Ontario Institute for Education Leadership
L'Institut de leadership en éducation de l'Ontario

Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.

Welcome, Engagement and Learning:
The Importance of Emotional Learning at School
Lucien Chaput

This story describes how a French secondary school integrated well-being and engagement of students in its school improvement plan with an emphasis on student emotion and empathy. It illustrates how the principal enacted the leadership practices and drew on the personal leadership resources (PLRs) of the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) to bring staff together to implement an evidence-based approach to improving student well-being, engagement and achievement.

It is impossible to improve the learning experience if we do not understand how a person learns, develops, and is motivated (Kieran Egan, 2013, Simon Fraser University researcher). All students at École secondaire catholique Algonquin (ÉSCA) must succeed! However, what does an environment that is favourable to learning and which fosters the success of every student look like? The answer to this question is not obvious. ÉSCA has 767 students in grades 7 to 12.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

The systemic project initiated and directed by the ÉSCA administration in cooperation with all staff members is a dynamic and evolving action research that began several years ago. As a priority, philosophies and objectives which highlight the Emotional Path of Dr. Leithwood's *Theory of Action*[1] were implemented in the school. Indeed, emotions

---

[1] Leithwood, K., Patten, S., Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how leadership influences student learning, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 5, 671-706

are contributors that have a considerable influence on the learning process and the capacity to learn.

Driving Force of the Project

Having become acquainted with the research and the books of education gurus such as Hattie, Leithwood, Seligman, Bereiter, Marzano, Fullan, and Willms, to name but a few, and after several philosophical discussions with the administrative team, we decided to implement the knowledge acquired through those readings. Research has clearly shown that an empathetic student is better equipped for daily living. When human beings learn, emotions influence the process as well as the capacity to learn. He or she is directly influenced by the emotions of the stakeholders. We are the educational leaders and first-line stakeholders of the school. We establish the climate and the type of environment we deem favourable for learning.

> Social Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways

To begin, we have given our school improvement plan objectives that are in line with the principles of emotional teaching. These objectives are aligned with the Board improvement plan for student achievement as well as the *Cadre d'efficacité pour la réussite de chaque élève à l'école de langue française*. Emotional teaching is the basis for all learning.

> 1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

> 2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

The criteria necessary for a school to foster emotional and empathetic development of its students are as follows:

- an environment favouring the well-being and safety of students;
- an authentically warm greeting;
- a generalized sense of belonging;
- an assessment of student engagement and learning in the classroom, and at school;
- an assessment of student learning.

Project Implementation

When we, as a community, commit to increase academic success, then skills, work habits, and school performance increase exponentially. It must be noted that everything we have implemented at ÉSCA is supported by research. The first phases

> 2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

> 4.1 Staffing the instructional program

of the project involved raising awareness and educating the teaching staff with regard to emotional teaching by offering professional development days on the subject.

Many members of the teaching staff were invited to discuss the initiatives they had implemented in their classrooms and that were directly related to emotional learning that had contributed to student success. Experts in the fields

2.3 Modeling the school's values and practices

of emotional teaching and development came to speak with staff. Monthly PLCs, ongoing training and coaching were also offered to help team members better meet the emotional needs of students. Finally, the school administration led by

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

example in its actions and commitment. This was done by creating conditions that fostered learning.

The environment created by emotional teaching is first and foremost set by relations between teacher and students. According to the Ministry of Education document entitled "Je m'engages, tu t'engages", "*The capacity to establish a relationship with students favours both*

2.1 Providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff members

student and teacher performance." The document sets out the benefits that result from a good teacher/student relationship. Once this teacher/student relationship has been established, and the student feels secure in the environment, it becomes possible for the teacher to convey not only skills and knowledge, but also pride and commitment.

The school administration has created a family environment at ÉSCA by modeling what it expects from staff in their classrooms:

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

- Every morning the administration welcomes students, staff and parents at the school's main entrance. Our clientele is important to us and our "customers" should be reminded of that on a daily basis. For various reasons, some clients require more attention than others.

2.3 Modeling the school's values and practices

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

- It is important to know all students by name and welcome them in the morning, to listen actively when they need to share.
- Ask strategic questions.

- Express genuine interest and pay particular attention to students, which generates meaningful conversations and fosters healthy relationships.
- Smiling is essential.

We have made staff conscious of the importance of welcoming students in the classroom and smiling even on those days when we have had some personal challenges to work through. This behaviour has a positive impact on individual well-being which, in turn, has a similar impact on non-verbal behaviour.

Presence of Administrative Staff at School

There are about 50 classrooms going on at any one time at ÉSCA and a member of the administration visits each classroom at least once

> 3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing

during the day. Our presence allows us to cultivate relationships with teachers and students. Students are asked about what they're learning in the classroom, particularly in regard to learning goals and success criteria. Teachers are asked to continuously move around and supervise learning in their respective classrooms. Members of the administration model empathetic discipline and

> 3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

prevent many disciplinary or complex situations that could arise by being present within the school.

Follow-up with respect to absenteeism is done immediately. In complicated situations, a member of the administration might sometimes go to the student's home, bring him or her back to school, with the intent of showing the student and his or her parents that attendance is very

> 2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

important to us. By showing empathy, students are made aware of our genuine interest in them. Being better accepted and recognized increases self-esteem, which results in greater engagement and academic performance.

What evidence is there to prove that we are adequately meeting our students' emotional needs? Maslow's theory states that there are five levels of need. Reaching the higher levels on his pyramid is not possible if the needs of the underlying levels are not met. Based on this theory, we see that emotional teaching directly impacts the capacity to reach higher levels of thought. More specifically, we would not be able to attain higher levels unless our emotional state was favourable to it. The

> 3.1 Building productive relationships with families and communities

emotions we experience are the result of our environment as we perceive it. Thus, there

is a direct link between emotions and the capacity to attain higher levels of thought, both for students and teachers.

In order to attain Maslow's higher levels of thought, the individual must first perceive his or her environment to be safe and welcoming. It is important then that the school convey positive messages of well-being. As a result, students perceive the environment as favourable and are

2.3 Modeling the school's values and practices

4.4. Buffering staff from distractions to their work

thus able to acquire skills of higher thinking. Students experience positive emotions that translate into favourable behaviour that, in turn, influences teachers' emotions.

Observable and Measurable Project Indicators

ESCA statistics for 2012-2013 compared with provincial averages

	ESCA data	**Provincial data**
OSSLT (students eligible for the first time in 2013)	Success rate: 93%	Success rate: 84%
Student retention rate	100%	87%
Graduation rate	99%	82%

- Average number of students having failed courses during the last 2 semesters at ESCA: 6
- Average monthly number of students having skipped classes during the last 2 semesters: 1
- Cases of discipline are less serious and student recidivism for the last 2 semesters has fallen by 46%
- 50% reduction in chronic absenteeism cases over the last 2 semesters
- 92% of students are involved in at least one school-based activity
- 87% of students and parents are very satisfied with the school environment (safe, welcoming and valued)
- 85% of teachers are very satisfied and happy in their work environment

**These indicators were drawn from Trillium, the behaviour profiler and various Survey Monkey surveys

Challenges and Next Steps

The greatest challenge faced during this project was at the initial phase, when it was presented to staff. ÉSCA has 90 staff members, and we didn't necessarily have everyone's "buy-in." At the present time, we estimate that 95 percent of them are committed and believe that the emotional component offers unprecedented results when we fully invest in it.

How did we overcome this obstacle?
- By having frank and courageous discussions with unconvinced staff;
- By questioning, by illustrating that their points of view, methods and strategies of the past 10 years or 20 years were not necessarily the most effective and that there are new methods supported by research that have significant success;
- By having PLCs which testify to the success with the implementation of emotional pedagogy;
- By sharing research with staff members and by having experts who present research during our meetings while highlighting successes.

When we, as leaders, are able to create an environment and culture where respect, cooperation and engagement are encouraged between students and teachers, school communities benefit greatly. To this end, the administration must first and foremost show empathy and compassion and support its staff throughout the process.

Psychological Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) – resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, proactivity

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

We realize that we are in a position to measure and optimize learning that is directly related to our strategies of welcoming and creating a favourable

3.4 Connecting the school to its wider environment

environment. We have proof from students, staff and parents that we are succeeding. Unfortunately, we cannot measure the engagement of the school community. We are preparing the next phase with Dr. Willms' team, a world-renowned expert in the field of engagement.

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

The next phase will be conducting surveys, developed with the help of Dr. Wilms' team, with students, staff members and parents. These will provide us with concrete data and leads to help us leverage our strengths to target our challenges with respect to engagement. The engagement phase of the project will occur over the next two years.

> 5.1 Building staff members' sense of internal accountability

> Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

Our school's new mission statement is *"Welcoming, engagement and learning."* Once students feel welcome, safe and valued, they are more likely to engage in learning. When they are engaged and we meet their basic emotional needs, learning can take place. Our interventions stretch out over a long period, rather than being limited in scope. The administration commits to reading up on the latest

> 1.1 Building a shared vision

research in order to model its knowledge sharing and Dr. Bereiter's and Dr. Scardamalia's "Knowledge Building." We also encourage those whose viewpoint differs from our own. All these interventions bring about a paradigm shift.