

Report No. 21-072

Update on the OCDSB Interest Academy Pilot

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PURPOSE:

1. To provide an update to the Board on the OCDSB Interest Academy pilot and to provide an overview of the evaluation analysis of the pilot and the next steps for further implementation in the District.

STRATEGIC LINKS:

2. The Interest Academy (IA) pilot has several links to the District's Strategic Plan. The specific links to the objectives are as follows:

Culture of Innovation - Promote collaborative environments which foster innovation and creativity; increased sense of relevance and motivation for students; increased capacity to support personalization of learning; provide professional learning and tools to support quality instruction and collaboration; modernize learning and enhance student experience.

Culture of Caring - Prioritize the dignity and well-being of students in inclusive and caring classrooms.

Culture of Social Responsibility - Improved social and emotional skills for students; opportunities for increased student voice for students.

This initiative at its core has capacity building for OCDSB staff in the areas of equity, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, instruction, assessment, and innovative practices, as well as fostering student engagement and voice in their learning.

CONTEXT:

3. At the Board meeting on 30 October 2018, Trustees passed a motion that included the following element:

THAT staff be directed to implement a pilot program which utilizes both the OCDSB Guide for Supporting Gifted Students in the Regular Classroom and the OCDSB Interest Academy: A Vehicle for Accessing the Curriculum Through Inquiry-based Learning - A Guide for Educator Teams, as soon as may be practical.

In January 2021, report *20-110 Update on Supports for Students with Giftedness (Elementary) in the OCDSB* was brought to the Board to provide an update on the progress of the two pilots, some challenges impacting their execution, and an update on the next steps to be undertaken. This report outlined some key changes to how the OCDSB IA pilot would be offered. The OCDSB IA pilot began in spring of 2021 and concluded in June 2021.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

4. **OCDSB Interest Academy Pilot Implementation Overview**

The OCDSB IA is an inquiry-based learning experience in which students are given class time to explore a student-selected topic of interest. Students and educators co-create project learning goals and success criteria and contribute to a learning portfolio that will serve to document and reflect on their learning. At completion of the project, students share their learning in a creative manner.

In the 2020-2021 school year, the creation of the Ottawa-Carleton Virtual (OCV) campuses presented a unique opportunity to reimagine how this inquiry-based learning project could be piloted. An exciting aspect of the OCV campuses is that their school communities were made up of a variety of students brought together from a variety of school communities across the District. In addition, the virtual mode of learning in the OCVs had the potential to be conducive to student-led inquiry projects in the areas of student interest and/or passion.

It was determined in collaboration with the Program and Learning (PAL) department, that the pilot plan be reviewed and adjusted to offer the pilot only in OCV campuses and to expand possible participating grades of students from grade 4 to 6 to grade 4 to 8. The cross-departmental collaborative team worked with the administrative teams in three OCV campuses to identify appropriate staff, classes, and/or students to participate in the pilot.

OCDSB Interest Academy Pilot Evaluation Overview

In spring 2021, the OCDSB IA pilot was implemented in seven different OCV classrooms. The pilot was formally evaluated using a participatory approach with the main purpose of exploring the experience of stakeholders involved in the pilot (i.e., students, parents/caregivers and teachers). A complete detail about the evaluation of the pilot is contained in Appendix A.

In line with the participatory evaluation approach (Patton, 2012)¹, key program stakeholders were involved at every stage of the pilot evaluation. An evaluation project team was struck composed of evaluation staff, program staff and administrators from the Learning Support Services (LSS) and PAL departments (i.e., program evaluator; psychologist; learning support consultant; instructional coach and system principals) who met weekly to inform the evaluation at each stage, and to ensure the pilot was being implemented and supported appropriately.

This team developed the IA evaluation purpose and the following two main evaluation questions:

1. How does the Interest Academy meet the needs of all learners in a virtual environment, including learners with giftedness?
2. What organizational conditions impacted the implementation of the Interest Academy pilot at the OCV sites?

Methodological Considerations

Notably, sensitivity to the stress and pressures which the COVID-19 pandemic had on families as well as staff in schools was required in carrying out the IA pilot evaluation plan (e.g., teachers delivering the IA project online for the first time; release time for teachers unavailable; scheduling for parent/caregiver focus groups unfeasible, etc.). Therefore, a survey vs. focus group method was selected for data collection - despite the limitations of this procedure to achieve the evaluation's purpose. For example, exploring participant perceptions and digging deeper into respondents' experience with the IA pilot was not ideal via an online survey. Important demographic characteristics about the pilot stakeholders' personal background, which may have emerged during focus group discussions, were not explored (i.e., income or identity information). In short, very little identity information about the survey respondents (parents/caregivers or students) was known.

Evaluation Participants

Information/consent letters containing an online survey link were distributed to all parents/caregivers of students involved in the pilot, and the resulting sample was based on parent/caregiver responses to the survey N = 60. All students involved in the pilot (N = 145) also completed a self-reflective assessment at the completion of the project. The sample represented both students with giftedness and non-gifted learners from Grades 4 to 8 located in Regular or French Immersion OCV classrooms. Six of the seven teachers involved in the pilot responded to the educator survey.

Evaluation Findings

Results from the stakeholder surveys provided strong evidence for the inquiry-based learning approach represented by the pilot. Notably, the majority of students, parents/caregivers and teachers involved with the initiative were in agreement that they would participate in the IA again or recommend it to others. Three main themes also emerged from the analysis of stakeholder experience.

¹ Patton, M. Q. (2012). Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation. Los Angeles, Calif: SAGE

The most salient theme centered on the utility of the inquiry-based learning approach to motivate and engage students in their self-directed learning, and ultimately to improve their connection to school. A second major theme pertained to how inquiry-based learning addressed the specific learning needs of all students, including learners with giftedness, particularly the impact on the learning skills and work habits contained in the Elementary Provincial Report Card. The third major theme which emerged surrounded the organizational conditions either supporting or impeding the implementation of the inquiry-based approach delivered via a virtual platform.

Highlights from the evaluation show that:

- Parents/caregivers provided rich insight into the ways that the pilot met their child's specific learning needs, including parents/caregivers of students who were identified with the gifted exceptionality;
- Parents/caregivers also reported observing several benefits of the pilot in terms of impacting their child's learning skills and/or work habits specified in the Elementary Provincial Report Card;
- Students also observed many benefits of the pilot in terms of impacting their learning skills and/or work habits;
- Teachers reinforced that, through the pilot, they were able to address several areas of the Ontario Curriculum, in addition to the learning skills and work habits contained on the Elementary Provincial Report Card;
- Teachers indicated that several aspects of their instructional practices changed resulting from their experience with the pilot, in line with the inquiry-based learning approach;
- Teachers were in general agreement that the pilot had a positive impact on their student's critical thinking, creativity, communication and metacognitive skills; and
- Stakeholders also put forward several organizational conditions which affected the implementation of the pilot. These centered mainly on the delivery of inquiry-based learning in a virtual environment, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. A full exposition of the findings as well as the implications for the District moving forward is discussed in Appendix A.

Recommendations / Next Steps

Interest Academy and/or Inquiry-based learning Field Testing

The findings from the pilot evaluation point to several implications for both the LSS and PAL departments. Possible next steps for PAL and LSS staff include expanding the implementation of this inquiry-based strategy to all interested educators. The results of this exploratory evaluation indicate that inquiry-based learning is an ideal differentiated instruction strategy suitable for all students regardless of whether or not they have been formally identified with giftedness.

Universal Screener Pilot

The results of this pilot further affirm and align with the work undertaken by LSS to gather and review information related to the possible implementation of a universal screening tool. It is recommended that a universal screener pilot proceed to further explore how its use may reduce barriers of access for all students and support underrepresented populations District-wide. Furthermore, a pilot may further provide staff with an opportunity to identify student strengths,

needs, talent, and interests to support the personalization of learning for each student based on their unique profiles.

Talent Development Exploration

The inquiry-based approach to learning in the pilot revealed a variety of student interests, passions, and talents. LSS and PAL would like to further explore the concept of talent development and possible approaches to fostering it. According to Renzulli (2005)², the focus in a talent development approach is to provide every student with opportunities, resources, and encouragement in order to help all students reach their full potential. Renzulli also described how a talent development approach allows for enriched programming models that develop talents of students who traditionally tend to be excluded from gifted programming. To further explore a talent development framework, additional information and consultation will be required to better understand the implementation considerations of such an approach for the OCDSB.

Learning Support for Students with Special Education Needs

The results of this pilot suggest that an inquiry-based learning approach is an impactful and ideal differentiated instruction strategy to include in the Learning Support for Students with Special Education Needs (formerly Quality Program Indicators) online resource. LSS will incorporate inquiry-based learning into the resource. Specifically, it will be incorporated into the section for students with giftedness both in the specialized program classes and in the regular program and other exceptionality areas as appropriate. The work on the resource is ongoing and further information will be shared in the coming months.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

5. The work undertaken on these recommended next steps and different initiatives will be substantive over the course of the 2021-2022 school year.

Interest Academy/Inquiry-based learning Field Testing

Release time for participating teachers will be provided to implement further field testing of this approach to learning in both specialized program classes and in the regular program. Sessions will focus on pedagogical strategies, assessment and evaluation practices and instructional strategies through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation, and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. To further support this learning, collaborative capacity building sessions will be provided by PAL and LSS coaches for participating teachers. Ongoing focused support will be provided by PAL and LSS coaches through weekly virtual sessions.

Talent Development Exploration

LSS estimates that approximately 15 days of work will be invested by a cross-departmental team in LSS and PAL to complete exploratory review activities and to develop possible plans for the next phase of this work.

² Renzulli, J. (2005). Applying gifted education pedagogy to total talent development for all students. *Theory Into Practice*. 44. 80-89. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4402_2.

The other two recommended initiatives will be discussed in future reports and their resource implications will be outlined at that time.

COMMUNICATION/CONSULTATION ISSUES:

6. In an effort to effectively communicate with a variety of stakeholders, the cross-departmental pilot project team was struck. Regular weekly meetings helped to set the course for communication with participants, other departments and stakeholders, and report regularly to the senior team members in both LSS and PAL. Regular office hours and information sessions were provided by staff from both departments to support the teachers with the implementation of the pilot.

Regular updates related to this pilot project were shared with the Association for Bright Children (ABC) representative. This ongoing communication with the ABC representative helped to inform the pilot evaluation plan.

Appendix A is the OCDSB IA Evaluation Report, which is another communication tool that may be shared with other educators and school staff as a part of the field testing. This report will help future participating teachers, parents/caregivers, administrators and where appropriate students to learn about this innovative learning opportunity and provide some details and context to support its implementation.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How might field testing of the IA support all learners in a variety of specialized program class settings and in virtual and/or in person regular program settings?
- What factors should be considered in the exploration of talent development for students in the OCDSB?

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APPENDIX

Appendix A OCDSB Interest Academy Pilot - Evaluation Report