

No Time, Less Money: A Collaborative Response to Intensification

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Abstract

After the completion of a difficult round of negotiations, Prairie Spirit School Division (PSSD) and the Prairie Spirit Teachers' Association (PSTA) convened a committee to investigate causes of teacher workload intensification. The committee perceived an increase in the amount and complexity of teachers' and administrators' workload but required reliable data to inform an appropriate response. This case narrative describes the collaborative efforts of the PSTA and PSSD to address workload intensification with limited resources. The committee contracted a consulting firm to assist in developing an online survey of more than 700 PSTA members to identify causes of intensification. The respondents reported a significant increase in workload over the previous three years, particularly in the areas of assessment, grading, and reporting; differentiating instruction to meet diverse learning needs; and finding classroom resources. The majority of the respondents positively rated their physical and mental health but indicated a need for increased support(s) for stress management and physical activity. While working to translate the data into solutions, the committee articulated the importance of collegial collaboration and recognized the difficulty in prompting struggling teachers and administrators to reach out to each other for help. The committee identified causes of intensification and the need to understand the factors that promote or restrict collegial collaboration. The case narrative is followed by four activities to help educational leadership students explore the complexity of workload intensification.

Keywords: workload intensification, teacher time, collaboration, collective bargaining

Case Narrative

It was a bitter cold, windy, Saskatchewan winter when Prairie Spirit School Division (PSSD) and the Prairie Spirit Teachers' Association (PSTA) prepared to meet for conciliation, as protracted bargaining discussion had reached an impasse. Reflecting back to 2006, the newly created school division was the result of amalgamating three divisions, including nine Hutterite colonies and three First Nation Communities covering 15,000 square kilometres, which is almost three times the size of Prince Edward Island. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) highlighted the division for its collaboration with teachers in the unification of three collective agreements. Several years of fiscal restraint, increasing enrollment, and less than half of the preparation time of neighbouring divisions had deepened frustrations all around the bargaining table. The chill of intensification permeated through all members of the PSSD. Teachers were seeking an increase in preparation time to help them cope with the increasing complexity and demands of their work. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, however, did not provide school boards with additional funding for local agreements. Stakes were high for both parties at conciliation. How could relationships and the spirit of working together be maintained in an intense, high stakes, geographically diverse, labour environment?

The conciliator worked with both groups, together and separately, looking for areas of common interest. The in-school administrators are part of the local PSTA and provincial STF and were bargaining with their fellow teachers. Given the history of collaboration, there was a strong belief that working together would provide the greatest benefits to all, including teachers, administrators, and students. Collaboration was emphasized at each point of contention. The PSSD and PSTA included a section titled “*Culture of Collaboration*” (2017, p.6) in the new agreement to promote collaboration on all matters of mutual interest. Collaboration also contributed to securing a modest increase to preparation time, as the PSTA and PSSD agreed that collaboration between teachers was an important professional responsibility.

The groups worked among themselves and together, facilitated by the conciliator for several days. Ultimately, they reached an agreement. Although relations were strained, there was gratitude for the hard, albeit respectful, dialogue and work that helped inform the final agreement.

Workload Intensification Survey

The STF, Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA), and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education were also engaged in conciliation to reach a Provincial Collective Agreement. Among other topics, workload intensification stood out as a significant issue but was not settled at the provincial bargaining table. The provincial agreement included the creation of a joint task force which published a report issuing recommendations for government, school boards, and teachers to address this challenge. The report recommended school divisions and local teacher associations obtain administrator and teacher input to identify themes and address workload intensification. To do this work, the PSSD and PSTA created a workload intensification committee comprised of the PSTA President, an in-school administrator, and two teachers, as well as the Superintendent of Human Resources, and a Learning Superintendent.

One key recommendation from the report was to gather information from all teachers and administrators. The intensification committee decided that the highest probability of obtaining input from as many people as possible would be to create a well-crafted survey. Rather than take on this unique project alone, the committee decided to obtain a third party to ensure the process was thorough, and the data valid. The committee contracted K2 Research and Consulting, an organization who specializes in working with education in areas of employee feedback surveys, exit surveys, and organizational assessment(s).

The three parties developed a survey, often debating among themselves, Superintendent to Superintendent, or PSTA member to PSTA member, and regularly looking to the survey experts in the room to help maintain focus on actionable items. These parties had criteria based in several provincial documents but had autonomy in determining how to move forward. After a satisfying collaborative process of several meetings and a barrage of email exchanges, they launched the survey via a PSSD email with a link to K2’s website. K2 tracked, collated, and reported all data back to the committee. The committee awaited the results with great anticipation and hoped that the data would help them to implement real action.

The intensification committee received the final survey report in May of 2016 and was pleased to learn that almost 50% of teachers and administrators responded (PSSD & PSTA, 2016). The final report confirmed that intensification was a significant problem. The respondents reported an increase in intensification over the previous three years, with more time spent on assessment, evaluation, and reporting to parents. Writing report card comments, conferring with students, and learning different reporting tools were the top three reported workload intensifiers in the assessment category. In a given week, respondents reported working an average of 23.2 hours outside of the school day, with the majority of this time devoted to planning (7.1 hours); extra-curricular, co-curricular and volunteer activities, including supervision (5.2 hours); and assessment and evaluation (4.8 hours). The majority of respondents regularly performed work-related duties before and after school, during lunch breaks, and on weekends. K2’s analysis found that working during holidays negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Respondents rated their perceived levels of confidence and support in a variety of areas related to assessment, evaluation, planning, and daily activities (PSSD & PSTA, 2016). Job satisfaction linked closely to supporting student behaviour, an area reported as high confidence but low support. Additionally, feelings of confidence and support in developing grading tools, finding resources, and side-by-side conferring with students correlated positively with job satisfaction.

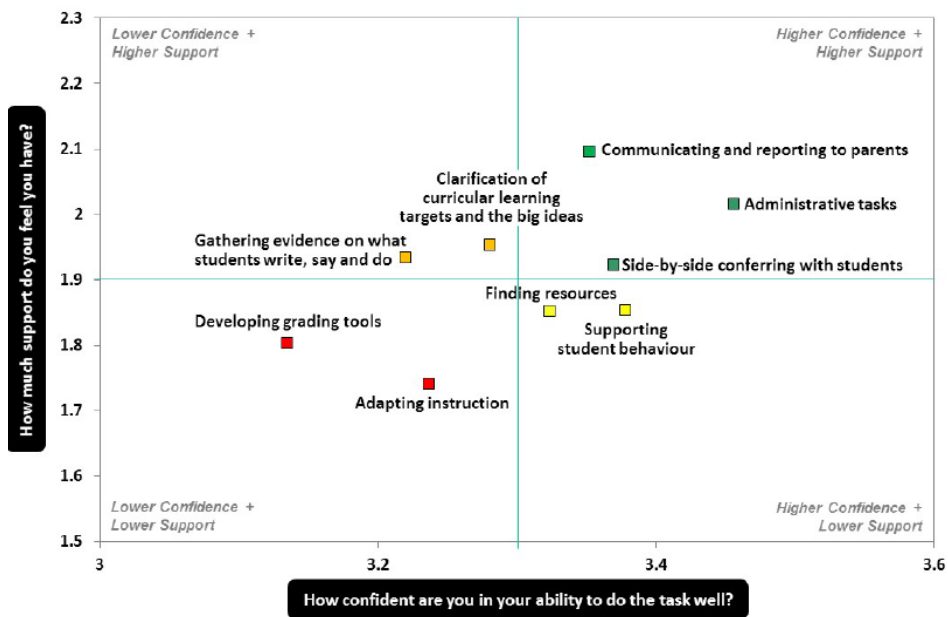


Figure 1. Confidence map of assessment, evaluation, and daily activities. 1 = not at all confident, 2 = not very confident, 3 = somewhat confident, 4 = very confident and 1 = not enough support, 2 = adequate support, 3 = more than enough support

The respondents’ satisfaction with their current position averaged 7.3 on a scale of zero (meaning not at all satisfied) and ten (meaning very satisfied) (PSSD & PSTA, 2016). Interestingly, 60% of respondents indicated they would appreciate support for stress management and 48% for more emotional and mental health support(s). The committee was intrigued with the high level of satisfaction in contrast to the significant percentage of respondents indicating a desire for the addition of supportive interventions.

Addressing Workload Intensification

The workload committee shared the survey results with PSTA members, PSSD Senior Administration, and the Prairie Spirit Board of Education. The committee also met multiple times from May of 2016 to June of 2018 to discuss the survey and search for ways to use the data to reduce intensification. Initially, the committee searched for one or two intensifiers with potential for quick solutions. However, the committee quickly realized the complexity of intensification and struggled to find ways to translate the data into action. Time and financial limitations made additional professional development, preparation time, staffing, or resources infeasible as division-wide solutions. At best, the data would inform the allocation of resources moving forward.

The workload committee reconvened in fall of 2017, and, in the hope of finding actionable problems, asked K2 Consulting for additional analysis to compare elementary, middle years, and high school teachers’ responses. The committee was curious to see if teachers at different grade levels experienced similar intensification. While some differences were evident, all groups reported an increase in time spent on assessment, evaluation, and reporting as contributors to workload intensification, and all groups reported low confidence and support in adapting instruction. The additional analysis provided detail, but assessment and adapting instruction were still the most common intensifiers. Teachers and Principals shared two main overarching concerns: (1) are students learning and (2) am I meeting everyone’s needs? These are necessary reflective questions, yet intensification can distort this professional reflection into manifestations of self-doubt. A slight change in administrative practice(s) does not suffice when hardworking, dedicated teachers feel they are not able to provide the best for their students. The committee wondered how they could help teachers feel more confident and supported in assessment and adapting instruction with the resources at hand.

Assessment as an Intensifier

Fortunately, just as the committee was seeking solutions, an opportunity arose for teachers and administrators to collaborate and address intensification related to assessment. Prior to 2016, the PSSD undertook a significant shift in student assessment. Separating behaviour from achievement, using outcome-based assessment, and not deducting marks for late assignments were a few of the changes that received attention from teachers, students, and parents. Many teachers understood the pedagogy behind these changes and incorporated them smoothly into their practice, but the adoption was not complete. As other initiatives gained momentum, the focus on assessment settled into the background, leaving a range of practices and misconceptions. In response, Prairie Spirit convened an assessment advisory committee (AAC) of teachers, coordinators, and administrators to provide feedback and next steps around assessment, evaluation, and reporting.

The PSSD and PSTA collaborated on the creation of the AAC by inviting teachers, coordinators, and administrators spanning a range of geography, experience, and assessment practices to join. The committee met several times during 2018 and articulated issues related to intensification. This work has continued through the 2018-2019 school year with the goal of issuing a series of recommendations to support teachers' practice(s) of assessment in ways that promote learning without increasing intensification. Bringing teachers and administrators together to discuss their challenges and generate solutions is an effective approach to alleviate intensification (Hargreaves, 1991; Pietarinen, Pyhalto, Soini, & Salmela-Aro., 2013). However, continued discussion without action is unlikely to reduce intensification.

Returning to Collaboration

Throughout 2017-2018, the workload intensification committee continued to meet to discuss other intensifiers identified in the survey. Knowing the creation of a separate committee to address each intensifier was unrealistic, the workload committee engaged in a *can-if* process to find further applications for survey data. Taken from the book *A Beautiful Constraint* (Morgan & Barden, 2015), the *can-if* (p.79) exercise encourages participants to think about a problem from a solution-oriented position. Participants capitalize on their limitations, using divergent thinking to uncover previously unrecognized resources, partnerships, and strengths. The workload committee created the following *can-if* statement: "We can support sound, sustainable pedagogy without increasing workload intensification if..." The committee used this stem to brainstorm a list of ways Prairie Spirit could address intensification. Nearly half of the brainstormed ideas dealt with connecting teachers to colleagues and learning facilitators (teachers within each school who are assigned time to support professional development) for peer support. The other half dealt with creating the conditions whereby a teacher would feel comfortable seeking out collegial support. Through this exercise, the workload committee articulated their belief that teachers can reduce intensification through professional collaboration. Unfortunately, it can be challenging to motivate overwhelmed teachers to reach out for support.

Knowing that any strategy should align with current initiatives, the committee referred to Prairie Spirit's beliefs about conditions that support learning. My Prairie Spirit Classroom (MPSC) is the PSSD's guiding pedagogical document¹. It describes learning conditions for students and highlights the importance of collaboration, choice, and regular feedback. Starting with the positive presupposition that all principals and teachers are learners who collaborate to construct their understandings of big ideas and use feedback to refine their learning, the committee began to wonder how MPSC could be implemented as working conditions for teachers and principals. Perhaps this implementation would ease workload intensification.

The PSTA and PSSD's collaborative efforts to address workload intensification signified an improved relationship healing from the strain of conciliation and years of difficult budgets. Their survey confirmed an increase in workload intensification and identified several intensifiers, including increased demands related to assessment, adapting instruction, and a lack of classroom resources. Most respondents reported feeling satisfied in their current position and positively rated their physical and mental health, though they also reported an interest in supports related to stress management and physical activity. With limited resources to address intensification, the committee looked for creative solutions. Collaboration arose as

¹MPSC is accessible at <https://www.spiritsd.ca/files/board/My%20Prairie%20Spirit%20Classroom.pdf>

a recurring theme, and the committee identified ways that increased collegial collaboration might ease intensification by encouraging teachers and administrators to turn to their colleagues for support. By June 2018, the committee left for summer holidays on a cooperative note, a long way from the cold days of conciliation.

Teaching Notes

Intensification of principals' and teachers' work is a decades-old trend driven by social, pedagogical, administrative, and economic change(s) that requires teachers to do more with less (Hargreaves, 1994). The pressure to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students with limited time and resources in an environment of increased accountability leads many teachers to experience guilt (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991), cynicism, fatigue, and burnout (Hargreaves, 1994; Pietarinen, et al., 2013; Beck, 2017). This case narrative describes the efforts of a local teachers' association and their employing board of education to address the pressures created by intensification and create a culture of collaboration to provide the best possible learning environment for students and working conditions for teachers. The PSSD's and PSTA's history of conciliation, along with decreasing resources and increasing enrolment, created a challenging context for these discussions. However, these discussions provided an opportunity to strengthen their collaborative relationship and create a detailed understanding of intensification. After conducting a survey of PSTA members, the committee was able to concentrate their efforts on a few causes of intensification, specifically assessment and adapting instruction. MPSC provided pedagogical guidance, and the committee recognized that the learning conditions Prairie Spirit was cultivating for students might also be productive and healthy working conditions for teachers.

Principals, as the interface between school division and school staff, play a significant role in cultivating positive learning conditions for students and working conditions for teachers. Intuitively, principals' engagement with senior administration, local associations, and school staff is critical in creating the collaborative environment necessary to alleviate intensification. The following activities invite students in educational leadership programs to consider the complexity of intensification and to propose collaborative strategies to alleviate it.

The first activity is a role-play scenario that asks participants to engage as school division, teacher, or administrator representatives in a mock investigation of the causes of intensification. The purpose of this role-play is to encourage the recognition of multiple viewpoints regarding the problem of intensification (i.e., financial limitations, increased accountability measures, diverse student needs, and supports for teachers). The second activity acknowledges the complexity and consequences of scheduling a school's timetable. Administrators create timetables to meet several goals, including fulfilling curricular requirements, ensuring the appropriate use of staff and spaces, meeting preparation time requirements, and promoting student engagement. A school's schedule has the potential to increase or alleviate intensification. This activity encourages reflective discussion about the complexity of creating a timetable and creative problem solving to reduce intensification. The third activity focuses on strategies to improve the health and wellness of administrators. Participants are asked to generate two strategies: one to promote the health of principals and one to help principals support the health of their staff. The fourth activity invites participants to create a survey to compare the levels of confidence and support for a variety of professional responsibilities and then plot the data to create a confidence map. Using a *think-pair-share* strategy, participants discuss their findings and use a *can-if* approach to address areas of low confidence and support.

Activity 1: Workload Intensification Committee Scenario

Intended for aspiring administrators, this activity invites participants to engage in a role-play scenario to explore the various viewpoints of workload intensification and brainstorm solutions. Divide the class into two groups: teacher representatives and school division representatives. Depending on the class size, there may need to be multiple scenarios going on at once. The teacher group could consist of an administrator, a special education teacher, a learning facilitator (or learning leader), and one or more classroom teachers. Ask the teacher representatives to create a list of intensifiers, some of which should be reflective of each member's unique position. These will be specific tasks, issues, or problems that add to intensification. Invite them to prioritize this list. The school division group could consist of a superintendent of human resources, a superintendent of learning, a school board member, and a director of education. Ask the school

division group to create a list of interests and needs, some of which should be reflective of each member's position. This list may include directives from the Ministry of Education, direction from the Board of Education, division goals, budgetary limitations, accountability measures, and community expectations.

Invite both groups to meet and address the issue of intensification. They might seek answers to the following questions:

1. How are teachers experiencing intensification?
2. What is the relationship between division goals or initiatives, ministry directives, and intensification?
3. What can each group do to alleviate intensification? How might collaboration provide a solution?
4. What might be some short-term goals? What might be some long-term goals? What actions will the committee undertake to meet these goals?
5. How will the committee know the effect of their work on intensification?

Ask groups to create a visual representation of their discussion. They might choose to start with *intensification* in the middle of a large sheet of paper, with workload intensifiers and potential solutions branching off, or they might choose to use an image as a metaphor and annotate it with key points from their discussion. Ask groups to share their concept maps with the class and discuss similarities and difference, as well as the potential efficacy of any short or long-term responses to intensification.

Activity 2: Scheduling Intensification

Preparation time is a commonly sought solution to intensification; it can decrease teacher stress and increase work-life balance, which allows teachers to have increased positive interactions with their students (Hargreaves, 1994). Indeed, a modest increase in preparation time was one outcome of the conciliation process described in this case. The PSTA and PSSD negotiated a 2% increase on timetable preparation time, bringing the total to 5%. Unfortunately, 5% has proved to be a difficult amount of time for administrators to fit into a schedule. Middle years and secondary schools that use a period system to organize the school day found 5% particularly difficult to schedule and ran into many of the problems Hargreaves (1994) noted as potential drawbacks to relying on increased preparation time as a solution to intensification. These drawbacks include the need for a teacher to prepare a lesson for the teacher covering their class (also known as prep for prep), disruptions in continuity within the classroom, and no guarantee that preparation time will promote professional growth and collegial relationships (Hargreaves, 1994). The successful implementation of preparation time depends on the scheduling decisions of administrators.

In preparation for this activity, ask students to bring a copy of a whole school timetable. Ideally, this would be a comprehensive timetable that includes classes, grades, teachers, preparation time, and class size, as well as any schedules for the gym, library, computer lab, or supervision. If the students are not school administrators, they will likely need to request this information from their principal. The more variables, the better, as this will provide rich material for discussion.

Ask students to work in small groups and compare their timetables.

1. What are the priorities of administrators as they create schedules, and how would you order these priorities? How do these priorities affect intensification?
2. What impact might this schedule have on intensification? How might this schedule affect teaching and learning?
3. How could an administrator adjust the schedule to decrease intensification?

After their discussion, ask students to create a T-chart with one column listing the scheduling practices that contribute to intensification and the second column listing possible solutions for each intensifier. Ask group members to test these solutions against their own experience(s) to determine their potential impact of intensification.

Activity 3: Healthy Principals

The notion of principals being superheroes clearly shows the importance of the role while assigning undue pressure and accountability to one person. Given the intensification research conducted by the PSSD and PSTA (2016), which showed an interest among respondents for mental health and stress management supports and the in-school administration research by Wang et al. (2018) that suggested approximately one third of in-school administrators are self-medicating as a coping strategy, what integrated strategy would

you develop for your school division to support the wellbeing of principals and vice principals?

Have students think about two main strategies: one support for principals themselves and one support for principals in leading their staff. Ask students to write down the main strategies and supporting strategies. In pairs, compare and contrast approaches and collaboratively come up with a joint presentation to the rest of the class based on the provided research and the context of their school divisions. After each presentation, ask students to compare and contrast the suggested strategies and the feasibility of these strategies in a time of fiscal restraint. What would make a strategy effective, but also relatively easy to implement?

After all presentations and feedback have been given, ask pairs to revise their strategies to include the critical feedback they received as well as any worthy new ideas they heard from others.

The following resources offer a starting point to inform the creation of the students' wellness strategies. The Manitoba Teachers' Society publishes a wellness magazine for teachers: issues are available at <http://www.mbteach.org/mtscms/category/library/balancemag/> (MTA Balance Magazine, 2019). *The Well Teacher* (Repta, 2018) is another resource that includes information ranging from mental health to the ergonomics of teaching. Its corresponding website also contains useful resources: <https://www.humanworkspress.com/collections/resources> (The Well Teacher Resources, 2019).

Activity 4: Evidence Based Decision Making

The Confidence Map of Assessment, Evaluation, Planning, and Daily Activities shown above in Figure 1 contains a comparison of support and confidence, which clearly displays areas of need in Prairie Spirit. The intensification committee found the charts above to provide the most direction, as they account for school division interventions, as well as the effect of these interventions on teachers' feelings of proficiency.

As a class, create a survey that asks participants to rate their levels of confidence and support in a range of teaching duties. Students may take a copy of the survey back to their place of work to administer to a handful of colleagues. Ask students to bring their data back to class and, together, compile the data into a chart, similar to the chart in Figure 1.

Use a *think-pair-share* strategy to develop discussion. *Think*: ask students to think and write, individually, about what stands out to them from the data. How does this relate to their experience? What do they think might be responsible for some of the findings? *Pair*: ask students to share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. *Share*: ask pairs or small groups to share with the whole class. What was similar in their responses to the data and what was different?

Ask students in small groups to engage in a can-if process (Morgan & Barden, 2015, pp. 78–101) to address one of the results of their survey. For example, we can help teachers feel more confident and supported in communicating with parents if we create opportunities for parents to be engaged in their child's learning through online portfolios. Challenge the groups to see how many ways they can think of to reach their desired state. Then, ask each student to create a plan to share their thinking with colleagues in their school and test some of their ideas. Later, students may share the results of these plans and discuss their experience(s) of data-informed decision making.

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