

# Building Success from the Ground Up: The Three-Year Student Success Initiative at Elmwood High School

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The true value of the Student Success Initiative:

“When I first came to this school, I didn’t know anything and if it wasn’t for SSI, I would have left school like my cousin did, but you helped me and now I am the first one to graduate in my whole family.” An SSI Graduate

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**Keywords:** Student success initiative; school leadership; action research; exemplary programme.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Student Success Initiative (SSI) Pilot Project at Elmwood High School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The article examines Elmwood High School’s profile, its guiding philosophy, and its past efforts to support students. Additionally, it outlines the Elmwood SSI model, distinguishes the principal features that led to the model’s success, and illustrates the success of the three-year pilot project through multiple data sources showing improved student outcomes.

In the spring of 2010, Elmwood High School was invited by the Winnipeg School Division to join the Provincial Student Success Initiative as the only urban school participating in the project. The goal was to team a middle-years school and a senior-high school together, and since we are a grade 7-12 school, Elmwood was deemed to meet both criteria. Other participating Manitoba pilot schools were Margaret Barber High School and Scott Bateman Middle Years School in the Pas, and Ashern Central, Eriksdale, and Lundar Schools in the Interlake Division. The Student Success Initiative Pilot Project is part of Manitoba’s “All Aboard Poverty Reduction Strategy,” designed with the following objectives in mind:

- to provide a framework for working in high poverty contexts;
- to identify core strategies to support schools to systematically identify students at risk of dropping out;
- to identify core strategies to support students academically and socially; and
- to provide personnel to support the implementation of the project.

The Student Success Initiative is based upon an Ontario model that placed a Student Success Teacher and a Literacy Coach in all Ontario schools. In September 2010, the five participating SSI schools in Manitoba visited Beaver Brae High School in Kenora, Ontario to see the structure of their program. Beaver Brae School’s definition of an at-risk student is one student who, without intervention and/or supports, would be less likely to succeed in the regular school environment. Success is synonymous with increased retention, credit accumulation, graduation rates, and an increased preparedness for life outside and beyond high school. A student may be at-risk academically, emotionally, socially, and/or physically. In addition, students may be deemed to be at-

risk for varying periods and lengths of time. The four pillars of the Ontario model are: (a) literacy, (b) numeracy, (c) pathways (college, university, or workplace), and (d) community, culture, and caring. This introduction to Ontario's SSI model was very valuable for our staff.

## Goals of the project

The overall goal of the Student Success Project in Manitoba is to improve graduation rates through the provision of additional school-based supports. In senior-high school, this translates to increased credit acquisition through additional supports and credit recovery strategies. In middle years, it refers to easing the transitions between grades, especially from grades 6 to 7 and from grades 8 to 9. Increasing student engagement is a fundamental underlying principle of this project. To achieve this goal, the province suggested a three-pronged approach: diagnostic identification, targeted intervention, and strengthening school-wide engagement. Each approach involves a subset of priorities, as outlined below:

### 1. Diagnostic identification

- a. Develop an early warning system that identifies students at risk of leaving school;
- b. Use expanded capabilities of the MAYET student record system (e.g., attendance, grades); and
- c. Create a team that acts on the information.

### 2. Targeted intervention

- a. Hire/designate Student Success Teachers to work with students (Elmwood chose to use a new delivery model in the form of a Student Success Centre); and
- b. Offer support to Success Leaders in the form of consultant assistance from the province, support from the Inner City's Machray Learning Centre, and administrative guidance/direction from the school.

### 3. Strengthening school-wide engagement

- a. Engage students academically/intellectually in their learning as well as socio-emotionally in the social life of the school.

## School profile

Elmwood High School (EHS) is a grade 7-12 school with 813 students (as of October 29, 2013). There are 575 senior-high students and 238 middle-years students. We have 53 teachers, 35 support staff, and 3 administrators. We serve an area of the city where the average income is \$39,200 and 36% of our families are below the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) level. Forty-four percent of our families are single-parent families, and that reflects a broad definition of "parent" that includes uncles, aunts, and grandparents. Thirty-five percent of our families are self-identified as Aboriginal, and 7% have English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs. We receive funds for a breakfast program and serve on average over 200 breakfasts per month.

Elmwood High School has a rich history of working hard to help struggling students get on track, and we host a wide range of programming with nine Special Education Programs. These include two Learning Assistance Centres (LACs) that work with students with challenging behaviours, two Life Skills Classrooms (LSs), two Special Education Centres (SECs), a Community Access Program (CAP), and two Integrated Special Education Programs (ISEP). We also host grades 7, 8, 9, and 10 Low-Enrolment classes and a grade 7 and 8 (combined) and a grade 9 Flex Program that utilizes a great deal of cross-curricular thematic individualized learning. In addition, we have a grade 9 Alternative Instructional Methods (AIM) Program that assists students who have failed Math in grade 9 and provides the opportunity for them to earn the credit in the first semester of their grade 10 year, an Infant Lab for young mothers, an Off-Campus Program, and an EAL Program that works with students at all grade levels.

Elmwood also has a wide range of co-curricular programming. There are a variety of sports, training, and visual and performing arts opportunities that frequently involve students who are deemed to be possibly at risk. Our student councils are active, and we feel that we are leaders in developing awareness of environmental and social justice issues. On the environmental front, we have developed a renewable energy project that links a wind turbine and an array of solar panels that power a set of computers in our library and have a team of students and staff developing a Learning Centre around these pieces of equipment. In the area of social justice, we support charitable efforts through the Free the Children Foundation and many other charities, and conduct forums for elementary grade groups on sustainability and social justice issues.

Our goal for the Student Success Initiative Project at Elmwood School is to find a way to build upon what we already do to assist students with their learning and find a way to reach those who struggle and who fail to qualify for other program assistance.

### **Guiding philosophy**

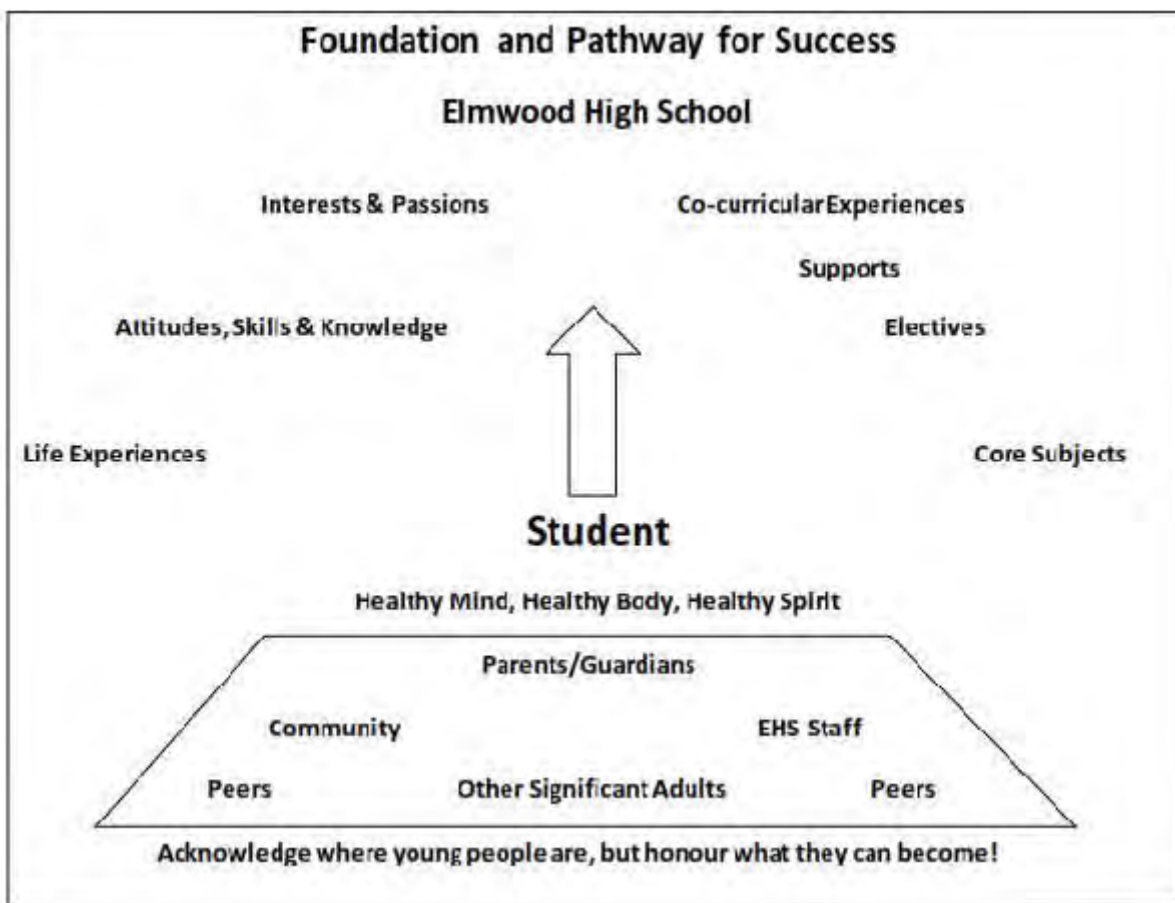
We felt that our school's venture into the Whole Child Philosophy suited the SSI Project well. The key underpinnings of how students are "engaged," "challenged," and "supported" – and ways in which we can ensure student "safety" and "health" – are key areas that we address as a school at all times.

Figure 1 summarizes our school's overall philosophy that has enabled the SSI Project to build upon our efforts to help students succeed. We have adopted American philosopher Ken Wilbur's idea of "transcend and include," where you build upon effective teaching/learning practices that are already in place. The Foundation and Pathway for Success is a framework that encourages teachers to consider what areas of students' lives we can influence and where we can impact on their growth. It recognizes the "multiple contextual factors" that may affect a student's decision to persist or leave school – "family, school, neighbourhood, and peers" (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, 2007). Our role is to link classroom learning to life experiences, provide a firm foundation in core subject areas, provide choice through electives, and build in a variety of co-curricular opportunities that enrich students' development and foster appropriate skills and knowledge for students to become contributing citizens who reach their potential.

### **The Elmwood SSI Model**

Elmwood staff met in the spring of 2010 to start to plan how to move the SSI initiative into reality in Elmwood High School. We wanted to ensure that our efforts complemented existing school philosophies:

- Student learning should be at the heart of everything we do;
- Forward-moving, solution-oriented approaches work best;
- Caring about all of the students in our charge is essential, even the ones that are giving us "a good run for our money." ;
- Collaboration around student learning and sharing of ideas maximizes our effectiveness;
- Systemic change needs to be driven by overriding philosophies (e.g., we went to a five-period day because it rendered a wider range of course availability for our students); and
- HEART + MIND + EFFORT = SUCCESS.



**Figure 1:** Foundation and Pathway for Success.

We decided to build upon an idea from Glenlawn High School in Winnipeg that developed a Support Centre, and we needed it to work with students across all senior-high grades. The initial goals of the Elmwood Student Success Centre were to provide academic support for students in regular classes to help them get through the course the first time they take it, develop a way to honour past learning through a credit recovery model, and support students socio-emotionally. Student supports offered through SSI were voluntary, meaning that students could choose to take advantage of the support or not, but they knew they were always welcome – at-risk students do not need more negatives piled upon them. These founding pillars enabled our Student Success Centre literally to go from zero to phenomenal numbers and provide a wide range of benefits to our school.

The benefits of the Student Success Centre were indeed numerous. The Centre helped students maintain the ability to continue in current credit courses by providing curricular supports in the form of intensive one-on-one support and scheduled tutoring time. The student work was supplied and assessed by the classroom teachers which helped to ensure that credit integrity was maintained. The Centre also helped students get caught up after attendance lapses. It developed individual student success plans, delivered Credit Recovery strategies by covering gaps from previous attempts in courses, and helped to change students' attendance patterns. In addition, the Centre established a strong learning culture, built a supportive learning community, strengthened ties to community programs, and offered time during lunch or spares where students could receive assistance with their assignments.

## Measuring the success of the project

### 1. Diagnostic identification: The early warning system

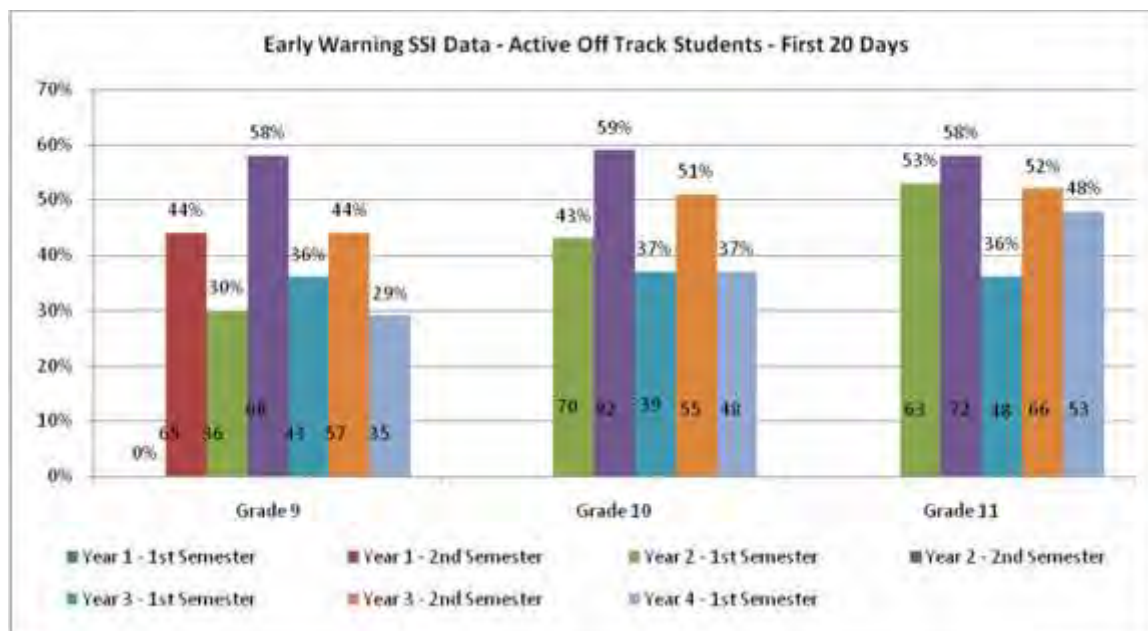
In collaboration with the Winnipeg School Division Data team, Brent Guinn and Kristine Vielfaure, an Early Warning System was developed that identified students with attendance issues in the first 20 days of a semester and performance and attendance issues at the end of the first term of a semester. In the first year, the grade 9 students were tracked, and the data provided such a useful format that we asked that the tracking be extended to our grade 10 and 11 students. Much of the literature suggests that helping students get through grade 9 sets them on a successful journey in future grades, whereas the data supported our reality that we need to provide supports through grades 9-11 and, in fact, also work hard to keep our grade 12 potential graduates on track.

Our early warning system criteria consisted of the following:

- i. **Poor Attendance** – Flagging absences of 10% or more in the first 20 days of a semester and over the first term.
- ii. **Poor Performance** – Term marks:
  - Failed Math or English Language Arts (ELA);
  - Failed two or more courses; and
  - Had a 55% average mark or less in the 1st term of each semester.

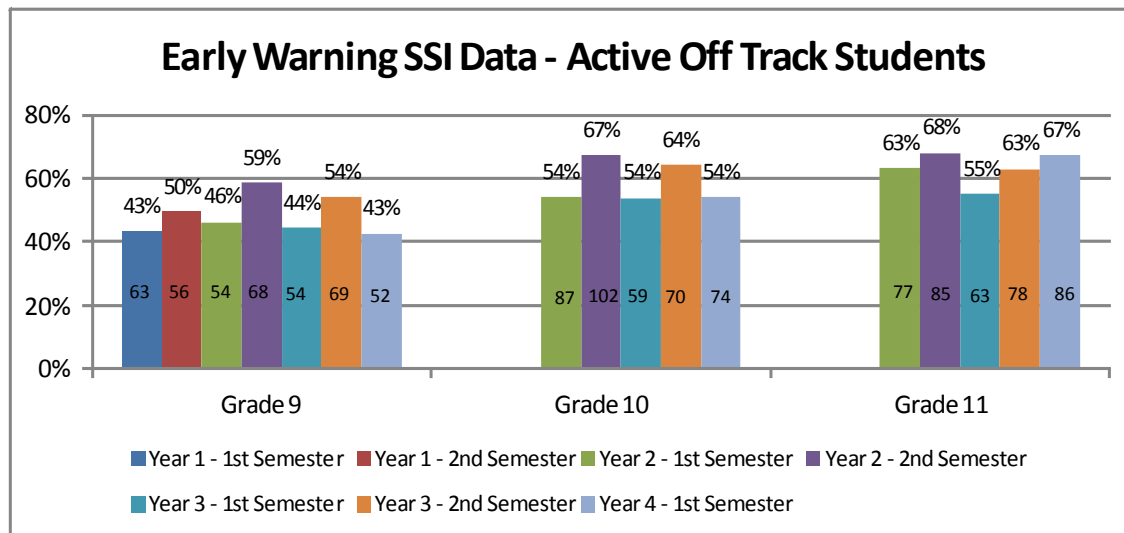
We did not use a third piece of data involving suspensions.

Figure 2 summarizes the Early Warning Data over the three years of the pilot project and into the beginning of the fourth year for which we received partial funding from the province. By absorbing a Senior High position, we were able to leave the SSI Program intact for a fourth year, at the request of our Department Heads who stated in a planning session that “SSI was essential to our school.” Figure 2 identifies the number of students who are “off track” as designated by school absences of at least 10% in the first 20 days of either Semester 1 or 2.



**Figure 2:** Early Warning SSI Data – Percentage and Numbers of Students (#’s inside the bars) who were Off-Track Based on Poor Attendance in the First 20 Days of a Semester – Years 1 to 4 of the Project.

Figure 3 indicates the percentage of students by grade who are off-track for attendance and/or performance at the end of the first term in the first and second semesters over a three-year period and for the first term of the current fourth year. The Early Warning Data reflect the numerous challenges that many of our students have throughout their senior high years and indicate that support is needed all the way through.



**Figure 3:** Early Warning SSI Data 2010-2013: Percentage and Number of Students (# inside bars) Off-Track in the 1st Term by Grade Performance and/or Attendance.

The successful credit acquisition rates in Table 1 reflect the tremendous efforts made by staff to help students get back on track and helped to offset the large numbers of identified “off-track” students in both the first 20 days and the first term data pieces.

## 2. Targeted intervention

### a. The Student Success Centre

The Student Success Centre worked very well as the targeted intervention piece and the underpinning of the Whole Child Philosophy served us well. The design enabled primarily grades 9-12 students, along with some middle-years students, to receive academic support in multiple subject areas and/or socio-emotional support. The first goal was to support students at the SSI Centre their first time through a course. If a student fell short but achieved a 40% or higher, a Credit Recovery Plan would be established with that student, the classroom teacher, and the SSI teacher. We also developed ways to honour past learning that proved extremely motivational for many students.

The tremendous impact that the Student Success Centre had on our school is indicated in Table 1, which shows that the number of students supported increased from 90 in Year 1 to 296 in Year 3. As well, the number of credits earned rose from 60 in Year 1 (with a successful credit acquisition rate of 55.5%) to 235 in Year 3 (with a successful credit acquisition rate of 76.3%). The increase in both number of students and the credit acquisition rate lets us know that something very positive was taking place, and demonstrates the value of gathering supporting data.

**Table 1:** A Three-Year Comparison of SSI Data.

<b>SSI's Student Success Centre</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>
# of Students Supported	90	145	296
# of Credits Earned with SSI support	60	101	235
# of Student Success Plans	51	65	73
# of Community Connections	29	31	31
# of Graduates with SSI Support	3	20	50
# of Math Credits Earned	19	68	118
Peers Working With Peers	Low	Frequent	Frequent
Use at Noon Hour	0-3	5-10	15-20
Successful Credit Acquisition Rate	55.5%	73.2%	76.3%

The SSI teachers were able to create a remarkable learning culture. They worked shoulder-to-shoulder with students and let them know that they were not going to give up on them. We were able to enhance our person power in the Success Centre by providing Educational Assistant time through our regular staffing and, in the third and beginning of the fourth year, using “mentoring” pre-service teachers from the University of Winnipeg’s Faculty of Education, which helped our students build connections with young people succeeding in university.

The academic-support teachers brought a strong Math/Science background to the table which enabled us to serve the extensive Math needs. Our SSI Lead teacher worked on building strong relationships with the students by providing socio-emotional supports, fostering family connections, helping students and families strengthen their connections in the community, and building connections with grades 7 and 8 students. Regular subject teachers were also on board and helped to develop student success and credit recovery plans. With respect to the community connections, Kani Kanichihk’s Restoring the Sacred is an after-school program that provides our Aboriginal students who are new to the city cultural resources and social outings. Elmwood High School students have been supported by and have become mentors in this program. The Urban Eagle Transition Centre (UETC) provides resources for our students and families. They have used UETC in many capacities including job skills, employment, and family supports. The Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development (CAHRD) provides social programming as well as employability skills and training opportunities. They also provide a link to organizations that are seeking employees of Aboriginal descent, and some of our students have, in fact, obtained employment.

Former students and parents have accessed employability-skills training related to specific job qualifications. The Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre (Mamaway) works on providing the Aboriginal community with many resources. Our youth have accessed the Centre’s cultural teaching and employment opportunities. Further connections have been made with VOICES, a support organization that supports youth who have been or are currently being supported by Child and Family Services. The Manitoba Metis Federation and the Louis Riel Institute support our students’ links to employability training and post-secondary scholarship opportunities. A connection has been created to support our students who need to obtain proper identification through tracing their geneology. SSI also provides a personal link to support staff at our local universities and colleges. Students receive support with scheduling meetings and are provided transportation to and from the post-secondary institutions.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown for subject-area support in Year 3, which reflects the pattern over all three years, with Math requiring the greatest amount of support.

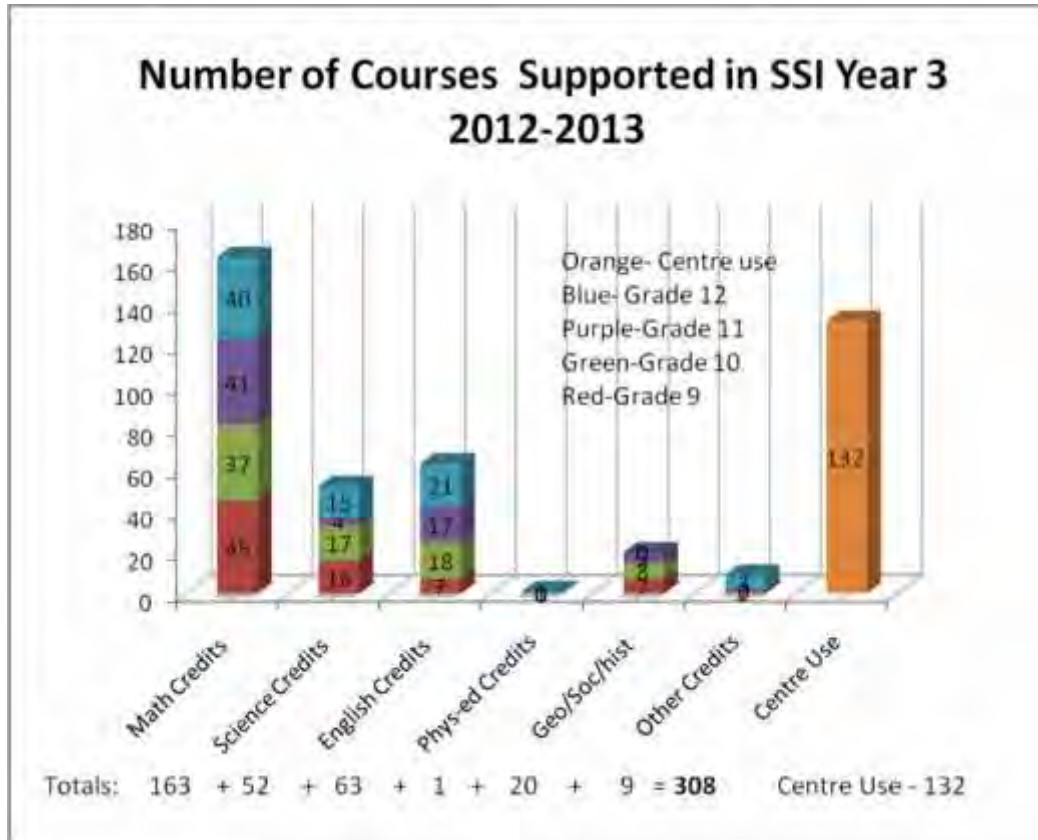


Figure 4: Number of Courses Supported in Year 3: 2012-2013 (Reflective of all 3 Years).

Figure 5 visually represents the second line of data in Table 1 that deals with the number of credits earned in each of the pilot years. The growth from 60 to 235 is a positive indicator of the success of the program.

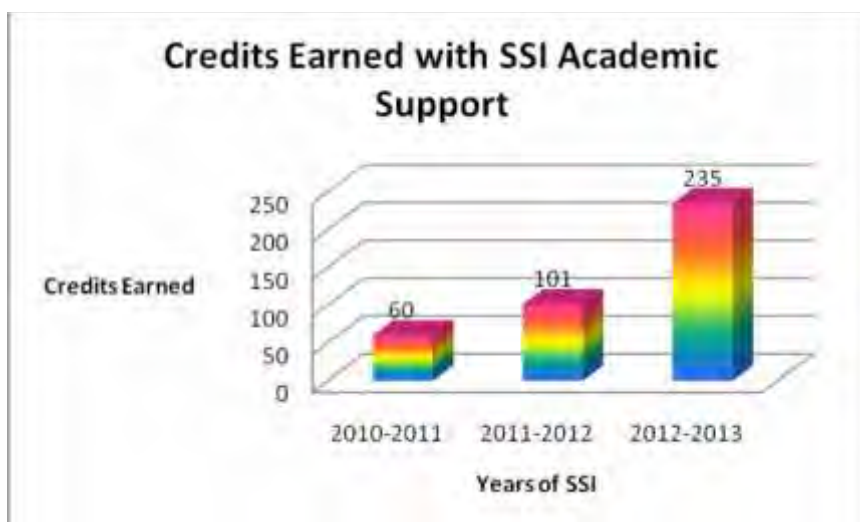


Figure 5: Credits Earned with SSI Support over 3 Years: 2010-2013.



In the first year, we pursued web-based courses which proved too difficult for many students, so we started to deliver courses through SSI in a variety of ways in Years 2-4. One of the findings over the first year was that many at-risk students were uncomfortable with using technology as a platform to enhance their learning. The Winnipeg School Division's substantial investment to upgrade the networking and wiring to enhance technology in the Success Centre has helped many students utilize technology more effectively to support their learning.

#### **b. The Elmwood SSI Team**

Joanne Sabourin was our Lead Success Teacher who focused on providing socio-emotional support for students and building connections with the families of SSI students. Grant Andruchuk is the current SSI Academic Support Teacher and has built upon the work of Madelaine Bongiorno in Year 1 and John Hasenack in Year 2. Mike Babb is the Lead Administrator for the project and has been a main author for each year's final report. Fran Davies is our Guidance Department Head and was the main guidance contact for SSI students. We drew the Educational Assistant (EA) supports from Elmwood High School Staffing.

Dr. Eleoussa Polyzoi from the University of Winnipeg is our Researcher in Residence and helped guide our data collection, analysis, and reporting of results. Brent Guinn and Kristine Vielfaure are the WSD Data Team that developed the SSI Early Warning System. Kathy Collis and Marc Kuly of the Machray Learning Centre received SSI funding to support all of the SSI schools in big-picture thinking. The University of Winnipeg mentors were an important addition to the Student Success Centre because they increased the ability to provide more individualized attention to more students. The connections they made with students gave them insights as to why students struggle and fall into the off-track categories. Sheila Geisbrecht was the lead for the province for the entire project and organized the SSI school meetings and the trips and provided encouragement and support throughout. The following comments from our Math Department Head reflect the support for the SSI program from regular classroom teachers:

“The SSI centre provides at-risk students an opportunity to succeed academically. The centre offers a flexible program to fulfill students' individual needs by setting goals and steps to achieve them. Teachers in SSI work along with the subject teachers to ensure that students are getting parallel fundamental concepts with their peers in the same subject. The diversity of the program can simply range from a quiet place for students to concentrate to one-on-one teacher assistance. As a Math teacher, I really appreciate what the SSI center is offering my students.” Thao Vo, Elmwood Math Department Head, 2012

### **3. Strengthening school-wide engagement**

Early on, we had adopted Dunleavy and Milton's (2005) Stages of Engagement that highlighted the idea that students' progress from social engagement to academic engagement to intellectual engagement.

In all three years of the SSI Project, we found these ideas, in fact, reflect students' real paths in moving toward academic success. Schools that deal with poverty in their school communities require expanded programming that is open to all and not elitist or costly in nature, because of the importance of drawing kids in – the all important first step. Involvement in school athletics, visual performing arts, student groups, and after-school programs have helped to establish this important first step for many students.

Another effort to engage students started with Elmwood's first Pow-Wow, which evolved into an active Aboriginal Leadership Group that strengthened social engagement by connecting with students from northern and rural communities and helped them become more comfortable in an urban setting. In Year 4, we are building connections with Elders for our students through the SSI program.

Filling in gaps in learning is another way to engage students, and Joanne Sabourin, our SSI lead teacher, worked with our Social Studies Department Head, Leslie Dickson, to develop and implement a Literacy Pilot Project. The results of this project in the second year of SSI were so successful that interest from staff helped move this to a school-wide literacy project in Year 3. Word development was strengthened through targeted *Words their Way* efforts in English Language Arts classes. Subject areas strengthened content and generative vocabulary using strategies from *Vocabulary their Way*. The Manitoba School Improvement Program has contributed time, funding, and guidance towards this project. A major theme of Elmwood's Literacy project is "Equity through Literacy" as literacy is so important in determining what doors students can open to their futures.

## Lessons learned

One of the keys to the success of the Student Success Initiative was that it was voluntary for students to accept the supports offered and that, even if they refused them, they knew the door was always open. Students who did not accept the supports were generally unable to turn things around on their own and were mostly unsuccessful in acquiring credits. One of the remarkable things that happened over the three years was the number of students who accessed SSI support though self- or peer referral. Other positive indicators are that lunch hour use went from zero students to many and September numbers over four years went from 8 students in Year 1 to 125 in Year 4. At the beginning of the first year, students did not want to be in the "rubber room" (their term).

The learning culture that the teachers were able to establish was very positive, and students worked harder than ever before and gained confidence in their ability to learn. Following their SSI experience, many students have been able to successfully complete courses on their own or with limited SSI supports. Many students continue to use the Student Success Centre as a home base.

The dual approach of academic support and/or socio-emotional support was a key factor to the project's success, as was the fact that students completed real courses. Credit integrity enhanced both student and staff support for this program. During the SSI pilot years, 6 of 8 subject areas in our school saw increased credit acquisition rates, and the two that stayed the same already had healthy passing rates. Many teachers developed their own credit recovery plans, and the focus on student success helped educators develop more proactive plans to maximize student engagement and motivation. Sharing ideas and progress with the other SSI schools and the support of the Machray Learning Centre, the Researchers in Residence, and the province were greatly appreciated and invaluable to helping the project continue to move forward.

Our SSI project evolved to address the four pillars of the Ontario model: literacy – with the establishment of our school-wide literacy programme; numeracy – the extensive support of all Math courses; pathways to community – our enhanced community connections; and culture and caring – a key part of the Student Success Centre.

The Student Success Initiative has been a tremendously inspiring three-year journey that provided a wide range of experiences that enabled us to better meet the needs of our school community. It helped strengthen connections with students who were off-track and move them onto a more successful pathway, and it helped us focus more intently on the primary purpose of our jobs – helping students to be successful. SSI gave us an avenue to help strengthen the building of trusting, caring relationships. When the Deputy Minister, Dr. Gerald Farthing, visited our Student Success Centre in 2011, he supported our efforts to build relationships with students with the statement, "It's all about relationships." Our jobs, after all, are not just to work with students who are "easy to reach, easy to teach" (Mendler & Curwin, 1999 quoted in Guskey, 2009) but to work with all of the students in our charge and help all of them move onto more successful pathways.

The support from the Winnipeg School Division and Manitoba Education is greatly appreciated. Their trust gave us a license, with a few parameters, to develop an effective means to help students who are off-track or at-risk of not completing school. The SSI project at Elmwood High School

allowed us to have a positive impact on a phenomenal number of students over the three years of the pilot, and the fourth year of SSI continues to reach a large number of students who – despite the decrease in provincial funding – need support for their learning. The challenge will be how to continue this tremendously successful project if funding is further reduced.

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## About the Authors

**Mike Babb**, Principal of Elmwood High School, has thoroughly enjoyed his 30-year career as a physical education/biology teacher, vice-principal, principal, and coach. He honours the extensive amount of time he has been able to work with young people in both curricular and co-curricular settings and is proud of the efforts that have helped many young people get on track and move forward along their life's path. He is in his 10<sup>th</sup> year as an administrator at Elmwood. Mike was honoured to receive the MHSAA Volunteer of the Year Award in the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year of that organization.

**Joanne Sabourin**, SSI Lead Teacher at Elmwood High, is actually a graduate of the school. As a former student, her pride in the community has deep roots. She considers it a privilege to have the opportunity to give back to the community that has given her so much. Joanne's life journey has helped her with having some insight into some of the challenges Elmwood's youth face today, along with an understanding of the amount of resiliency some of these students possess. She knew that the SSI program could further support, encourage, and provide students some of the missing links that could be crucial to their success. Joanne feels blessed to work alongside her colleagues as they further support Elmwood High School's students. She has had the honour of seeing the positive ripple effects of the Student Success Initiative go from students to parents and to the community.

**Grant Andruchuk** is a recent graduate of the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Education, where he was an active participant in a targeted mentorship project. More specifically, in that initiative – developed in cooperation with Manitoba Probation Services – Grant worked as a mentor in a literacy project designed to serve previously incarcerated youth. He has spent much of his career to date engaging young people through after-school programs and camps that foster success in life. While teaching at Elmwood High School, Grant is currently doing a post-baccalaureate in Guidance, which he hopes to complete in the next couple of years.

**Dr. Eleoussa Polyzoi** is Professor of Education and Director of Developmental Studies at the University of Winnipeg. She has published extensively in the areas of risk and resilience, leadership, capacity building, and comparative education. Currently, she is involved in a large multidisciplinary project examining respiratory health, housing conditions, and school absenteeism in First Nations communities – a study funded by the Canadian government's Collaborative Health Research Projects (NSERC and CHRP) and conducted by a team of researchers from the Faculties of Education, Medicine, and Engineering. She is also the recipient of the University of Winnipeg's prestigious Erica and Arnold Rogers Award for Excellence in Research and Scholarship.

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