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*Employability Skills
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*Fundamental
Personal Management
Teamwork*

Effective practices in developing and supporting educators'
knowledge and skills

B.C. SCHOOL DISTRICT 59 AND ITS COMMUNITY

Teaching Skills Deliberately Building Ownership for Skills-based Learning Outcomes

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

November 2000

School District 59, which includes the B.C. communities of Dawson Creek, Chetwynd and Tumbler Ridge, has been one of the first to recognize that building students' employability skills is key to their making successful transitions to the world of work. It has pioneered the development of performance criteria relating to individual employability skills against which students, teachers and employers can assess students' skills development. Significantly, it has also evolved a process that not only helps teachers and students agree on what different skills look like in different contexts (e.g., in the classroom or in a co-op program), but also builds their ownership in developing and assessing students' skills. Operating such a process requires teacher development, and it is School District 59's support for its teachers in this regard that is the focus of the present case study.

Overview

Case Study 11 outlined a variety of B.C. Ministry of Education initiatives since 1993 to define, develop and assess employability skills, and, after 1995, to measure how well schools are doing in a variety of areas, including developing students' employability skills. It also devoted considerable attention to one of the more innovative initiatives undertaken in the B.C. K-12 system, namely, School District 59's development of performance criteria relating to The Conference Board of Canada's 1992 *Employability Skills Profile*. Given the importance of that discussion to the present case study, it is worth reviewing its main points.

In 1996, School District 59 produced a draft set of performance criteria to guide and assess the demonstration and development of students' employability skills. The performance criteria explicitly spell out what constitutes performance of a skill at different levels of competency. For example, with regard to listening

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skills, satisfactory performance would include such things as checking to confirm understanding of what others say or feel; good performance would include the ability to act on instructions; and excellent performance would include the ability to paraphrase statements made by others. The existence of clearly defined performance measures such as these enables students to self-assess in a way that is comparable to the way teachers and employers assess them.

Having students evaluate themselves to determine whether they have developed a particular employability skill is half of the education equation. The other half is intentionally teaching them these skills, with heavy emphasis on the word *intentionally*. For example, when attempting to develop students' teamwork skills, it is not sufficient simply to put students together in groups. It is also necessary to involve them in identifying performance criteria or articulating what demonstrating teamwork skills looks like as an observable phenomenon. Students must then be encouraged to demonstrate their mastery of teamwork skills, with specific reference to the relevant performance criteria benchmarks. It is also important that students be shown how to reflect on their own performance and the performance of others on their team in order to articulate precisely how each student in the group contributed to the work of the team, and to identify activities that could improve their performance in the future. Teaching teamwork skills effectively requires teachers to coach students on setting new skills development targets in an iterative, continuous improvement process.

Adequate performance assessment therefore requires the completion of a full skills development cycle: moving students from being taught to self-teaching. To accomplish this, students must progress from initial engagement in the process of identifying and developing their skills to having an awareness of what their employability skills

successes and challenges are, participating in skills enhancement activities, assessing their performances and setting new goals for improvement. Successfully taking students through such a cycle requires support for teachers—as well as for administrators and students.

To identify where support for teachers is needed, it is useful to note the steps educators need to take to teach employability skills effectively (the model depicted below is based on the experience of School District 59):

1. Engage in a dialogue with their students to help them understand what employability skills are and to identify the skill areas that their activities are likely to support. The easiest and most natural way to help students appreciate employability skills is to relate them back to activities in their daily lives.
2. Brainstorm with students to produce a list of mutually agreed-upon performance criteria that show students how they can demonstrate their proficiency in a given skill area.
3. Model or show by example or through role-playing activities what employability skills look like in practice, using contexts with which students are comfortable and familiar.
4. Walk students through a complete self-evaluation to identify their strengths and the skill areas they need to improve.
5. In cases where work experience is involved, review performance criteria with work placement employers to adjust performance criteria agreed upon by teachers and students for specific workplace settings; as well, make employers aware of skill areas that students have flagged for improvement. This step enables employers to help individual students enhance the identified skill areas—and to do this in ways that are meaningful to both employers and students.
6. Where appropriate, ensure that employability skills are developed

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both in the workplace and in the classroom, so that lessons from one setting are reinforced in the other.

7. Prepare (with employers, if appropriate) assessments of individual students' progress with their employability skills and discuss these evaluations one on one with students. Following this, encourage students to compare their self-evaluations with those completed by their teachers and employers to identify any skill areas that still need improvement and where it is important for them to grow. Students can then set new goals and work on their weak spots.

Context

Developing a common skills language was the first step in putting students, teachers, parents and employers on the same page regarding their awareness of understanding, having and demonstrating employability skills. The starting point for this common language was the Conference Board's *Employability Skills Profile*. However, the *Profile* had to be adapted to students' needs and operationalized to ensure its relevance to students and its effectiveness in helping students make successful transitions.

Operationalizing the *Employability Skills Profile* has been achieved in many ways ranging from including it in report cards and portfolios of employability skills language to publication of the Conference Board's own *Toolkit for the Self-Managing Learner* and supporting curricula. The more successful of these products take into account the needs of teachers (or coaches in general, including parents, trainers and employers) and suggest activities to support the teaching and learning of skills. When teachers and other coaches are supported in developing students' skills, students are better able to develop their skills in different environments and to transfer their learnings in a range of situations.

Some teachers in School District 59 use a carousel activity (see page 4) in which students, teachers and employers co-operate to develop transparent, mutually agreed-upon performance expectations for students; students then benchmark their actions against these expectations when they are in a classroom or the workplace. Developing such criteria for knowing when students have reached their skills targets is key to ensuring more objective assessments, in particular by employers, and more focused strategies on everybody's part to help students achieve their skills goals.

Groups Served

- ✓ Teachers
- ✓ Students
- ✓ Employers

Objectives

- ✓ Engage teachers in the process of integrating skills development into their classroom activities
- ✓ Use skills assessment to enhance teaching and learning
- ✓ Equip teachers to help their students build their skills and make successful transitions to further education or the world of work
- ✓ Provide students, teachers, parents and employers with the same skills language and transparent, mutually agreed-upon performance expectations, so they can more easily reinforce each other's efforts to develop young people's skills

Activities

Since 1995, School District 59 has been engaged in a series of interconnected activities to develop performance indicators that could be applied to all grade levels and across the curriculum to ensure a more objective measurement of individual students' skills outcomes.

Case Study 11 described the District's *Guide to Criterion-Referenced Assessment*, a performance-based skills assessment tool. The present case study describes another

Teachers use assessment of their students' skills as a vehicle for enhancing their teaching and shaping classroom activities.

Students understand what their responsibilities are in different settings.

innovative activity from the District, the *Employability Skills Carousel* activity. The virtue of this activity is its adaptability to any group of learners at any skill level.

In the *Employability Skills Carousel* activity, the teacher selects 8 to 10 employability skills for students to focus on in a given term. The teacher then creates a large chart for each skill, indicating at the top of each chart the name of a skill, a brief definition and a question, for example, "In Media Arts class, how would you demonstrate responsibility?" Students are expected to record their answers on charts at different stations around the room. The specific steps of the carousel process are shown in the box below.

Benefits for Teachers

- Teach more autonomous, self-motivated students
- Make what they teach more relevant and engaging for students
- Develop more objective criteria for

assessing students' skills and directing their progress

- Use assessment of their students' skills as a vehicle for enhancing their teaching and shaping classroom activities to help students' achieve their skills goals while they learn curriculum content
- Teach more deliberately and effectively—do not assume that students pick things up by osmosis

Benefits for Students

- Are much happier and participate more in classroom activities
- Understand what their responsibilities are in different settings (e.g., at home, school, work or in the community) or in different relationships (e.g., with siblings, fellow students, co-workers or fellow citizens)—learn behaviours that are appropriate or employable in different situations
- Know the standard of excellence

Employability Skills Carousel Activity

1. The teacher discusses with students what employability skills are and why they are important. She/he emphasizes that there are many ways in which students can demonstrate these skills.
2. The teacher explains that students will be working in groups to brainstorm a list of behaviours that show how they demonstrate a specific employability skill in the classroom (e.g., responsibility). Each group picks a recorder and a spokesperson.
3. Each group goes to a chart and, within 90 seconds, records one to three classroom behaviours that demonstrate the specific employability skill listed on the chart. (Behaviours demonstrating responsibility might include "being on time," "booking out equipment and returning it" and "admitting your own mistakes.")
4. The groups then move clockwise to the next chart and repeat Step 3.
5. The groups continue this process until they reach the chart they started with.
6. When they have reached their original chart, the groups select three behaviours that best represent the skill featured on that chart by placing a star beside them. (Alternatively, students break the behaviours into three levels: 1) satisfactory—e.g., "not abusing resources"; 2) good—e.g., "showing up for class"; and 3) excellent—e.g., "taking the initiative when things need to be done.") In addition, they discuss why they felt these were the most important behaviours (or how they indicated higher or lower levels of proficiency in a given skill area).
7. Everyone sits down, except the spokesperson for each group. Spokespersons then present their choices and the reasons for their choices to the class.
8. The teacher leads students through a self-evaluation of their performance on employability skills in the first term. Each student checks "satisfactory" or "needs improvement" next to each performance indicator (i.e., behaviour that demonstrates a specific employability skill) and provides details of how he/she demonstrated that skill. At the bottom of the sheet, students write their goals for improving their employability skills in the next term.

Students use visioning, feedback and problem-solving techniques to develop action plans to get where they want to go.

Students learn how on-the-job performance in the workplace is assessed while they are still in school.

Teachers agree on how particular skills are demonstrated (e.g., “doing one’s fair share” when working with others) at all grade levels.

- expected in the workplace before they begin work
- Make successful transitions to further education or the world of work
- Recognize and self-assess their skills—know which skills employers are looking for
- Identify skills they need to develop to get where they want to be in their work placements and beyond
- Use visioning, feedback and problem-solving techniques to develop action plans to get where they want to go
- Hone their skills by actively pursuing their goals at home, school and work and in the community
- Deliberately transfer their skills and knowledge to new situations
- Document their progress and successes and market themselves to employers on the basis of their most valuable skills
- Learn how on-the-job performance in the workplace is assessed while they are still in school
- See the connection between school and work
- Understand what they are doing while they are in school and why they are doing it
- Get “a leg up” in the job market and gain the skills they will need to succeed in further education or in their daily lives
- Avoid “a rude awakening when they get out into the real world” by keeping an eye on how they can apply and use the knowledge and skills they are learning in school while they are still in school
- Move beyond being grade-oriented (applying themselves only when and on projects where marks are at stake) to looking for the application of and actively applying skills and knowledge, regardless of whether they “have to know it for a test”

Benefits for Business

- Helps students to become employment-ready

- Takes ownership of building a relationship with education
- Understands what the student/employee can and cannot do
- Gains a basis (a common language) for discussion and reflection on student and employee performance
- Can be involved in establishing performance standards for their own workplaces

Keys to Success for Teachers

- Making the connection between the courses they teach and the skills they could develop more deliberately in their courses
- Agreeing on how particular skills are demonstrated (e.g., “doing one’s fair share” when working with others) at all grade levels and collecting suitable evidence of student performance of these skills in the classroom
- Coming up with innovative new activities while delivering a traditional curriculum to impart content and develop skills at the same time
- Seeing that enhancing their teaching and assessment practices with regard to skills can increase their teaching satisfaction
- Holding students accountable for learning and applying their skills throughout their education
- Creating artificial situations where students can practise problem-solving skills *and* having students apply their problem-solving skills to real-life problems when they arise—students respond better to relevant examples
- Not “dictating” expectations for skills performance to students but, instead, encouraging them to brainstorm about what a given skill looks like and drawing them out on things they miss—each week, one automotive instructor who taught Grades 11 and 12 used to write a skill on the blackboard and ask students to collect evidence of how they demonstrated that skill on the shop floor (when on work experience), at home and in the community

Students reflect on how they did in relation to clearly defined performance expectations. ►

The school district needs to preserve teacher autonomy on the best way to do things with their students. ►

The school district needs to recognize what teachers are already doing to build their students' skills. ►

- Modelling employability skills themselves and using their imagination to put students in situations where they can model a skill
- Providing students with ongoing, constructive feedback so they can progress—being frank but positive

Keys to Success for Students

- Reflecting on how they did in relation to clearly defined performance expectations
- Understanding that feedback on their performance contributes to their development and is not a reflection on them as individuals
- Seeing that they are being assessed on things they see as relevant, which means they have to provide input into expectations regarding what constitutes demonstration of a skill

Keys to Success for the School District

- Starting with the assumption that teachers care about what is best for their students
- Preserving teacher autonomy on the best way to do things with their students
- Having district-wide support for teaching skills from superintendent on through director of instruction to school principals and teachers
- Providing release time to allow teachers to brainstorm ideas about developing performance expectations that are relevant for their students and align with observable behaviours in the classroom—this enables them to help their students see the skills being demonstrated in their classrooms
- Recognizing what teachers are already doing to build their students' skills and positioning the development of performance criteria as building on their successes—creating a support system for the 15 teachers who were initially involved in developing performance expectations
- Prompting teachers to think more

deliberately about how they are developing students' skills in the classroom and how they might try to do this in the future to improve results. As one elementary teacher put it:

I think it is very powerful to show what young students can do with the same basic skills-based outcomes as those expected of older students and adults. The intentionality of it is the key, and it does not matter if the student is 7 or 17 years old. If our goal is to educate students for whatever their future might require, it is essential that they start young and then apply the basic understandings they gain to all of their future learning. I think that developing employability skills is a developmental process—just as reading and writing and math are—and that it is one of the “basics” if we are talking “basic education.”

- Showing teachers the difference between having skills development as a goal in the back of their minds and actually putting skills-development strategies into their classroom activities—getting teachers to reflect on how they integrated a skills-development component and then asking them to think about what they would do differently to improve students' knowledge, awareness and performance of these skills
- Asking employers in Chetwynd, Tumbler Ridge and Dawson Creek (largely small business operators) to confirm that the skills listed in the Conference Board's *Employability Skills Profile* are the skills on which students should be assessed during their work experience placements
- Raising teachers' awareness of what employability skills are and what they look like in the classroom—teachers have to be able to visualize how a skill is demonstrated so they can model it for their students
- Emphasizing that employability skills are actually transferable or foundation

Teachers need to overcome their concerns that helping students develop their skills is training, not education. ►

Students need to be active participants in their own learning and skills development. ►

Engaging students and teachers builds their buy-in for developing and assessing employability skills and generates a common language for measuring progress and mapping out strategies for improvement. ►

skills, the practice of which encourages the kinds of behaviours teachers want to see in their classrooms and lays the foundation for students' future career development

- Emphasizing that examples of skill demonstrations are not prescriptive; they are only meant to be suggestive
- Showing how skills development fits in with what teachers are already doing in many curricula and other initiatives with students, so skills development is not perceived as adding to teachers' workload

Challenges for Teachers

- Overcoming their concerns that helping students develop their skills is training, not education, which is their mandate
- Integrating skills development with their teaching so that it is a value-added feature of everything they do instead of a free-standing module or an "add on"—this is more of a challenge for secondary teachers, since elementary teachers can, and tend to, reinforce learnings across the curriculum because they teach more than one subject to the same group of students
- Understanding that focusing on developing students' skills is nothing new for teachers—recognizing that they are already doing all kinds of really good things in their classrooms to develop students' skills

Challenges for Students

- Being active participants in their own learning and skills development—seeing themselves as responsible for developing their own skills and knowledge with the help of teachers, employers, family and fellow students
- Making the connection between the courses they are taking and the skills they are developing
- Actively transferring their skills in new home, school, work or community contexts

Challenges for the School District

- Allaying teachers' fears that the Conference Board's *Employability Skills Profile* was created by big business to serve its own purposes
- Getting teachers to see that developing their students' skills is part of what they do and not a mere by-product of teaching
- Showing teachers a variety of skills-building initiatives to attract their support and to enable them to choose an approach that will work best for them
- Resisting the temptation to use a cookie-cutter approach in supporting teachers as they adopt the practice of teaching to, and assessing for, skills-based outcomes—the use of performance criteria works best where individual teachers customize the criteria with their students, so that, together, they own the process. It is neither possible nor desirable to produce a common set of performance criteria to be used by every teacher

Innovation

School District 59's great innovation lies in the ways in which it has engaged and supported students and teachers in the process of developing co-operatively the behavioural benchmarks relating to employability skills. Engaging students and teachers builds their buy-in for developing and assessing employability skills and generates a common language for measuring progress and mapping out strategies for improvement. Supporting students and teachers through this process ensures that skills development is seen as an integral part of teaching and learning across the entire curriculum.

Achievements

- Employers comment favourably on students' performance in the workplace and their general employment readiness following participation in the career and personal planning module of the curriculum from Grade 8 on.

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Sandy O'Donovan
Sheila Simard
Daria Thiltgen*

- Teachers remark on their students' improved problem-solving, teamwork and listening skills (see box below for a success story).
- Students are much more aware of what they want to do and concerned about what they need to do from an earlier age (Grade 10) to achieve their

career goals. Students are willing to use their evenings, weekends and summer vacations to do work placements, and they also start applying for placements very early (in October for January placements); some even do two placements, one of which is on their own time.

A Success Story

When the B.C. Ministry of Forests announced a competition inviting Grade 5 students to submit a forestry-related science project, Sandy O'Donovan's class was eager to take part. The children helped write and illustrate a story book, and then turn it into a "reader's theatre," which was performed for the school and videotaped. For over a month, everyone contributed in all areas to the best of their ability. And their efforts paid off: the Ministry awarded them a three-day educational trip to Vancouver.

As the children worked on the project, Ms. O'Donovan quickly noticed a number of positive developments. For example, whereas at the beginning of the school year students had required a lot of direction, counselling and encouragement to complete assignments, they now became focused on achieving specific tasks and completing their work. Also, whereas they once had difficulty carrying out critical thinking tasks or co-operative assignments, they were now keen to show their expertise in employability skills such as planning and goal setting, teamwork and critical thinking. They were also able to draw on achievements in other areas of the curriculum, such as social studies, fine arts and language arts, in what was ostensibly a science project.

Ms. O'Donovan attributes the changes to the fact that once the children had decided to compete, they "seemed to take ownership" of the project—they were thus willing to spend the time needed to achieve what they had determined was important.

NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

Employability Skills 2000+

Employability Skills Toolkit for the Self-Managing Learner

Science Literacy for the World of Work

Understanding Employability Skills (Apr. 99)

The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.

Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.

Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.

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