

Critical Friend ships:

MOVING FROM STRUGGLE TO SUCCESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

THE MANITOBA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT Program Inc. (MSIP) is a Canadian school improvement program which began in Manitoba in 1991 with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The results of a major program evaluation, to be released in Winnipeg on October 20, 1998, will show that MSIP worked. Most schools' improvement initiatives made progress — in some cases, considerable progress.

As key MSIP staff, we have worked closely with some 30 high schools on improving education for their students. Our role in the process was to serve as critical friends — to support teachers in the risks they were taking to do things differently. We were not representatives of government or districts. The Foundation was a critical friend to us, just as we were to the schools.

We would describe our role of critical friend as: giving genuine, long-term support to schools struggling to change; helping teachers stay aware of professional literature and best practice; offering professional and technical skills when schools needed them; asking difficult questions, such as “How will you know you’ve been successful?”; empathizing at moments of discour-

agement; prodding at moments of inertia; and celebrating at times of success.

Together with the schools, we developed a simple set of guidelines for schools to keep in mind as they planned their work. The three complementary imperatives were:

- the need to focus on student learning, curriculum and instruction;
- the need to reach out to mobilize the involvement of teachers, students, parents and community;
- the need to look in at their own context to develop skills necessary to build their capacity for change.

It is no simple matter to summarize the strategies we found most effective. As a supplement to the formal evaluation of MSIP, we suggest the following points of leverage for school improvement.

1 Mobilizing the Energy Within

It is critical that key individuals in the school commit intellectually and emotionally to improving learning and teaching conditions. Certain qualities differentiated schools that exhibited deep whole-school change from those

that tinkered around the edges. In every case, success grew from the commitment of a group of dedicated teachers. These teachers cared deeply about their students, but it was not simply as sentimental affection for young people. It was manifested as consistent, concerned, and relentless attention to students and their learning.

2 Broadening the Base of Leadership and Participation

In successful MSIP schools, many individuals came together to share a sense of responsibility for making things happen. School-based coordinators, acting as the “keepers of the dream” (as one teacher put it) and as troubleshooters, encouraged others and created opportunities for their active participation. Administrators were important as advocates and facilitators, but they alone were not sufficient to make change happen.

Successful schools encouraged students to take leadership roles. Students ran professional development events for staff, hosted parent evenings on assessment practices, held school-wide workshops on teaching and learning, and led community forums.

3 Inquiry-Mindedness: A New Way of Working

In the early stages, MSIP's evaluation requirement was a tolerated burden for most schools. They had neither the interest nor the skills to evaluate their own progress. After several years of providing on-site support, we offered workshops where teachers, coordinators, and administrators came together to learn how to collect, analyze, and interpret data. No longer were they in awe of evaluation or data. Indeed, they actively searched for ways to describe the complexity of their work, and they used systematic inquiry procedures to stand back and examine their schools. Schools began to invite parents, students,

and community members to examine their data with them, working collaboratively to improve their methods and results.

Successful schools regarded evaluation as an invaluable tool for charting their journeys and deciding how to allocate scarce resources. The more confident schools became in their success, the more commitment they developed to external accountability.

Conclusion

Schools need to coalesce around student achievement and student engagement in ways that honour their own distinctness. In our experience, the most successful schools were committed intellectually and emotionally. They believed that good schools can make a difference for their students, regardless of their backgrounds and perceived motivation. No matter what the initiative, we found that staff in successful schools shared a deep and pervasive caring for their students as individuals — and their students knew it.

Experience has made us both hopeful and realistic. Secondary schools are complex organizations, and there are no magic bullets to fundamental change. We are persuaded, however, that it can be done. It is possible for schools to have a powerful impact on changing teaching methods, curriculum, and school culture — the key components that need to merge in order to maximize success for all students. An atmosphere of optimism and risk-taking, encouraged by critical friends who provide opportunities to build skills and share ideas, can lead to fundamental change. ■

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