

Introduction

The Leadership Academy is pleased to present the first edition of the Leadership for Learning Journal for the 2010/2011 school year. The action research reports featured here share common themes: the importance of connecting deeply with vulnerable students and their families, and the value of reaching out to the greater community.

K. B. Woodward Elementary investigated to what extent children at their school feel a sense of belonging. The team engaged in a variety of interventions involving staff, students, families and community members with the goal of deepening their understanding and support for their vulnerable population. A key finding was that "worrisome" students had a caring adult they felt connected to, but many lacked bonds with peers.

Chronic truancy was the topic of study at L.A. Matheson Secondary. Their research indicates that traditional methods of dealing with chronic truancy are ineffective; instead they focused on proactive strategies involving students, families and the greater community. Attendance rates increased dramatically as a result of their interventions, yet they caution that systemic change is needed to fully support truant students and their families.

The purpose of this bimonthly publication is to promote curriculum and instructional leadership, encourage innovation in teaching and learning, and showcase action research projects that have recently been undertaken in Surrey schools.

The Leadership for Learning Linking Research to Practice Journal is available in electronic format only on the Surrey School District website at: <http://www.sd36.bc.ca/general/research-eval/leadershipforlearningjournal/index.html>

The Leadership Academy Advisory Board

In This Issue

- ◆ Action Research Project Reports:
 - *Belonging at K.B. Woodward Elementary*
- K.B. Woodward Elementary
 - *Chronic Truancy: Collecting Data and Implementing Strategies Based on Data*
- L.A. Matheson Secondary
- ◆ Websites:
 - *Thinkfinity*
 - *Edutopia/New Forms of Assessment*

Belonging at K.B. Woodward

K.B. WOODWARD ELEMENTARY ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: Teachers: Ravinder Bhangu (LST), Jamie Carroll, Jodi Florio, Nicolle Hurley (music), Leslie Litfin, Jennifer Melvin, Greg Monroe, Simplicio Mountali, Christa Rawlings, Leah Vincent (integration), Sarah Woolley, Barbara Lawson (Aboriginal CCW), Shannon Rennie (CSP co-ordinator), Tara Webber (counsellor), Tammy Hartmann (vice principal), Heather McAllister (principal).

CONTEXT:

KB Woodward is a large, inner city school located in the heart of Whalley. We offer late French Immersion, and enrol significant numbers of designated ESL learners (48%). Over 47 different languages are spoken in our hallways. The Human Early Learning Project (HELP) data identified kindergarten children at our school as having the highest vulnerability rate in Surrey at 57%. Data indicate that our children's emotional vulnerability has doubled in the last five years, and social vulnerability has tripled.

Current school data show that the K.B. Woodward population has significant family transience, associated lack in belonging, and consequent disengaged student behaviour.

Staff initiated a process to identify students who display belonging-related needs. This process indicated that 25% of our K-7 students display "worrisome" social and emotional behaviour. The data point to groups of returning "worrisome" students in the fall of 2009. Therefore, we undertook this action research to further investigate how the children perceive their own experience of belonging with adults and peers.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Do students at K.B. Woodward experience a sense of belonging?

ACTION:

A committee formed to:

- deepen our examination of the school's "worrisome," vulnerability, and demographic data and to explore how these data relate to teacher-identified belonging needs at the school.
- advocate with all staff the importance of collecting baseline data from the students' perspective.
- develop a survey for primary and intermediate students related to belonging with peers, teachers and the school environment.
- administer the survey.
- collect, sort and interpret survey data.
- conceptualize future directions.

HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

K.B. Woodward staff recognize the critical importance of developing a sense of belonging among our student population and facilitating deepened relationships throughout the larger school community. Pursuant to these goals, we undertook the following:

- established partnerships with community groups and agencies that allowed us to forge a series of community events aimed at strengthening relationships between parents and staff and increasing the comfort level parents have with coming to the school
- staff, parents and students worked daily with Welcome Centre Settlement Workers helping to strengthen ties between Immigrant and Refugee newcomers and their new community
- aligned ourselves with the Community-Schools Partnership program, allowing us to provide additional critical programming for children, including The Kla-How-Eya Homework Club
- many families attended Strong Start each morning, and programs offered by Surrey Parks & Recreation, the City of Surrey and Diversity/Options
- targeted support was offered through a Child Care Worker, including a daily Breakfast Club, recess and noon hour supervised games program and classroom friendship support
- school organization structures were changed in response to the social/emotional needs revealed by initial data. KB Woodward staff now provide students with combined grade classes taught by teams of teachers

Phase one of our Action Research has helped us:

- better understand belonging needs of students from their perspective.
- identify cohorts within the population who express unmet belonging needs with peers.
- differentiate student needs to belong with adults, from needs to belong with peers.
- better understand our school's role in advancing the families' sense of belonging to the larger school community.
- enhance adult understandings of human growth and development needs.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Students have positive feelings and attachments with teachers and adults in this school.
 - a. Interestingly, more "worrisome" students reported having a caring adult to whom they can speak than non-worrisome students. This finding corroborates that staff's attention to the social development of those children is crucial.

- b. Teachers on the belonging committee are encouraged that students report a sense of belonging between themselves and the teachers. The next phase of research will attend to staff examination of which key relational factors may be making the difference.

2. Some students express absence of belonging in their peer to peer relationships. This phenomenon was reported more frequently by the "worrisome" students.
 - a. Thirty-two percent of primary "worrisome" students responded negatively to: "I feel like my classmates listen to me when I talk," compared to 23% of non-worrisome students.
 - b. Intermediate student responses to "I am an important part of the class" revealed that 27% of "worrisome students" replied negatively, in contrast to 6% of non-worrisome students.
3. For each survey question, trends of positivity and negativity were similar within the "worrisome" and non-worrisome segments. However, the degrees of positive and negative responses were more extreme from "worrisome" students.

Primary Belonging Survey (Scale is consistent for all questions)

Are you a boy or a girl? _____ What grade are you in? _____

1. There is at least one teacher or other adult at the school that I can talk to when I have a problem.
___ Strongly Agree ☺☺
___ Somewhat Agree ☺
___ Somewhat Disagree ☹
___ Strongly Disagree ☹☹
2. I feel safe at school.
3. I feel like my classmates listen to me when I talk.
4. I enjoy coming to school.
5. The children in my class are friendly to me.
6. I feel like I belong at this school.
7. I am an important part of the class.
8. I feel like my teacher and other adults at the school care about me.
9. I care about my classroom.
10. At this school, adults are friendly to me.
11. I feel welcome to participate on the outdoor schools grounds.
12. I feel welcome to participate in clubs/on teams at my school. (Int.only)

INTERPRETATION:

Overwhelmingly, our children express that they experience a strong sense of safety and of being cared for in their relationships with the adults in our school. Perhaps our involvement in the belonging-focussed action research has contributed to the adults' increased commitment to providing for belonging needs. Striving to build a sense of belonging in the larger community, utilizing organizational models for continuity of relationships for adults and children, and implementing classroom strategies aimed at increasing belonging were likely contributors to enhancing children's sense of belonging.

Many of our children also express that their sense of belonging (feeling safe and cared for) is less well-developed in their relationships with their peers. Our research has cracked open issues in the "hidden world" of the school, revealing that many of our children (most notably our "most worrisome" group) have intensive peer-related belonging needs.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

Committee members identify as most significant to our work in advancing a sense of belonging, the following key shared leadership issues:

- There are challenges for school-wide action research when school attends to multiple goals.
- There are challenges for implementing innovation and changing status quo.
- It is essential for collaboration to build norms for teamwork.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

The next phase of our research includes:

1. How do we ensure that all students at K.B. Woodward not only continue to feel a strong sense of belonging to caring adults, but also develop a stronger sense of belonging with peers?

Additional leadership question for our committee:

2. How do we provide for the ongoing development of group and individual values so that our school sustains a commitment to building positive adult-child and child-child relationships?

Future actions for our Belonging committee will include:

- Continue to administer and analyze Belonging survey data each November and April.
- Implement "new kids" survey one month after student arrives part way through the year.
- Build staff membership of Belonging committee.
- Review survey data, demographic data, and HELP data, and report back to staff twice yearly.
- Implement small student focus groups with our committee members and counsellor to further explore peer to peer relational trends and issues identified in phase one research.
- Refine methods for identifying the "under the radar" kids. Of concern, our anonymous survey revealed that some respondents answered negatively to almost all questions.
- Spearhead community events to build parent and family sense of welcome and belonging at the school, and to create a sense that the schoolhouse is the centre of the neighbourhood.

- Continue to seek out and implement programs (ie. Roots of Empathy) that align with and support school goals of belonging.

Chronic Truancy: Collecting Data and Implementing Strategies Based on Data

L.A. MATHESON SECONDARY ACTION RESEARCH TEAM: Leslie Alexander, Michelle Bertrand, Manju Binning, Michael Brown, Derek Carr, Kaillie Crosby, Laurie Daku, Bonita Hayden, Rosie Khaira and Lorryne Norris.

CONTEXT:

L.A. Matheson is an inner city school with a population of 1312 students. Though most students attend classes regularly, there are a significant number of students who are chronically truant. These students are identified as missing more than 25% of their classes. Traditional methods of encouraging these students to attend regularly have met with limited success. More effective strategies are needed to increase attendance and improve students' opportunities to succeed.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What are the reasons for student non-attendance and what strategies can be implemented to increase student attendance?

ACTION:

Chronic truancy is a complex issue that extends well beyond the student-school relationship. Before implementing a plan, data was collected on the topic and shared with staff. The primary source was the Quantifying School Engagement: Research Report authored by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE). The truancy committee undertook the following course of action:

- Data was collected in the form of surveys, questionnaires, student-led focus groups and a two-day visit to King County, Washington where information was shared on how their district deals with truancy issues. Strategies were implemented with three students to see if truancy could be reduced.
- A rigorous check and balance sheet was implemented to record the amount of class time missed by a student, with the amount correlating to after school help with a support teacher. If students continued to miss classes and did not attend after school sessions, they would face a suspension. The students were required to present their case in front of a truancy review board consisting of teachers, an administrator and a community member. The board would decide if the student had given thoughtful reflection to why attending L.A. Matheson was important and had developed a strategy to increase attendance.

- Staff members conducted two home visits over the course of a semester. The objective of the first visit was to understand the needs and concerns of the family. The goal of the second visit was to introduce a plan that would foster attendance and empower parents to be part of the plan.
- A parent night was organized that included participation from sixteen parents and eleven students. Student facilitators were trained by North Delta Secondary students to run the evening's focus groups. A slide show outlining economic and social consequences of being a high school drop-out was shown.
- Course material from different disciplines was compiled to create 'catch-up packs' for students who fit the criteria of a chronic truant.

HOW DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Our truancy reduction strategies focused on three students from two families. The home visits, follow-up meetings, tapering of strategies and constant contact produced positive results. In spite of one of the families moving out-of-catchment and the other leaving for Ontario for over a month, our data shows attendance increased by more than 47%. Although two of the three students are still missing more than 25% of their classes, they are all moving in a positive direction.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Identified chronic truants have a history of non-attendance in elementary school.
- Truancy is often linked to chronic truant behaviour.
- Parents of chronic truant students have little formal education (70% of the parents who attended the parent focus group did not have their high school diploma.)
- Chronic truants reported feeling safe and welcomed at LA Matheson (unlike the quantitative data collected by the NCSE.)
- Chronic truants are more likely to participate in 'at-risk' behaviours.
- Chronic truants undervalue a high school education.
- Chronic truants do not respond well to traditional punitive consequences (detentions, late-marks and suspensions.)
- To change patterns of behaviour, chronic truants and their families must be involved.
- Family visits and developing relationships with parents and students is paramount for change.
- Consistent, positive reinforcement (by a team of advocates) is necessary if change in behaviour is to occur.

INTERPRETATION:

Evidence strongly suggests that the use of traditional approaches when dealing with chronic student behaviour does not work. Instead, a proactive approach must be embedded in our practice. One option is to emulate a system similar to that of the King County School District. Their tiered approach involves not only the school but law enforcement, the District Attorney's Office, and subsequently the courts. Students move through a process from school consequences to court-mandated consequences with many checks and balances along the way. This approach may have resulted from a tragic event involving a truant student who was murdered while she should have been attending school. A bill was passed (the Becca Bill) in order to make truancy an illegal act. Every school works under the same protocol, there are several steps for intervention and family involvement, and there is a community component that can be effective. However, this approach is costly, involves much court time and can monopolize time during the school day.

Our research suggests that there are nuggets that can be taken from the King County School District model. Educating students and parents about chronic truancy is very important; our parent night was a testament to the need in our community for solutions to this problem. It is crucial to identify chronic truants early and develop a support plan for students and their families as soon as possible. Resources such as "catch-up packs" can assist students who fall behind. Continuous feedback from students and the use of student-led focus groups were found to be extremely effective.

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM THIS PROJECT?

Leadership is a shared process that inevitably involves an element of risk. Committee members took on different leadership roles; some worked with staff while others worked with students and families. We also witnessed and were duly impressed by the student leaders who were trained focus group facilitators.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT? FOR SCHOOLS?

L.A. Matheson is not the only school with chronic truancy issues. We believe the strategies that we implemented would transfer to other school contexts, and are willing to share our knowledge/experience. We would recommend another action research grant to continue with our work as many of our initiatives have not been fully realized.

We are cognizant of the current financial restraints that face school districts, yet we believe that hiring a youth and family worker to work specifically with chronic truants and their families would be beneficial. Perhaps this person could be shared between two schools.

Ultimately, building positive relationships with students and families is essential. Regardless of the setbacks and frustrations, educators must embrace a philosophy of no surrender and be prepared to adapt, modify and re-think their approach to supporting truant students and their families.

Websites

Submitted by Amy Newman, Research and Evaluation Helping Teacher

Thinkfinity

www.thinkfinity.org

Thinkfinity.org was recognised by the American Library Association as a "2010 Great Website for Kids" due to its rich content and educational value. Content partners include the *International Reading Association, Association for the Advancement of Science, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics* and more. The site includes thousands of free lesson plans, student interactives (check out Power Play), ideas for integrating Web 2.0 tools in the classroom and a Today in History calendar. Also featured are adult literacy resources and reference materials for parents.

Edutopia/New Forms of Assessment

www.edutopia.org/assessment

Founded in 1991 by filmmaker George Lucas, *Edutopia* celebrates and encourages educational innovation. The strand dedicated to Comprehensive Assessment may be of particular interest to teachers embarking on a new school year. Videos of real-life examples of authentic assessment, an article by Grant Wiggins and an interview with Howard Gardner are among the offerings. While the Gardner interview is not new, it is well worth investing eight minutes to remind ourselves about the importance of different learning styles and student choice. Search for "engagement" to read a succinct piece titled "Ten Steps to Better Student Engagement."