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A Broadly Shared Mission, Vision and Goals Founded on the Aspirational Images of the Educated Person

Algoma District School Board

Algoma District School Board serves approximately 10,000 students in 35 elementary schools, 8 secondary schools and 2 JK-12 schools. The geographic area in which the board is located encompasses communities along the north shore of Lake Huron from Spanish to Sault Ste. Marie and along the east coast of Lake Superior from Sault Ste. Marie to Wawa and includes Hornepayne, Chapleau and Elliot Lake, for a total of more than 72,000 square kilometers. As the board's website notes, the district of Algoma offers quality of life particularly for outdoor enthusiasts. Surrounded by water and trees, this four-season playground provides immediate access to magnificent scenery. The area is rich in history with sites of ancient native significance and travels of the voyageurs. Creative arts and culture are important components of our communities with many active theatre groups and internationally acclaimed artists.

This case study describes how the district has gone about enhancing the condition of two of the nine characteristics of strong districts: a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on an ambitious image of the educated person; and learning-oriented organizational improvement processes. In particular, this account stresses the practices of senior leaders that are effective in enhancing the two characteristics.

A Broadly Shared Mission, Vision & Goals Founded On Ambitious Images Of The Educated Person.

Evidence reviewed in the *Strong Districts and their Leadership* research indicates that senior leaders enhance the quality of this characteristic by:

1. Ensuring that a transparent visioning/direction-setting process is carried out
2. Consulting extensively about district directions as part of the process
3. Spending sufficient time to ensure that the mission, vision and goals (directions) of the system are widely known, understood and shared by all members of their organizations
4. Articulating, demonstrating and modeling the system's goals, priorities, and values to staffs when visiting schools
5. Embedding district directions in improvement plans, principal meetings and other leader-initiated interactions.

Why this Characteristic?

Following the appointment of a new Director of Education in July 2012, the board embarked on a year and a half process to revise its mission, vision values, and to establish its first Strategic Plan and Strategic Priorities. The rationale for this review was that the mission, vision, and values had not been changed since amalgamation in 1998 and it was felt (from within the system and from the Board of Trustees) that it was time to renew and refresh.

What We Did?

The process, supported by an outside facilitator, engaged the Board of Trustees, Senior Administration and stakeholders in providing feedback and ultimately in producing renewed mission/vision/values statements and three Strategic Priorities that are now the foundation for decision-making and improvement planning. Based on feedback from the system, the Board of Trustees and the Director of Education met several times to articulate a vision for teaching and learning in the board. Proud of our programs and our character education focus, there was a strong desire to capture a vision and mission that would demonstrate our commitment to teaching, learning and to developing good citizens.

One unexpected challenge along the way was the labour turmoil in the province in 2012. As a result, only minor progress was made that year, and so the process continued beginning in 2013-2014. Determined to respect the progress and current directions, lists were drafted that identified key activities, initiatives and beliefs. These lists were then grouped and commonalities and themes were highlighted. Through much discussion and dialogue, three key priorities were identified: Achievement, Well-Being and Engagement. Much time was spent trying to ensure a common understanding of the difference between a mission and a vision. A turning point for us was when we realized we needed to separate WHAT we wanted to accomplish with HOW we would accomplish things. This helped us focus on a few priorities, and then to establish actionable goals (HOW) for each priority.

Once identified, the priorities and sub goals were shared with representatives from all stakeholder groups for feedback in the spring of 2013. By fall of 2013, the three priorities and goals were finalized and were shared during a system Professional Development Day. In the spring of 2014, the Chair of the Board and the Director presented to city council and met with all the CEO's of community agencies and the Tribal Council to share the Board's new priorities and mission, vision, values, while reaching out and welcoming further opportunities to partner and to celebrate "confident learners, caring citizens." Additionally, written communication went to School Councils and all Service groups, summarizing the priorities and goals and extending an invitation for further engagement and collaboration.

What was the response of these groups about the work you were doing?

To embed the new priorities and facilitate improvement planning, it was announced to the system in the fall of 2013 that School Improvement Plans and the Board Improvement Plan would now reflect a January-to-January timeframe. This was to allow for transition and to make clear that the Board Improvement Plan would be developed once all School Improvement Plans and priorities had been received.

This action sent a clear message to the system that staff voices had been and would continue to be heard and that alignment to the new priorities was a genuine commitment. Thus, improvement plans were simplified and focused on the priorities of achievement, well-being and engagement. The Board Improvement Plan, when released, took the format of an inquiry question, and modeled the inquiry process being used in the system. Senior Administration shared with principals, their theory of action and how they wanted to work differently to support the work in schools. To further enhance the new model and priorities, the format of principal meetings was changed to include a dedicated time for supporting school improvement and the priorities within each Superintendent's family of schools. Thus, not only can senior leaders conduct school visits and support the progress, but they can, monthly, speak to focus areas within a particular family of schools to share best practices, problems of practice and next levels of work.

Current Status

In August, 2014, a session was held for all managers and non-union staff to, once again, review the mission, vision, goals and strategic priorities with the Director of Education and the Superintendent of Business. This session, led by an outside facilitator, helped each department (Plant, IT, HR, and Finance) to "see" how they fit into the plan, how they communicate and have "voice," and the goal now is for each department to establish a departmental plan based on the board's strategic priorities.

At the time of writing this case (September 2014), there was a renewed excitement and energy around our mission, vision and values and our Strategic Priorities. Feedback from staff and community partners indicates that they love the tag line "Confident learners, caring citizens" and our staffs are embedding this tag line in ways we hadn't imagined. The Chair and the Director incorporate the tag line, at public events, and our principals are using it in newsletters and in school activities.

Advice for Others

Based on what we have learned from this effort to revisit our mission, vision and goals, our advice to others doing the same thing would be to:

1. Include all stakeholders in the process and don't hesitate to take the time to seek feedback along the way;
2. Use a facilitator to keep discussions focused and neutral;
3. Communicate with all partners in your community once the mission, vision, goals are established;
4. Separate WHAT is to be accomplished from HOW you will accomplish it;
5. Allow the mission, vision and goals to be your lighthouse ... align everything to them!