Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

Character, School Climate and Student Leadership

Effective Practices

University of Calgary
Research Findings

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Character, School Climate and Student Leadership  
Provincial Research Review  

ALBERTA INITIATIVE FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (AISI)  

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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. The review provides data and findings that could influence future AISI developments. 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 Arlene Connell, Stephanie Davis, Dr. Lisa Panayotidis and Joanne Steinmann for its work conducting a specific research review of 25 AISI projects, with a focus on character development, school climate and student leadership.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context of AISI Projects

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 Home and School Councils’ Association, Alberta School Boards’ Association, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, Alberta Teachers’ Association, College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Education, Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge.

Background and Scope

The goal of AISI is to improve student learning and performance by supporting initiatives that address unique needs and circumstances within school authorities. AISI funding is targeted, which means it is provided to school authorities for specific local initiatives that focus on improving student learning. This funding is in addition to basic instruction funding. All provincially funded school authorities in Alberta participated in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of AISI, including 77 public school authorities (e.g., public, separate and Francophone districts, charter schools) and 231 private school authorities (e.g., 115 private schools, 116 ECS private operators). Over 800 AISI projects were developed and implemented during the first cycle (2000–2003) and approximately 460 projects were approved for the second cycle of AISI (2003–2006), which began September 2003.

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 established accountability measures and criteria to provide evidence that the initiative works and set the stage for continuous improvement. Cycle 2 of AISI consolidated emerging knowledge and synthesized what works. It built on the enthusiasm and commitment from Cycle 1 and expanded AISI’s sphere of influence to more Alberta teachers and students. During Cycle 2, there was greater focus on collecting the right data, in-depth analysis of promising practices and further dissemination of findings, all of which are fundamental to the future success of AISI.

AISI, currently in Cycle 3 (2006–2009) with about 400 approved projects, continues to build on the accomplishments of the first two cycles. Characterized by collaborative inquiry, it emphasizes innovation and research, extends what has been learned through in-depth analysis of project outcomes, enhances professional practice, focuses on professional development and expands knowledge sharing and dissemination.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to gather and synthesize findings from AISI projects that made successful use of character education, school climate and student leadership strategies and to identify effective and promising practices that school authorities can use to improve student learning in Kindergarten to Grade 12 environments.
Key Findings

- It is believed amongst schools that when teachers, parents, students and the larger community work together to provide the most efficacious and positive school experiences, overall student success is positively impacted. A study of meaningful student experiences would suggest that strength in character can occur by building a capacity to be resilient in the face of risk factors, by benefiting from the support of teachers and other committed adults and through a strong sense of belonging. Student leadership opportunities naturally evolve out of these experiences and the opportunity to lead is not relegated to the elite in the school but is encouraged and built amongst all students.

- Projects were enhanced when participants considered meaningful questions about their schools and communities and when they clearly identified what they were hoping to achieve in the name of character and climate.

- An important component of the successful projects was the development of student leaders instrumental in creating healthy, safe and inclusive school environments.

- Successful projects provided students with ongoing individual support and advocacy through mentorship.

- Safe and caring school environments fostered respectable and respectful relationships and programs for all students. Successful projects occurred within this context.

- Meaningful parental and community involvement contributed to the achievement of project goals.

- A difficulty rests with interpreting the term character as being achievable, measurable and comprehensible in instrumental ways. It is important and interesting to consider notions of achievement as related to this topic.

- Committing the necessary time, energy and deep thought required to establish an agreed upon common understanding of what constitutes character was essential in achieving the project goals.

- The development of character and a healthy school climate cannot simply be about compliance and the imposition of an adult’s view of what constitutes good behaviour. At its worst, character development can be construed as behaviour modification.

- When all students were invited to contribute to a healthy school environment, the challenges of elitism and favouritism were eliminated. By providing the best examples of what would contribute to a healthy school environment and through participatory opportunities, all students were able to contribute to the greater good.

- By understanding the terms related to this theme, teachers could see how they are pivotal in the strength of a school’s climate. Their responsibilities to individual students, to the program of studies, to their colleagues and to the community were central to this work.

- Making definitive correlations between character or school climate and student achievement was not always apparent in the findings.

- When projects encountered challenges, it was found to be more helpful to adjust and refine the project and keep its intent organic, rather than to abandon the project and start again.

- Explicit definitions of character, education, school climate and student leadership were critical to common development and understanding of the projects and their goals.
Implications and Considerations for the Future

- Given that there is importance and value placed on character development in schools, it is critical to understand the associated terminology and to grasp why this might be important. Consideration must be given to the term itself. Additionally, the following points are critical:
  - Where does the term character originate?
  - How might we arrive at some common and shared understandings?
  - How can all participants contribute to this understanding?
  - What counts as data?
  - How does the development of character, student leadership and a positive school climate contribute to the overall success and achievement of students? Can academic success be influenced positively?
  - What are the measures of character?
  - How can existing research be used in sound ways?
  - What research methodologies would make the project claims valid, viable and reliable?

- It is important, when taking up these profound ideas of character and school climate, that: the results do not contribute to elitism, compliance, marginalization, tokenism and superficiality.

- Developing character and a healthy school climate is a process best captured through narratives and questions, rather than through prescriptions and templates.

- The role of the university is to help provide appropriate connections to literature and resource people and to support the work through academic research and project design.

- The front end work is critical in that project goals are maintained despite challenges and setbacks. Sustaining the project through adjustments and refinements is more suitable than a complete abandonment of the project.

- Explicit definitions of character education, school climate and student leadership are critical to common development and understanding of the projects and their goals.

- How will this work be sustained in efficacious ways in the life of the school and in the life of each community member?

- What experience is desired for each and every member of the school community? How can value and importance be dedicated to this topic so that it does not become trivial, meaningless or contrived?
INTRODUCTION

AISI Themes

In 2007, each Alberta University undertook a study and analysis of AISI projects organized under common themes. The University of Alberta reviewed projects developed under the theme of differentiated instruction. The University of Calgary reviewed projects developed under the theme of character development, school climate and student leadership. The University of Lethbridge reviewed projects developed under the theme of high school completion.

Lead researchers found the following characteristics common to the reviewed projects:
- Regularly scheduled, job-embedded time for teacher collaboration was necessary.
- A common culture of action research and inquiry emerged from the work.
- Significant leadership support, at school and district levels, was critical to success.
- Empowerment and ongoing professional development for teachers helped ensure changes were sustained.

Study Background

Research reviews were conducted to provide information that would inform Alberta school jurisdictions 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.

University of Calgary Review

This particular document reviewed 25 Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects that were identified as having a positive impact on student learning, that demonstrated promising teaching practices and that sought school improvement through efforts to create positive school climates, meaningful student leadership opportunities and ways for students to build strong character.

Study Data

Three sources of data were analyzed for the review:
- annual reports from 25 successful projects in Cycle 2 (2003–2006)
- findings from a focus group of representatives from nine schools and districts
- findings from telephone interviews with schools and districts that did not participate in the focus group.

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 lent itself to a qualitative approach, thus findings are descriptive rather than predictive in nature. Findings provide insight into the wide range of opinions held by study participants, not the population at large, and, while these findings are helpful for setting general directions or goals, the specific details provided may not be applicable in all contexts or offer specific predictive value.
Project Scope

The projects represented the diversity in Alberta schools. Their scope ranged from very large urban schools to small rural schools and included schools for Aboriginal students, Hutterite schools and schools with religious orientations.

- number of schools in a single project ranged from one to 97 schools
- number of children intended to be impacted by the project ranged from 57 to 5000
- grades or divisions intended to be impacted by the project:
  - Grades 1–3: 0 projects
  - Grades K–6: 2 projects
  - Middle school/junior high: 2 projects
  - Secondary school: 11 projects
  - Grades K–12: 10 projects

Overview

The underlying philosophy in these 25 projects suggested that when teachers, parents, students and the larger community work together in an attempt to provide the most meaningful school experience for students, their overall school success was impacted.

The projects that seemed most successful were those that took into account the local school context or, at the very least, the jurisdictional context in planning their projects to support the students. Communication was central to their success. Where all interested and vested parties were included in discussions and decision making, greater achievements were seen.

The universities were identified as having made a significant contribution to the research process and data collection. In fact, the greatest successes were documented when this was the case. The perspective of the universities was extremely useful in determining the most appropriate methods to gather data and the best way to answer responses to surveys; the use of Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) alone did not give a true picture of what was working and what was not.

Students were mentored and supported in ways that built their sense of self, their successes and their increased capacity to remain resilient in the face of personal and school-related challenges. This was accomplished through mindful and planned professional development for teachers, through a number of differently defined opportunities for student leadership and through the inclusion of parent and community perspectives.

These findings were gleaned from a double-blind review of Cycle 2 annual reports from 25 AISI projects that focused on the development of strong student character, leadership and a healthy school climate. They suggested the complexity of working within this context or theme and the need for in-depth study of what would contribute to these desired attributes. Agreement about the meaning of the terms was central to success.
Emerging Themes

Researchers conducted their own review process, independent of each other, to determine themes, key findings and practices that led to project success. Challenges and considerations for the future were also identified. The following two themes emerged from the work, on the basis of extensive reading of project reports and through discussions. An elaboration of these themes will highlight the key findings, strategies and indicators of success.

Theme One

The school or jurisdictional context is central to understanding how character development, a healthy school climate and opportunities for student leadership contribute to overall school success.

Key Findings:

- Projects were enhanced when participants considered meaningful questions about their schools and communities and when they clearly identified what they hoped to achieve in the name of character and climate. As reported by the focus group, understanding human behaviour, in the context of the school and its participant responses, was critical to the success of the projects. For example, teachers reported their increased capacity to understand the theories of resiliency and how these theories applied to their day-to-day work in supporting students. Their work included connecting students to meaningful mentoring relationships and partnerships with members of the both the school community and the external community.

- Notable projects were marked by their diverse and rich language and open-ended inquiry questions. Sophisticated references were made to interdisciplinary planning and delivery. Such projects also indicated some direct or indirect connection to one of the universities and the research undertaken therein. These projects showed a compelling and thoughtful understanding of the school and community context and sought to create meaningful change for the better. The projects were seen as highly innovative. For example, an action research project focused on a model of professional development in collaboration with eight schools, district office administrators and researchers at the university to see the impact of planned, purposeful professional development for teachers on the overall impact of school climate, strong character and student involvement in the work of the school.

In their own words...

Project activities and research observations were structured to explore a comprehensive answer to the following question, In what ways, and to what extent, does increased emphasis on collaborative, inquiry-based teacher professional development contribute to improvements in student learning?

The emphases on reflection, collaboration and ongoing research-based professional development that were specifically job embedded led to success in the projects. This was further enhanced where site-based leadership opportunities were available.

The focus on improvements in teaching practice to enhance student learning challenged teachers to consider what it might mean to work in teams alongside their students. This disposition had wide reaching impacts on the students’ feelings of belonging and success.

These innovations contributed to feelings of safety and security in the school. Students could see their roles in the school as significant. They could see that they could play a part in not
only their own school success but perhaps that of others. Their leadership involved effective communication, team building and planning for school and service projects. The work was meaningful and contributed to worthy changes.

*In their own words…*

It has been said many times that AISI has given a gift of time—time to rejuvenate, reflect, modify and learn.

A worthy project shared the example of a music program that was used to create a greater opportunity for the development and education of the child as a whole. The project was linked to the school goal of improving the quality of school learning and provided yet another way for students to experience a rich, supportive and fulsome education. The strategies, evaluation methods and outcomes were succinctly and articulately stated, with an additional bonus of sharing the connections with the University of Alberta as it studied the impact of band music on the students and the school. A correlation was drawn between the advantages of musical experiences for students and the overall well-being and success of the student population.

A challenge rests with interpreting the term character as being achievable, measurable and comprehensible in instrumental ways. It is important and interesting to consider what constitutes achievement in this context.

**Theme Two**

Successful projects are dependent upon the degree of meaningful involvement by students, teachers, parents and the community.

Understanding the need to be resilient in the face of challenges, developing leadership capacity to make a difference in the world and participating in service learning are critical to success. A sense of agency is built from these opportunities.

**Key Findings:**

- Safe and caring school environments fostered respectable and respectful relationships and programs for all students.

- Broad, multiple and contextual assessment procedures and the use of student portfolios and journals helped students make sense of school and community experiences.

  Individual process meetings were a method of connecting meaningfully with students who are at risk. More attention was paid to assessment for learning than to assessment of learning.

- An important component of successful projects was the development of student leaders who were instrumental in creating healthy, safe and inclusive school environments.

- Student involvement in school decisions and curriculum planning seemed to positively transform or alter the student’s experience in school. One powerful example of this transformed experience was in the project undertaken with a school librarian. “When four boys were allowed to participate in the book buying process, the students’ circulation rates were dramatically increased—on average by 44%— which resulted in significant improvement in standardized reading assessment.” Another example of meaningful student leadership was
in the formation of a youth council that now works with the mayor and councilors in a small city.

- Meaningful parental and community involvement contributed to the successful achievement of project goals. Parental involvement provided the type of motivation, encouragement and positive reinforcement that leads students towards a more positive sense of self. Communication to and from parents became central to success.

  In their own words…
  Schools believed that when parents are involved and the communication pathways are open, they experience better success with the students…more resourceful parents, over time, will lead to more resourceful, resilient, responsible children, youth and citizens of the future.

Other important partnerships with related agencies made strong links between the strategies used collectively and the eventual outcomes experienced. Diversity, cultural awareness and respect developed from these relationships and partnerships and led to much more understanding and sensitivity toward all realities and perspectives. These partnerships evolved over time, growing in both intensity and success.

In one project, Native Elders were asked to speak to students and parents. They had important and relevant perspectives to share and meaningful connections to make with the student population. They indicated they had never been in the school for these purposes, that they were pleased to be invited into the schools and that they hoped this partnership would continue. These connections provided a stark reminder to many First Nations people of their former experiences with residential schools. The inclusion of many perspectives was important in creating the respectful and responsible environment sought by schools.

  In their own words…
  With parents and community agencies, we are not only building bridges, but we are also opening spaces to work together.

- Successful projects provided students with ongoing individual support and advocacy through mentoring relationships with each other, with teachers and with community members. Student voices were included in the decision making and their contributions were considered useful and meaningful. There was no sense of student involvement being trivial. Particular note was made of the impact on those seemingly invisible students who do not garner much attention or support in the context of school and the larger community. The work was strength oriented. It created a degree of optimism and faith that successes were to be expected.

  In their own words…
  I’ve had a chance to let my mind run to possibilities…a place to integrate some foundational values with the project and to evolve to a perspective of ‘how’ and ‘why’ we work, not just ‘what’ we work at (the curriculum.)

Although schools realized some setbacks in their implementation of project work, the projects seemed to invite and allow school staff to think deeply and meaningfully about the needs of students and the school community. Where the focus was on improvement in teaching and intense personal connections with teachers to enhance student experiences, positive results occurred. Teacher care and support of students, over long periods of time and organized in a systematic and thoughtful way, paid large dividends to students. Significant achievement results have been documented.
In their own words…
Daily, intentional personal contact with and genuine interest in these students made them feel that the school cares about them as well as their education so that they are more motivated to participate in the learning process.

On-site mentorship frameworks that supported new teachers and administrators unfamiliar with AISI gave the kind of support that would inspire teachers to take on leadership roles in an effort to help schools and jurisdictions to achieve their AISI goals. This provided an important lineage for AISI on the whole. Students were often invited to participate to achieve these ends. To more powerfully engage students and community, the work in the projects was connected to larger jurisdictional goals and vision statements. The work was well integrated into the larger context.

Mentoring relationships with outside agencies seemed to provide students with yet another advocacy group and led to enhanced opportunities from a bigger perspective on how they might handle some of their challenges and questions. The Calgary Health Region, for example, provided a link to some informed perspectives on the importance of general good health and well-being as being critical to overall school success.

In their own words…
Students involved in the AISI program arrived with low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness and no idea of how to turn their lives around. The mentorship aspect of the program enabled the students to experience small successes that, in turn, gave them the belief in their own ability to influence their future...positive feedback improved their sense of self and encouraged them to take an active, rather than passive, role in their own school success. Self-advocacy was a tremendous step forward for many of these students.

Key Strategies

• Reflection and ongoing research-centered professional development, as referenced in 23 of the 25 projects, included job embedded experiences, readings, ongoing and sustained collaborative work, conferences, the perception that all students have gifts, peer teaching and coaching. The focus group reported that involving all staff in the considerations and activities for professional development made the work more intentional, more likely to succeed and had the end result of building a stronger, more connected community.

Parental involvement, as referenced in 20 of the 25 projects, included:
• positive reinforcement and guidance for students
• active partnerships more easily communicated to the larger community
• positive relationships with schools and the community
• clear and meaningful communication
• parents as leaders
• focus groups and conferences as forms of communication
• support for students
• advisory councils.
Community connections, as referenced in 19 of the 25 projects, included:

- Elder visits and speakers
- partnerships with community agencies
- student volunteers in the community
- external performances and productions
- storytelling
- public education about the roles and gifts students have to offer
- guest speakers
- community projects
- links to community resources
- service projects.

Mentoring, as referenced in nine of the 25 projects, included:

- formal mentorship for students at risk
- informed counselling and support for students
- teachers as mentors
- asset building for students through mentoring projects
- teachers mentoring each other, students mentoring each other, students mentoring younger students
- students studying resiliency theory and research
- community mentoring.

Leadership opportunities for students, as referenced in nine of the 25 projects, included:

- student involvement and voice in school decision making and curriculum planning
- leadership seminars, camps, courses and conferences for students
- leadership development of students
- committed, informed and passionate teachers.

**Project Management**

Jurisdictions and schools developed projects to include a number of steps to ensure effective implementation. In this review, the following were identified as important:

- clarity of terms, agreement on the meanings
- parental and community involvement
- student involvement in key school decisions
- jurisdictional and school visions that guide the work
- character development and leadership as part of the larger work of the school and community
- school-based administrative involvement
- necessary leadership in project development, research design and data collection.
Challenges

• Committing the necessary time, energy and deep thought required to establish an agreed upon common understanding of what constitutes character might not always be recognized as essential to achieving the project goals. As an example, celebrations of success that focused on prizes for students, proper behavior and/or good attendance amounts to a form of bribery and may have the capacity to forge unequal relations amongst students; they will surely mitigate against a sense of belonging, community and self-efficacy. The above mentioned behaviors are not what the research would describe as the characteristics of a strong character, a healthy school climate or student leadership. The development of character and a healthy school climate simply cannot be about compliance and the imposition of an adult’s view of what constitutes good behavior. At its worst, character development can be construed as behavior modification.

• In developing and emphasizing character education in schools, it is important to attempt to develop equal relations amongst students, rather than possibly encouraging unequal relations. Some attempts can create a sense of elitism. Is the development of character built through the completion of jobs around the school? Questions arise about the link between the theme of the projects and what students are asked to contribute in the way of student leadership and school climate. For example; does a school project, such as building a green space, involve hosts of students and contribute to their overall sense of belonging and self-efficacy? Who builds this space? Does everyone contribute? Whose agenda is being addressed?

Notions of student leadership are varied and, in many instances, may have more to do with modifying and controlling students, within acceptable parameters, than with what it means to lead in powerful and meaningful ways. There were some suggestions that teachers would identify potential student leaders and students who could take on leadership roles, all of which implies a kind of elitism and competition that is not in the true spirit of leadership development. It also implies that this kind of development is only available for certain students, rather than encouraging all students to contribute in meaningful and fulsome ways to the greater good and to interpret leadership in ways that go well beyond the notion of completing jobs around the school!

• School-based challenges cannot be addressed through pre-formulated, existing programs that have been built in a different context and where the understanding of the terminology may be quite different. For instance, linking violence prevention and character education as a way of encouraging socially responsible and respectful behavior may not necessarily be bonded together to forge some necessity for a project. It may not take into consideration the multitude of social and cultural issues outside of school spaces that contribute to school violence. Professional consultants or speakers hired to facilitate the implementation of existing programs may not be able to address the needs, contexts or understandings of a particular school or jurisdiction. Programs are not universally useful or beneficial to individual contexts in schools or jurisdictions.

Making definitive correlations between character or school climate and student achievement is not always apparent in the findings and the correlation cannot always be substantiated. In some instances, there was a heavy reliance on cognitive and psychological models as indicators of the development of character and leadership. Measuring the success of the projects in technical, rational ways and making fixed and undeniable claims is suspect. A critical element would be the discussion of the ways in which a multitude of contextual
variables may affect, positively or negatively, the indicators chosen as measures of success. Each school or jurisdictional context, in all of its uniqueness, would mitigate against any kind of standardized measures.

Implications and Considerations for the Future

- Given that there is importance and value placed on character development in schools, it is critical to understand the associated terminology and to grasp why this might be important. Consideration must be given to the term itself. Additionally, the following points are critical:
  - Where does the term character originate?
  - How might we arrive at some common and shared understandings?
  - How can all participants contribute to this understanding?
  - What counts as data?
  - How does the development of character, student leadership and a positive school climate contribute to the overall success and achievement of students? Can academic success be influenced positively?
  - What are the measures of character?
  - How can existing research be used in sound ways?
  - What research methodologies would make the project claims valid, viable and reliable?

- It is important, when taking up these profound ideas of character and school climate, that: the results do not contribute to elitism, compliance, marginalization, tokenism and superficiality.

- Developing character and a healthy school climate is a process best captured through narratives and questions, rather than through prescriptions and templates.

- The role of the university is to help provide appropriate connections to literature and resource people and to support the work through academic research and project design.

- The front end work is critical in that project goals are maintained despite challenges and setbacks. Sustaining the project through adjustments and refinements is more suitable than a complete abandonment of the project.

- Explicit definitions of character education, school climate and student leadership are critical to common development and understanding of the projects and their goals.

- How will this work be sustained in efficacious ways in the life of the school and in the life of each community member?

- What experience is desired for each and every member of the school community? How can value and importance be dedicated to this topic so that it does not become trivial, meaningless or contrived?
FOCUS GROUP—PERSPECTIVES FROM PARTICIPANTS

The focus group was asked to summarize its perspectives on the second cycle of AISI by responding, in a number of different groupings, as referenced in the appendix. Responses to the questions and discussions included these key points:

- Grassroots development in the projects contributes to a legacy, to sustainability and to the development of leadership capacity in the project participants.
- Site-based knowledge is key to innovation and change.
- The work requires much more visibility and public involvement. The successes are so profound that they require much more celebration. Stories from the students about what contributes to their school success are vital.
- Communication experts could contribute to the public presentations. Celebrations of learning promote and extend the work. Students reinforce and extend their understandings by sharing with others.
- Improved understanding of what constitutes research, what could be used as viable measures beyond the Provincial Achievement Tests and what is justifiable evidence of success require greater understanding on the part of all participants. In some instances, the voices of students and teachers are lost in the reporting.
- Who writes the reports and who is ultimately accountable to the projects is important; some reports do not indicate a close connection to the implementation and development process. The reports may not capture the magnitude of the work nor bring the work to life for the readers. Focus group participants, in this instance, provided some dynamic and enlivening perspectives on the projects.
- The scope of the projects may be critical. In some cases, the projects are so large that the achievement of the project goals and the coordinated efforts of project participants might be difficult to measure, to document and to see in individual schools.
- The universities are a very important and reliable resource in the development and evolution of the projects.
- Alberta Education might feature case studies on the Web site as a means to bring the work closer to the schools and to provide powerful images of what works.
- The principal, as the instructional leader, remains one of the most vital participants in AISI and plays a large part in the success of the projects.
- Optimism for and about all students, most particularly the invisible, is foundational in this work. Staff perspectives are seen to change with the shift in emphasis.
- Envelop funding implies no competition and inspires exploration, risk taking, innovation and study. The funding cannot be used for other purposes.
- Emerging societal issues require different and new understandings of the role of schools. We cannot rely on old practices. The changes require a cultural shift to make the work in schools meaningful.
- There is now a critical mass of influential people who will contribute to the sustainability of best practices and who will influence the culture of schools.
- We ultimately need to reinterpret our understanding of school success. What does achievement mean?

_In their own Words..._

“The students on the margins are the ones who need to be drawn in and that is what constitutes a ‘positive school climate.’ Then, these students are perceived differently.”
SUMMARY

Findings in this report suggest that progress is being made toward teacher and administrator professional development that is collaborative, job embedded and intentionally focused on changes that encourage strong character, leadership and healthy school experiences amongst students and lead directly to improvements in student learning.

The consistency of the themes and issues represented were significant in written AISI project annual reports, written reports and findings from the focus group and telephone interviews as well as between report findings and professional development literature.

This consistency is encouraging, not only in that it assures us of the validity and integrity of these findings, but also in that it suggests there are some common success strategies that can, with sustained effort and growing wisdom, shape schools into positive teaching and learning environments for all.

Also encouraging is the sense of progress and growth from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 of AISI. With six years of reporting now available, we can begin to distinguish some longer term trends in school improvement efforts and note that these trends are, overall, very positive. This report has identified an expanding awareness and knowledge of the benefits of teacher collaboration as well as a sense of increasingly sophisticated project management and the evolution of teacher research skills.

Finally, improved student learning, as identified by both qualitative and quantitative measures, suggests that we are succeeding in focusing improvement efforts on practices and policies that directly and intentionally impact student learning. Review in the areas of character education, improved assessment practices, mathematics, literacy, differentiated instruction and community building form the content of teachers’ collaborative work; the evidence points to teacher and student commitment to and engagement with learning.

As we pause to summarize and celebrate the successes of AISI work to date, we also take time to reflect on what we’ve learned and the challenges we face. The findings of this report are not all positive, but the review process and analysis has provided very positive learning experiences for all who participated.

In their own Words...

It was a privilege and an honor to work in AISI.

In Cycle 3, we anticipate:

- continued efforts to educate stakeholders about the value of collaborative teacher professional development and to see growth in collaboration skills as teachers with increasingly diverse perspectives are incorporated into learning communities
- ongoing challenges and creative solutions to find sufficient time to coordinate and prioritize amongst multiple collaborative initiatives in schools and districts
- the need for strong site-based leadership to build and sustain professional learning and to continue the positive trend toward strategic, coordinated professional development planning at site and district levels
- efforts to improve and co create qualitative and quantitative measures that link improvements in professional development with improvements in student learning
• increased parent awareness of and engagement in AISI projects, through improved communication between schools and parents
• the need for teachers to have resources and support to engage in sustained, collaborative learning to improve their pedagogy.

*In Cycle 3, there appear to be 23 projects oriented towards the theme reviewed in this document.
APPENDIX A

Research Methodology

The purpose of this report was to gather and synthesize findings from a review of projects that experienced success by focusing on character development, school climate and student leadership. The audience for this report includes key decision makers, teachers interested in replicating successful practices and others interested in school improvement initiatives.

Three sources of data were analyzed for this report:
- annual reports from 25 successful projects from Cycle 2 (2003–2006)
- findings from a focus group of representatives from nine schools and districts drawn from the above noted sample
- findings from telephone interviews with schools or districts that did not attend the focus group.

Research Review Procedure

1. Two reviewers conducted a double blind review of AISI project annual reports from 25 selected projects. The reports were reviewed to:
   a. identify common findings, themes and promising practices
   b. construct preliminary questions for phone interviews and the focus group
   c. develop a preliminary list of potential candidates for the focus group.
2. Reviewers participated in a focus group with nine representatives of school districts and charter schools from the 25 selected projects. Focus group data included:
   a. chart paper notes, taken during discussions
   b. handouts distributed to participants for individual completion of questions
   c. reviewers’ observations and synthesis, drawn from independent notes taken during and after focus group sessions.
3. Reviewers conducted a series of telephone interviews, each approximately an hour in length, with additional projects that were not represented at the focus group. The handouts used at the focus group were used to structure the telephone interviews.
4. Findings were further triangulated by review of practitioner and scholarly literature related to professional learning communities and other models of collaborative professional development.

Project Selection Criteria

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

- AISI Cycle 2 (2003–2006) projects related to character education, behavior or school climate that had statistically significant effect size, e.g., small, medium, large, on any of the following measures:
  - student learning; e.g., PAT/Dip, standardized tests, locally developed measures
  - student behavior, satisfaction or attitude
  - parent satisfaction.
Effect Size Calculation

An effect size of 1.0 indicates an increase of one standard deviation, typically associated with advancing children’s achievement by one year, improving the rate of learning by 50% or a correlation between some variable and achievement of approximately 0.50 (Hattie 1992, pp. 5–6.).

All data on student learning, both baseline and results, were converted to a common scale, e.g., standard score, that permits comparison of improvement, regardless of the type of measure school authorities used. An effect size expresses the increase or decrease in standard deviation units.

For each measure, the baseline and annual results were converted to standardized (z) scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The effect size for each measure was determined by the difference between the z scores for the baseline and the actual annual results and then averaged over the measures for each project and weighted by the number of students involved in each measure. These average effect sizes were grouped into four categories: no effect\(^1\) (less than zero or not significant), minimal (.01 to less than less than 0.2), small (0.2 to 0.3), medium (0.4 to 0.7) and large (0.8 or higher).

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\(^1\) No effect includes all positive effect sizes that are not statistically significant.
APPENDIX B

Focus Group Meeting, October 30th, 2007
University of Calgary, Faculty of Education

Questions for consideration, discussion and data gathering:

1. What were the key goals and expected outcomes in your project?
2. What was the development process for your project?
3. What were the successes?
4. Why were they successful?
5. What were some of the key strategies that led to success?
6. What research proved most useful?
7. How did you arrive at a definition of terms?
8. What measures provided the most significant indication of success?
9. How was the management of the project organized? What was the impact on the AISI coordinator? How did this person contribute to teacher growth?
10. How were the parents involved?
11. How was the community involved?
12. What was the nature of the professional development in the project? Which elements seemed to have the greatest impact on teachers? How did this translate into changed practice?
13. What administrative support at the school or district level had the most impact on the success of the project?
14. What were some of the major successes in the project?
15. How were student leadership, ownership and authenticity developed?
16. What presented challenges to the project?
17. What will sustain the impact of this project?
Proposed Agenda for Focus Group Discussions
October 30th, 2007
University of Calgary
Room 370A, Doucette Library

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 response 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 following:
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?

5. What research proved most useful?

6. How did you arrive at a common understanding of the terms character, school climate and student leadership?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
First Small Group Discussion
October 30th, 2007

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

2. What presented challenges in the project?

3. How were student leadership, ownership and authenticity developed?

4. What were some of the challenges associated with student leadership development?

5. What measure 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
October 30th, 2007

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
October 30th, 2007

1. What is sustainable?

2. What advice could be offered?

3. What are the next steps?

4. What are the implications for the third cycle of AISI?

5. What other questions should be considered?
APPENDIX C

Project Summaries

The 25 projects reviewed in this report spanned the province, were intended to impact students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, used a number of measures as indicators of success and recognized that factors of school climate, student leadership and character development could directly impact the success students were experiencing. Many of the measures documented observable changes in behaviour, attendance, academic responsibility and participation in the life of the school. Many emphasized the importance of building resiliency and capacity in the face of risk factors and challenges. Those projects that invited student participation and voice in the decisions made about the school and the larger community seemed to experience the greatest success.
APPENDIX D

Annotated Bibliography


The author argues that the most difficult tests for leaders are those that challenge their character rather than their skill. Leaders grow and mature by asking difficult questions about themselves. Badaracco invites readers to learn about leadership and themselves by examining works of fiction as case studies.

Reading stories in which classic characters struggle with questions of worrying, regretting, reflecting, succeeding and failing helps deepen leaders' self-knowledge, enabling them to be more effective. Serious literature allows the reader to get inside the character in ways that are not possible by observing behavior or asking questions of leaders in the real world.

Badaracco examines eight universal leadership challenges through classic stories:

- Do I have a good dream?
- How flexible is my moral code?
- Do I have unsettling role models?
- Do I really care?
- Am I ready to take responsibility?
- Can I resist the flow of success?
- How well do I combine principles and pragmatism?
- What is sound reflection?

Each of these is a question of character and can serve as a guide for self-assessment. The author argues that success in leadership is not a factor of skill, technique, position, credentials or experience. Rather, it is a function of self-knowledge, of having clarity about one’s self. He uses themes that emerge from the selected stories to pose questions the readers may use to examine their own core beliefs and the choices that emerge for them.

The questions in this book offer a valuable way of assessing the character of other people. If leaders have thought through questions as to aspirations, moral codes, taking responsibility, balancing principles and pragmatism, and the ability to reflect before taking action on hard issues, they will be better able assess these qualities in others.


Moral intelligence is the capacity to understand the difference between right and wrong and having a strong ethical conviction to act in right and honorable ways. Borba defines character, i.e., moral intelligence, in terms of seven core virtues: empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. In this book, she shows why each of these virtues is a vitally important human quality, how to assess its development in a child and how to nurture its growth. She believes that children need moral strength to keep their ethical bearings. Moral intelligence is learned and must be consciously modelled and nurtured for children by the significant adults in their lives.
This book provides a guide for parents and teachers to teach these critical principles to children. Each chapter offers research-based practical strategies to enhance moral intelligence. These include a self-test, practical ways to enhance the virtue, a real story that illustrates the virtue, discussion questions and further resources to enhance the virtue.

In the chapter on empathy, for example, there are three steps to building the virtue: 1. Foster awareness and an emotional vocabulary, 2. Enhance sensitivity for the feelings of others and 3. Develop empathy for another’s point of view. In each case, Borba uses stories to illustrate the virtue and the implications of its absence and includes activities that can be used to help a child explore and practice this virtue. For example, role-playing is an effective way for children to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others. Activities, such as switch roles to the other side, walk in my shoes and imagine how the person feels, help children see beyond themselves.

This book does not present a prescriptive list of dos and don’ts. Rather, it contains a wealth of practical insights, workable strategies, inspiring stories and supportive, helpful resources.


Cushman collected notes from interviews and writings that involve 40 high school students who reflected the face and voice of diverse populations in New York, Providence and San Francisco. In spite of this diversity in ethnicity, academic ability and living situations, students reported consistent themes about how they experience high school and what they need as learners. They want to be known and understood, but they also want to maintain boundaries. They crave respect from adults and they want help from teachers without it shaming them. They want power to shape their own futures. They show appreciation for teachers who help them learn but were open to offering advice to the teachers. They respond with real respect when teachers show that they believe in them. The most important issue for most was the strength of the relationships, not the academics, as one might expect.

Cushman presents the voices of these students, often blunt and irreverent, in an unedited version and chooses not to exclude even suggestions that are perhaps impractical. The point of her work is to encourage teachers to develop the habit of listening to what students have to say, whether they speak in words or actions. This book is about teachers taking on the role of elder, coach, leader and friend as well as instructor. It’s about teachers being inspired by the voices of the students in this study to talk to their own students. It inspires teachers to talk to their students in similar ways and to use the voices of students to make educative decisions.


Hulley and Dier offer a way for schools to deal with change and to create a culture of hope where 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.


Thomas Lickona believes that becoming a person of character means growing in terms of ethical and intellectual potential. Virtues, such as empathy, compassion, sacrifice, loyalty and forgiveness, constitute our capacity to love while virtues, such as effort, initiative, diligence, self-discipline and perseverance, constitute our capacity to work and to become competent at the tasks of life.

He also believes that academic learning will improve with the implementation of a character education program, if the environment for teaching and learning improves the quality of relationships between students and teachers and if the program includes a strong academic program that teaches students the skills and habits of working hard and making the most of their time in school.

Lickona presents evidence that character education initiatives have improved student learning. The evidence, in the form of data from individual schools where programs were started to address issues of low student achievement and frequent discipline problems, show that test scores rose and discipline problems declined as a result of the program. He also presents evidence from controlled research studies that have found that students in a school implementing a quality character education program outperformed students in a comparable school that did not have such a program.

According to Lickona, intellectual development and moral development are the two goals of character education. He presents practical strategies through which schools can achieve both these aims.


The authors examine social change through a systems and relationships lens. The way to understand any great social project, globally or locally, is to try to understand complex relationships among the essential elements. This book uses the experiences of a wide range of people and organizations to lay out a new way of thinking about making change in communities,
in business and in the world. The book’s core message is a powerful statement of hope and possibility.

Great social change is not exclusively brought about by larger than life heroes. Rather, it is the province of ordinary people who want to make a difference and then make a deliberate commitment to act and bring about change. Complexity science is about “unpredictable emergence without regard for (indeed, even in spite of) human intentions” (pp 21). The authors pose the question, To what extent and in what ways can we be deliberate and be intentional about those things that seem to emerge without our control, without our intention? Getting to Maybe is about acting intentionally in a complex world by being in and of that world. It is an examination of the stories of individuals or groups who bring about significant change that starts with a simple intention to do something, where people are prepared to take a risk to see the door and to step through, even with no guarantee of success.
APPENDIX E

A Case Study

The following is a description of one Cycle 2 AISI project. The information was gleaned from data included in the project annual report submitted to the School Improvement Branch, Alberta Education in the fall of 2006 and from discussions with the project coordinators.

Project Description

The project was built upon the following beliefs:

Resilient students demonstrate problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose and a sense of future. Schools that have a holistic philosophy that integrates the key influences on a student can better foster growth and resiliency in the students. This, in turn, improves student learning and achievement.

To build resiliency and growth in students, the following necessary components of the project were identified:

- Resiliency workshops and coaching – This component was designed to address the professional development of staff to enable understanding of the resiliency framework.
- School program development – This component was developed collaboratively with schools to address the specific needs of the learning community, as identified by various constituent groups. The programs became part of the culture of the school and are owned by the particular learning community to ensure sustainability.
- Mentorship program – This special projects course was developed for grades 10, 11 and 12 students to teach the theory and implementation of resiliency theory and practice, and to build student resiliency amongst those registered in the course. The student mentors identified elementary school students they could support and also identified service learning opportunities in the community.
- Community and family support program – This project element connects school, family and community. Community-based support is provided to children, families and school staff.
- Linkages to other AISI projects and initiatives – A number of proposed projects requested collaborative support to develop a resiliency perspective.

Project improvement goals included:

- Increase student resiliency through mentorship – Student mentors and mentees will develop more positive attitudes and perceptions towards school and learning.
- Increase the number of programs and courses, based on resiliency, capacity building and community involvement, that are offered to junior and senior high school students.
- Increase understanding of the resiliency theory across the jurisdiction by involving schools and staff in professional development that develops and implements practices, based upon the resiliency template that promotes student learning and capacity.
- Increase connections and strategic relationships among community agencies, businesses and organizations to promote student learning, capacity and resiliency.
- Increase the protective factors for children and families that contribute to student capacities and learning.
Key strategies in project implementation include:

- Provide resiliency workshops and coaching for staff.
- Promote resiliency programs developed in collaboration with school staff.
- Develop and implement a mentorship course for high school students that will help them to learn the basics of resiliency theory and how to apply them in a mentor/mentee relationship.
- Package the course in a form that can be implemented by other schools.
- Develop and implement volunteer programs with the mentors/mentees.
- Develop a service model that promotes resiliency and capacity building in students, families and the community and that fosters the idea that the school and its students are an integral part of the community.
- Promote the resiliency perspective provincially.

Effective practices included:

- All aspects of the project were based on a philosophy of strength and positive youth development.
- Students were assessed, based on their input and reflections of how they were succeeding in their mentoring/mentee relationships and how they were making an impact in the community. Seventy percent of assessment was based on student input. The assessment model was based on strengths.
- Communication about the project occurred on multiple levels and in many ways. Active participation on the part of students and staff gave voice and evidence of success to the project. Increased public participation seemed to give strength to the students and how they saw themselves. Many inspiring and profound perspectives were documented through film.
- Professional development was ongoing and sustained and gained momentum with the full implementation of the project. Key influencers, including directors, principals and strategic staff members, were championed because of their belief in the work and their will and the means to spread the word and to help make the vision a reality. The work became widespread and influential across a large school district and grew substantially from the work in three schools. An increased depth in relationships and partnerships to address the needs of students, families and the community permeated the project.

In summary, the elements of the project that seemed to be most significant were the mentoring relationships established between and amongst students and their teachers. The study of resiliency theory made a significant difference in how students saw their lives and their capacity to make choices and impact their world and the world of others. The study of resiliency theory also gave teachers the capacity to see the gifts in their work and to more efficaciously face some of the challenges and difficulties associated with teaching. Greater depth in the relationships and partnerships amongst children, families and communities became a reality.

The capacity of the schools to expand the resiliency course availability became somewhat of a challenge; however, it was anticipated that a community organization would begin to assume some of the responsibility. The increasing request for professional development support from the resiliency team had some implications for the development of a larger team.

What became most striking in the overall implementation and evolution of the project was the voices of students sharing how they had grown, changed, developed and flourished. Students were very keen to share how they felt they had been positively influenced because of the project and how they hoped to become influential and impactful in future endeavors. Sustainability seemed to be assured.
REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


