

Chaska-Chanhassen Practicum Reflection

Planning

The first stage of getting an internship or practicum is thinking about where would I feel comfortable? Where would I get a variety of experiences? I had been working summer school with Chaska-Chanhassen for three years now. Jeff Theis and Maggie Rasmussen were good colleagues of mine and they ran that particular summer school. Jeff was the director of community education in that district and was in charge of summer school, after school learning, online platforms and credit recovery. He had a practicum student, Lori, during my third year and she was talking to me about how nice it was to get her experience AND get paid for it. So before I accepted my fourth year of summer school teaching I asked if I would be able to also do my practicum with Jeff and Maggie. The answer was yes.

The position itself was a bit of a unique situation as it ran two separate 3-week sessions. The first session had just the 9-12 grade students who were there to earn credit missed from school. Sometimes the students didn't pass the tests, sometimes they skipped, some students had medical reasons or anxiety that kept them out of school. Students were allowed to make up to 3 classes worth per session. All subjects were possible and classes (3) were 75 minutes long from 8:00am – 12:00pm with 5-minute passing times. If a student finished a class early, then they were allowed to start the work on their next class depending on how many credits they needed in a subject. Teachers were more tutors and individualized mentors rather than large classroom teachers. Classes did not exceed 25 students and most were 15-20 students.

The second session was the same as the first for grades 9-12. However, there was a second set of students participating from the middle school. These were students going from 7th to 8th grade and from 8th to 9th grade. It was more meant to be enrichment and “gap-filling” so students could have more practice during summer. The middle schoolers were invited to participate rather than open enrollment. However, parents were allowed to request an invite if they so wanted one. There were three field trips and an ice cream social on the last day. During session 2, I spent most of my time with the middle schoolers.

Jeff's first assignment for me was to prepare for the initial meeting. He talked all about how important it was to be prepared and have a timing sense down as people had things to accomplish and needed to know certain things about the logistics of summer school. We didn't need to hire anyone new as there was less need for math. So the other math teacher that had taught with me for three previous years was there. That was the good news, no new and unknowledgeable staff. Everyone was a veteran. This didn't mean there wouldn't be questions

or hiccups or “my tech isn’t working”, but it did make things feel a little less hectic. Back to the initial meeting planning. Jeff sent me a template to look over and add items as needed. I added the schedule times, snack distribution, bus information, emergency procedures, and needed numbers (including my cell phone – this was weird as I was always private with my number, but this seemed to be the administrator way).

The second item to plan for was much more direct. I had to lead the initial meeting with the entire summer student population and all of the staff members. This was not officially planned by me but by Jeff, Maggie and more of a look over by me to make sure I didn’t need to add anything. As I got up to present, this was the first time that I understood why I was the leader of this presentation. All eyes were on me. Any mess-ups would be visible and obvious. Jeff sort of watched from the front row. Trial by fire is what I kept thinking of. I remember thinking that I wished I had rehearsed the script more. But one of my strengths is I thrive in chaos. I can turn all situations into positive experiences as I think quickly on my feet. It has helped me in many circumstances that could have ended poorly. The presentation included two videos including what to do if an armed intruder comes into the building. I remember thinking that the students who were grabbing weapons like a stapler and a textbook was going to give our students some goofy ideas. I also remember thinking how sad it is that we have to worry about school shooters.

The rest of the planning was pretty basic. Keep to routines. Go over an agenda for a weekly meeting with Jeff and Maggie. Maggie was tremendous. We had become friends over the three years and were always very excited to work summer school together. We shared stories, celebrations and woes. I think Maggie maybe helped me a little more than I wanted as I was there to learn. So anything she helped me with I would make her show me again from the start. How to process Individual Learning Plans (ILP); how to report students for bad behavior; how to find students in the system and all of their numbers; and how to properly use the chain of command. All-in-all I think planning went well.

Data & Tech

In my many years as a teacher, I have found that using data to drive my instruction was the most effective way to be a teacher. Data is really powerful if you have tech that is understood and works. Although I was not to be a teacher in this instance, I knew that my knowledge of being data driven would be useful to teachers who were working directly with the students. Since the curriculum for teachers was strictly online through Edmentum, tech and data were at the forefront.

The first item that I seemed to excel in for tech was through the Edmentum platform. I had become somewhat of an expert through my three years running that platform. I had become so good at it that Jeff paid me two summers before to rewrite all of Chaska’s math curriculum for credit recovery. Maybe it’s my math brain, but setting up a logical sequencing of materials came

quite natural to me. I wrote 13 sections of curriculum and was paid for 60 hours of curriculum writing. I never told Jeff, but I would have done it for free as I totally enjoy it. So when other teacher from other subjects needed help with Edmentum, I was able to show them all the tricks I sort of naturally ran into. I was able to show them how to organize, reorganize, what buttons to avoid, how to name, and how to have the program create a test in the end that could be further edited. This quickly formed trust with the teachers I had worked with as a teacher to their go-to person when they needed something, anything. Nothing frustrates a competent teacher like not knowing how to use tech. I was able to solve that problem.

Another way I helped teachers with tech and data was through the belief of “Fair Isn’t Always Equal” by Rick Wormeli. The belief that behavior, attendance, bias and homework should have no bearing on the grading. Grading should be about performance on the test. Think about this if you’re angrily disagreeing with me on this. Imagine you are a basketball player. You practice, try new things, miss tons of shots and play sloppy during the practice. But in the game, because of all those failures and learning from those failures, you shoot the highest percent in the game at 59% and had 20 points, 4 blocks, 3 steals and 8 assists. Your team won. Should I judge the player on the failures during practice or by the success of the actual game? Students get to the understanding of things in different ways. I have had many students do absolutely no homework and then average 92% on their tests. Did they earn a C or an A-? So this philosophy really helped teachers who were getting stuck on what the student did to prepare for their exam and just focused on the exams themselves. Wormeli argues that anything but focusing on the exam is cheating the student. With this philosophy in place, more students were earning credits, teachers were less stressed on little details and seeing the whole picture, and the flow of school became more seamless.

Leadership

Although tech and data are ways that I was showing leadership and providing support, there were other ways in which I was learning and exerting leadership. As a teacher in regular practice, I was fresh in mind of what teachers needed for support. As the tech woes subsided in the first couple of days, behavior and attendance problems began to arise. My favorite teacher support book is “If You Don’t Feed The Teachers They Eat The Students” by Neila A. Connors. I believe whole-heartedly that teachers are the driving force of any good school and that it’s an administrator’s number one job to support the teacher in every way. This philosophy is similar to “Happy Wife, Happy Life”. ;) The book is based on the understanding that the teachers are most important part of successful schools. So when a student is misbehaving in one of the classrooms and teacher reaches out for help, I made sure to connect with the student, the teacher, then the student with the teacher. I was clear, consistent and followed through at every promise made.

The most interesting dilemma with one of the students was actually when I was helping out in a class for a teacher who was ill that day. I had the computer monitoring system active to

where I could see the screens thru my own computer screen. This allowed me to take students off inappropriate websites, send them messages of encouragement or help, and take screen shots of both good and bad items. I was helping some students before I made it back to this monitor. To my surprise, a student was researching “How to crash your school’s online system.” So I took screen shots, locked the student’s computer and called Jeff for advice. We discussed with this student about what he was doing, helping him tell the truth along the way. We then called parents to discuss further action and expectations of their child. Lastly, the student signed a contract of behavior to be present and earn credit. In this process, we used a lot of empathy and support rather than negative language and ultimatums. This lead the student to be successful and remorseful.

Now, everything I’ve written about has been focused on the high school, the technology, and credit recovery. There was also another aspect to this practicum: middle school. There was a small program being run in a different part of the school for 8th graders going into 9th grade, and 6th and 7th graders going into their respective next grades. I only helped with this program sometimes as I was not as familiar with the agendas. However, I became the field trip liaison. We went to the Science Museum of Minnesota, the Minnesota Zoo, and a river cruise on the Mississippi river. The boat was my greatest challenge. I was in charge of any dangerous behavior as the admin on the field trip. Well, there was one student, lets call him Billy, that presented a unique situation. So he was stealing money from other students. Multiple students came up and reported this. So two teachers followed Billy and he was indeed rifling through other students’ belongings. When I talked with hi and asked what was going on, he picked up a chair and threw it. He began kicking other chairs. I kept one teacher with me who knew him pretty well, and had the other teachers clear the area and set up a perimeter so students couldn’t see the incident anymore (top floor of boat vs bottom floor). I then called the office to get the mother’s phone number and then called her. We had a calm discussion about what was going on and agreed that she should meet us at the port to grab her child. She talked with her child and the child agreed to sit quietly until the boat lands. As an administrator, all I could think about was if there was an IEP or a 504 and was I following it. I was thinking about the child’s safety and the safety of the other students. I was worried about objects or people going into the water. I was thinking about how sad it was that a child had learned this behavior somewhere. But mostly, I wanted to be the one who took the brunt of this situation. I wanted to let my teachers worry or enjoy the rest of the students and their experiences. Because the other students needed their teachers. I could feed the teachers and students were not eaten. That was my goal.

I found that most of my administrative duties were parent communication. Although teachers were supposed to connect with parents at least once during each session, behaviors continued to creep up. Every day there were incidents of fighting, cheating, roaming, abusive language, sleeping and more. I had to meet with students, connect with teachers, and then call parents to discuss resolutions. We even had to release some students from the program for drug possession, multiple fights and one bullying situation that included threats. I was more of a listener with Jeff during those meetings with parents. The sadness we felt was immense as after the meeting we understood that school was probably the best place for that student to be. But rules must be enforced.

Final Reflection

Being given the responsibilities of both the 9-12 program and the middle school program allowed me to have some genuine experiences in a variety of ways. From field trip catastrophes to technology successes to students crying to me that they finally did it! The two items that I learned the most about and tried to ask the most questions about were how the budget works and what the rules are about students who create absolute havoc. There were many questions:

Are we allowed to simply tell parents it's not working? Yes, but this was a last resort.

What do we do when we discover drugs on a student or suspect drug usage? We have the police officer on hand search and take over. If the officer finds drugs or vaping devices, then they process the student and inform the parents. We also work with the parent on next steps and due process.

Do we have to follow IEPs during summer school? Surprisingly we are not beholden to them by law during summer school as it is extra time. But we try to still accommodate and work with case workers as much as possible. After all, we are trying to help create success.

How do grades get reported? Students have ILPs that are signed by the student, parent and teachers and are allowed to earn up to 3 credits per 3 week session. I found this also is flexible due to online components. Since Edmentum was already state approved, as long as the time was documented and the tests were in-person, students could earn even more. But no one did, so that took care of itself.

I also learned a lot about administrative duties through my past readings. Having books like *Shifting the Monkey* by Todd Whitaker (and like 7 others by him), and the Connors book and Wormeli book made things a lot more understandable. It was important to me to not only hold teachers accountable, but to help them when their struggle was evident. Whether through tech woes or behavior management, there were clear needs for teachers to receive help from both myself and Jeff. I truly enjoyed this process and will continually reflect on what I learned and what I still needed to learn.