

This series of resources presents effective practices implemented by some of the 27 schools involved in the original High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project (HSFEPP) as they explored ways to use flexibility to increase student engagement and achievement and to support quality teaching in their schools.

This series represents a sampling of the effective practices being implemented in redesign schools across the province.

## BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN THE SCHOOL

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.”

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*Chris Meaden, Principal, Thirsk High School*

## What are communities in the school?

Thirsk High School in Calgary has nine community centres in the facility, each with classrooms, a breakout area and an open area. Communities are schools within the school, and at Thirsk this year, where the students are in Grades 10 and 11, the community provides a home base, which includes a core of teachers who work with the students.

The Grade 10s have a community with four core teachers. Core teachers have blocks of time for math, science, English, and social studies. At the end of each 70-minute block, students do not move. Instead, there is core instruction and flex time. Teachers have the leeway to build in flex time, and they do this by using daily common planning time

to set up the schedule, which is created for one week or two week periods.

“We’re keeping the 10s close, with a limited number of core teachers, to focus on building community,” explains Principal Meaden. “The Grade 11s have more courses, so the population is a little more spread out.”

Communities use various technologies. Some communities have smart boards, others have projector systems. The school has an iPad projector system and uses the projector to display school-wide communication on the white boards. “In the double classroom space, the math and social studies have currently combined their classes because they want to flex their time in the two subject areas.”

## 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: Chris Meaden, Principal, Robert Thirsk High School, Calgary [schools.cbe.ab.ca/b880](http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b880)