

# How a Northern Manitoba High School Encourages Student Engagement

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## **Abstract**

*Exemplary practice within a northern Manitoba high school encourages student learning. Through the utilization of collaborative practice in consistent school-wide plans, teachers have provided beneficial education to learners (Sagor, 2011). The direction of educational programs can be provided through the expertise of teachers within the school. By contributing consistency and increasing cooperative learning among staff, school plans have contributed to student engagement in learning, and to positive student-teacher relationships (Greene, Lee, Constance, & Hynes, 2013). Relevant and inclusive learning with purpose draws student interest, and increases successful learning. Critical thinking makes the acquisition of knowledge an enticing endeavor for learners.*

When viewing schools through a critical lens, educators are aware that change needs to occur as student requirements dictate. Critical pedagogy and exemplary practice play important roles in engaging students in good schools. With the changes made under the scrupulous observation of successful learning, educators can meet the learning needs of students, empower students, and make knowledge acquisition meaningful (Giroux, 2009). School-wide planning under strong leadership, a collaboration of knowledgeable educators, positive student-teacher relationships, purposeful learning, and cultural inclusion lead to greater motivation in learners within a northern Manitoba high school. This high school manifests the definition of a good school.

## **School-Wide Plans**

With the implementation of a school-wide plan for educating youth, clear goals and expectations can increase student engagement (Sagor, 2011). A plan administered within the entire system generates coherence, which leads to benefits for students (Hierck, Coleman, & Webber, 2011; Sagor, 2011). Through the creation of unequivocal goals, and a rationale for those objectives, students are provided with a consistent learning environment and active engagement results (Gebre, Saroyan, & Bracewell, 2014). Cohesion school wide is further increased when the educators utilize a common language in teaching and making assessments (Glaude, 2010). Through the articulation of challenges to be solved, teachers approach matters with a better understanding of the critical changes to increase student engagement in learning.

School-wide planning within this northern high school incorporates new ideas from all teaching staff during administration days to maintain cohesiveness. Following group-wide discussions, instructors in similar teaching areas meet to ensure that assessment is consistent within subject areas. Through attending to standardized testing, indicators pinpoint focus areas for classroom instruction. Teachers pursue solutions through common professional development days focusing on those topics. Improvements and collaboration stem from the whole school, under strong leadership, taking responsibility for student success in the learning environment (Glaude, 2010; Hierck et al., 2011).

## **Leadership**

Strong leadership is required to carry out a school-wide plan for educating learners. A positive learning environment requires commitment from teachers and administrators with shared leadership roles (Glaude, 2010; Hierck et al., 2011). Contributions from experts in the

areas of study, that require greater student activation, provide information to assist leaders in directing the essential changes. Like a conductor of music, the leader orchestrates the activity taking place, adjusting the speed and direction as student needs dictate. When all educators within the school work to create the same environment, exemplary practice has a greater chance to optimize results under strong leaders.

Within this northern high school, several teachers with expertise in the areas of literacy and technology have provided leadership in revising the learning programs. Province-wide courses in reading and thinking have been added to the curriculum to increase literacy skills. One instructor has piloted the course for two years, and instructs students in reading at the high school level. A pass or fail credit is given to students who make gains in their reading ability through this program. As an additional course to English classes, this program supports the skills that students require to become proficient readers and critical thinkers. Another teacher has designated time within the day to enlighten staff in current technological methods for engaging students. Through the use of chrome books and updated computer programs, this educator activates learning and enhances programs for teachers and students. Connecting with schools on other continents, and the variety of people, in different learning situations, alters the students' view of the world. With strong leadership, collaborating instructors can initiate critical changes in student thinking.

### **Teacher Collaboration**

Collaboration among teachers can alter students' behaviour, to increase their engagement in learning and to empower them with knowledge and skills. When students understand "the basic human principles of respect, discipline, dignity, and ethical responsibility" (Lipman, 2009, p. 576), they can begin to question the world and seek to find solutions to intolerable situations. Consistent topics for discussion within multiple classes transfer knowledge from one area of study to another. Teachers assist one another in keeping engagement alive through this process. Social responsibility provides a platform of discussion to activate critical thinking and keep students focused on learning.

This northern high school utilizes the survey "Tell Them From Me" (TTFM, 2013), which equips teachers with information on student expectations and concerns. Once the behaviours that require consideration are identified, the attention of staff and students can be directed toward changing that undesirable behaviour within the school (Strand, Christensen, & Halper, 2006). Weekly meetings attend to academically, socially, and emotionally distressed students through the discrete sharing of student disengagement evidence. Follow-up sessions are arranged to evaluate student progress, and plans are established for future actions required from designated staff. Communication with staff has been increased through the sharing of information with technological aid. Faster transmission of vital messages has been achieved between parents and staff. With collaboration among staff, the school learning climate has been transfigured, and constructive student-teacher relationships have increased.

### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

Positive student-teacher relationships are instrumental in engaging student learning. Caring staff members in a safe, supportive environment increase attendance and frequent participation by the youth (Greene, Lee, Constance, & Hynes, 2013). Teachers' generosity of time, in an effort to encourage students, helps to create a caring relationship at school (Darder, 2009). Beginning each day with an optimistic view of learning provides teachers with a positive approach to persevering when progress may be slower than expected. Through emboldening learners to question ideas, teachers inspire learning. Critical thinking about knowledge is necessary to "instill a sense of hope and possibility" (Lipman, 2009, p. 373) for future change in students' lives. Smaller schools have closer student-teacher relationships, and therefore

students are more engaged in school and community (Hutchins & Akos, 2013). Strong connections among school populations foster change (Kezar, 2014). The manner in which good schools approach students contributes to their sense of belonging and acceptance within the school setting.

Attention to diverse groups in the northern high school increases positive student-teacher relationships. A group supporting students of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender orientation has created connections between several students and teachers with an interest in the rights of all people. Other youth groups focus on musical theatre, clothing design, art, travel, and photography. Positive communication within each of these clubs instills a sense of acceptance for its members, and prompts students throughout the school to revise their thinking. Bonds between students and teachers elevate student learning when connected to meaningful material.

### **Purposeful Learning**

Teachers need to make knowledge meaningful to students in order to escalate learning (Giroux, 2009). For example, increased student engagement and improved academic performance can be attributed to the use of digital resources inside classrooms (Beld et al., 2014; Edwards, 2014). When computer skills are used to educate individuals, knowledge is increased along with self-reliance (Gebre et al., 2014). Current trends in technology have been implemented in this northern school and the courses required in computer use have been in place for more than two decades. Career courses at this school provide the opportunity for youth to research post-secondary institutions on line, and determine future vocations. Restructuring the skills and information provided in the classes is an ongoing process. Through the use of computers, students' engagement and learning continues to have an intrinsic place in this school's planning for purposeful learning.

Students exert greater focus on activities when they envision purposeful learning as education for future work. Identity investigation, combined with connections to school and community, can be linked to high-quality programs offered after school hours (Greene et al., 2012). Out-of-school time programs can be used to connect engagement to enjoyment, interest, and challenge within activities. When the program contains content related to new skills for the future, including learning about jobs and college, engagement has been stronger for older youth. Internal motivation supported through these activities has a greater positive influence in high school students' learning than financial incentives. Extra-curricular programs offered throughout the school year at this northern educational facility offer opportunities for students to participate in a variety of activities that build skills and boost confidence. When learning materials are purposeful and support future work skills, inclusive student-centered education leads to lifelong learners.

### **Cultural Inclusion**

Cultural inclusion, along with Indigenous content in teaching units, assists students in making sense of learning material presented in the classroom (Kearns, 2013). When historical content informs the First Nations students of the reasons for power and privileges, students have the opportunity to amend colonial patterns through education (Burleigh & Burm, 2013). In utilizing the talking circle and intergenerational knowledge, students gain a healthier view of their world in traditional ways of living (Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2013). The voice of these students rises with hope as their interest in learning is activated, and they "consider new structures and systems" (Aquash, 2013, p. 132). Each group of students is more engaged in learning when materials are relevant to their world.

With the population shift within this school, inclusion of *Braiding Histories* (Dion, 2009) has provided new learning material relevant to the incoming student population. Teachers and fellow

learners all gain an understanding of the previously ignored pieces of the past. With the inclusion of this cultural material, more students are engaging in critical thinking through the weaving of history into classroom work (Lorenz, 2013). Activities surrounding culture have been celebrated annually with community days around the beginning of each school year. Change is slowly taking place with the shifting of ideas, surrounding colonies and racism, as a result of cultural inclusion.

### Conclusion

Exemplary educational practice necessitates that educators attend consistently to learning, with a critical eye to encouraging student engagement. Educating students requires school-wide planning under strong leadership, a collaboration of knowledgeable educators, positive student-teacher relationships, purposeful learning in the context of the current world, and cultural inclusion. Truly good schools create a “thirst for understanding” (Aquash, 2013, p. 132) and knowledge through critical thinking. Through exemplary practice, this high school aspires to increase student engagement. Just as life transforms around the learners, the methods that educators utilize in the educational system can be transformed to activate successful student learning in a good school, such as this northern school.

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### **About the Author**

*High school teaching requires clear articulation and informative discussions to stimulate critical conversations with colleagues and learners. Through the graduate program, Lori Lawrence's experience of over 20 years in the educational profession is expanding to include a more critical focus on education, and increase engagement of adolescents in learning.*