Thirsk High School opened for students on September 3, 2013,” says Principal Chris Meaden. “The previous year, we hired 12 learning leaders and set up a high school redesign project. We hired the first teachers in March 2013 and are still hiring.

“To support the learning leaders and to support professional development for our teachers, we conducted retreats in Olds with Olds High School principal Tom Christensen.” Over the course of these retreats, as well as professional development and learning sessions, the administration drew on Ontario, American and Alberta models to develop and roll out a complete plan for their own students. “We set up the facility to support the philosophy. We built Thirsk High School around the concept of community.”

How success is measured

All of the flexibility afforded by the physical structure of the school, with its extensive community centres, as well as the community philosophy, can cause some stress for staff. “Professional development support for staff is there for anyone feeling overwhelmed,” explains Meaden. The structure of the school fosters collegial support too, which can go a long way to help smooth the transition to community-based learning.

“IN this first year, we have kept communities grade specific, and we’ll see if that was the right decision. We’ll use quantitative and qualitative measures. The number of students successful in achieving credits will tell a story.”

The TELL Them FROM Me student engagement survey, together with asking students how they are perceiving flex time, will bring data that can be correlated with the data from assessments. The focus at Thirsk is less on the final assignment and more on the outcomes and competencies, so there is an ongoing conversation among staff, between staff and students, and with parents about the importance and value of the outcomes and skills. There is an intention to develop a measure of success that accounts for these.

What we learned

“We really worked on personalization – of assessment and task design; on connecting – we use class profiles and a learning program and are developing a virtual platform; and on thriving – we want a success-based model,” says Meaden.

Staying in touch with students and parents is important for Thirsk as the model develops over the course of this first year. It’s going to give the school a baseline of information that will help them determine what, if any, changes may be needed next year.

For more on Building Communities in the School, contact:
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