

Smoothing the Path to Learning Success

A Student Perspective

COLLEEN DOUCETTE

In our ongoing efforts to increase the effectiveness of the education system, we traditionally seek the advice of educators, researchers, ministries and boards of education, parents, and the public at large. Less frequently, however, do we ask those who are most directly affected – the students – to express their views. Last December, six high school students from six different high schools in the Halifax Regional School Board, met to share their opinions.

Meet the Students

Trevor, 16 and in Grade 11, emphasized the importance of a good education to success in life and to financial stability. He thinks it is critical for teachers to demonstrate their belief in their students both verbally and through their actions.

Tyrone, 24, is a father of four who intends to complete his Grade 12 this year through the board's Flexible Learning Education Centre program. With a keen enthusiasm for the production side of the music industry, he plans to go on to post-secondary education and eventually own a recording studio.

Fiona, 17, who is looking forward to attending university after graduating this spring, is very involved in her school and serves on the student council. She believes teaching and learning that extend beyond the classroom walls, students working collaboratively, and opportunities for self-directed learning are key components of an effective education system.

Krystal, 17, lives away from home. At the time of this discussion, she was planning to graduate in January and spend the second semester working to help with the cost of university tuition. Krystal's long-term goal is to complete a PhD in history and to teach in university.

Iain, 17, a French Immersion student, has participated in several school groups and activities throughout his high school career, including football, choir, student council, volleyball, arts committee, debating team, and musical theatre. He will be entering university next fall to study music.

Daniel, 17, is looking forward to graduating from high school this June. He credits his parents and several of his teachers with having had a significant impact on him as a student. He is working hard with an eye towards receiving a scholarship for university.



The students were very articulate about what helps learning and what makes learning difficult for them and their peers. While their backgrounds, interests, talents, and aspirations are diverse, they shared similar views on the questions. Their thoughts can be categorized into seven areas: curriculum, instruction, school climate, services and supports, organizational structure, physical plant, and peer influence.

Curriculum

The students agreed unanimously that relevant curriculum facilitates learning. Fiona pointed out that one way of addressing relevance in the curriculum is to include components that extend beyond the classroom. She emphasized that this should be a “built in” curriculum feature, rather than dependent upon the instructional style of the teacher. Tyrone believes in the importance of courses dealing with issues such as career and life management. He expressed concern, however, that sometimes balancing teaching loads plays a greater role in deciding who teaches such courses than does teacher expertise and interest in the subject. Such situations can decrease the effectiveness of the learning experience.

The students believe high schools should provide more options for students. The current system, they said, is geared primarily towards those who intend to go on to university, and they see a need for more courses and programs that appeal to a broader range of student interests and talents. They hastened to add that enrolment in such courses and programs should be a student’s own decision, made without pressure and with good information. The students also think the success of such courses and programs will depend on demonstrating their value and establishing respect for them among teachers, students, and parents.

Iain would like to see more balance in the curriculum, and his fellow students agree. While they understand the importance of science and math, they expressed concern that limited availability of courses in the arts limits the opportunities for some students to express their talents. They are also concerned that fees for materials in some arts related courses prevent some students from enrolling.

Instruction

Moving from the curriculum itself to how it is taught, the students agreed on two key factors that help students learn. First, teachers should clarify course expectations, while at the same time providing opportunities and support for students to establish their own goals and expectations. Second, teachers should include, as part of the introduction to their instruction, an explanation of the assessment strategies they will use. Student involvement in the assessment process, such as participation in the development of rubrics and in teacher-parent-student conferencing, further increases support for learning.

Although they would prioritize them differently, the students agreed on several other ideas and suggestions related to instruction and teacher attitude. Making curriculum relevant by building connections to students’ daily lives is a priority with Trevor as are opportunities for “hands on” learning experiences. Fiona emphasized the need to address different learning styles. Tyrone stressed the positive impact on students of teachers who are passionate about their

The students believe high schools should provide more options for students. The current system, they said, is geared primarily towards those who intend to go on to university, and they see a need for more courses and programs that appeal to a broader range of student interests and talents.

The term “flexibility” arose frequently during the students’ discussion of organizational structure. They recognize the difficulties of achieving flexibility in a large system but believe it is critical in order to successfully address individual student needs.

teaching. For Iain, an understanding by teachers of their potential influence, accompanied by respect for students and ongoing efforts to relate to them, are key factors in successful teaching. Krystal thinks the teachers who are most helpful in supporting students’ learning are those who know both their subject and their students. She acknowledged the difficulty in getting to know large numbers of students but feels strongly that every effort must be made to do so in order for teachers to be sensitive to students and the individual talents, needs, and situations which may have an impact on their learning. Daniel considers the ability of teachers to inspire and motivate students as critical in supporting their learning.

The students also expressed strong convictions about things that make learning difficult, including

- relying too heavily on the lecture approach;
- identifying the text as the curriculum;
- focusing on the curriculum while overlooking who is being taught;
- failing to capitalize on opportunities to challenge students;
- failing to provide adequate support for students who are struggling;
- not recognizing the importance of motivating students;
- using “put downs” and sarcasm in the classroom.

School Climate

A welcoming and comfortable atmosphere, in which all students feel safe both physically and emotionally, is high on the students’ list of things that help learning. They see a role for both students and school staff in establishing a positive school climate. All of the students highlighted the leadership student councils need to take in promoting student involvement, reaching out and communicating with students, and ensuring that the diversity of student interests is addressed in school activities, groups, and clubs. They view extra-curricular activities not only as providing an outlet for students to pursue interests but also as a vehicle for developing life skills.

The students described the ideal role of school staff in establishing a positive school climate as supportive, approachable, and highly visible. For them, these characteristics are demonstrated through teacher attendance at and participation in extra-curricular activities, visibility in the hallways, provision of advice to students, and sensitivity to students as individuals. They also feel strongly that reaching out and building partnerships with the community will broaden and deepen a positive school climate.

Speaking from the perspective of an African Nova Scotian student, Tyrone emphasized the importance of acknowledging and celebrating diversity. Staff and students have a role to play in building a school culture that does not tolerate stereotyping and in which differences are viewed as strengthening the school community.

Practices identified as having a negative impact on school climate and student learning include:

- restrictions on extra-curricular involvement based on academic performance;
- failure to adequately address situations and incidents in school hallways that make students feel unsafe and insecure;



- failure to adequately address stereotyping and other diversity issues;
- insufficient community involvement.

Services and Supports

The students agreed that a number of school services and supports – such as guidance, library, resource, learning centres, and teen health centres – contribute to school success. They also agreed that the factor most closely linked to their effectiveness is the personality of the individuals providing them. Unless they are able to reach out to students, recognize their individuality, and respect their unique strengths and needs, students will not use the services.

Turning to material resources, Krystal expressed concerns about school libraries; she feels there are problems related both to numbers and to the range of books and materials available. The other students echoed these concerns; Daniel pointed out that such shortages makes doing research for assignments difficult for many students.

The students also voiced concern about what they view as insufficient information about and promotion of school services and supports. They would like to see more effort to make students aware of what is available and how it can be accessed.

Organizational Structure

The term “flexibility” arose frequently during the students’ discussion of organizational structure. They recognize the difficulties of achieving flexibility in a large system but believe it is critical in order to successfully address individual student needs. Increasing the use of challenge for credit and independent study credits are just two examples of ways to accomplish this.

Semestering poses a double-edged sword for these students. They acknowledged a number of ways in which semestering can potentially help student learning, including:

- increased subject and scheduling options;
- a more manageable course load;
- an opportunity for students to be more focused;
- longer free periods that provide students more time for completion of assignments in school;
- reduction in the overall number of assignments.

Some of the factors related to semestering that make learning difficult are:

- longer periods and the associated difficulties of sustaining attention and productivity;
- schedules that include two periods per day in a subject area;
- pressure caused by reduction in the number of months over which material is to be taught and learned;
- failure of teachers, in some instances, to vary the activities and experiences within a longer class period;
- increased significance of a single absence from class;
- potential regression in skills and knowledge in a subject resulting from the lapse in time between completing one course and beginning the next.

Physical Plant

The discussion here was based on the students’ premise that the physical condition of a school is a reflection, at least in part, of how education is valued. The students see

EN BREF Six élèves de six écoles secondaires du Conseil scolaire régional d’Halifax se sont rencontrés pour parler de ce qui favorise leur apprentissage. Même s’ils étaient issus de milieux sociaux différents et n’avaient pas les mêmes intérêts, talents ou aspirations, leurs idées et perspectives se ressemblaient beaucoup. En général, ils étaient d’accord pour dire que le programme d’études devait être pertinent et équilibré, et qu’il était important que les enseignants énoncent clairement leurs attentes de même que les méthodes d’évaluation qu’ils prévoient utiliser. En outre, ils étaient d’avis que l’ambiance scolaire devait être accueillante et sécuritaire, tant sur le plan physique qu’affectif. L’école devait offrir des services de soutien facilement accessibles et dispensés par un personnel compatissant, son organisation devait être souple afin de répondre aux besoins individuels, et elle devait encourager l’interaction positive entre les pairs.



a strong connection between a student’s pride in his or her school and that student’s motivation to learn. Features contributing to the creation of a good physical learning environment include:

- cheerful paint colours;
- natural light;
- places for students to congregate;
- an attractive foyer;
- plants;
- up-to-date equipment;
- displays, including those that celebrate various aspects of student diversity;
- a well-equipped cafeteria;
- a well-equipped auditorium;
- appropriate gymnasium facilities.

When Tyrone raised objection to the use of cameras in the hallways, his fellow students agreed. They expressed a discomfort with this type of surveillance, seeing it as overly intrusive, symbolizing a lack of trust and impacting negatively on school climate and students’ attitudes. They agreed that monitoring is essential, but they prefer that it be accomplished through the use of human resources.

Peer Influence

The students see promoting, teaching and supporting positive peer interaction as part of the process for supporting student success. Issues such as stereotyping and establishing exclusive cliques must be addressed, and students must understand how they can complement each other’s skills by working together, thereby increasing both their confidence and their self-esteem. Students who are able to work well in collaborative groups are developing important life and employment skills.

Conclusion

The education system invests time and resources in collaborative processes designed to improve its ability to support students as successful learners. The thoughtful responses of these six young people from Halifax serve as a reminder that students – for whom the system ultimately exists – should be recognized as full participants in decisions that affect their learning and their future. ■

COLLEEN DOUCETTE’S career in the public education system spanned thirty years in the area of student services at the school, board, and provincial department levels. She now works in private practice in educational consulting.