Northern Gateway Public Schools
in Alberta
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In response to a government directive, Northern Gateway Public Schools engaged their teachers in a unique way to improve efficacy.

When the Government of Alberta asked school divisions across the province to improve teacher efficacy, Northern Gateway Public Schools engaged their teachers in a meaningful way to learn about what day-to-day activities affect their ability to positively influence students. The division sought to understand the thoughts and feelings of its staff to ensure a better system for both teachers and students.

Northern Gateway Public Schools engaged their teachers to improve efficacy and ensure a continued quality education for all students.

Thoughtexchange (previously Thoughtstream) helped Northern Gateway Public Schools build teacher confidence and provide more benefits for students. It also provided a dynamic and genuine process to hear real thoughts and opinions from staff.

A unique engagement to address a government directive

195 of 300 teachers participated from a rural division of 18 schools

Improved teacher confidence and increased benefits for students
Northern Gateway Public Schools Engages Teachers on Efficacy

When a directive is given in an organization, it often comes at a time when everyone’s plate is already full. It can leave staff feeling overwhelmed and add to a long list of ‘to dos’. Some may look for a way to merely check it off the list, while others have the determination and dedication to see it as an opportunity to make things better, and tackle it with vigor.

That energy and desire to make things better is what Northern Gateway Public Schools (NGPS) had when the Alberta Education ministry asked them to improve teacher efficacy. Deputy Superintendent Michelle Brennick said, “We saw it as an incredible opportunity to learn and ask ourselves ‘how do we get better’.”

“This process was effective and dynamic. It was an excellent way to authenticate the voices of our teachers.”

MICHELLE BRENNICK, DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT of NORTHERN GATEWAY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NGPS brought in Thoughtexchange to help engage its teachers in a dynamic way. They wanted a process that would generate independent thoughts and ideas from questions asked, rather than one where teachers were asked to choose from an already predetermined list of priorities generated by the school division and ATA Local Teacher Efficacy committee. “This was a chance to hear authentic voices and bring out things that enhance or detract from teacher efficacy,” said Michelle.

The process involved teachers only, and with over 60 per cent participation, the response was comprehensive and identified items that impact teacher efficacy. Housekeeping and administrative tasks were pinpointed as duties that could detract from teachers’ focus, as well the challenges faced by using varying processes in different schools. Various ways of filling out forms, collecting money and completing Individual Program Plans (IPP) presented obstacles to positive efficacy across all schools.
When the feedback was reviewed, 35 priorities were identified. NGPS will examine all of them, but is currently focused on addressing the top five over the two upcoming school years. One of the top priorities identified is the need to improve the way IPP’s are completed. “The IPP process needs to be streamlined and we want to get a deeper understanding from a practice perspective,” said Michelle.

To address the IPP challenge, the school division and ATA Local Teacher Efficacy committee will roll-out a plan that will provide teachers with supports, resources and a more streamlined process that will assist teachers in their program planning to meet their students’ needs. This improved approach to personalizing student learning will enhance teacher/s’ efficacy. “This is the beginning process of working collaboratively towards a solution and addressing the priorities we learned about through the Thoughtexchange process,” said Michelle.

One of the greatest benefits of the Thoughtexchange process is the ability for participants to write comments that provide the context of their concerns and/or recommendations. The majority of teachers took great care in writing thorough and meaningful comments that provided NGPS with the perspective needed to truly understand what was being said. “They were thoughtful and expressive, and they took time to guide us, their school division/ATA Local Teacher Efficacy committee- it was very powerful,” said Michelle. Teachers wanted to be heard and felt confident that they would be understood in a supportive way. The process also provides anonymity to ensure that thoughts, ideas and comments aren’t judged or attached to a particular person.
NGPS was involved in both division and provincial meetings to review progress and hear from others. At the provincial level, NGPS heard similar feedback from other divisions about efficacy challenges. Michelle said "It became very clear to our committee that by using Thoughtexchange, we didn't put words in people's mouths; it was a real opportunity to share information." The Alberta Education representative also commented that NGPS was approaching the issue in a fundamentally positive way and digging deeper to enhance their practice.

By the end of June, NGPS will have started the process to address three of the top five priorities. "We didn't want this process to be a 'let's get it done and check it off the list'. We wanted this to be a real opportunity to learn and hear from each of our teachers, and the collective NGPS teacher voice," said Michelle.

The division has also used Thoughtexchange with 160 community members and partners at a school-division-organized public engagement event, and its 560 staff members to develop its 2013–2016 three year education plan. It is currently moving forward by inviting parents and principals to discuss priorities and provide input on the strategies that will inform the outcomes and goals of the 2014–2017 three year education plan.

NGPS stands out as a division that has dedicated themselves to making their practice, their schools and their communities better by engaging people in a significant way. They see the opportunity and value in getting feedback and then taking it forward to create a better system.