Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

The Role of Parents and Community in Supporting Student Success

A Review of AISI Cycles One, Two and Three Projects (2000-2008)

University of Calgary
Research Findings

Authors: Joanne Steinmann, Gary Malcolm, Arlene Connell

Stephanie Davis and Joy McMann

i. Contact Information

University of Calgary provincial research review of *The Role of Parents and Community in Supporting Student Success*

Findings from selected projects in Cycle I (2000-2003), in Cycle 2 (2003-2006) and in the first year of Cycle 3 (2006-2007)

ii. FOREWORD

The research review was conducted to provide substantiated information to Alberta Education and to school jurisdictions about what is promising in the selected projects from cycles one, two and three (2000-2008) of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The research review provides data and findings that are intended to influence future AISI developments. It has been conducted in order to determine the most successful and efficacious ways in which parents and communities support the success of students in their particular contexts.

Although direction was given to the researchers and writers to establish parameters for the reviews, the content reflects the writers' perspectives on the topics and subjects and may not necessarily reflect the position of Alberta Education.

We are pleased to recognize the research team of Joanne Steinmann, Gary Malcolm, Arlene Connell and Stephanie Davis with technical support provided by Joy McMann for their work in conducting a specific research review of AISI projects from cycles one, two and three, that showed the importance of parents and community in the development and evolution of the AISI projects. Methods of communication both by and for parents and the community were also identified.

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Introduction

Since 1999, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) has provided funding to Alberta school authorities for projects designed to improve student learning and performance (http:www.education.alberta.ca/aisi). To date, the funding has been distributed in two three-year cycles from 2000-2006 and in a third cycle which will conclude in 2009. AISI has successfully established a community of trust, enthusiasm and professional commitment amongst participating partners which include parents and the larger community. The initiatives are aimed to improve student learning based upon informed, collaborative decision-making, as evidenced through observable and measurable ways.

The University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge, as partners with Alberta Education, are mandated to work collaboratively to provide support to schools and school authorities and to conduct research in the context of AISI. This University of Calgary review will highlight the ways in which AISI projects involve parents and the larger community in supporting students' school success. The intent of this review is to share the successes, effective practices, challenges and considerations for the future.

Study Background and Study Data

This research review was conducted in order to provide information to Alberta school authorities and Alberta Education to enhance future efforts and mandates to include parents and the community in school endeavors.

The goal of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by supporting local initiatives that address unique needs and circumstances in school authorities. AISI funding is in addition to basic instructional funding and is targeted towards those local initiatives as they strive to achieve their goals and objectives. Over 800 AISI projects were developed and implemented during the first cycle (2000-2003), 460 projects in the second cycle (2003-2006) and over 300 have been approved for the third cycle (2006-2009).

Cycle 1 of AISI established a foundation of trust between government and education stakeholders and created a model for collaboration that has been employed in other government initiatives. It also established accountability measures and criteria to provide evidence that the initiative is working and set the stage for continuous improvement.

Cycle 2 of AISI consolidated emerging knowledge and synthesized what works in schools. Cycle 2 built on the enthusiasm and commitment from Cycle 1 and expanded its sphere of influence to even larger numbers of Alberta teachers and students. During Cycle 2, there was a greater focus on collecting worthy and revealing data, analyzing promising practices and disseminating findings, all of which are fundamental to the future success of AISI.

Cycle 3 of AISI continues to build upon the accomplishments of the first two cycles. AISI cycle three is characterized by teacher collaboration, learning and inquiry; it emphasizes innovation and research, extends what has been learned based on an in-depth analysis of projects, enhances professional practice, focuses on professional development and expands knowledge sharing and dissemination.

This review shares the results of a study conducted in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary by the team of Joanne Steinmann, Gary Malcolm, Arlene Connell and Stephanie Davis.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report was to gather and synthesize findings from AISI projects in the three cycles (2000-2008) and to show how parents and the larger community were involved in the AISI work, from becoming informed, to showing their support, to taking an active role. The effective practices identified in this report could be considered by school authorities as they endeavor to improve student learning in K-12 environments in the future.

As an AISI University Partner, the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary has conducted this research review as part of its mandated responsibility to work with learning system stakeholders in order to study and support the implementation of proven promising practices and successful innovations in AISI.

Report Limitations

Although data was triangulated and the findings of this report were consistently validated, researchers recognize the limitations of this work. The work's exploratory nature lends itself primarily to a qualitative approach, thus findings are descriptive rather than predictive in nature. Findings provide insight into the wide range of actions taken by AISI project participants and, while helpful for setting general directions or goals, the specific details provided may not be applicable in all school contexts. The day long focus group session provided for a deeper exploration of the annual report findings and an elaboration of the extent to which parents and the community was involved. As is the case in any exploratory research, new and challenging questions and suggestions emerged and will be helpful is addressing future directions and research. In each instance, local contexts were referenced as having significant influence on the degree of parent and community involvement.

Information in this report comes from projects that were either specifically dedicated to increased parent and/or community involvement or from information in the "G" section in the project template that asks project coordinators to indicate how and to what end, parents and the community were involved.

In the detailed project plan, the project template includes a section that asks project coordinators to illuminate how this involvement occurs and the 'parent involvement/communication strategies' section of the project template forms the basis for this research review.

This study draws from an analysis of 312 AISI projects from cycles one, two and three. As part of the project design and reporting process, parental involvement and communication strategies must be identified. This review documents the strategies that were implemented and what resulted from their implementation. Nine cycle one projects were reviewed with an intense review of four projects that identified parent and community involvement as a critical element of their work. 272 projects in cycle two were reviewed with an intense review of five projects that identified parent and community involvement as a central theme. Thirty-one projects in cycle three that identified parent and community involvement as a central theme were reviewed. "Perspectives from the field…have been drawn directly from the reviewed AISI annual project reports, from the focus group and from an intense session with project participants in one of the case studies.

Key Findings

Each AISI project required an indication of how parents and the community were involved in the successful implementation and evolution of the project. One section in each project report template is devoted to this requirement. The findings below are based upon a reading of the "parent involvement/communication strategies" in the 'G' section of AISI annual reports in cycles one, two and in the first year of cycle three. In this section, project coordinators are asked to provide evidence that has been collected and analyzed. Listing the strategies used for implementation and why these strategies were used is part of the total reporting process.

The research review revealed that parental involvement could be categorized under the following broad headings:
- Volunteering in school
- Participating in parent education
- Supporting students at home
- Helping to develop and implement AISI projects
- Advancing beliefs, values, cultures and languages
- Sharing expertise, knowledge, talents and gifts

Key related research citations include the following;

> *Parents and other interested members of the broader community have much to contribute to the articulation of the school's values, vision and purpose statements. Broad-based consultation that includes all stakeholders is imperative if a school is to serve its community effectively. (Hulley and Dier, p.167)*

> *For such partnerships (with parents) to be meaningful, they must move beyond fundraising, compliance with homework and discipline policies and general supportiveness to the core of teaching and learning as it affects parents' own children. (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998)*

> *Working together, teachers and parents become, if only for an evening or a semester, a team of elders collaborating to raise the next generation. (Kessler, 2000, p.166)*

> *We must work with parents because families are the first and the most important sources for students' joy, creativity, purpose and all the other gateways to soul in education. Parents' wisdom and modeling continue to shape these young people throughout their lives…a strong foundation from which to launch. (Kessler, 20000, p.165)*

Beyond the broad headings of parent involvement, the review also revealed the following key findings about the role that parents and community play in supporting students:

- As corroborated in the academic literature, these projects showed that parent and community participation is crucial for student success. Where parents are not available to provide support, schools can encourage other meaningful relationships with adults in the larger community.

- Strategies for parent and community participation and the degree of their involvement were impacted by educational contexts such as grade levels, socio-economic realities, time and commitment.

- Parents and community members provided important connections between the students and the larger community which then led to enhanced opportunities and broader experiences for the students.

- Projects that endeavored to build character, citizenship and student leadership were most successful when parents and community members were involved in creating and implementing the project goals and strategies.

- Some communication strategies were better than others because they encouraged, supported and inspired the deeper involvement of parents and the community.

- Parent education was a central means of communication and contributed to parent involvement. It was an opportunity for schools and groups of schools to introduce new and innovative teaching strategies and alternative forms of assessment so that parents were in a position to provide more in-depth and meaningful support to both children and schools.

- Students at-risk of leaving school required significant parent and community involvement in the planning and implementation of their educational goals.

- The use of technology greatly impacted the participation of parents and community in students' schooling.

- Factors such as ethnicity, school culture, cultural beliefs, personal beliefs, gender and style impacted the degree to which parents and the community were involved in the projects.

- Specific strategies were successful in increasing the participation of parents of ESL students.

- Schools continued to be challenged by how to best include parents and community members as participants in students' overall success.

Challenges

- The context of each school, AISI project and jurisdiction required very effective communication strategies so that the contexts were understood by parents and community.

- The capacity to effectively communicate teaching and learning beliefs and strategies to parents and communities required careful planning, time and commitment. While a challenge, this also presented a wonderful opportunity.

- Social issues such as poverty were beyond the scope of the school and have the potential to impact the level of parent and community involvement.

- Parents of ESL students were unsure of how to advocate for their children in the school setting. They may also have been uncomfortable participating in school events, in particular when the school may not be aware of their cultural norms.

- The nature of parent and community involvement has not always contributed to a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. Parents have more frequently been involved in "jobs" around the school and in fundraising.

- Staff continuity impacted the involvement of parents and community and the nature and volume of turn over in staff can be a factor in ensuring the successful involvement of parents and the community. Changes can break the threads of continuity and shared understanding.

- Greater participation of parents and community impacted the role of the teacher in the AISI initiatives. Where parents and/or the community were heavily involved, the understanding and commitment to the project was paramount for the teacher.

Considerations for the Future

- Research conducted through a review of AISI projects over the past eight years can inform the work of schools, showing what does work and what does not work as well as indicating possibilities worth considering when involving parents and the community.

- Emphasizing and normalizing deeper levels of parent and community involvement in the early grades might contribute to a commitment on the part of parents and the community to continue a meaningful involvement in schools through to student graduation. How can perceptions that parents hold about their involvement in higher grades be changed or challenged?

- Schools benefit from a wider inclusion of parents and community as elders, experts and resources in the classroom, connecting their adult life and professional experiences to student learning.

- The use of new technologies can facilitate better connections between parents, students, the school and the community.

- Educating parents and community members about current theories of teaching and learning provides them with the tools to better support students in being successful.

- Sustaining ongoing commitment and involvement on the part of parents and community requires careful planning, effective communication and engaging opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

AISI Education Partnership

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), developed through a collaborative partnership in 1999, was implemented in Alberta school authorities in the 2000-2001 school year. Partners include the Alberta School Councils' Association, Alberta School Boards' Association, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, Alberta Teachers' Association, College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Education and the university faculties of education.

AISI Research Reviews

In 2008, the university partners undertook a review of the following studies and analysis of AISI projects:
- The University of Alberta reviewed projects developed under the theme of Leadership and Sustainablity.
- The University of Lethbridge reviewed projects developed for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students.
- The University of Calgary reviewed projects pertaining to parent/community involvement and communication strategies.

Study Background

The research reviews were conducted to provide information that would inform Alberta school jurisdictions (K-12) and Alberta Education in their future efforts to support and enhance student learning. The reviews share the results of a study conducted by a research team from each of the Faculties of Education at the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge. This particular review was conducted by the University of Calgary.

The central goal in AISI is to support local initiatives that address the unique needs and circumstances in school jurisdictions. Funding is targeted in AISI so that school authorities can create initiatives specific to their local needs to improve student learning and success. The funding is in addition to base funding to school jurisdictions and is calculated on a per student allocation. All provincially funded school authorities in Alberta have participated at some point in cycles one, two or three of AISI, including the 77 public school authorities (public, separate, Francophone and charter) in the province and the 231 private schools (115 private and 116 ECS private operators). Over 800 AISI projects were developed and implemented in cycle one (2000-2003), 460 AISI projects were approved in cycle two (2003-2006) and approximately 380 projects have been approved in the present cycle (2006-2009). In total, over 1600 AISI projects have been implemented in the province of Alberta. The projects profiled in this review are representative of regions across the province. Findings from all the university reviews have the potential to influence the concluding work in cycle three projects and in the development and implementation stages in cycle four (2009-2012).

Study Scope

As stated in the AISI Handbook, AISI is a "partnership that includes parents and the community and is characterized by trust, collaboration and teamwork." The handbook also states that "in order to improve student learning, parent engagement is essential. Student learning and performance is improved when parents have the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes as members of the AISI partnership. It is expected that parents and the community will be aware of and have meaningful roles and involvement in project initiation, development, implementation, celebration and institutionalization." The project must identify who participated in the consultation process, how the participants will be involved, how the support for the project will be shown, and how services will be provided in order to affect the ability of students to be successful learners. It is believed that in order for the projects to be successful, they must be based on support from the community.

This study draws from an analysis of 312 AISI projects from cycles one, two and three. As part of the project design and reporting process, parent involvement and communication strategies must be identified. This research review documents the strategies that were implemented and what resulted from their implementation. Nine cycle one projects were reviewed with an intense review of four projects that identified parent and community involvement as a critical element of their work. 272 projects in cycle two were reviewed with an intense review of five projects that identified parent and community involvement as a central theme. Thirty-one projects in cycle three that identified parent and community involvement as a central theme were reviewed.

In the 312 projects that were reviewed, the number of students potentially impacted by the individual projects, ranged from 2 to 90,000: The grade configuration of K-12 comprised the largest number of projects.

Grade Focus	# of Projects
K-12	104
K-3	39
K-5 or K-6	29
K-8, K-9 or K-10	43
5, 6, 7, or 8-12	43
9-12	28
One specific grade	35

Study Data

Three sources of data were analyzed for this review:
- Final annual reports from nine cycle one projects, 272 projects from cycle two and 31 cycle three projects
- Findings from projects that particularly identified parent and community involvement as a goal
- Findings from fourteen schools or districts who participated in a focus group

Although direction was given to the researchers and writers to establish parameters for the reviews, the content reflects the writers' perspectives on the topics and subjects and may not necessarily reflect the position of Alberta Education.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report was to gather and synthesize findings from AISI projects in the three cycles (2000-2008) and to show how parents and the larger community were involved in the AISI work, from becoming informed, to showing their support, to taking an active role. The effective practices identified in this report could be considered by school authorities as they endeavor to improve student learning in K-12 environments in the future.

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Overview

Key related research citations include the following;

> *Engaging parents means bringing them to a new awareness of what occurs in classrooms … when parents learned what was happening in the classrooms they became naturally engaged and impressed with their child's learning and became motivating and encouraging partners in the process.* (Parsons, McRae, Taylor, 2006, p.76)

> *[Students must know] someone who is not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school; that there is someone who knows them and is available to them throughout the school year, the summer and into the next school year; and that caring adults want them to learn, do the work, attend class regularly, be on time, express frustration constructively, stay in school, and succeed.* (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004, p. 38)

> *The multiplicity of parental involvement leads to the need for the use of an assortment of communication methods to achieve family-school relationship. Technology…provides a means of quick and frequent communication between teachers and parents much more than can be accomplished through conventional means.* (Rogers & Wright, 2007, pp.24 & 26)

> *…there are educators who have been learning how to implement…education for global citizenship. Schools can be places that not only promote in young people a unity of one's sense of self but also an interconnectedness to others and a sense of meaning. (Noddings, 2005, p.111)*

> *In and through community lies the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important. (Peck, 1987, p.17)*

The literature is clear that when parents and community work together with schools to provide the most meaningful opportunities for students, students experience greater success. This belief is confirmed in this research review.

Because parent involvement and communication strategies are an integral part of each project design, schools are constantly evaluating and changing the ways in which they involve and engage parents and community. The depth of involvement is impacted by many factors, including the way in which information is communicated and the way in which parents and community are invited to participate with the school. In the review of the research data it was gleaned that parent and community involvement ranged from receiving information to making educational decisions about learning opportunities for students in the true spirit of shared leadership.

Much can be learned from the common narrative of successful parent and community involvement across the province and in diverse educational contexts. Each story, of which three are outlined in appendix E, is a demonstration of innovation and ownership on the part of several connected parties.

2. PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Key related research citations include the following;

> *Parents and other interested members of the broader community have much to contribute to the articulation of the school's values, vision and purpose statements. Broad-based consultation that includes all stakeholders is imperative if a school is to serve its community effectively. (Hulley and Dier, p.167)*

> *For such partnerships (with parents) to be meaningful, they must move beyond fundraising, compliance with homework and discipline policies and general supportiveness to the core of teaching and learning as it affects parents' own children. (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998)*

> *Working together, teachers and parents become, if only for an evening or a semester, a team of elders collaborating to raise the next generation. (Kessler, 2000, p.166)*

> *We must work with parents because families are the first and the most important sources for students' joy, creativity, purpose and all the other gateways to soul in education. Parents' wisdom and modeling continue to shape these young people throughout their lives…a strong foundation from which to launch. (Kessler, 20000, p.165)*

Each AISI project requires an indication of how parents and the community have been involved in the successful implementation and evolution of the project. One section in each project report template is devoted to this requirement. The findings below are based upon a reading of the "parent involvement/communication strategies" in the 'G' section of AISI annual reports in cycles one, two and in the first year of cycle three. In this section, project coordinators are asked to provide evidence that has been collected and analyzed from the project participants. Listing the strategies used for implementation and why these strategies were used is part of the total reporting process.

The research review revealed that parental involvement could be categorized under the following broad headings:

- Volunteering in school
- Participating in parent education
- Supporting students at home
- Helping to develop and implement AISI projects
- Advancing beliefs, values, cultures and languages
- Sharing expertise, knowledge, talents and gifts

In this review, a number of key findings, strategies and challenges are identified from the projects. These findings arise from an analysis of the project annual report section G, parental involvement/communication strategies' and are confirmed by a focus group. AISI project coordinators and participants believe that parent and community participation is crucial to student overall success and this belief is corroborated in the literature.

Key Findings:

- As corroborated in the academic literature, these projects showed that parent and community participation is crucial for student success. Where parents are not available to provide support, schools can and do encourage other meaningful relationships with adults in the larger community.

- Strategies for parent and community participation and the degree of their involvement were impacted by educational contexts such as grade levels, socio-economic realities, time and commitment. A significant shift was seen in the degree of involvement of parents from the earlier grades to the higher grades. In other words, parents were more involved with the school in the earlier grades. There is a perception on the part of parents that their involvement in higher grades is less necessary, less desired or even less possible. The organization of schools and the changing needs of students imply very different kinds of involvement by parents, as students proceed through the grades. In the projects that were reviewed, community involvement, on the other hand, increases in the higher grades by supporting students through the Registered Apprenticeship Programs (R.A.P.), work experience, job shadowing, mentoring and larger community events and projects.

- Parents and community members provided important connections between the students and the larger community. This kind of involvement is dependent upon the levels of interest, the areas of expertise and the opportunities that schools foster for these connections to take place. One of the results of these connections is that perceptions of young people can be enhanced. Another result is that students benefit from exposure to areas of study and interest that might not otherwise be available to them on a first-hand basis.

- Projects that endeavoured to build character, citizenship and student leadership were most successful when parents and community members were involved in creating and implementing the project goals and strategies. When beliefs and values were aligned between home, school and community, the experiences for students were more consistent and powerful, leading to a greater sense of well-being amongst students.

- Many projects targeted parent education as a very worthwhile endeavour in supporting student success. The varied opportunities for parents included: evening workshops, parenting courses, information sessions, printed materials and online materials. Often, celebrations of learning provided opportunities for students to educate their parents and for parents to gain a greater understanding of the school's intent. It was an opportunity for schools and groups of schools to introduce new and innovative teaching strategies and alternative forms of assessment so that parents were in a position to provide more in-depth and meaningful support to both children and the school.

- Students at risk of leaving school required significant parent and community involvement in the planning and implementation of their educational goals. The fostering of positive relationships between students and caring adults is essential to students' commitment to their education and to their overall well-being. In the projects, it was reported that when parents are unable to provide support, it is critical that the school and community help facilitate other supportive relationships.

- The use of technology has greatly impacted the participation of parents and community in students' schooling. On one end of the spectrum, technologies provide information about schools and schooling. On the other end, technologies connect students to their own community and beyond in order to participate in projects, community service, dialogues with experts and creating new knowledge. All of the projects reviewed are utilizing technology in some way, most often to a profitable end.

  Increased availability of technologies in the project schools, addresses some of the barriers to parent involvement. Parents can access important school information, course outlines, curriculum updates, assignments and grades as well as being able to communicate with both their children and teachers. This access is available at any time and from multiple locations. Particularly at the secondary level, technologies have encouraged an increase in parent involvement, resulting in parents gaining a sense of being an integral part of their child's schooling.

- Factors such as ethnicity, school culture, cultural beliefs, personal beliefs, gender and style can impact the degree to which parents and the community is involved. Unless some deliberate and mindful decisions are made to address the diversity in parent and community groups and to address issues of poverty, language, customs and facility, involvement does not occur. In some successful work, accommodations are made for the care of younger siblings, food and transportation are provided, meetings and parent education events are hosted in the community rather than in the schools, and in some instances the groups are kept very small in order to improve the levels of comfort.

- Specific strategies were successful in increasing the participation of parents of ESL students. Efforts are made to bring parents into the school to understand how schools work, what is expected of the children, what the role of teacher means in Canada, and how parents can be effective in supporting their children's education. These strategies were respectful of the challenges inherent in moving to a new country.

- "Ownership" on the part of parents, teachers, students, administrators and community as well as "innovation" in the context of the specific projects were crucial elements of parent involvement that led to demonstrated student success. How well each participant understood these two terms was pivotal.

- Schools continue to be challenged by how to best include parents and community members as participants in students' overall success. Permeating the annual reports are comments referring to this challenge and the goal of increasing parental and community involvement in the future.

3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

A wide range of communication strategies are used in an effort to keep parents and community informed. Communication strategies are also critical to increasing parental and community involvement in order to impact students' success in school. These findings arise from an analysis of the projects' annual reports and are confirmed by a focus group.

Key Findings:

- Openly and frequently communicating about the project work was not only critical but also easy to achieve through newsletters, websites, brochures, displays and celebrations of learning. Because of enhanced understanding and involvement, parents and community members could then provide important connections between the students and the larger community.

  Perspectives from the field…
  Having parents involved in celebrating student learning helped them to be more aware of AISI in general, as well as understanding some of the strategies their children had been learning.

  This helped parents to be more informed and also better able to support their children at home.

  Parent awareness and commitment led to parent at-home action that is supportive in developing, reinforcing and sustaining in-school learning.

- Some communication strategies were better than others. Many of the communication strategies identified in the projects are traditional, one-way information channels and do not necessarily reveal the extent to which people understand the projects or see a meaningful role for themselves in supporting the projects. Schools benefit from being open to and welcoming parent and community involvement and in striving to understand what this means.

- Some communication strategies supported and inspired a deeper and more significant role for parents and the community. These strategies go well beyond information sharing and invite feedback, insights and participation in a variety of ways. They may require more time and a greater degree of confidence in articulating pedagogical stances, philosophies, legitimate partnerships and realistic parent and community involvement. Such strategies have implications for the degree to which teachers can articulate why they are doing what they are doing. Well articulated pedagogical stances inspire confidence for parents and the community.

- Projects intended to improve the academic success of students were more successful when parents are knowledgeable about the curriculum, pedagogy, learning strategies and alternative forms of assessment. When parents understand why schools undertake the work in the ways that they do, they are more able to support, encourage and inspire their children to succeed. The greatest concern of parents appears to be the academic success of their children and therefore, this is the area in which parents are most involved and the area in which schools encourage and educate for effective parental involvement.

Perspectives from the field…

Parents view the school more positively by being involved hence parent involvement has a positive impact upon the community.

Any amount of parental involvement enhances student commitment which in turn has a positive impact upon student learning.

- The use of technology has greatly impacted the participation of parents and community in students' schooling. There were many examples provided in the projects showing how schools are using the burgeoning technological capabilities available to them. These connections were not possible in the past and are helpful in addressing issues such as time and availability.

- Factors such as ethnicity, time, school culture, cultural beliefs, personal beliefs and style can impact the degree to which parents and the community is involved in the projects. Modifications and adaptations in communication are required in order to address the diversity and complexity of 21st century school communities and no single way of communicating to parents and the community will be sufficient. School communities benefit from having well established and appropriate inter-cultural communicative competencies.

- Specific strategies were successful in increasing the participation of parents of ESL students. Adapting to language differences, cultural norms, and creating educational opportunities for parents so that they understand their role, the role of school, and the importance of community lead to student school success.

- Schools continue to be challenged by how to best include parents and community members as participants in students' overall success. Successful projects had all participants asking, "what is parent engagement and what is student success?" These questions have no universal answer. The answer is actually constructed in the context of a specific school or jurisdiction and the AISI project, itself. The more these questions are discussed, the clearer and more collectively understood, the answer.

4. STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Strategies

More than twenty different strategies were identified as having an impact on the level and success of parent and community involvement. 70% of the projects listed parent education as a critical way of involving parents. While much parent education occurs by volunteering in classrooms, assisting with displays and exhibitions, participating in celebrations of learning, reading print and on-line information, by far the most effective means of educating parents in order to magnify their involvement and it's effectiveness occurred through attendance at seminars and workshops, participation in professional development with teachers, participation in research endeavors, discussions about pedagogical issues, working to understand teaching and learning in today's context and participating in school and community events with experts.

Strategies used as a means of inspiring parent involvement include the list below. The percentage of projects reporting the particular strategy is also reported.

- Parent education (70%)
- Newsletters (51%)
- School councils and parent advisories (37%)
- Celebrations of learning (37%)
- Phone calls and personal contact (32%)
- Displays and exhibits (18%)
- Pamphlets, brochures and handbooks (18%)
- Surveys and input (17%)
- Parents as partners, mentors and experts (13%)

Strategies used to inform and involve the community include:
- Newsletters
- School councils
- Displays and exhibits
- Community newspapers and partnerships
- Community members as mentors and experts
- Presentations and motivational speeches
- Counseling, modeling, volunteering
- Participation in school events

Perspectives from the field…

…students have worked with an Artist in Residence, pictures have been in the local newspaper, there has been a float in the summer parade to publicize one school and one school has participated in an art walk with their artists in the area and has sold hand painted cards, some of which have been purchased by the mayor.

Project Management

The project template expects that project coordinators will report the level and kind of parent involvement and communication strategies that have contributed to student success. Therefore each project does include information about this involvement. As reported, the degree of involvement ranged from "none" to full participation in the development and evolution of the project. Many project coordinators reported that they would appreciate more involvement and would seek ways of achieving this as cycle three projects come to a close and as cycle four is contemplated. In some instances, parents were directly involved in the conceptualization, design and implementation of the project, but more often were involved in the role of expert, mentor or volunteer. Tacit support for the projects and true championing of the project goals was evident in many annual reports and was received very favorably. There did not seem to be any role for parents in the management of the projects.

Challenges

- Leaders of successful projects wanted to be assured that their successes would not end with the project. Funding and normalizing successful projects while continuing to search for new and innovative ways to use AISI funding to develop new projects was deemed as critical to the long lasting legacy of AISI. Inherent in this is how an increased level of involvement by parents and the community will be achieved.

- Increased demand on teacher time, energy, goodwill and ability to adapt to change influences the degree to which they involve parents and the community.

- Issues of poverty, alienation, time and confidence mitigate against parent involvement.

- Testing and grades are easy for parents to reconcile and understand. Progressive and new ways of assessing and inviting 'inquiry' learning are difficult for parents to comprehend and require substantial parent education.

- Parents who have come from other countries do not necessarily understand the language, the role of school, their role or how to participate meaningfully.

- Parents are generally involved in schools and in specifically supporting their own children but project participants did not necessarily invite parents to be involved in a meaningful way. Project participants reported that tacit approval and championing of projects to a large degree was a sufficient commitment.

- Each school and or school jurisdiction has a unique and different context therefore any recommendations or findings from this review might realistically need to be adapted or adjusted to address the context.

- The mobility and transitions of teachers and staff can interrupt the implementation and evolution of the projects over the three year period and as a consequence, parent support and involvement can also be lost in these transitions.

Considerations for the Future

When parents and members of the broad-based community are included in the school in respectful and authentic ways, positive interpersonal relationships and lines of communication can be developed that will support all stakeholders. (Hulley and Dier, p.168)

- In three successive cycles of AISI, project developers have been asked to report how parent involvement has contributed to student success however, in the future, we will need to expand the knowledge of how this works by supporting innovative and creative means of integrating schools, parents and community in student learning. Distinctions between parent/community awareness and parent/community involvement will continue to be a focus in cycle four.

- New and sustaining AISI projects can be informed by the developing research on the importance of parent and community involvement and can use past findings to help set new directions. Schools that are welcoming and respectful of family and community are more likely to form good, workable partnerships. These partnerships are best built by attending to basic democratic principles where respect for all participants regardless of gender, language, culture, religion, educational status and economic realities is evident.

Perspectives from the field…

Parent participation with students in many of their volunteer activities resulted in improved parent-child bonds and demonstrated the important societal value of students and adults undertaking volunteer activities to make our world a better place for all.

- How will this involvement be sustained in efficacious ways in the life of the school and in the life of each parent and community member? If the funding for AISI is not available, will the excellent work continue? What is possible? Does AISI ask for a different level of accountability for the involvement of parents and the community than would normally be expected? By including a section on parent involvement and communication strategies in the project template, does the accountability and commitment change or improve?

- What is the lived experience desired for each and every member of the school community in supporting and aiding student success and achievement? How can value and importance be placed on active participation on the part of all 'members' of the school community? A definition of what constitutes community is central to the discussion.

- How can the involvement of parents throughout the school life of students be maintained, in fact, increased over time? How best might parents be educated in order that their involvement remains meaningful and helpful without infringing on the rights and responsibilities of students and teachers? How can the voices of parents and the community be encouraged effectively?

- How could the successful experiences in other cultures be adapted to the Alberta school context? What can be learned from others?

- Could the meaningful involvement of parents and the community address some of the challenges of teacher and staff mobility? By increasing the level of involvement and understanding, would the momentum in the projects be maintained?

- Communication and involvement that contributes to mutual understandings about projects, their intent and the parent and community roles therein will contribute to greater parent involvement and engagement. Effective communication is best achieved through a two-way exchange of information and insights. Demonstrating a respectful attitude towards parent contributions and an acknowledgement of their strengths will contribute to meaningful and increased involvement.

  New research studies indicate that parent involvement is increased by helping them to develop skills in parenting, leadership, governance and decision-making.

- Principals of schools are central in fostering meaningful parent engagement and involvement. Principals are often the critical champions of an AISI project and can clearly see how parents or the community can contribute to the success of the project.

5. PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group represented a cross-section of project coordinators from urban, rural, elementary and secondary school settings. They were provided with a number of different opportunities to respond to essential questions in order to corroborate key findings derived from the review of the annual reports. The research team wanted to explore the participants' experiences in involving parents and community. For example, what role did parents and community play in the project development process, what key strategies were used, what challenges were faced, what administrative support was required and ultimately what impact did the involvement have on student success? The findings were gathered from fourteen project coordinators. Details about the research methodology and questions can be found in the appendices.

The data gathered from the focus group can be integrated into the following framework;

Parent and Community Involvement:

ESSENTIAL PURPOSE

Student success is impacted by the meaningful and authentic involvement of parents and community.

Central Themes

What was learned from the focus group participants can be categorized under the following three major themes: Context, Trust and Resources.

A. Context

The involvement of parents and or the community was directly influenced by the context of the AISI projects. Contextual factors are many and have varying degrees of influence. In order to address the local contexts, a certain degree of flexibility in the project design and implementation is required. The focus group discussed the following contextual factors:
- urban/rural
  - connections in the communities and a strong sense of belonging seem to have more influence on the support for the school than differences between rural and urban settings.
- elementary/secondary schools
  - elementary schools are much more impacted by the day-to-day support of parents, secondary schools benefit from the involvement of the larger community
- size of the project/district
  - projects need the involvement at the grassroots level; leadership seems most influential when it remains at the school level. The context of each school is so particular that it requires different interactions with the parents and the community depending on that context

- project topics
    - when the project theme directly focused on the involvement of parents and the community, teachers were more immersed, thoughtful and mindful because they were involved in reading and integrating the research on the role of parents
- demographics (cultural, political, social, economic, gender)
    - ethnic communities presented new and different opportunities and challenges
- leadership
    - school-based leaders had the capacity to connect more directly and immediately with parents and the community on behalf of their student population
    - direct involvement between the AISI teachers and leaders and other administrators created the necessary network to address the successes, concerns, challenges and efforts
    - increased teacher capacity and support led to feelings of success and efficacy which enhanced relationships with parents
    - learning from the professional development opportunities transformed teaching and teachers which then led to more positive and informed relationships with parents
- funding target (at risk students, young children, ESL, gifted and talented)
- communication
    - understanding the services provided, the dollar value, the processes for implementation and the accountabilities in AISI contributed to parent and community support and endorsement
    - giving parents the 'tools' to advocate on behalf of their own children and community at large was important
    - often, the school began with actions that directly involved parents in order for parents to understand the overall vision the project is hoping to achieve
    - a variety of strategies were utilized in order to provide the appropriate support (one on one exchanges, home visits, whole school communiqués)
    - on-line communication increased the exchanges between home and school and provided an easy way for parents to remain up-to-date
    - naming AISI as the contributor to the success of school or student endeavors and ensuring that credit to AISI is duly assigned
    - clearly articulating the accountability measures in AISI is necessary
    - sustaining the innovations and the parent support once the AISI project had ended was a challenge in some instances
- parent commitment
    - creating a need or purpose for families to come to the school was a challenge and projects found many ways to address this challenge (celebrations, educational evenings, cultural meals, invitations to extended families)
    - circumstances negatively impacted the degree to which parents were involved (poverty, fatigue, life style, time)
- community roles
    - greater community involvement illustrated for students, the larger vision of what it means to be a positive, contributing citizen and how in turn, they might give back
    - open exchanges between communities and schools builds an understanding of what comprises community in order to make clear that schools are part of a community; not separate from

B. Trust

Mutual trust is a crucial element in the partnerships between parents, community and the school. This trust is built over time and derives from authentic, generous and meaningful involvement. Understanding the benefits of these partnerships and valuing what parents and community can contribute to the success of the projects was evident in both the annual reports and from the focus group.

The focus group shared the following examples of the ways in which trust was built:
- parent voices were included in decision making
- parents were seen as 'experts' in the lives of their own children; it is critical to listen to, and to value and acknowledge their voices in the educational environment
- reframing the view of students and parents to a strength- based model from a deficit- based model
- parents' past personal school experiences might impact their involvement and they made need support and encouragement to overcome any residual difficulties

C. Resources

Many resources, both human and material, contribute to the successful implementation of the projects. The projects seem to be best served when parents and community are involved in the decision making for the fair and equitable distribution of these resources. Time, equipment, professional learning spaces, technology and services are examples of the resources that can be used to support students and teachers.

The focus group shared the following examples of the ways in which resources were beneficial:
- resources were provided to parents to address all aspects of their role in their child's life (parenting courses, counseling services, technology)
- mentoring relationships were established (for example; family liaison workers created parent support groups in four high schools)
- different images of professional development included parents, community and teachers which inspired confidence and increased understanding and knowledge of the educational decisions being made
- parents and the community contributed in their areas of expertise or interest and this led to different kinds of relationships
- financial support

Advice and Questions from the Participants

- Please use our present study in order to help us all understand where to go next.

- If we ask for parent input, we must use it!

- How will parents know the impact of AISI professional development funding?

- How do we share effectively with parents the impact of the work teachers are doing on behalf of their children?

- How can they effectively be involved in the work?

- Help teachers who are in AISI roles deal with the perceptions that they are automatically promoted into leadership roles in other contexts and if so is this a problem or a result of the excellent leadership opportunities they have had in AISI.

- Make certain that we are all clear in identifying AISI as the catalyst for the successes being reported

- It is hoped that cycle four will continue to allow for grassroots decision-making and this needs to define the direction for the projects.

- Encourage projects that more specifically incorporate parents and the community and be more targeted in the ways that the influence of the partnerships is documented.

- Provide workshops and or mentoring in order to help all partners to speak more effectively to each other.

- Resistance to AISI can occur amongst teachers when they do not see that the work is connected to their other responsibilities and that it clearly provides benefits. Communication is critical so that positive perceptions are fostered and transferred to parents!

- Clear and timely communication remains a critical element in the success of AISI. When teachers and parents fully understand the intent of the projects, they are more likely to commit to the project's implementation and evolution. The following from a student exemplifies the benefit from meaningful communication between parents and teachers, "My parents look at me differently, they get me now!"

APPENDIX A

Research Methodology

The purpose of this report was to gather and synthesize findings from a double blind review of projects that experienced success by focusing on **parent and community involvement and communication strategies.** The audience for this report will include key decision-makers, teachers interested in replicating successful practices and others interested in school improvement initiatives.

Data for this report was derived from;

- Annual report section on Parent Involvement/Communication Strategies in 312 cycle one, two and three reports.
- Annual reports on projects dedicated to parent and community involvement in cycle one (2000-2003), cycle two (2003-2006) and from the first year of cycle three (2007-2008)
- Findings from a focus group representing fourteen schools or jurisdictions
- Findings from an intense interview with participants in one project identified as a case study

Research Review Procedure

1. Two reviewers conducted a double-blind review of AISI project annual reports from over 300 projects in the three cycles. The reports were reviewed to:
    a. identify common findings, themes and promising practices
    b. identify challenges and offer suggestions and questions for future consideration
    c. construct preliminary questions for a focus group
    d. develop a preliminary list of potential candidates for the focus group
    e. create summary statements from the three sources of data
    f. provide a reference list and annotated bibliography for the three sources of data
    g. include meaningful quotes from both the field and from the academic literature
2. Reviewers participated in a one day focus group with 14 representatives of school districts and charter schools from the over 307 projects. Focus group data included:
    a. chart paper notes taken during discussions
    b. handouts distributed to participants for individual completion of questions
    c. open dialogue with the entire focus group
    d. reviewers' observations and synthesis, drawn from independent notes taken during and after focus group session.
3. Reviewers conducted an intense half day interview with a large scale project in an urban centre to build upon the information gathered in the focus group and to use the project as a viable case study.
4. Findings were further triangulated by review of practitioner and scholarly literature related to the role of parents and the community in contributing to student success in school.

Project Selection Criteria

The following sources of data were used to determine projects selected for this review.

- Selected cycle one projects (nine) were reviewed because of the substantive effort made to involve parents and the community.
- 272 cycle two projects were reviewed, specifically in the project design section G., entitled "parent involvement/communication strategies.
- 31 cycle two and three projects that identified parent/community involvement as a project theme were reviewed.

APPENDIX B

Proposed agenda for the focus group discussion held in Calgary on November 8th, 2008:

10:00-10:20	Welcome
	Purpose of the day, goals for the focus group, project selection process
	Introductions
	What did the project mean to you? Scope of the project?
	Research process, consent forms, signatures, ethics, expense claims

10:20-10:50   Individual responses to essential questions

10:50-12:00   Small group responses to essential questions
                      Large group summary

12:00-12:45   Lunch

12:45-1:45   Small group responses to the following:
                      Are there different responses to the questions?
                      Are themes emerging?
                      What challenges have been highlighted?
                      What promising practices should be shared?
                      Over time, what changes occurred in the project?
                      How did they evolve?
              Large group summary, what have we heard today?

1:45-2:00   Break

2:00-3:00   Large group discussion of the claims, what are the key elements?
                      What is sustainable?
                      What advice?
                      What next?
                      Implications for this new cycle?
                      What other questions should be considered?

3:00-3:15   Individual reading of the meta-analysis
              Summative statements - have we got it right?
              Research review delivery date
              Next steps

3:15-3:30   Expense claims and evaluations

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Individual responses:

1. What were the key goals and expected outcomes in your project?

2. What was the development process? Who was involved? How did the project align with larger jurisdictional goals?

3. What were the successes? Why?

4. What were some key strategies that led to success in involving parents and the larger community?

5. What made a difference for students?

6. What research proved most useful?

7. How did your school and or jurisdiction arrive at a common understanding of parent and community involvement and how it would impact student success?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

First small group discussion:

1. What were some of the major successes in the project?

2. What presented challenges in the project?

3. How were decisions made about what parent and community involvement might look like? What evolved? What changed? What was abandoned?

4. What were some of the challenges associated with parent and community involvement?

5. What strategies for involving parents proved most useful in achieving the project goals?

6. What administrative support at the school or district level had the most impact on the success of the project?

7. What was the nature of the professional development? What seemed to have the greatest impact on the teachers? How did this translate into changed practice?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Second small group discussion:

1. Are there different responses to the questions?

2. Are themes emerging?

3. What challenges have been highlighted?

4. What promising practices should be shared?

5. Over time, what changes occurred in the project?

6. How did they evolve?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Large group discussion:

1. What is sustainable?

2. What advice could be offered?

3. What are the next steps?

4. What are the implications for a potential fourth cycle of AISI?

5. What other questions should be considered?

APPENDIX C

Project Summaries

AISI is a partnership among teachers, superintendents, trustees, business officials, universities, parents and government. By working together, the partners continue to develop new relationships, strategies and practices that provide long term benefits to teaching and learning in our province. (Alberta Education)

To this end, the AISI project template includes a requirement that indicates how and to what extent parents and the community are involved in the planning, development and achievements of an AISI project. Beyond this, a number of schools and districts chose to use the involvement of parents and the community as their central AISI theme in addressing and impacting overall school success. This research review has shown through an analysis of the AISI annual report section on *parent involvement/communication strategies*, the findings from a focus group and from current research findings in the academic literature, that AISI is and has positively contributed to an understanding of the complexity and challenge of involving parents and community in educational innovation and change and to see that they do make a difference.

The findings and analysis of the AISI annual reports and the data collected in the focus groups is valid and substantive and is affirmed in contemporary research literature. Parents and the community do make a difference in the lives of young people and conversely, students wish to be acknowledged for having a vital and important role in the larger context in which they find themselves. It is only through our collective and continuing efforts to build these relationships and to place value on their existence that we will offer even greater opportunities for students to succeed. The context in which each AISI project involves its partners remains a critical element in considering what works and what does not. Educators continue to seek ways to ensure that the involvement is meaningful. It is hoped in the development and evolution of cycle four AISI projects that an increased attempt to involve parents and the community will occur. It is also hoped that AISI as an entity will be given suitable acknowledgement for the opportunities and differences it makes in the province of Alberta by asking that parents and the community contribute to the education of our young people.

APPENDIX D

Annotated Bibliography

Brendtro, L.., Brokenleg, M. & Van Bockern, S. (1990). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future*. **Bloomington, Indiana: Solution Tree.**

This book integrates Native American child-rearing philosophies and western psychology to provide a unique perspective on troubled youth. Part 1 examines the alienation of some children in modern society. Part 2 presents a holistic Native American philosophy of child development that is built on the idea that the education of children is the most important function of a society. Part 3 offers principles and strategies for parents and educators for creating reclaiming environments.

The authors explore the causes of discouragement for many of today's youth, including destructive relationships, learned irresponsibility, and a "loss of purpose." The creation of a "Circle of Courage" is shown to give youth a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.

From a belief that it is the highest imperative that the modern family be strengthened and stabilized, and the recognition that the "tribe" has a responsibility to nourish the new generation, the authors explore the kinds of relationships that are crucial to the development of the reclaiming environment. If children's needs are to be kept paramount then "relationship technology" must be revived. Over and above positive individual relationships between adults and youth, four other relationships are also crucial: peer-group relationships, staff teamwork relationships, teamwork relationships with parents and leadership relationships.

Henderson, N. & Milstein, M. (2003). *Resiliency in schools: Making it happen for students and educators*. **Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.**

The authors offer resources for resilience education as well as an action plan that can be used to build the inner strength and flexibility of young people and adults. They suggest ways that everyone develops the defenses needed to meet the dynamic, vigorous demands of school life. They explore:
- what resiliency is and why it is important
- how to integrate resiliency building with educational reform
- how to move "at risk" students to resilient ones
- why resilient students need resilient educators, skills and tools for resiliency building
- how to chart your progress as you make resiliency a way of life for yourself and your school.

While the book is primarily written for educators, it does offer a wealth of information that parents might access in order to better support their children in coping with a very complex and stressful modern world. An understanding of resiliency, its importance, and the ways that programs can help people bounce back and evolve into more competent and successful learners, workers and citizens, is needed now more than ever. Resiliency can be described as the process of coping with challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with more protective and coping skills after the event than were present before the disruption.

The authors present six consistent themes that have emerged from the research which show how schools as well as families and communities can provide both environmental protective factors and the conditions that foster individual protective factors.

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

This book combines the authors' extensive experience with effective school research and the power of the professional learning community to create a uniquely hopeful approach that results in schools that are effective, efficient, and excellent. Hulley and Dier suggest a way that schools can cope with change and create a culture of hope in which students receive the support they need to achieve success.

This resource offers practical solutions to improve student achievement, attitudes, attendance and behaviour through a model that addresses how to:
- use the power of purpose to align staff efforts
- use critical evidence to establish meaningful goals and measure progress
- engage the professional learning community in improvement plans
- implement high yield strategies to enhance student achievement
- involve parents and community members in plans for school improvement
- create a culture of change
- follow the cycle of continuous improvement

The authors provide three terms that support the rationale for this book and the approach it suggests. The term "effective" means doing the right thing, the term "efficient" means doing the right thing in the right way and the term 'excellent' means doing the right thing the right way and better than most.

While many school improvement processes emphasize cognitive development, the authors claim that the emotional component must not be neglected. The book's title illustrates the importance of hope in planning school improvement strategies. Hope is the belief that all students can learn and school staffs have the capacity to structure changes that will ensure that this becomes a reality. Effective schools actively plan for continuous progress and adhere to the idea, learning for all-whatever it takes.

McEwan, E. (2005). *How to deal with parents who are angry, troubled, afraid, or just plain crazy.* **Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.**

While the title of this book is somewhat problematic, there is "tongue in cheek" intent in the use of the word "crazy." The author uses the term to refer to irrational behavior that is upsetting to others, whatever its cause. The book will provide help for administrators to work with parents who may have a particular problem with school-related issues.

It may also be a resource for creating a school environment that enhances general parent-teacher-school relations as it offers many specific suggestions that point to positive solutions. It provides ideas that will develop the skills and confidence to handle many difficult situations including how to:
- determine if your school's culture encourages parents or pushes them away
- build parent support in your school
- keep your school community relations positive
- diffuse emotionally charged parents
- facilitate book groups and staff development

Building relationships with parents toward the goal of helping all students grow intellectually, socially and academically is, according to McEwan, one of the most enriching parts of being an educator. She means no offense with the use of the word "crazy" as she uses the word to describe the heightened emotions that sometimes occur when parents try to access school processes. She provides insight into the reasons this may occur and provides strategies for acquiring the skills necessary to deal with difficult situations.

She also suggests ways to create structures and practices that avoid the issues that cause parents to be angry. The solution is to create a school climate that invites parents and members of the community to be partners in helping children grow and mature.

Neufeld, G. & Mate, C. (2004*). Hold on to your kids: why parents matter.* Toronto, Ontario: Alfred A. Knopf.

The authors suggest reasons why children and youth are turning to peers for direction: for a sense of right and wrong, for values, identity and codes of behaviour. Children seem less likely to take their cues from adults, less inclined to please those in charge, less afraid of getting into trouble, while parents are less confident, and have less impact on their children. Peer orientation undermines family cohesion, sabotages healthy development and fosters an aggressive and prematurely sexualized youth culture.

This book contains concepts, principles and practical advice that will help parents keep or regain their natural authority and will protect children from becoming detached from family values. The authors hope to empower parents to be for their children, the true source of contact, security and warmth.

Parenthood is a relationship, not a list of skills to be followed. To attain parenthood in the modern world, it is of primary importance to discover how and why things are not working in the parenting and education of children and youth. This awareness will prepare parents and educators for the challenge of creating a relationship with their children in which the caregiver adults are taking the lead. The aim is to re-forge a bond that doesn't rely on coercion, artificial sanctions, and contrived consequences to gain children's cooperation and respect. Relationships with children and youth must encourage and enable them to become self-motivated and self-regulated adults, conscious of their self-worth and considerate of the feelings, rights and human dignity of others.

The University of Alberta's Faculty of Education AISI Team. (2006). *Celebrating school improvement: Six lessons learned from Alberta's AISI projects.* **Edmonton Alberta: School Improvement Press.**

The authors wrote this book for two reasons: first to celebrate AISI as a profound school improvement initiative and second to share with teachers, some of the lessons learned from AISI.. Particular issues became obvious as school districts considered what projects to address through AISI. The results show that these projects have directly impacted the culture of schools in a variety of ways.

The authors devote one chapter to the issue of parent and community involvement. While parent and community involvement was underrepresented in AISI projects, the findings that were presented were significant. Of those projects that were successful, many used multiple 'out-of-the-box" strategies to achieve their goals. The authors conclude that schools need to be active in their attempts to help parents feel safe and comfortable in schools and should be willing to be creative in those attempts.

The authors consider what "good" parent involvement is. This occurs when children are helped to achieve success in their education. Engaging parents means bringing them to an awareness of what occurs in classrooms through including them:
- as assistants in the classroom
- in the development, implementation and presentation of technical and other learning projects
- in witnessing their own children's learning in events where students often teach parents what they have learned.

The authors present specific strategies that had positive outcomes in terms of student learning according to the participants in a number of AISI projects. The overriding key to parent involvement was communication.

APPENDIX E

Case Studies

One significant project of seventeen schools in a large urban school jurisdiction wanted to broaden the scope of what it meant to be a literate person in the 21st century and to be respectful of the diversity of its student population when determining what 'to be literate' meant. This involved the larger community and all of its supportive agencies who would be asked to work with the schools in achieving their AISI goals. The agencies included representatives from the arts community, from social agencies, and from academic experts who would all work with the schools and parents to understand the AISI goals and then provide the most appropriate educational opportunities to achieve these goals. A parent advisory group representing the schools worked with school staff in planning and evaluating the many opportunities and services that were introduced. This connected and supportive relationship meant that parents were clear about their role in advocating for their own children and others, that academic success and engagement rose, that attendance and lateness were no longer a challenge, that the larger community would see students in a very positive way and that teacher practice was changed.

A rural high school project that involved one hundred students in the school and twenty-five in an out-reach program used community partnerships to extend understandings of the trades and other careers and occupations. A range of options was introduced to the students and their parents. Additionally, girls were made aware of more non-conventional options that would be available to them and were assisted in the transitioning into these post-secondary career options. Parents were also provided with information and direction for career options and were made aware of scholarships available to students. Parents were asked to act as mentors during and after the students' school careers in order that they experience 'work' in a broad sense. Every student built an inventory of career possibilities learned from their interactions in the community, built solid one-on-one mentoring relationships with caring adults and were supported specifically by the local college, flexible timetables, and school board members. This meant that the students and their parents were better able to take advantage of current information, opportunities and work experiences.

Families of at-risk youth are often at risk themselves. These families have disengaged from involvement in the school, may see themselves as "bad parents," feel unsupported and have few resources upon which to draw. An AISI project, once again in a large urban centre that involved four large high schools, sought to provide meaningful and mutually beneficial connections to the school. This was achieved by assigning Family Liaison Workers to the families of the at-risk students and by doing so helped to re-build connections with the schools. The Family Liaison Workers gave parents tools and insights to better support their children. The Family Liaison Workers were also helpful in giving all partners the language to ask for what was needed in respectful and supportive ways, thus eliminating some of the adversarial relationships that had existed. The parents began to see that they were part of a team that was advocating on behalf of their children and that ultimately the team effort would benefit their children and contribute to their school success. The relationships in this project were open, included brainstorming together, provided a 'pause' in the day and gave time to thinking about what parents really wanted and needed. The contacts were positive, one-on-one, and personal and encouraged active listening. Feedback was gleaned from satisfaction surveys from parents and students, stories, questionnaires and the correlation between the students' perceptions and those of their parents.

More specifically, the project identified the following as important strategies to involve parents:

- All team members focused on engaging the family in on-going communication regarding the needs of the student and advocating with and for them.
- *The* unique role of the School Family Liaison Worker added a significant opportunity to engage families in the home. They counseled, supported, engaged the family and student in addressing relationships, social skills, coping strategies and behavior modification practices to meet the needs of the student. Parents felt supported through problem-solving, goal setting, proactive planning and crisis intervention.
- The Family Liaison Worker also supported parents and students in connecting with effective community partnerships, providing seamless service delivery and linkages for students moving out to services and then back into the school setting.
- School Liaison Partnerships in the four high schools helped to implement a **parent support group.** This meant that they worked collaboratively to create a six week evening program including parents from each of the high schools to develop coping skills, enhance family communication, build positive relationships with children and the school, and learn some problem solving skills. This was all done in a respectful and confidential setting. Cross school collaboration and partnerships evolved.

  Perspectives from the field…

  My mom loves the Family School Liaison Worker. I really like her too because she has helped my mom look at me differently. Instead of just seeing me as a loser, she now understands me better.

  I am going to pass all my courses this semester. That would never have happened without the help I got from the program.

  I learn better when I have one-on-one help and most teachers don't have time for that. It is really good for me to be able to come to this space and work quietly here.

  The project participants believe that their "in-reach" program as opposed to an "out-reach" program is contributing to improved family relationships, changed perspectives on parenting, improved perceptions of schools and increased capacity to be resilient in the face of life challenges.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD

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