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Productive Working Relationships with Staff and Stakeholders

Superior Greenstone District School Board

"The goal of family engagement is to not serve clients but to gain partners."[1]

Background

Superior-Greenstone District School Board is located in North-Western Ontario and covers a vast area of 44,100 square kilometers. The board is responsible for providing public education, and its 17 schools are proud to serve the communities of Beardmore, Geraldton, Longlac, Dorion, Nipigon, Red Rock, Schreiber, Terrace Bay, Marathon, Nakina, and Manitouwadge. The board office is located in Marathon on the beautiful north shore of Lake Superior. There is an approximate enrolment of 1600 students; split equally between the elementary and secondary panels. There are approximately 55 elementary classrooms. Many of our students are of Aboriginal ancestry and live both on and off reserve. Our Board's Aboriginal Self-Id Policy was revamped within the last year and we have started the process of implementing it in our schools. This is the first year that we gathered data and therefore we do not have any information to share regarding exact numbers of students who have self-identified as Aboriginal. Tuition Agreements is an ongoing process between First Nations within the region and the Board about First Nation students who come to the public schools from the reserves and the tuitions are negotiated between the parties. Currently there are 9 Tuition Agreements between First Nations and the Board. The Board is in the process of creating a confidential voluntary self-identification for staff. Enrolment continues to decline as the region struggles with economic challenges in the forestry and mining industries.

[1] Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 10

At the time of the project, the senior administrative team was comprised of a Director of Education, a Superintendent of Business, a Superintendent of Education, a Student Success Lead and a School Effectiveness Lead. We had no "in house" research department; thus we consulted the research department at Lakehead University in order to hire a researcher. Fortunately for us, Rachel Mishenene, a certified classroom teacher with teaching experience in grades K-12 and post-secondary levels was available to assist us in this research project. She was also a PhD candidate and has research experience through her Aboriginal education consulting business. Rachel is also a band member of the Eabametoong First Nation; as such she has personal and professional connections to the First Nations involved in this project.

For the past three years, conversations at the school and system leadership level in this school district have moved from a focus on parental involvement to one of parental engagement. For system leaders, this shift from desiring active parental volunteerism to active family-school connections that raise student achievement has seemingly corresponded with the shift toward a focus on student-centered learning whereby the development and well-being of the whole child is considered and supported by the entire school community.

In Ontario, the belief that "we can only make progress if we acknowledge that the development of children and youth happens through the collective interactions with adults and peers that take place at home, in school and in the community" (Zegarac, 2013, in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) is grounding this new approach to implementing family-school engagement. An understanding of the distinction between "involvement" and "engagement" is one of vital importance if leaders wish to create the kinds of active family and community engagement that impacts student achievement. Ferlazzo (2011) contrasts these terms; "involve" means "to enfold or envelope" while "engage" is "to come together and interlock" (p. 10). "Thus, involvement implies doing to; in contrast, engagement implies doing with" (Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 10).

Objectives

Increasing the social and intellectual capital of parents was the main goal of this work. The term social capital describes "the societal and economic value of building connections among people"[2]. Ferlazzo best describes the impact of improving social capital,

> *I am firmly convinced that the supervisor and teachers whose achievement I have described have struck bedrock in community building. It is not what they did for the people that count most in what was achieved; it is what they led the people to do for themselves that is really important. Tell the people what they ought to do, and they will say in effect, "Mind your own business." But help them to discover for themselves what ought to be done, and they will not be satisfied until it is done. The more the people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment* [3]

Intellectual capital, as defined by Leithwood (2012), is "the knowledge and capabilities of parents with the potential for collaborative action" (p. 8) as "low income parents often are unable to gain access to and benefit from the resources available in the schools" (p. 8). Building the social and intellectual capital for the parent participants from our school has a level of complexity brought on by years of mistrust of educational institutions by First Nations peoples.

While the objectives of this project are similar to those of other districts in the overall project, it is important to distinguish the methodology and the results of this work in light of this mistrust. This work aimed to include significant face-to face interactions and conversations between families and the school; each interaction was structured to develop the family's understanding of the "grammar" of schooling while building relational trust with the teacher and principal. The formal methodology of this project did not appear to engage parents; however the informal conversations that arose from parents feeling welcome in the school, able to access support from the principal and participating teacher began to build a relationship of mutual trust.

[2] (Ferlazzo (2011, p. 11), Hanifan (1916, in Ferlazzo, 2011)
[3] Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 11)

Sample

A teacher and the principal in one school implemented the Superior-Greenstone District School Board version of the project with 6 parents and 78 students. “Focus Public School” served 72 Students and included 5.5 Educators (4.5 of which were new to the school), 3 Educational Assistants (1 was new to the school) and an administrator new to the school (with 3 years’ experience).

While walking the halls at “Focus Public School” in May of 2013, what became increasingly apparent in this building was the lack of engagement in learning by administration, parents, students and the school community as a whole. Students, 90% of whom were of First Nations ancestry (majority off reserve), could be found wandering the hallways. Student work was visible only in the area of visual arts, and staff could be seen and heard attempting to tell students what they needed to do. It was a “compliance” model of education. Few families were visible at the school having expressed a lack of confidence that the staff was dedicated to the well-being of their children, a condition that may have resulted from the perceived hierarchy or distance that existed between the communities and the schools. The staff was transient, often teaching in the school for less than a school year.

As a consequence of these conditions, little relational trust existed in the school and a number of families had moved to the neighbouring school. School administrators spent considerable time on the telephone with district administrators attempting to find solutions to the rapidly growing challenges including student behaviour, lack of staff efficacy and disengagement, low academic expectations, and an apparent lack of trust by parents.

The community, comprised of a municipality and two separate First Nations communities had suffered economic downturn with the closure of the local plywood mill and the woodlands industry; thus the middle class had disappeared and many families were on social assistance or were “working poor.” Substance abuse was evidenced by the existence of a methadone clinic in the community and suboxone) programs in both First Nations

communities. In September of 2013, a new principal was assigned to the school and the project was introduced. This school quickly became the focus school for this project as little hope for the future existed for parents, students, staff and the communities.

Based upon our reading of the research, the original intention was to develop social capital in parents. Although 13 families expressed interest in the project (Parent Engagement Group), turnout at these sessions did not reflect this interest; this was the case even with personal phone calls as reminders, notes home, and the offer of transportation. Families had been consulted regarding the possible dates and times for the sessions. Such lack of participation may have reflected the lack of engagement of parents and the possible mistrust of the educational system.

Nature of the Interventions

Five sets of interventions were undertaken as part of the project:

1. Responding to parent focus groups
2. In-service for educators,
3. Community evening
4. Literacy sessions
5. Family engagement group (Building Intellectual Capital)

Responding to Parent Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2013. Although the data between the control and focus schools had been collated, the small nature of the schools allowed for the new principal to determine which recommendations related to her school. These included:

1. Include a Native Language Class
2. Incorporate culture programming into teaching practice and programming*
3. Provide regular cultural training for all staff*
4. Hire Aboriginal Staff (Aboriginal Liaison, counsellor and programmers)
5. More encouragement from teachers to complete schoolwork*

6. Teachers take more time to teach students with specific needs*
7. Lunch-hour change*
8. More academic and learning supports (educational assistants, speech therapists)* (referrals/guidance/support and follow up to appropriate outside agencies for services)
9. Student agenda/journal* (coming in September 2014)
10. Constructive feedback on child's behaviour and academic achievement*
11. More educational materials/supports for parents to help children with learning*
12. Native parent council committee/representative on current parent council
13. Explanation of report cards*
14. Clear and simple communications with parents*

The new principal considered several of these interventions to be feasible to implement immediately (as marked by *), thus demonstrating "to parents that she really cares about their kids, that they share a mutual investment in their well-being and that they are not going to play game, they're going to be open and honest with them and that they are not going to try to hide what's going on, even when the news may be hard to hear" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 8).

In-service for Educators

Conducted by the newly appointed principal, began with developing an awareness and beginning understanding of:

1. Poverty: Goal was for educators to understand the life situations of most of our children and families (http://www.ahaprocess.com/solutions/community/)
2. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and ADHS (characteristics are very similar): Goal was for educators to begin to understand the needs of many of their students. (http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/fasd/fasdeducators_en.pdf)
3. Trauma: Goal was for educators to begin to understand the needs of many of their students as diagnoses "may be comorbid with trauma. These include depression,

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, anxiety disorder, phobic disorder and borderline personality"[4]

These new understandings allowed staff to react differently than they had in the past to student behaviours, thus increasing their credibility with parents.

Community Evening

Another component of the intervention was a community evening for parents and families. The goal of this event was to build intellectual capital by introducing parents to the programs and services that were currently available to them in the community, to build familiarity with the people who are associated with the programs and services, and to have families meet and interact with the school staff. Community agencies set up booths in the main foyer and hallways of the school and provided information through handouts, draws, goodie bags and conversations about how their service could support healthy children and families. Booths were set up by representatives from recreational organizations, social services (Child Protection, Mental Health, Counselling Services, Psychiatry, Academic Assessments, Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy), Public Health, Northwest Health Centre, the local food bank, municipal services such as the Fire Department and Ontario Provincial Police, and the local First Nations (26 organizations were represented).

The Director of Education was also present for this event as was all of the teaching staff from the school. Supper was provided for parents and the staff sat with families as a means of sharing information about expectations for students at school, the nature of the work students were doing at school, and how parents could support that work at home. Parents unexpectedly began to visit the classrooms and chatted further with teachers. Parents were invited to sign up for the Parent Engagement Group (the lead teacher in the project coordinated this). Thirteen families signed up. The lead researcher was introduced to the parents during the introduction, and then made herself available at her own booth where

[4] (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005. P. 21). (http://traumasensitiveschools.org/tlpi-publications/download-a-free-copy-of-helping-traumatized-children-learn/)

she had culturally appropriate reading materials that were made available to purchase and where she spoke with parents about their schooling concerns.

Family Engagement Group

These sessions aimed to give parents voice and increase their knowledge about how school "works" and the challenges for students in their school experiences. The principal facilitated almost all sessions, offering food and an opportunity to collectively discuss student achievement (topics selected by parents). Following this, culturally appropriate book selections were provided to the parents with discussions of ways to interact with their children when reading these books. Embedded in these learning sessions was the opportunity to engage in informal conversations about the struggles that parents and families experience with the school. This included topics such as policies and procedures, curriculum documents, how teachers assess student work and what grade level student work "looks like." These informal conversations allowed the principal to "lead with her ears – listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about" (Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 10) thus she was able respond to areas of concern.

Literacy sessions were as follows:

1. Reading: parents read to students, student read to parents, students read to self. Materials used for this purpose included two books (*My Kokum Called Today* and *All About Me*). This part of the project was about improving the parental relationship with their children by building a strong foundation, and with the community. School staff modelled reading with a student and showed parents three ways to read a book.
2. Oral Language: This session aimed to help parents understand how to develop a sense of sentence and vocabulary. Materials for the session included the book *Red Parka Mary* with support for engaging in oral discussions with their children about this book.
3. Words, Letters and Sounds: Helping parents understand how to foster their child's recognition of rhyming and syllables and letter recognition was the aim of this session using the book *What Would You Do?*

4. Community Print: Exploration of flyers, environmental pictures, food boxes, etc. allowed participants to increase awareness that almost all print carries some sort of message and this message is not always obvious.
5. Writing: Parents learned that writing is a way to convey a message and has a purpose in this session. Parents were encouraged to have their children write authentically in the home (thank you messages, invitations), learn the letters of alphabet and then make letters into words. Parents were encouraged to not be too concerned about correct spelling during this stage (explanation of inventive spelling). Alphabet books and magnets, the *All About Me* book were used during this session.
6. Mathematics: In this session, parents became aware of approaches to helping their children count to 10, skipping rhymes, using your hands to count, and to be counting all the time. The session used skipping rhymes, the book called *Listen to the Loon*, and a scavenger hunt (where do you see math in the environment – look for the number 5 somewhere – how many animals did you see this week?). Parents were shown how to model the counting activities by making bracelets or necklaces – with buttons of assorted colours, then asking children, for example, how many are of a particular colour.
7. Good Life Teachings: This meeting with parents was focused on the 7 Grandfather Teachings (using *The Lost Teachings*). The goal was to gain a mutual understanding of the 7 Grandfather Teachings.
8. Relationships: The focus of this session was building relationships with children and with the environment. Strategies introduced in earlier sessions using one of the books to facilitate discussions with parents and children about extending the relationships – the gift of *Listening to Mother Earth and Father Sky*. Material for this session includes *Shin-chi's Canoe* and *Shi-shi-etko, Listening to Mother Earth and Father Sky*.
9. The wrap up session asked parents what areas they wanted to focus on in the future. Questions asked included "How has your relationship with your child improved from these sessions? What have you learned from this program?"

Overall, these sessions were not well attended despite repeated phone calls and notes home, offer of transportation, books, free food and babysitting. Suitable times and dates for the session were discussed with participants; these accommodations did not result in improved attendance (minimum of two families and up to 6 families attended these sessions). Families who did attend however were not necessarily those who signed up but who chose to attend based upon word of mouth. Two First Nations parent members of the original group had service roles within the community-child welfare system and books were taken by these individuals. These resources went to the respective offices of these parents to share with the wider community who visit their organizations. The relationships built with these members of the two First Nations communities helped to make inroads into the community and built trust and understanding.

Results: Parent Interviews

> *…we must gather information about what life is really like for those we teach. The best way to do that is by listening to the people who know our students best – their parents. (Freeman-Loftis, 2011, p. 1)*

In 2013 and 2014, two schools were selected in two neighbouring communities and Aboriginal parents were invited to participate in a focus group interview to discuss their child's learning and issues that were related to parenting and supports. There were 8 parents that participated in the 2013 interviews, and 6 that participated in the 2014 interviews. The following is a summary of the interviews from 2013 and 2014. The majority of parent participants were either married or in a common law relationship. The main age group, of the predominately female participants, was between 26-40 years old. All participants identified as First Nation.

The majority of parents completed some secondary schooling and found their personal educational experience to be 'good.' On average the number of school-aged children these parents cared for was three who were mainly registered in primary and junior grades. When asked if they saw Aboriginal content in their child's learning, all participants

responded 'never.' All parents felt that the schools need to incorporate more Aboriginal content and resources in the learning environment.

During the interviews, when parents were asked about their impression of the school, staff and programs that were available to their children, the parents were satisfied with the services with the exception of not having enough information about in-school programs and not having any resources to support their children in literacy. Parents also shared concern about the lunch hour at one of the schools as it meant that children would be home alone during that time period (as parents are working). This matter was later addressed and dealt with. Another issue that came up was the issue of bullying

The parents found the schools to be welcoming. Almost all parents said they could not volunteer in school functions because of work schedules and having to care for younger children at home. The participants suggested that providing additional teacher-parent meetings and communication in non-academic terms would provide them with an opportunity to discuss their child's progress and how they could support them in their learning.

The lack of access to transportation for parents and for older school-aged children was also an issue that was shared in the interviews. The negative behaviour and attitude of a local school bus driver was discussed, and the stress it caused their children.

When it came to discussing why a child would miss school, the most common responses were: the lack of parenting skills (i.e. routines, scheduling, supports); parents may be struggling with addictions (i.e. drugs/alcohol); socio-economics of family (i.e. limited income and/or large families); challenges at home (i.e. relationship with parents; parent separation; what children are witnessing at home); and parent(s) may feel embarrassed to send child to school without lunch and/or proper clothing. For these reasons and for the lack of access to resources and lack of literacy on the parent's part, the child's learning would also be impacted.

Along with racism in the community, and the lack of supports available in the community for parents and/or people with addictions or mental health is a factor that continues to

contribute to the overall well-being of Aboriginal families. The complete interviews for each year are provided in the Appendices.

Results: Student Engagement Survey

Table 1 (see end of report) describes the results of responses to 25 questions that were asked to students in the student engagement survey. The student body that completed this 2014 survey included students in grades 2-5 at the same two schools that completed the survey in 2013. The number of students that participated in the 2013 survey was 63 and in 2014, 78 students completed the survey. The additional numbers account for new students and returning students that were not present on the day that the 2013 survey was administered. In both surveys that were completed students did not answer all the questions.

Table 1 in the Appendix summarizes the results of the student surveys conducted with both treatment and control students at the beginning and end of the district's project. The survey measured student perceptions of both their behavioural and psychological engagement (identification) with school, as well as their estimates of parents' expectations for their success at school, the social and intellectual capital of the family and the nature of communication in the home between parents and children.

Behavioural engagement. This form of student engagement includes two components: responding to the school's requirements and class-related initiatives. As table x indicates, changes in the aggregate measure of behavioural engagement from pre to post-test increased by .31 for the treatment group as compared with a loss of -.27 for the control group. This overall difference favouring the treatment group was accounted for by students' perceptions of the extent which they responded to the school's requirements (.36 for the treatment group vs. -.18 for the control group) and their class-related initiatives (.24 for the treatment group vs. -.37 for the control group).

Psychological engagement (identification with school). Students' psychological engagement with school (the extent to which they feel the school is a good place to be) includes their sense of belonging in the school as well as their valuing of the school. Evidence in Table x

indicates large differences favouring the treatment over the control group on both facets of identification (.45 vs. -.13 for sense of belonging and .63 vs. -.12 for valuing school)

Parental Expectations. Table 1 reports large differences favouring the treatment group (.50 vs. -.15) in parents' expectations for their children's success at school. The treatment group had a particularly large gain (1.14) on the survey item "My parents make sure I do my homework."

Family's social and intellectual capital. Positive changes in this variable between pre and post-test were relatively large for the treatment group (.76) but moderately negative (-.22) for the control group. Of the three items measuring this variable, the largest treatment group gain (.94) was for the item "My parent comes to school to meet with my teacher and to attend special school events."

Communication between parents and children at home. Results on the single item measuring this variable, as Table x reports, indicate at least a moderate gain for the treatment group (.57) but a small loss for the control group (-.19).

Conclusions

Results of the student survey, as a whole, indicate a substantial treatment effect and provide support for the value of Superior-Greenstone District School Board's interventions. Critical leadership lessons have emerged during this project. According to the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (2013), "the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders" (p. 18) requires a clearly articulated and broadly shared vision that aligns with the district's strategic plan as a tool that articulates expectations to school leaders. However, these expectations will not become reality until the school and system leaders interact with or practice enacting these expectations.

This movement, from research that is conceptually understood into practices that will have a long lasting and positive impact requires commitment, genuine collaboration through shared leadership, ongoing analysis and measurement of impact, and refinement; all of which is done through authentic monitoring and support. Acquiring a full understanding of

this research by integrating these leadership practices into our daily work – by practicing – and over time making permanent changes to the role of family and the community play in the school, is the essential and challenging work of this leadership team.

While the body of research around engaging family and community is consistent, it is important to note that very little of it has been carried out with First Nation's peoples. The historical relationship between First Nations peoples and Canada's government has meant that First Nations communities continue to cope with injustices such as disempowering government policies and the impacts of the residential schools. These policies have been detrimental to the continuation of First Nations people traditional practices, customs and livelihood, which in many ways, has affected parents' ability to enthusiastically engage in their children's education. The socio-economic realities in many First Nation communities include higher than average rates of unemployment and poverty, which largely stem from paternalistic government policies and limited access to economic opportunity. Some of these policies include infringement on lands and extraction of natural resources, as well as the creation of the *Indian Act* and the reservation system.

The most devastating influence in terms of education has come from the residential school system. The residential schools, which began in the 1600s and continued until the late 1900s, were government-run and church operated schools which aimed to assimilate First Nations children into the mainstream Canadian society by forcibly removing children from their families in order to educate and socialize them into the European-Canadian way of life. The children who attended these schools were not allowed to speak their languages or engage in cultural and spiritual practices. The children were instead given a basic education in English and Math and taught Christian beliefs. The residential school system interrupted traditional education and parenting practiced by First Nations by removing children from their families and communities. The schools were underfunded and poorly operated, staffed largely by nuns, missionaries and priests. The children were often underfed, undernourished and suffered from harsh discipline at the hands of the school staff.

Beginning in the 1990s, survivors of the residential schools began disclosing the level of abuse that they experienced in the schools. It was 2007 before the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* was established and 2008 when the Canadian government formally apologized for the harms done through the residential school system (Legacy of Hope Foundation). While the policy of assimilation was unsuccessful and many First Nations people have continued to practice their cultural traditions, on the whole First Nations peoples in Canada have continued to be negatively impacted by the onslaught of colonial government policies. Contemporary research continues to show disheartening statistics about the realities in many First Nations communities, including high rates of substance use, poverty, and involvement with child welfare, all of which has been connected with the detrimental policies of assimilation.

Lessons Learned

Lesson One: Intellectual Capital Comes First.

> *As families move from being school clients or volunteers to being leaders in education improvement efforts, they gain more power. As a result, the whole pie gets bigger, and more possibilities are created. (Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 13)*

The research that we reviewed had a focus on building social capital and this was the main objective for this project. On a day-to-day basis, however, it became apparent that the school was actually working on developing the intellectual capital of parents and staff, as well. We had learned of the need to truly understand the life experiences and knowledge unique to the particular First Nations families in our project. "Sharing information, empowering parents, dismantling barriers to understanding and cooperation, and recognizing parents' strengths, priorities, and perspectives is fundamental to building strong relationships between the home and the school"[5]. Understanding the uniqueness of each First Nation's history and experiences is vital to the development of trust and family engagement.

[5] Stelmack, obtained from http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/files/Mar8ParentalInvolvement.pdf

Historically in Canada, First Nation's people have not been equally or respectfully represented in the educational curriculum. First Nation's people have been subjected to a non-Aboriginal education system that has often contained a lack of information, understanding, and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples. This has contributed to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples and their separation from mainstream Canadian society (Malatest et al., 2002, p.11). In order to address this, it is imperative that educational curriculum reflect the histories, perspectives and cultures of First Nations people. Scholars like Agbo 2001; Demmert et al. 2006b; Nelson-Barber and Trumbull 2007; and Rameka 2007 believe that, "[u]ntil Aboriginal culture is recognized in the curriculum and the manner in which instruction and assessment are provided reflects Indigenous methods of learning and knowledge Aboriginal people around the world will continue to feel marginalized in educational settings, thereby failing to meet suitable attainment standards (cited by Gunn, Pomahac, Striker, & Tailfeathers, 2011, p. 325). When First Nation's knowledge and culture is not reflected in the classroom resources, both learners and their families may feel disconnected from the teachers and the learning materials. Thus, it is important that teachers and school administration engage family by learning about the communities that they serve. Understanding Aboriginal people and the traditional ways of life and culture would help to create effective communications between the education staff and Aboriginal parents (Agbo, 2007, p. 8).

Results from the spring 2014 Parent Focus Groups included requests for additional opportunities including:

- More after school programs directed to learning and not just sports
- Math club
- Book club/reading club
- More activities to facilitate students to be engaged in learning.
- More one-to-one supports available to students such as teaching assistants
- Aboriginal guidance counsellors or liaisons available to students
- Aboriginal representation in the schools*

The number and focus of these recommendations, when compared to those from the spring of 2013, are fewer in number and increasingly focused on student learning. This indicates that our efforts to building parents' Intellectual Capital has increased their understandings about the value of "gain[ing] access to and benefit[ing] from the resources available in the schools (Leithwood, 2012, p. 8). We now believe that we are moving into the development of Social Capital; parents are becoming increasingly empowered as evidenced by their willingness to collaborate with the school regarding their children's specific needs and the way that the school community has come together to fundraise and provide grade 8 students with an overnight trip.

In the Focus Groups, "participants described school council as a group of people (parents) that meet to share ideas about the school and help plan events for school children. Four out of six parents expressed interest in becoming involved in the school council" (Focus Groups, 2014). Much work continues to be required as evidenced by the parental comments from the Focus Groups, however there is a small group of parents who are beginning to positively engage in the school.

Several of the remaining recommendations from interviews are currently in the process of being addressed for the fall of 2014; a Native as A Second Language teacher is being recruited, a member of one of the First Nations is a now a permanent teacher at the school, and there is agreement that new after school programs need be considered.

Lesson Two: Trust Results from Listening and Acting

> *School leaders have an opportunity early in their arrival at a new school to demonstrate their benevolence, to demonstrate to parents that they really care about their kids, that they share a mutual investment in their well-being, and that they're not going to play games. Leaders put themselves on solid ground with parents when they make it clear that they're going to be open and honest with them and that they're not going to try to hide what's going on…school leaders have to keep that up and follow through (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).*

Parent Focus Groups were vital to the project because the families offered information that could be interpreted as not only not understanding the language of school but also not understanding the structures of school and how their feelings could influence the organization. The incoming principal listened actively to parent concerns, considered the recommendations from the initial Focus Groups and implemented as many recommendations as feasible from the Focus Groups and other expressions of parental concerns voiced through conversations (funding dictated what was possible). The administrator and the researcher became conduits who facilitated the sharing of issues and concerns between families and school staff.

Teachers began to develop an understanding of the socio-economic realities of the families and their children that allowed them to stop making judgments on family's choices and actions that did not reflect their personal realities. Staff began to explicitly explain the implied rules of institutional environments to students and families (e.g. a parent taking their child to the doctor, diagnosed with ADHD, was supported in advocating for their child's needs). Enrolment began to grow, staff did not exercise their rights to transfer, the senior team reported a sense of efficacy on the part of the staff, the school became increasingly student centered and students and staff are now proud to share their work (Superior-Greenstone District School Board Support Visit, May 2014). Parent Focus Groups revealed interest in the academic program of the school, as opposed to the structural running of the school.

Final Thoughts

We are at the precipice of this journey. We have learned some important lessons from this research, the most important being that while the research informs our work, it is the practical application of this research and the monitoring, refining and measuring of impact that leads us to new thinking and returns us to different research. As Elmore et al. (2009) have argued, "we learn to do the work by doing the work, not by telling other people to do the work, not by having done the work at the same time in the past, and not by hiring experts who can act as proxies for our knowledge about how to do the work" (p. 33). Developing a positive school climate isn't done in isolation focusing on just one area of

need, but rather needs to be an integrated approach that considers the unique and diverse needs of all stakeholders – families, students, educators and support staff. Using the second principle of the Instructional Core, if you change one element, then by nature you must also change the other two to make an impact (Elmore et al., 2009, p. 25).

Our most significant finding is that while we began this project focusing on building social capital with First Nations parents, our work truly became about improving the intellectual capital of all stakeholders in the school community. Thus we have learned that the goal of improving parental engagement is one critical factor in the journey to improve the climate of a school. Healthy relationships, grounded in understanding history, and a mutual sharing of leadership are the beginning foundations for this improvement in school climate.

Table 1

Student Engagement Survey Results for Superior Greenstone DSB

		Pre-test				Post-test				Change	
		Treatment		Control		Treatment		Control			
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	T	C
Behavioural Engagement		2.76	1.06	3.24	.91	3.07	.76	2.97	1.01	.31	-.27
Respond to requirements		*2.91*	*1.01*	*3.33*	*.87*	*3.28*	*.76*	*3.15*	*.97*	*.36*	*-.18*
1.	I am late for school. *(Recoded)*	2.50	.97	3.23	.94	3.14	.77	2.80	1.05	.64	-.43
2.	When I am asked questions in class, I answer.	3.19	.75	3.40	.80	3.32	.65	2.98	1.04	.13	-.42
3.	I come to school every day.	3.06	1.12	3.41	.78	3.45	.60	3.30	.93	.39	-.11
4.	The principal has to speak to me because of my behaviour. *(Recoded)*	2.88	1.15	3.40	.90	3.30	.88	3.29	.94	.43	-.11
5.	I miss school even though I am not sick. *(Recoded)*	2.94	1.06	3.21	.93	3.17	.89	3.36	.91	.24	.15
Class-related initiative		*2.57*	*1.12*	*3.13*	*.96*	*2.80*	*.77*	*2.76*	*1.06*	*.24*	*-.37*

		Pre-test				Post-test				Change	
		Treatment		Control		Treatment		Control			
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	T	C
6.	I work hard at completing tasks at school.	3.20	1.15	3.60	.85	3.71	.46	3.44	.84	.51	-.15
7.	I ask questions during class.	2.38	1.02	3.02	.97	2.68	.72	2.39	.98	.31	-.63
8.	I have discussions with my teachers about things I find interesting.	2.38	.96	2.76	1.02	1.95	.90	2.50	1.21	-.42	-.26
9.	I like to read on my own time.	2.31	1.35	3.15	1.00	2.86	.99	2.69	1.20	.55	-.46
Identification with School		3.13	.97	3.41	.89	3.67	.57	3.29	.93	.54	-.13
Sense of belonging		*3.28*	*.94*	*3.54*	*.79*	*3.74*	*.55*	*3.41*	*.89*	*.45*	*-.13*
10.	I feel that I "belong" at this school.	3.00	1.21	3.36	1.03	3.50	.91	3.20	1.05	.50	-.17
11.	I have friends at school.	3.53	.92	3.66	.67	3.86	.35	3.60	.78	.33	-.06
12.	My teachers treat me the same as other students.	3.25	1.00	3.46	.84	3.77	.53	3.30	.95	.52	-.15
13.	I get along with my teachers.	3.36	.63	3.70	.63	3.81	.40	3.55	.79	.45	-.15
Valuing school		*2.97*	*.99*	*3.28*	*.98*	*3.60*	*.60*	*3.16*	*.97*	*.63*	*-.12*
14.	Good things happen to me at school.	2.75	1.06	3.11	1.03	3.36	.58	3.04	.93	.61	-.07
15.	I think learning is important.	3.13	1.09	3.32	.96	3.76	.70	3.11	1.06	.64	-.21
16.	I enjoy school.	2.56	1.09	3.26	.93	3.50	.67	3.04	1.07	.94	-.23
17.	All people should get as much education as they can.	3.44	.73	3.43	1.03	3.77	.43	3.46	.83	.34	.03
High expectations		*3.04*	*1.12*	*3.38*	*.91*	*3.53*	*.69*	*3.23*	*1.01*	*.50*	*-.15*
18.	My parent makes sure I do my homework.	2.81	1.33	3.35	1.12	3.95	.22	3.25	1.13	1.14	-.10
19.	My parent makes sure I get to school on time.	3.53	.83	3.60	.71	3.82	.39	3.71	.65	.28	.12
20.	My parent makes sure I attend school unless I am sick.	3.00	1.31	3.49	.69	3.50	.96	3.34	.96	.50	-.15
21.	I have a workspace at	2.80	1.01	3.09	1.14	2.86	1.17	2.63	1.33	.06	-.46

		Pre-test				Post-test				Change	
		Treatment		Control		Treatment		Control			
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	T	C
	home to do school work.										
Social/Intellectual capital		*2.74*	*.94*	*3.20*	*.99*	*3.50*	*.67*	*2.98*	*.91*	*.76*	*-.22*
22.	My parent comes to the school to meet with my teacher and to attend special school events.	2.43	.94	2.98	1.07	3.36	.85	2.52	1.06	.94	-.46
23.	I talk with my parent about my schoolwork.	2.33	.98	2.94	1.17	3.18	.96	2.59	1.09	.85	-.35
24.	My parent makes sure that I have enough food and sleep.	3.47	.92	3.67	.74	3.95	.21	3.82	.58	.49	.15
Communication											
25.	My parent supports me to keep trying when I am having trouble with my schoolwork.	2.87	1.13	3.39	.93	3.43	.99	3.20	1.12	.57	-.19

Appendix C: Work Relationship Assessment Form

Plot your practice's performance in these six critical areas on the continuum below. You may want your colleagues and staff to assess your practice as well, then compare and discuss your ratings.

Characteristic	What does it look like?	Where is your practice on this continuum?
Trust	• Seeking input from others. • Allowing others to complete their work without unnecessary oversight. • Feeling comfortable discussing successes and failures.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |
Diversity	• Including people who have different backgrounds or perspectives. • Encouraging those who think differently about important issues to share their opinions.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |
Mindfulness	• Being open to new ideas. • Talking freely about what is and isn't working in the practice. • Adjusting routines in response to current situations; not running on autopilot.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |
Interrelatedness	• Being attentive to current tasks as well as larger goals. • Being aware of individual roles and how they affect other functions and people in the practice.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |

Respect	• Being considerate, honest and tactful. • Valuing others' opinions.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |
Varied interaction	• Understanding the importance of both social and task-related relationships. • Encouraging people to pursue activities outside of work.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |
Effective communication	• Understanding when certain methods of communication are more appropriate and timely than others. • Using "rich communication" (e.g., face-to-face meetings) for more sensitive matters. • Using "lean communication" (e.g., memos) for routine matters.	| Always | | Sometimes | | Never |

 "Seven Characteristics of Sucessful Work Relationships." Tallia AF, Lanham HJ, McDaniel RR Jr., Crabtree BF. *Family Practice Management.* January 2006:47-50; http://aafp.org/fpm/20060100/47seve.html.