our English 10 students, as we have one class of students in Outdoor Ed and one class of English 10 who are not in Outdoor Ed. The students that generally choose the Outdoor Ed program are French Immersion students, and/or more confident learners.

What have we already done or innovated?

Within our current framework, we have already taken many opportunities to alter our system to better fit the needs of our students. One aspect that we have focused on is the creation of a Middle School Model for our grade 8 and 9 students. Some of the innovations we have implemented for our Middle School students:

1. Two years ago we switched all grade 8 and 9 students into a linear program and into pods

2. Blended the non-French Immersion and the French Immersion students within their exploratory classes and P.E. classes
3. Created a competency-based report card for our exploratory classes
4. Beginning baseline and end of course numeracy assessments to determine learner progress and needs
5. Developed Literacy Triad Model with collaboration support teachers, LSTs, and classroom teachers
6. Conduct literacy assessments (2 times per year) to determine learner needs
7. Transition time for grade 7 students now occurs throughout the year, once per week
8. LINK Crew leaders work with the same small groups of middle school students all year to build the younger students' confidence, and give them a 'critical friend' in the higher grades to support them throughout grades 8 and 9.
9. A focus on student inquiry versus content coverage

As a staff, we have created structural innovations that foster collaboration among staff and result in improved student learning:

1. Our School Based Team meets at least once per week to review needs for all incoming students, and create flexible learning plans for all students,
2. At-Risk Meetings for grades 8-12 to "check-in" on the progress and status of students who need extra support are conducted at midterm, twice per year,
3. Wrap-around model of support is implemented after each At-Risk Meeting,
4. We have created Teacher Inquiry Groups who take on initiatives to help support the School Growth Plan and move innovative ideas forward,
5. We have monthly Middle School Collaboration times where teachers of grade 8 and 9 students are able to co-develop goals and ideas to help support the development of our Middle School learners. LINK Leaders work with our middle school students at this time,
6. Instead of traditional Department Heads, we instead have a Steering Head Committee. This group of teacher leaders works collaboratively to bring our School Learning Plan and District Strategic Plan into action. We meet once per month. This team is made up of 5 teachers and 2 administrators,
7. We call our staff meetings The Staff Meeting Road Show which means that teachers sign up each month to showcase the learning in their classrooms, and lead staff in a learning task. All meetings are learning focused,
8. At the beginning of each staff meeting, teachers write postcards to individual students to highlight their personal successes. These "Good News from PSS" cards are mailed out to families each month, and
9. Our staff is reading Damian Cooper's *Redefining Fair: How to Plan, Assess, and Grade for Excellence in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, as a support for our professional learning this year.

What are we trying to do?

As previously mentioned, we have the identified goals of deepening purposeful authentic learning, and improving student/staff connection and engagement in our learning community. In doing this, our next step is to re-imagine the learning structures and constraints that our high school is facing. This specifically involves finding innovative pedagogical approaches to do the following:

1. Create a school-wide timetable that allows for students to engage in personally meaningful, real world, cross-curricular inquiry, through teachers co-planning in multi-disciplinary teams. This would also include more space for teacher collaboration and place-based learning. With the recent addition of a teacher librarian, who operates in a collaborative teaching role, we seek innovative methods to better utilize this resource.
2. Work at preventing the streaming that takes place across all grades, but most specifically at the grade 10 level. This would include seeking ways to further integrate the French Immersion and non-French Immersion students, specifically at the grade 8-10 levels. Achieving this would require addressing issues in the scheduling of the Humanities, Math, Science, electives and programs of choice for both senior and middle school classes.
3. Create a schedule that enables a core of middle school teachers to work within the framework of teacher collaboration and co-teaching, while also teaching senior classes due to the small population within our school.

Where do we want to go?

We want to be the school that students 'run to', rather than choose other options.

We want a middle school program at PSS that builds young adolescent learner confidence that reaches our diverse student population. We feel that a strong middle school program, based on research, is the pathway for our students to graduate, and have the opportunity for life success and happiness.

We want teachers to have a linear prep so that our teachers stay healthy and balanced, and be able to infuse our middle school with expert teachers that guide or support middle school student inquiry.

We need to (re)create reporting practices for middle school students that best align with their learning progress, rather than aligning with the high school reporting periods.

We want to know how to 'blow up' the timetable as a small rural school that has middle school teachers who also teach senior courses.

Our Four Questions:

1. How can we influence our school-wide timetable to be more flexible, and inclusive and offer opportunities for collaboration between teachers and students?
2. What practices and approaches can we deepen and take up that will increase inclusion and success (literacy/numeracy, academic, and social-emotional/well-being)?
3. How can we renew and better integrate our professional learning to develop our school and nurture ourselves and our students?
4. How can we maintain and sustain our innovations (signature pedagogies) and grow them into grades 10-12?