

LEARNING FORWARD

After twelve years of world renowned success, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) launches into its fifth cycle of innovation in teaching and learning. All of Alberta's public and private school authorities have worked closely with their communities to identify local education needs and are finalizing their plans to introduce new instructional practices and approaches that will improve the engagement and learning of their students. They are moving forward with twelve years of experience in innovation and a wealth of knowledge about effective change and school improvement.



The School Research and Improvement Scoop – or The Scoop – is the official publication of SRIB. This first issue of 2012-13 has a new look that is more visually appealing and symbolic of our ongoing drive to make The Scoop a place for lively and engaging conversation about AISI and school improvement. Let us know what you think of the look and feel and, most all, the content. Do you find the articles useful? What would you like to see in future issues? And, of course, in order to make The Scoop an ongoing successful support for AISI and school improvement, readers are invited to be writers! Share your stories. Reflect on the learning. And help create and build on the powerful conversations across Alberta about what works for kids. Please send your comments and suggestions to the editor at

david.harvey@gov.ab.ca.



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Mark Your Calendars

AISI Conference 2013
February 11-12, 2013
Shaw Conference Centre
9797 Jasper Avenue,
Edmonton AB

Information is available on the AISI Website:

http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi/leaders.aspx



STAFF CHANGES AT THE SCHOOL RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT BRANCH

This summer has seen many changes in the staff at the School Research and Improvement Branch.

Dr. Dianna Millard, Director, and Deb McFarlane-Smith retired, and Hazel Love-McLaughlin and Dr. Paul Wozny returned to their school authorities. We wish our colleagues the very best in their new endeavours and thank them for the excellent contributions they have made to AISI.

New to the branch are Dr. Monica Ellis from Edmonton Public Schools, Dr.
Vonda Chatterton from Prairie Land,
Janne Edney from Chinook's Edge, Kelly
Johnson from Northern Lights and Dr. Anna
Nadirova from the Workforce Planning and
Development Branch of Alberta Education.
Also, new to the Student Engagement
initiative is Al Chapman from Alberta
Culture and Tim Jeffares from Edmonton
Public Schools. We welcome our new
colleagues to the branch and look forward
to working with them to support the work of
AlSI and Student Engagement across the
province.

Dr. Alfred Sakyi, longtime member of Alberta Education and of the branch, is our Acting Director, leading our new team into Cycle 5. Maria Crudo, Anna Di Natale and Lorna Sobie continue as AISI administrative support.

SRIB Manager Assignments for 2012-13
Monica Ellis, Zone 1 and Part Zone 2/3,
Independent Schools
Janne Edney, Zone 2/3
Vonda Chatterton, Zone 2/3,
Independent Schools
Kelly Johnson, Zone 4 and 2/3
Charmaine Brooks, Zone 5
David Harvey, Zone 6
Marcel Lavallee, Francophone School
Authorities

The staff at School Research and Improvement Branch of Alberta Education looks forward to working closely with project teams as they embark upon their new projects.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The publication Preparing for Teacher Research (Parsons et al. 2012), launched at an AISI Coordinators' workshop in October, has been very well received by project teams as a resource for teachers who are preparing for site-based research. This publication was the first in a two-part series. In the article Planning an AISI Research Project, lead author Dr. Jim Parsons of the University of Alberta shares some key advice drawn from Part Two of the series, which is soon to be published.

The Centre of Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) Charter School provides us with an insightful reflection on the nature of their school-community in

the article **Defining Community**.

Community-University Partnership (CUP) for the Study of Children, Youth and Families is a unique collaboration among the University of Alberta, community agencies, and organizations in the province. CUP's mandate includes "connecting research and community". In the article Developing an Effective Knowledge Mobilization Plan, Dr. Kelly Shaw and Dr. Tatjana Alvadj-Korenic, provide timely support to school authorities as

they consider how to share the learning that has come out of their Cycle 4 projects and as project teams develop the knowledge mobilization plan for Cycle 5.

The article *Public Sentiment is Everything* was written about a year ago by Aspen View AISI Coordinator, Sharen Kucey. In the midst of Cycle 4, the Aspen View project team began to envision how to best optimize the learning that was taking place, particularly around the involvement of their school community, and to carry

this learning forward into Cycle 5.

In Speak Out:
Engaging the
Student Voice,
the Student
Engagement
team of
the School
Research and
Improvement
Branch reflects

on the key elements to success for student engagement. To maintain this level of engagement, both face-to-face and online, a conscious commitment from teachers, parents, students and department stakeholders to include the student voice must be encouraged at all levels of educational discourse.



PLANNING AN AISI RESEARCH PROJECT

In his classic *Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire defined literacy as diminishing the distance between dreaming and doing. The world is filled with great ideas gone wrong because those with the idea didn't move well from the *dream* of the idea to the *do* of the idea. AISI research projects are no different. In fact, because children participate in this research, it is crucially important that all AISI research projects be done well.

My purpose here is to review the fundamentals of research projects. I encourage you to see this review of seven steps of research projects as a checklist of things to include in your own school authority's project. Although conducting research well is crucial, managing research projects is not difficult. One simply must work considerately.

What is a research project?

An AISI research project is an activity with a beginning and end. It is the total work completed from conception to completion. This work includes all the steps from forming and shaping the research idea, to collecting and analyzing data, to reporting the findings of the research project to those interested. Many steps in the project are included in the research methods – the plan used to collect, analyze, and report the data; but, research methods alone do not define the whole AISI research project.

Two specific activities must be completed prior to beginning a project. First the project must be outlined; second the project must be planned. A third necessary activity for any research project is systematic review. I encourage you to apply these general ideas about research project management specifically to the AISI research project you are part of.

What should research projects include?

(1) A research project has a *rationale*.

In the big picture, why is your school authority undertaking this AISI project? Where does the project "fit" into other research? What might a successful AISI project promise in terms of positive educational changes?

(2) A research project has general and specific goals. By the end of the AISI project, what would those involved like to accomplish? What milestones exist along the project "path?" How should these milestones be met?

I believe all AISI research projects should answer these questions:

- What is the content of the project?
 Is everything included that should be? Is anything included that should not be?
- b. How should the project be built?
 Who should help build it? Who should build the plan (the content, the process, the completion)?]
 How will the project be reviewed?
 What evaluation procedures should be undertaken? Who should evaluate the project as it unfolds? Who should be "in the know" about the project and provide insight as it proceeds?
- c. How will regular feedback be gained about how the project is progressing?
 How will suggestions be handled for changing or improving the project?
- (3) A research project has a *timeline*, including a finishing point.
 - a. What must be done to begin the project?
 - b. What steps must be taken to conduct the project?
 - c. How will people know when the project is completed?
- (4) A project requires resources.
 - a. What people are needed to complete the project?
 - b. What funds are needed to complete the project? How will these funds be managed? What budget considerations must be met to run the project efficiently?
 - c. What tools or equipment are needed to complete the project?
 - d. How should the project be administrated? Who should administrate it?

(5) A research project has a **vision** of success.

- a. How will people know if the project is successful?
- b. How (where and to whom) will the project's successes be reported?
- c. How will the successful project be celebrated?

(6) A project requires **structure**.

- a. How will the documentation of the project be organized?
- b. Where will the work of the project be tracked?
- How will modifications to the project be listed? All research projects change as they are reviewed.
- d. How will the work of the project be archived? How and where will it be saved?

(7) A project has a **communication plan**.

- a. How will team members communicate during the project? How will the goals be kept alive and stay on target?
- b. How will the project's findings be reported to others?

This week, my 4-year old daughter Gisella's favorite book is *The Gulps*. In the book, a young daughter advises, "Stop wishing and start working!" This is good advice for any research project. The process is not complex; it just takes work.

Brown, M. & Wells, R. (2007) *The Gulps*. New York: Little, Brown.

Dr. Jim Parsons, University of Alberta

DEFINING COMMUNITY

The Centre of Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) Public Charter School defines its school community in both broad and narrow perspectives. Our sense of community involves a cohesive group of diverse people working together for a common purpose and good. Being the only charter school south of Calgary within a community of sixty-five thousand, CAPE draws students from the city of Medicine Hat and its surrounding area.

Students have come from as far as Manyberries, Irvine, and Redcliff.

Parents who bring their children to CAPE are looking for choice within public education. In this way, CAPE's parent community is a group of like-minded individuals. They are seeking the best education for their children and tend to be very engaged in their education. The composition of the staff includes immigrants, members of various linguistic communities within Canada, teachers from abroad and from other provinces, and members of the immediate community. Board members also come from within this greater Medicine Hat area. Integrated programming encourages close ties with the community and so students are regularly learning within the community via field trips, community consultants, charity endeavors, etc. It is our goal to foster students to become lifelong learners who are confident and successful not only in our immediate community, but the global community.

Our sense of community involves a cohesive group of diverse people working together for a common purpose and good.

OUR SCHOOL HAS A HIGH LEVEL OF ETHNIC AND CULTURAL **DIVERSITY**. This has resulted in a rich cultural mosaic. Individualized programming not only addresses individual academic needs, but has fostered acceptance and celebration that we are each individuals. It would not be reasonable for everyone to do the same things the same ways because we are not the same. In recognizing this individuality, we also identify the challenges of working with various sub-communities within the school. Each community has a complex package of particular beliefs, practices, traditions, histories and perspectives which are unique. Within each sub-group, there are further delineations.

When making decisions within the school, it is imperative that each of the groups be identified and recognized as valid through respect for the complexity of their lives. Having participation from each group enriches the process and increases the support from more stakeholders. Failing to recognize and validate these various cultural subgroups and not taking those cultural patterns into consideration when making decisions leads to conflict, hurt feelings, feelings of confusion, separation between home and school, feelings of alienation, and less parental engagement in support of the school program.

An environment that does not recognize, or chooses not to recognize, the diverse subcultures alienates members of those groups and results in non-engaged, non-supportive parents. Recognition of, but non-acceptance of existing subcultures, results in the same type of negative outcome. Recognition and acceptance of the groups, but lack of inclusion, is just as detrimental to the school community and parental engagement. It is only when the

school identifies, accepts, and makes decisions with consideration of these groups does the environment become supportive, nurturing, and engaged for all stakeholders.

The key to creating this environment is communication and the building of relationships. This may mean seeking out people of various communities to directly ask them questions about their beliefs. practices, traditions, histories, and perspectives. This may mean

opening the school to activities for these various groups. This may mean soliciting input of members from various sub-communities to become involved in the school as consultants, resource people, an extra set of hands on a special day. A process must be put in place so that the knowledge and skills of the members from various communities are deliberately sought out to enrich the cultural fabric of the school and the program within the school. Part of this process means seeking out

the input and considering it critically before making decisions. This is an active process which must occur repeatedly as new students and new families come into the community. It is this communitybuilding process that contributes to the development of a global educational environment in which students become life-long learners and citizens of the world.

> Jeney Gordon, AISI Coordinator, CAPE

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION PLAN

Knowledge mobilization (KM) has become an integral component of research and evaluation projects and it is often an essential requirement of funders. KM can be defined as the flow (i.e., creation, dissemination, exchange, and use) of information (e.g., research, experiential) among stakeholders (e.g., researchers and community members) leading to intellectual, social and/or economic impact. Similar terms abound in the literature such as knowledge transfer, knowledge translation, knowledge exchange, and diffusion.

At a minimum, a well-developed KM plan should describe what knowledge should be mobilized, to whom, by whom, how and with what impact. Development of the KM plan should begin in the early stages of research planning and should be integrated throughout the entire research process. Integrated KM ensures that researchers and knowledge users work together to shape the research process. Collaborative approaches also produce research that is relevant and more likely to be used. There are several key questions that should be addressed when developing an effective KM plan. However, it is important to remember that KM is a dynamic and interactive

process and that the answers to one question may inform your thinking about another.



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1. Who are your partners or stakeholders, to what degree are they engaged, what are their roles, and level of KM expertise? Identify the most important stakeholders and invite them to be involved in the development of the KM plan. Partners or stakeholders can include researchers, children

and youth, families, the public, decision-makers, policy makers, private sector organizations. practitioners, or others, and they may be on the research team. Priority should be given to stakeholders who are also potential knowledge users. Stakeholders with research/ KM expertise will be especially valuable in terms of their contributions to the development of the KM plan.

- 2. What are the goals of your KM plan? Determine what you expect to achieve with your KM activities. Is your goal to increase knowledge, awareness, values, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, or behaviors? Do you expect to change a practice or policy? Ensure the goals are in keeping with the nature of your research results, e.g., you can only expect to impact a practice or policy if your research is conclusive and ready for application.
- 3. What knowledge will be mobilized? Create clear, simple, action-oriented messages that are tailored for each audience and based on what they need

- to know from their perspectives. Present the research as ideas not data. Explain what your research results are, what they mean, why they are important, and what the implications are. Use plain language, devoid of jargon and statistics, which clearly communicates the message.
- 4. To whom will you mobilize the knowledge? Determine who could or should act upon the results, how and when they will be engaged, what the contexts are within which they work, and what you expect them to do with the results. Specifically identify which messages should be targeted to which audiences.
- 5. What knowledge mobilization tools will you use? All knowledge mobilization tools are effective at translating knowledge in some, but not all, contexts. However, in general, traditional passive, written methods of translating knowledge are least effective, whereas tools that are to some or even a great extent interactive (i.e., involve two-way communication), are most effective. In addition to face-to-face methods, many new technologies exist that

- facilitate social interaction (e.g., networking tools, webcasts). Remember that the information source is just as important as the method and must be seen as credible and trustworthy to ensure research uptake and application.
- 6. What resources and costs are expected? A knowledge mobilization plan can only be successful if the appropriate resources are available to carry out the proposed activities. Discuss with partners or stakeholders what personnel, supplies, travel, and other expenses will be required to implement the knowledge mobilization plan. Funding and/
- or in-kind contributions may need to be sought. Also consider when and how much time will be required.
- 7. Were the goals achieved? Evaluate the impact of the knowledge mobilization plan to determine whether your goals were achieved. Identify indicators or measures of success for short-term, mediumterm, and long-term impacts of the knowledge mobilization. Employ evaluation tools such as pre- and post-intervention surveys, focus groups, interviews, and/or direct observations of behavior. Determine for whom the evaluation results will be useful and how they might be used.



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Kelly Shaw and Tatjana Alvadj-Korenic Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP), Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta

PUBLIC SENTIMENT IS EVERYTHING

In the past 150 years, the words of Abraham Lincoln have been recited and reconceptualised by different leaders in various contexts. As an AISI coordinator for the Aspen View school division, I have experienced the truth within those words and have come to understand the difference between true engagement and silent acceptance.

The Recent Past and Implications for the Future

Our AISI Cycle 4 Project required teachers to focus on student engagement through fundamental Assessment for Learning (AFL) strategies as outlined in Chappuis (2009). These strategies included explaining clear learning targets to the students; providing exemplars to enable students to assess their work: and giving timely and descriptive feedback to improve student engagement.

The AISI team was present in the schools and within the communities throughout the Aspen View project. By the end of the second year of Cycle 4, the team found that large gaps existed in the knowledge and use of AFL: some teachers and school leaders had engaged in the AFL process, while others had not. These gaps were prevalent within schools and among the schools throughout the division.

Planning for the third year, the team heeded the words of Fullan. Hill. and Crevola (2006): "Coherence between the multiple levels of schooling—the classroom, the school, and the larger system—is an important precondition for successful school[s] ...When there is alignment, there is a much greater likelihood of sustained progress" (p. 27).

Fublic sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Abraham Lincoln, 1858

Consequently, the team decided that the question to ask at the beginning of the second year of Cycle 4 would not only continue to the end of that cycle, but also drive our AISI Project throughout Cycle 5. Therefore, the desirable goal for the new term was to continue to increase student engagement and achievement using AFL strategies and to promote a culture of professional collaboration among the educational stakeholders.

Project research would focus on increasing engagement and achievement of junior high students in core subject areas using effective formative (descriptive) feedback over a three-year period. In an effort to engage the educational stakeholders, we focused on the following question:

How do we engage those who will implement the AISI project and research?

Stakeholders: The Implementers

The answer to that question was obvious - we needed to understand the context of each of the ten schools and that meant questioning the immediate "public" - those stakeholders who would implement the AISI goals: the students, the administrators, the teachers, and the parents.

The students

Through Student Voice interviews and surveys (Tell Them From Me), we asked junior and senior high students to define common AFL terms, such formative and summative assessment, and to indicate whether teachers stated clear learning outcomes within their classes. As expected, the results varied from

school to school. Overall, more than 60% of

students could not define the terms and more than 50% said that specific learning targets were not clearly stated. Bi-annual student input, at all grade levels, will be one of the processes used to measure the engagement of students in the future.

The administrators

In an attempt to align, unify and extend the practices already in place and to prepare for Cycle 5, the superintendent of Aspen View Public Schools and the AISI team decided that an overarching AFL focus was necessary for the school division. Studies have shown an increased student achievement in schools where the principals were enthusiastic in building capacity within their staff (Harris, 2004). To understand the context and culture of the schools, we met with each of the administrators. We asked them to explain the vision they held for their school, the goals that they wanted to accomplish, and how AFL practices could encourage teacher and student engagement.

Our findings from the interviews with the administrators suggested different ways that AISI coaches could work with the teachers through one-on-one coaching in the classrooms and through subject area or division groupings. Every administrator that we spoke with expressed an interest to network their teachers with others in Aspen View and encourage them to share resources, ideas and techniques with others. All believed that short sessions during monthly staff meetings would be a good time to

introduce and discuss AFL strategies, although some felt that they needed more instruction and review of the primary AFL strategies. As a result, we held workshops for administrators focused on the primary AFL strategies and provided them with the material needed to share with their teaching staffs. This process will continue into Cycle 5.

The teachers

We repeated the semi-structured interview process with every teacher in the school division, often meeting with them in small groups. We recorded their comments and suggestions and found that while some teachers had a firm grasp of AFL theory, they still wanted more time to apply it with confidence. Others were just beginning to grasp the concepts. Although, the interview process was time consuming, it did allow the teachers to engage in defining a clear AISI purpose: To improve student engagement, learning, and performance by implementing the foundational strategies of AFL (outcomes, exemplars, and feedback).

The interview process also provided the team with the knowledge of the grade level assignments and subject areas of each teacher and enabled us to adapt AFL techniques to the teachers' specific contexts. Throughout this past year, we have worked to establish positive teacher-coach relationships and have begun the process of forming professional learning communities within the schools and networking teachers between schools.

The parents

As is often the case, parents are most likely to be engaged with their child's education in the earlier years, but the difficulty that schools face is sustaining that interest into junior and senior high. At present time, teachers need to understand how to align AFL theory with the new outcomes-based report cards for grades K-6. Our AISI team has offered workshops and online tutorials for both teachers and parents. We have presented our findings and project proposals at parent council meetings. We hope to

encourage parental involvement at all grade levels into Cycle 5.

In AISI Cycle 5, we will also continue to work with the students, administrators, teachers, and parents throughout the school division to fully develop the skills and language of formative assessment and move forward through the AFL strategies. We appreciate that success with the AISI Project and research is dependent upon the commitment and engagement of the educational stakeholders. Their sentiment *is* everything and will inspire future advancement of AISI within our school division.

Sharen Kucey Aspen View Public Schools sharen.kucey@aspenview.org

Sharen was the AISI Coordinator for Aspen View Public Schools and has recently accepted the position of Assistant Principal at Edwin Parr Composite in Athabasca. She will continue to promote the AISI project.

SPEAK OUT – ENGAGING THE STUDENT VOICE

Since November 2008, Speak
Out – the Alberta Student
Engagement Initiative has been
enabling Alberta's youth to share
their experiences and ideas on
education to help the Ministry
understand how best to meet
students' varied needs, goals
and learning preferences and,
in turn, strengthen Alberta's
education system as a whole.
Student engagement is about
collaborating with students in an

effort to enhance their interest in education and their passion for learning; it is about empowering them by providing opportunities for personal achievement and a say in their education system.

This initiative gives students ages 14 to 19 the tools they need to engage with and influence their fellow students and key education decision makers.
Currently, these tools include

online discussion forums and blogs on the *Speak Out* website, in-person forums with the *Speak Out* team or through the DVD toolkit, the Annual *Speak Out* Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council (the Council). This feedback is used to inform and influence the growth and development of many Alberta Education programs and initiatives.

Looking forward, *Speak Out* will continue to work closely with its student demographic and other stakeholders to further investigate the impacts of the student engagement initiative, and more specifically the student voice, which will help determine the future direction of the initiative.

Speak Out Website

Speak Out's website, which includes moderated and interactive discussion boards and a daily blog, provides a unique interactive online presence. This format allows students to discuss education issues and concerns and to brainstorm recommendations and solutions with their peers across the province. The website has 10 monthly featured forums



supported by other branches within Alberta Education.

Speak Out Forums

Speak Out forums continue to be a platform for students in Alberta to share their thoughts on education with key decision and policy makers, and to become invested in their learning. The forums provide an opportunity for Alberta Education to speak directly with students about their education.

Between April 2011 and March 2012, 56 forums were conducted using the *Speak Out* DVD toolkit, led by the *Speak Out* team or by students across the province. We heard from 1,598 students,

with varied backgrounds and perspectives, in 29 school districts across the province. The forums were conducted in a variety of educational settings, including public, private, separate, Francophone, charter, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) and outreach schools. At each forum, students were asked to answer and discuss a series of questions about their educational experiences.

"Through hosting a forum, I have learned skills on teaching and working with my peers. It's so neat to see the discussions on education grow and develop into these fantastic ideas that eventually will become ready in Alberta Ed."

Teacher

Annual Speak Out Conference

In April each year, hundreds of students from around Alberta, ages 14 to 19, and their chaperones attend the Annual Speak Out Conference in Edmonton. Hosted by the Council, the Speak Out Conference aives students and chaperones an opportunity to explore key issues and initiatives related to the province's education system, and to connect with Alberta Education representatives and other students with similar interests and

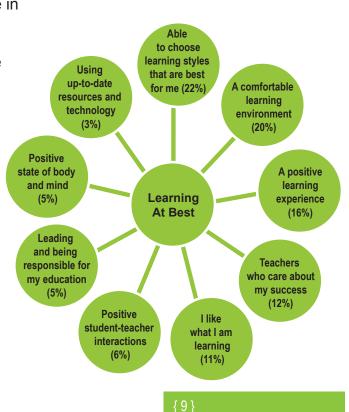
aspirations. The

event includes inspiring keynote speeches, engaging breakout workshops for both students and chaperones, networking opportunities, music and dance performances by local artists, a dance party and much more.

In preparation for the conference, we work closely with other Alberta Education staff and members of the Council to develop workshop themes for students and chaperones. The themes are chosen based on student feedback collected by *Speak Out* through the website, the forums and the Council members. Information will be posted soon at www.speakout.alberta.ca regarding the next conference in April 2013.

"Best session!!! It was a great way to end the day! Talking about great things teachers do. This session gets an A++!!"

Parent



Minister's Student Advisory Council

The Council consists of 24 members, between the ages of 14 and 19. Council members act as ambassadors of Speak Out and representatives of the student voice within their schools and communities and elsewhere across the province. Their roles also include active participation in various communications on the interactive Speak Out website, hosting at least one Speak Out forum using the DVD toolkit, meetings with the Minister of Education to share outcomes of their *Speak Out* forums and their perspectives on education in general, and hosting the Annual Speak Out Conference. Council members are selected in part based on the diversity of their backgrounds, opinions, perspectives and experiences, as described in their written application forms.

"The best part of being a Council member is sharing what I think about our education system and working with decision makers to help make a difference for generations to come."

Student

Engaging the student voice for input, and taking action on their ideas, will move us toward creating more actively engaged citizens and a stronger education system in our province. Speak Out staff encourages everyone to assist in promoting this provincial initiative by sharing information about the initiative with principals, teachers and students across Alberta.

Al Chapman, School Research and Improvement Branch

The School Research and Improvement Scoop is the official newsletter of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement and Student Engagement Initiative and is produced by the School Research and Improvement Branch of Alberta Education.

Share your AISI stories! *The Scoop* is an excellent forum for sharing your AISI project experiences, discoveries and achievements

Please contact David Harvey at any time with your ideas for future articles.

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