Qualities of a Good First Nation School

Ron Constant

Abstract

In the continual reformation of the nature of schools, one central theme appears: the concept of a good school. A good school has a clear sense of purpose, dedicated staff, strong leadership, parental involvement, and continual improvement. To transform current educational pedagogy, one must take risks, read the literature, and seek the desire continually to improve. These qualities are desirable in every good school, but they are essential in a good First Nation school.

The concept of a good school is not that difficult to fathom. A good school contains these common themes: a clear sense of purpose (Lipsitz & West, 2010), dedicated staff (Hulley & Dier, 2009), parental involvement (Kirkness, 1999), strong leadership (Lipsitz & West, 2010), and continual improvement (Hulley & Dier, 2005). Each of these themes affects the atmosphere and educational standards of any school. Time used ensuring that good school practices are followed equates to having an effective school conducive to high student achievement, especially when that school is located in a First Nation community.

Clear Sense of Purpose

Most school improvement teams begin with an investigation of a sense of purpose from which all pedagogy within the school is generated. Vision statements articulate to everyone the goals of the school, what the school identifies as its priorities, and what it holds itself accountable for (Lezotte, 2009). The school is the centre of a community and, as such, should articulate to its students the desires of all educational stakeholders, which are imbedded in the school's vision.

A vision statement or purpose statement gives school personnel and the student body a clear path to follow, pedagogically speaking. Each school has a unique vision statement that has been generated by means of consultation with the community, staff, and students. If we liken teachers to atoms, we can use the following analogy. A non-magnetic substance has all of its atoms moving and spinning in random directions. A magnetic substance has all its atoms spinning in the same direction. A school with a clearly articulated vision statement is like a magnetic with all of its teachers, support staff, and students following the same pedagogical path. Clearly, one can see the educational benefits of everyone (administration, teaching staff, support staff, and students) moving in the same direction, pedagogically speaking.

Administrative teams, when identifying vision statements, must first identify what values the community holds dearly. In a First Nation school, consultation amongst the Elders, community (Chief and Council and the Board of Education), parents, staff, and ultimately the students must take place. Historically speaking, the process of identifying community values was not done; traditional western values were forced upon First Nations communities, creating a "gross misreading of the nature of difference, opening the door for the proliferation of deeply cynical theories of racial superiority" (Grande, 2000, p. 186) that were entrenched in residential and day schools. This misreading created several generations of First Nations people who lost their unique culture. This problem still is true to some extent; however, today's First Nations communities have built up human resources who are certified specialists in the education field, effectively taking control of their own education (Assembly of First Nations, 2010). To ensure that assimilation does not reoccur, it is paramount to identify the values of the community before attempting to create a First Nation school's vision statement.

The wording in a school's vision statement refers to accountability. To whom and by what measure is the school accountable? Accountability is a measurement of how one holds up to

expectations (Loeb & Figlio, 2011). There are many different tools to measure a school's accountability, depending on what has been identified in the vision statement. However, with the patriarchal Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), formerly Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), First Nations schools are subject to extra accountability regardless of the vision statement as mandated by the First Nations Student Success Plan (FNSSP) (Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada, n.d.). This program is not negative, as it provides funding for literacy and numeracy with the intent to bridge the educational gap between Canada's First Nations and the rest of the country. It is difficult to add the FNSSP mandate to the values that a First Nation community has identified, because its priorities may be different. Still, each school has to be accountable to itself and ultimately the community.

When initiating school improvement, administrative teams may at times face adversity from naysayers. Fortunately, through negotiations progress can be made. After identifying community values, a vision statement can be created. Once the vision statement is generated, one can begin to take steps to identify measures of accountability. This task can be daunting, but it is well worth the effort. One must also keep in mind that the vision statement is a living document that must be continually evaluated for its effectiveness, and tweaked as necessary to maintain proper standards of education as set out by Manitoba Education. In the end, any school with a clearly articulated vision statement is well on the way to be considered a good school.

Dedicated Staff

Education is not a solitary profession; staff members must work in unison to achieve the vision that the school holds in regard. A good school has staff members who are willing to work together, keep abreast of fundament changes and trends in education, and take educational risks. Gone are the days when a teacher would sit in the classroom unbeknownst to the world outside; teachers must now be armed with the latest practices that enhance learning in society.

Integral to a good school is staff dedicated to working together to make decisions that have a direct bearing on the school's planning process. To achieve a willingness to collaborate, administrative teams must create an atmosphere that is conducive to everyone being seen as an equal member of the school community, regardless of position. This collegial atmosphere is the premise behind Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Administrators must believe in the staff's ability to guide the educational programming of the school now and into the future. Staff participation in a PLC leads to better academics, school atmosphere, and teacher retention (Phelps & Benson, 2012). Having many minds geared towards solving any difficulty is an excellent trait of a good school.

In direct consequence to the ideals of a PLC, teachers must be dedicated to keeping themselves abreast of any recent practices that will enhance student engagement. In doing so, the staff maintains an ever-changing repertoire of skills to choose from when attempting to maximize student engagement. PLC meetings, whether whole school or subject specific, benefit all, because a technique that may not be working for someone may be replaced by another technique tried and suggested by another. The sheer dynamics of having many different minds collaborating give a school a huge educational advantage over one that does not employ a PLC determinant of staff professional development.

Strong Leadership

Strong leadership can always be found in good schools. Anyone can lead, but it takes a true leader to take the time and set up his/her school so that it "fits" the criteria of a good school. When practising principals were asked what they should do when they move to another school, their answers mirrored the overall themes of a good school (Lipstiz & West, 2010). Still, the principal cannot do it by him/herself; it has to be a shared responsibility by all involved (Hulley &

Dier, 2009). Good First Nations schools have dynamic leaders who demand the best out of all, staff and students alike.

In the field of education, there has been a recent shift over the past couple of decades with regards to shared leadership (Hulley & Dier, 2009). The school principal no longer runs the school as he/she sees fit; rather, there is a fundamental shift, transforming the leadership role to that of a shared leadership among all staff members. The ability to use the collective ideals of each staff member and community member creates an atmosphere that is conducive to student engagement, because of skilled leadership.

Parental Involvement

Having a clear vision statement and dedicated staff are not enough; without parental involvement, a school is not complete. The school is part of the community and is accountable to all stakeholders. Residential schools have had a lasting effect on many generations of First Nations (Reforming First Nations education, 2011). Now is the time to reawaken their lost cultural values (Grande, 2000), which will re-establish their identity. The adage that it takes the "whole community to raise a child" is well suited for First Nations communities, because everyone must contribute to raising their children and provide them with the educational opportunities to lead them into the future.

Parents can be a powerful ally or roadblock in the education of their children. School attendance has been declining in Manitoba schools (Adams, 2012). If students are not present, they cannot be expected to learn. Because parents see communication as one of the major factors (Adams, 2012), early intervention, combined with constant communication, should be paramount issues for a First Nation school to work on.

Continual Improvement

It is not a coincidence that a good school is always evaluating its progress and continually seeking ways to improve. What works in one school will not necessarily work in another. Schools are unique and have definitive cultures. It is up to the school to create and/or update its vision statement, gather and analyze critical evidence based on the vision, create SMART goals (specific, measureable, attainable, results-focused, and timely) through PLC collaboration, put the goals into action, and continually monitor the effectiveness of the plans through data collection. This cyclical process is ever changing, always bringing with it the changes that are required to answer the needs of today's society (Hulley & Dier, 2009).

Change means taking risks. Educational risks are not typical life risks such as cliff jumping, but they still have direct bearing on students' lives. Examples include a new formative assessment format (William, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004), a self- and student-based efficiency rating (Bordelon, Phillips, Parkinson, Thomas, & Howell, 2012), an interdisciplinary approach to teaching subjects outdoors (Fägerstam, 2014), and a positive or negative attendance policy (Self, 2012). This list gives insight into some of the new trends taken in regard to school policy and personal pedagogy. Unless teachers are willing to take risks and change their personal current pedagogy, they cannot transform current educational trends to keep up with the innovative ways of teaching through technology.

Conclusion

To create a good school is a daunting task; all of the pieces must come together, working in unison. Having a clear vision (set of values), dedicated staff working together in unison, a strong leader, community assistance, and a continual effort to improve best practices are the qualities of every good school, including a First Nation school. It is not a job to take on by oneself, nor can one take complete credit for having created one; rather, it is a group effort. The next time

the reader goes into a school, he/she should look around and see whether he/she is entering a good school and would want his/her children, and grandchildren, to attend there.

References

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2014, from http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100033703/1100100033704

Adams, C. (2009). *School attendance in Manitoba*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Education.

Assembly of First Nations. (2010). *First Nations control of First Nations education*. Assembly of First Nations.

Bordelon, T., Phillips, I., Parkison, P., Thomas, J., & Howell, C. (2012). Teacher efficacy: How teachers rate themselves and how students rate their teachers. *Action in Teacher Education, 34*(1), 14-25. doi:10.1080/01626620.2012.642282

Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

Fägerstam, E. (2014). High school teachers' experience of the educational potential of outdoor teaching and learning. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 14*(1), 56-81. doi:10.1080/14729679.2013.769887

Grande, S. M. A. (2000). American Indian geographies of identity and power: At the crossroads of Indigena and Mestizaje. In A. Darder, M. P. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.). *The critical pedagogy reader* (2nd ed., pp.167-182). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hulley, W., & Dier, L. (2009). *Getting by of getting better: Applying effective schools research to today's issues*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Hulley, W., & Dier, L. (2005). *Harbors of hope: The planning for school and student success process.* Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

Kirkness, V. (1999). Aboriginal education in Canada: A retrospective and prospective. *Journal of American Indian Education, 39*(1), 1-29.

Lipsitz, J., & West, T. (2010). What makes a good school? In K. Ryan & J. M. Cooper (Eds.), *Kaleidoscope: Contemporary and classic readings in education* (12th ed., pp. 74-84). Independence, KY: Cengage Learning.

Loeb, S., & Figlio, D. (2011). School accountability. In E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, & L. Woessmann (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, (3). 383-423. San Diego, CA: North Holland.

Phelps, P., &, Benson, T. (2012). Teachers with a passion for the profession. *Action in Teacher Education, 34*(1), 65-76. doi:10.1080/01626620.2012.642289

Reforming First Nations education: From crisis to hope. (2011, December). Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. Retrieved March 20, 2014, from http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/411/appa/subsitedec2011/reports-e.htm

Self, S. (2012). Studying absenteeism in principles of macroeconomics: Do attendance policies make a difference? *The Journal of Economic Education, 43*(3), 223-234. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220485.2012.686382

William, D., Lee, C., Harrison, C., & Black, P. (2004). Teachers developing assessment for learning: Impact on student achievement. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice, 11*(1), 49-65. doi:10.1080/0969594042000208994

About the Author

Ron Constant is currently the principal of Oscar Lathlin Collegiate in Opaskwayak, Manitoba, working toward a Master of Education degree in educational administration. After 16 years as a high school teacher, he decided to pursue administration so that he could make more of an impact on the children of his home community.