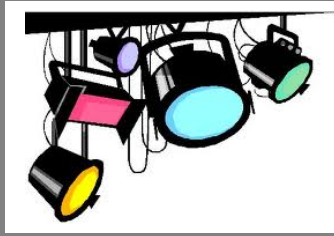


Spotlight on...Parent Engagement



*What we've learned from
AISI*

Communicating ⇒ *Involving* ⇒ *Engaging*

What we have learned about parent engagement

Many AISI projects have clearly demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between the engagement of parents and community and the success of students.

1. Parent engagement leads to improved student learning and attendance.
2. Engaged parents support students at home.
3. A variety of strategies increase communication with parents.
4. Parents are valuable resources for sharing expertise, knowledge, talents and gifts.
5. Parent-student-teacher conferences build partnerships.
6. Parents who participate in parent education events become more involved.
7. Parents and teachers working collaboratively can advance understandings, values, cultures and languages.
8. Volunteering contributes to the success of school activities, builds parent comfort in the school and increases understanding of student learning.

What is parent “engagement” and why is it important?

Parent engagement is a focus on a *shared connection*, where

- power and authority are shared by educators and parents
- the agenda is mutually determined and beneficial to all
- there is a two-way conversation between caring adults

There is a growing shift from parent involvement to parent engagement!

AISI projects often describe successful sharing of information with parents through various modes of communication, such as newsletters, websites and calendars. In some instances, parents are involved in discussions about assessment and new ways of teaching in their child’s classroom. Other projects report that parents are involved in the sharing of ideas about the project at its inception through focus groups, council meetings and surveys. These are good examples of parent *involvement*.

Parent *engagement* is a more active form of involvement. Engagement is harder to develop and difficult to coordinate. It must be well thought through by a school authority, based on factors such as community needs, culture and parental experiences with education. Parents can be engaged through active participation and involvement in their child’s learning, active involvement in the AISI project itself and active involvement in the design of projects and support within the community.

Schools that are making the shift from involvement to engagement are finding additional benefits to partnerships they forge with parents and the broader community. They enjoy a wider inclusion of adults as elders, experts and resources in the classroom, connecting their adult life and professional experiences to student learning.

Do we know for sure if parental engagement is important? The answer from AISI is a resounding **Yes!**

“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.”

Celebrating School Improvement, Six Lessons Learned from Alberta’s AISI Projects.
The University of Alberta

Successful strategies for involving and engaging parents

Several AISI projects describe the growth from “parents being informed” to “parents showing their support” to “parents taking an active role.” Let’s take a closer look at some of the successful strategies that have been used to involve and to engage. Click on the links to read more about the projects.

Communication strategies

Communicating with parents is one of the most common ways that school authorities involve parents. Strong communication between home and school enables parents to understand school programs and policies, to have an awareness of their child’s progress relative to learning and performance, and to work with the school when there are concerns or issues.

“Parents were involved through a ‘whole’ school approach, where they worked together with the school to promote healthy environments and healthy choices for their children. Through informative

newsletters, school websites, parent information evenings, family wellness fairs, and demonstration of learning evenings, we worked to educate the parents and increase their knowledge in promoting wellness to their children.”

Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 7. [Project 30055](#)

Electronic tools are increasingly being utilized to communicate with the home. Keeping parents informed results in greater student success.

“The use of technology greatly impacted the participation of parents and community in students’ schooling.”

[*The Role of Parents and Community in Supporting Student Success*](#)

(University of Calgary, 2008)

Electronic tools that are in widespread and/or increasing use include

- *Websites*—Websites post pertinent information for students, parents and the community.
- *AISI homepages*—AISI homepages have prominent links on school and district websites.
- *Social media*—Social media is used as a means to communicate with parents.
“Following the text messaging (to families), we decided to create a Facebook page that our families got involved in. (has 98 fans today)”
Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School Society. [Project 31046](#)
- *Software*—Programs such as Home Logic or Students Achieve provide an excellent way for parents to be apprised of attendance, grades and messages relevant to their child. Students can access this information as well so that they are up-to-date on their status.
“The implementation of Home Logic, a web-based program which allows parents to view students’ grades, attendance and teacher messages at the high schools and progress reports in junior highs ensured informed communication.”
St. Albert Protestant Separate School District No. 6. [Project 30002](#)
- *Newsletters*—Newsletters are often emailed home with information about the school and with tips for parents about working with their children at home.
- *Calendars*—Calendars with student activities inform parents about events and encourage them to get involved.
- *Video*—Videos and visual displays of AISI highlights and activities are screened and posted during parent-teacher evenings or other school events.

[Parent-student-teacher conferencing](#)

Parent-student-teacher conferencing and student-led conferencing engage both students and parents. Students are able to demonstrate their learning through a variety of artifacts and explain how each sample illustrates what they know. Parents are able to better see and understand the achievements and learning of their children.

“Parents were invited by a formal letter written by their child to attend their conference so that the student could display the achievements they had accomplished. Students were responsible for maintaining their portfolio with work samples that illustrated what they knew and could do. Parents were very proud of their children’s progress and their ability to explain why each sample was included in the interview.”

St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 38. [Project 30020](#)

“In classrooms using portfolios, parents were asked to take a more active role during parent/teacher/student conferences. Students led parents through their portfolios, and then either shared their learning goals for the year or worked with parents to develop the goals.”

Lakeland Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 150. [Project 30220](#)

Parent education and parent nights

In [*The Role of Parents and Community in Supporting Student Success*](#) (University of Calgary 2008), it is noted that parent education is a central means of communication and contributes to parent involvement. It is an opportunity for schools to introduce new and innovative teaching strategies so that parents are in a position to provide more in-depth and meaningful support to both children and schools.

“Parents who accepted the invitation to the Focus Group remarked how valuable the experience was and how it should be a part of each school’s contact with their parent population as a form of dialogue and the breaking down of barriers between school-based staff and parents.”

Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 1. [Project 30531](#)

Successful parent evenings tend to be workshops where parents can learn skills that will be useful in supporting their child, or hear keynote speakers on current educational topics.

“Parents who attended the curriculum evenings, meet the staff nights and report card interviews were able to gain a fuller understanding of the instructional strategies teachers were using and why they were using them.”

Northern Lights School Division No. 69. [Project 30247](#)

Successful project teams foster the support of students and teachers who are active partners in the formation of project plans, project strategies, project measures and project reports.

Surveys

Many AISI projects involve parents through the use of surveys, both the provincial surveys as well as locally developed surveys. One school jurisdiction used the parent-teacher conference day as an opportunity to invite parents to complete an online survey using Survey Monkey. Almost every parent participated in the survey, making the results more representative of the whole parent population.

“The comments from our parent survey help us to continually identify areas of need and improvement and support students in a proactive manner, with the Pyramid of Interventions Strategies. They are our true partners in education.”

Christ the Redeemer Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 3. [Project 30216](#)

Parent volunteers

When parents volunteer in school, there is an increased comfort with being in the school and an understanding that families are welcome at school. Often, once a parent has volunteered at school, there is carryover of activities from the school into the home. Home reading programs are a strong example of this carry-over effect.

“Parents participated in the Amazing Reading Race, a component of the literacy plan, as they guide and track student reading through home reading programs. Parents were also the target population of Read With Me, the component of the literacy plan that looks at providing parents with activities to help their preschool children receive pre-reading experiences in the home.”

Fort McMurray Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 32. [Project 30400](#)

“Twice a week volunteers from the community were in our schools reading with students. Tubs of books and supplies were set up for these volunteers and schedules to visit classrooms were created. There was also a training session and strategies that they could use with students who were struggling were given to all volunteers. We had 36 committed volunteers who came into our school to read with students.”

Lloydminster Public School Division. [Project 30414](#)

{Un}anticipated delights!

In addition to achieving the goals laid out at the planning stage, the innovative nature of AISI project plans often leads to discoveries and improvements that were not anticipated. AISI teams often write about these discoveries in their annual and final reports.

Good things can happen when you plan to engage parents. The University of Lethbridge report on [Successful Assessment for Learning Projects](#) noted that when administrators and teachers are able to convey to parents just how much they want them to become involved in the school, “*they are more successful than usual in attracting parents, keeping them involved, and providing the kinds of educative experiences that parents really want*”.



“Parents became even more involved than we anticipated: involvement in planning activities, more attending school council meetings, parents are talking about assessment and are more willing to accept changes that are happening in schools, for example, embracing outcomes based report cards.”

Livingstone Range School Division No. 68. [Project 30431](#)

“Parents were eager to find out more about student led conferences, the use of portfolios and other topics such as ‘no zeros’, ‘second chances’ and using descriptive feedback rather than solely relying on marks to indicate student learning.”

Peace Wapiti School Division No. 76. [Project 30350](#)

“Parents who attended the curriculum evenings, meet-the-staff nights, and report card interviews were able to gain a fuller understanding of the instructional strategies teachers were using and why they were using them.”

Northern Lights School Division No. 69. [Project 30247](#)

“The comments from our parent survey help us to continually identify areas of need and improvement, and support students in a proactive manner with the Pyramid of Interventions strategies. They are our true partners in education.”

Christ the Redeemer Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 3. [Project 30215](#)

“Parents were involved through a ‘whole’ school approach, where they worked together with the school to promote healthy environments and healthy choices for their children. Through informative newsletters, school web sites, parent information evenings, Family Wellness Fairs, Demonstration of Learning evenings, we worked to educate the parents and increase their knowledge in promoting wellness to their children.”

Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 7. [Project 30055](#)

Challenges

AISI projects identified a number of continuing challenges in moving from parental involvement to parental engagement. AISI educators and researchers made the following observations:

Communication

“With the changes that occurred at the school level, the need to develop effective communication strategies was identified as a challenge. Teachers need to communicate more effectively not only with students about expectations and learning, but also with parents.”

“We need to continue to be more informative to our parents about what AISI is all about and how it is working in our school...how AISI benefits our students.”

“The capacity to effectively communicate teaching and learning beliefs and strategies to parents and communities required careful planning, time and commitment.”

“While technology inspired engagement, there were frustrations with lack of access and with technology not working effectively.”

Parent Education

“There are still challenges with parent understanding of changes to assessment and reporting practices. Our new practices are vastly different from what they know from their own experiences as students or what they have seen in the past with their own children.”

“Parents of ESL students were sometimes uncomfortable participating in school events.”

Leadership

“Although we have made some good progress, there is a need to help our principals to develop more skills to lead this [sort of] school improvement work.”

“Our AISI coordinator had to wear too many hats.”

Staffing

“Contact with parents was disrupted with AISI team membership and leadership changed. More time was required to focus on the immediate needs of the teams, so less time was available to attend to the engagement of parents.”

“Every year of the project we had a significant turnover in teaching staff. As many as 30% of the teachers in any one year were new, new to the division and/or new to the province.”

Time

“There was often not enough time for teachers, lead teachers, facilitators and coordinators to plan, schedule, collaborate and do all the things that needed to be done.”

A case study in parent engagement

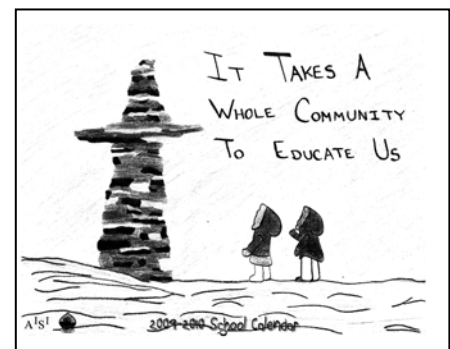
Aspen View Public Schools Regional Division No. 19 Project 30434 made a concerted effort to engage their parents during the cycle 3 project on assessment for learning. They moved beyond parental involvement to a more meaningful engagement of their parents and families. Project coordinator Linda Woychenko says that “both parent involvement and parent engagement are good.” However, she quotes Larry Ferlazzo (2009) in saying that “parent engagement is better, and offers opportunities for transformational beneficial change—for the school, for the community, for the family and for the student.” Aspen View’s website at <http://asperview.org> has a special section for parents, including links for accessing further information on AISI and other related topics.

Parents have always been invited and encouraged to attend the AISI Conference as one of the major partners in education. Aspen View invited parents to attend at no cost. They attended as delegates in 2009 and the following year collaborated with teachers to present one of the showcase sessions on the topic “So You Want Engaged Parents?”

“One parent who attended the AISI Conference said, ‘Personally the invitation to the AISI Conference opened up a whole new world to me! It would be great if other parents had the opportunity to share that experience’.”

At the AISI Conference 2010 Gallery Walk, Aspen View displayed a tip sheet that featured “Six Key Ways to Improve Parental Engagement”:

1. *Know how you’re doing and take action*
 - assess current situation through surveys or parent comments, then make goals and create a plan
2. *View parents as equal partners*
 - position parent knowledge and stories alongside teachers’
 - collaborate and problem solve together
3. *Encourage parent voice*
 - ask for parent input on decisions and share their expertise
 - listen and act!
4. *Invite, Invite, Invite!*
 - most effective when done personally and face-to-face
 - invite parents to workshops, conferences and sharing sessions
5. *Communicate*
 - frequent and two-way
 - newsletters, phone calls, email, web pages and notes
6. *Offer professional development workshops*
 - teach parents about new assessment practices and technology
 - include parenting workshops



Parents were invited to attend workshops on assessment for learning that were held in conjunction with school council meetings. The AISI coach from each school attended meetings and provided information sessions to familiarize parents with the assessment language that their children were using at school. As a further support to parents, newsletters were sent home that provided information on important assessment topics, such as the need for feedback, the difference between formative and summative assessment, and the fundamental underpinnings that support good assessment practices that are fair and about learning. Other workshops addressed differentiated instruction, technology and the use of Smart Boards, and how to be an engaged parent.

The Aspen View AISI team also created a division calendar with the theme “It Takes a Whole Community to Educate Us”. The calendar featured student artwork and parent and community involvement at each of the twelve schools across the division.

Linda Woychenko, AISI Coordinator for Aspen View, wrote an article entitled [*Creating a paradigm shift – from parent involvement to parent engagement*](#) published by the ATA in *PD E-News*, Spring 2010. This article chronicles the Aspen View story of parent involvements.

Additional AISI resources and sources

Want to find out more about AISI projects and research? Here is a sampling of good resources that are available online at the [Alberta Education AISI homepage](#), at <http://education.alberta.ca/aisi>. This homepage includes links to sections for Parents & Community, Educational Researchers and AISI Project Leaders.

- Alberta Education. [AIS/Parents & Community](#). This page reached directly from the AISI homepage leads parents and community members to useful information and resources, including AISI conferences, project stories, projects, and themes.
- Alberta Education (December 2010). [Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, Cycle 3: Improving Student Learning, Provincial Report Highlights for Cycle 3, 2006-2009](#).
- Alberta Education (2010). [Supporting the Literacy Learner II, Promising Literacy Strategies in Alberta from Cycle 2 and Cycle 3 AISI Projects](#).
- The University of Calgary AISI Research Findings (2008). [The Role of Parents and Community in Supporting Student Success, A Review of AISI Cycles One, Two and Three Projects \(2000-2008\)](#), Alberta Education.
- The University of Lethbridge (2009). [Successful Assessment for Learning Projects from AISI Cycle 3](#), Alberta Education.

Texts available from the [Learning Resources Centre](#), at <http://www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca>

- Parsons and Kelly Harding, University of Alberta (2009). *Little Bits of Goodness: How the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement inspires educators to explore, challenge inquire and imagine better schools*. LRC Product # [758922](#)
- 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. Note: This text is in the process of being reprinted. LRC Product # TBD.