The School Improvement Scoop

Information on AISI and School Improvement

Meeting the Challenges Ahead

Project teams across the province have been moving quickly to analyse the impact of the AISI funding reduction for Year 3, announced February 24, and to prepare strategies that will bring their projects to fruition.

School Research and Improvement Branch posted key messages in the form of a Q&A, March 5, to assist teams with their planning, and is keeping in close contact with project coordinators.

The major portion of most project budgets supports professional development, in the form of release time for professional collaboration and salaries for lead teachers. As a result, professional development is likely to see the most changes next year. Many project teams are noting that the increased student and professional capacity that is now in place, thanks to the work already done in their projects, will lessen the impact of reduced professional development in Year 3. However, it is also noted that the role of lead teachers as facilitators for collaboration and as PD providers is still considerable and that reductions in their time will certainly have an impact.

Networks of sharing and collaboration that have developed among project teams across the province are likely to be of great value in the remaining months of this school year and through Year 3, as project teams exchange ideas for how to carry forward the learning from years 1 and 2 and to ensure that the increased student and professional capacity they have helped build is sustainable in Year 3 and beyond.

The message from School Research and Improvement Branch is that AISI is alive and well. Alberta Education's recently published *Action Agenda 2011-14* lists AISI's innovative projects as a priority initiative for transforming teacher practice. The seven education organizations that form the Education Partners Steering Committee continue to meet regularly and planning is well underway for Cycle 5.

The Q&A is posted on the AISI Project Leaders tab of the new website at http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi/leaders.aspx.

A Quick Guide to the New AISI Website

The new AISI website, launched in March, has been receiving excellent reviews. With a new look and feel and an easy-to-navigate structure, users are reporting that it is now a lot easier to find the information they are looking for. They are also being pleasantly surprised by the many new features to be discovered!

The new homepage provides three ways to enter the site, taking users quickly to the resources they are most likely looking for, based on their key roles: AISI Project Leaders, Educational Researchers (which includes teachers) and Parent & Community.

Of course, the impressive collection of links and resources is available to everyone; but here are

some examples of the key links made easy to find for each group:

Project Leaders

- Project Management Links—a one stop shop for the files and links project leaders are always using, such as the Extranet, the 2Learn Portal, the Cycle 4 Handbook and APAR Completion Instructions and Tips.
- Projects and Promising Practices—thumbnail overviews of all the projects since AISI began, as well as succinctly formatted descriptions of over 250 promising practices.

Education Researchers

- AISI Publications Search—a keyword search accesses links to AISI publications and other publications closely related to AISI.
- Conferences, Symposiums and Events—the proceedings, such as discussion notes presenters' handouts, from research events, including AISI conferences.

Parents & Community

- About AISI—includes Frequently Asked Questions for parents.
- Useful Resources for Parents—access to documents by Alberta Education and others that provide resources to support parent involvement in AISI projects, as well as information about new education approaches.

Another new feature on the site is a growing collection of over sixty videos, ranging from one-minute clips to full speaker presentations. Some clips include teachers and students talking about their AISI projects. Others include keynotes from conferences. It is hoped that diverse groups will be able to put the video collection to good use for various purposes. For example, some videos will be useful to schools for explaining AISI in the community or setting the stage for professional discussion. Project teams are invited to add to the collection by submitting footage to School Research and Improvement Branch. Videos that "tell the story" about strategies and practices from an AISI project are what people are looking for. Recordings should have good audio and video qualities, be around ten minutes or less in length, and have copyright and privacy requirements met before submission.

The new AISI website may be found at http://education.alberta.ca/aisi.aspx.
Please contact Deb McFarlane-Smith, webmaster, at deb.mcfarlane-smith@gov.ab.ca for inquiries and comments about the website and for submissions.

AISI Conference 2011: A Model of Collaboration and Innovation

The AISI Conference 2011 was a great success, with 88% of survey respondents rating the conference as a 7 or higher on a 10 point scale. Attendance was the largest ever, at just over 900 delegates, including teachers, administrators, MLAs, members of our partner organizations, parents, trustees, school age students and university students.

The Minister of Education, Honourable Dave Hancock, brought greetings to delegates on the opening morning. He placed AISI solidly in the broader context of Alberta Education's engagement initiatives and applauded AISI for focusing on enhancing the learning environment for students through active and collaborative learning, critical thinking and knowledge creation, and for supporting students as individuals with unique needs and interests.

The new pecha kucha presentation format introduced into thematic sessions was well received as an effective way to bring project teams together, to efficiently encapsulate a topic and to free up time for questions and discussion.

The conference organizers sincerely thank the 217 presenters who spoke at the conference, making the AISI conference such a rich opportunity for networking and learning.

An array of materials from the conference, including videorecordings of the keynotes and showcase and pecha kucha sessions, are available on the AISI website. As well, the *AISI Conference 2011 Report* has just been released. This concise and very readable document provides an excellent overview of the conference. It is available on the AISI website at http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi/leaders/conferences.aspx [at the bottom of the page].

What we Learned from Cycle 3

A new publication entitled *AISI Cycle 3 Highlights* has recently been released to accompany the full Provincial Report for AISI Cycle 3. The 14-page *Highlights* provides a very readable summary of the 2006-09 AISI cycle in a format that can be readily shared with various stakeholders. The *Highlights*, as well as the full

report, may be accessed at http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi/leaders.aspx.

A qualitative analysis of Cycle 3 projects, entitled *AISI e-bits of the best: Spotlight on Mobilizing Knowledge* is currently underway to help consolidate our learnings from Cycle 3. These reviews, beginning with parental engagement, will be published in a series of monographs and distributed by email to all school authorities and AISI partners and will be posted on the AISI website. Excerpts from the monographs will appear as a new feature in upcoming editions of *The Scoop*, beginning with the June edition.

AISI Parent Engagement a Focus at Spring Conferences

Two education conferences in Alberta this spring included presentations about parents' engagement in AISI projects.

At the Alberta School Councils Association (ASCA) Conference, Edmonton, April 16, the new AISI website was presented, with a focus on the Parents and Community pages. Parents from Aspen View School District presented about their experiences of engagement with AISI. Dr. Jim Parsons presented to parents his newly published book, co-authored with Kelly Harding, entitled *Little Bits of Goodness*.

At the Speak Out Conference, also in Edmonton, April 16, AISI managers from School Research and Improvement Branch talked to the 100 parents and other chaperones accompanying the
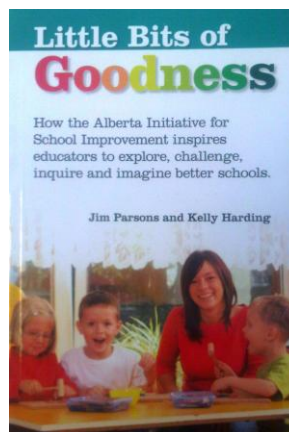
225 student delegates about how parents are becoming engaged in AISI projects across the province. Participants became students in a sample lesson involving 21st century learning and were then given a tour of the new AISI website.

The emerging trend in schools across the province is one of parents moving from involvement to engagement in AISI projects. Readers are invited to submit stories about parent engagement to the editor, for consideration in upcoming editions of The Scoop.

Little Bits of Goodness

"*We used to find resources on our own. Now we share a wealth of resources for the entire grade, as well as the school, to enrich learning in reading. We used to teach in isolation. Now we teach collaboratively.*"

This quote from a newly published book by Jim Parsons and Kelly Harding of the University of Alberta illustrates the spirit of *Little Bits of Goodness*. This soft cover collection of AISI success stories shares the many different projects that teachers, schools and districts imagined, built, and implemented to improve student learning across the province.

Copies of *Little Bits of Goodness* were distributed to AISI Conference 2011 delegates. Additional copies will be available in late May from LRC for a nominal cost.

Body, Mind and Spirit

by Cheryl Shinkaruk, Edmonton Catholic Schools

Edmonton Catholic Schools' AISI Project 40009 – *Body, Mind and Spirit* – takes a K to 12 comprehensive approach to health promotion that involves the home, school and community, as well as partnerships with diverse community agencies and institutions.

A variety of topics are addressed to promote overall wellness: healthy eating, physical activity, mental wellness and spiritual connectiveness.

A goal of the project is to create a sustainable school wellness environment, in which students gain knowledge, solve problems and engage in reflective thinking about what promotes a healthy body, mind and spirit, as well as to empower students to take on leadership roles within the school and the greater community. Students develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a healthy active lifestyle.

Teacher champions in each school have been trained and create a school wellness team of students, staff and parents who work together to implement wellness strategies in their school work plan.

Authentic experiences for students help create a culture of school wellness. These include community service, philanthropy, student leadership, digital storytelling, health fairs, pedometer activities and peer education. Students are embracing their important role as leaders. As one student put it, "*I am learning how to be a great leader to influence my friends to make better choices.*"

A district **student symposium** on school health and wellness gave students the opportunity to participate in sessions presented by specialists who provided students with wellness strategies they could implement in their schools. This educational involvement gave students the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to empower others in their school to lead the way in healthy choices. As a result, students felt empowered to make change happen at their schools. As one student said, "*I am part of the broadcast team at school and I am informing students of the importance of having a healthy lifestyle.*"

Teachers interact with parents in a variety of settings, including school health fairs, parent

information nights, school newsletters, website links, social activities and parent volunteer opportunities. Involving parents has heightened their awareness about school wellness, so they can discuss the positive changes that are happening with their children at school.

Professional development, along with collaborative sharing time with Alberta Health Services School Health Nurses, gives staff the opportunity to share knowledge, strategies, successes and challenges in the project.

Resource kits have been developed for each school, such as: *The Elementary Mental Health Kit*; *The Portion Wise, Fat Wise*; and *Sugar Shocker*. These resources provide teachers with support in teaching outcomes from the Health and Life Skills Program of Studies.

Partnerships with diverse community agencies and institutions helped our project foster innovation and creativity in the 21st Century. We have developed partnerships with The University of Alberta School of Agriculture and Food Sciences, The University of Alberta College of Education, The Hope Foundation of Alberta, Canadian Mental Health Association, Stollery Children's Foundation, Alberta Health Services, Alberta Milk, AADAC, Alberta Healthy Community Wellness Fund, APPLE Schools and many additional partners that support specific schools. Educational engagement with our partners allows for the sharing of expertise, which is one of the key contributors to the success of this project.

The AISI project is integrated into the district's goals and priorities for wellness and has been instrumental in the following achievements:

- A strong Nutrition Policy based on the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth has been developed.

- An awareness campaign that involves posters with examples of healthy choices has been launched.

- Teacher champions and cafeteria providers have been educated in wellness strategies.

Change takes time, but we believe that through the education of all project participants, we will be successful in our implementation of our district's wellness project.

Success of the project can be seen and measured in many ways. As one teacher states, "*Now, I can see that students are making healthy choices by*

being physically active, packing healthier lunches and donating their time to help others – that's what it is all about!"

Survey results for the first year of the project showed a small increase in the percentage of students, parents and staff members who agree that the knowledge, skills and attitudes to support a healthy school environment are evident in their school. These results are expected to keep rising as whole school communities continue their journey of health—in Mind, Body and Spirit.

For further information, contact Cheryl Shinkaruk at Cheryl.Shinkaruk@ecsd.net.

Using Evidence from Student Focus Groups to Inform School Improvement

by Dr. Lorraine Slater, Calgary Public Schools

Introduction

Gathering student input through focus groups provides the opportunity for teachers to understand student learning and engagement. As well, student focus groups are a rich source of qualitative data that can be used to measure success related to student learning outcomes. In the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), knowing students well and finding out about them as learners, paves the way for the personalization of student learning. In the words of a grade 6 student who participated in one of over 200 school-based focus group interviews that were part of the district's AISI Cycle 4 data collection:

"*I think it's important that your teacher knows about you and how you learn because then she can make it so that you have fun in the classroom. It's easier to connect with her if you're comfortable talking to her if she knows more about you and what you like.*"

A value added component of student focus group methodology is that through their participation in focus groups, students feel positive connections to peers and adults. "Each of us needs to belong. A sense of belonging is part of our business, social and personal interactions" (Alberta Education, p.1). "When students know that they have a voice in their education they feel valued and experience a sense of belonging" (Slater, 2004, p.59). As this student who participated in a focus group stated:

"*If you feel like you belong, you are more confident and you let out your opinions easier because you feel comfortable with people that are around you.*"

This article examines some of the considerations that were important in conducting student focus groups in 220 CBE schools. The article considers issues related to planning and procedures, components of a focus group, the moderator's role, examination of findings, and suggested follow-up actions with students and the school.

What is a focus group interview?

A focus group interview brings together 4 to 6 individuals who have experience in and with a particular topic. It is a moderated conversation. Involving students in focus group interviews presents the opportunity for them to discuss something that they know about and have definite opinions on: their learning. As Holcomb (2010) states, "students as young as fifth grade are very articulate, respectful and accurate when they are asked what they need in order to learn" (p.22). Just how focused should a focus group be? The process needs structure to have validity. The degree of structure determines the kind of data that the discussions will produce.

Participants

Like most other qualitative methods, focus groups rely on purposive sampling techniques. Students are selected to participate based on their capacity to contribute to productive discussion related to the topic. However, the focus group should be representative of the population within the larger class or school context. It is important to meet with the students before the date of the focus group to explain the process to them, to help them understand why and how they are being asked to participate, and to have them agree to be participants. It is important for students to know that their voice and opinions are valued and that what they say will be considered in improving the teaching and learning environment in their school. At this pre-focus group meeting, parental consent forms for participation in the focus group can also be distributed.

Moderator's role and interview questions

Focus groups should be facilitated by adults who are not directly involved with the students in the school. Within CBE's Cycle 4 AISI project, learning leaders, who work in schools as instructional coaches, conducted the student focus group interviews. Because data from the focus group interviews informed both school and system direction, the questions used in the focus group interviews were created at the district level to ensure consistency, reliability and validity. The focus group questions arose from and relate to the measures in the AISI project.

The moderator plays a key role in the focus group interview. To this end, district support was provided to learning leaders in the project to prepare them for their role as moderator. Professional development for learning leaders included an in-depth discussion of focus group methodology and an identification of the communication skills required as a moderator. As well, a video of an actual student focus group moderated by one of the learning leaders provided a strong exemplar for how to conduct the interview. The video identified and demonstrated the following components of the focus group interview:

- Welcoming the students
- Setting the students at ease/revisiting the purpose
- Opening question – setting the stage
- Following the same question, including other students
- Paraphrasing – checking for understanding
- Probing – asking students for more detail
- Stop – how are the students doing?
- Transitioning to another question
- Summarizing – using a visual

Analysis and reporting of the data
Learning leaders analysed and reported the data for each school in which they had conducted a student focus group. Using the audiotapes and transcribed notes from the interview, every student comment was read carefully and key words were highlighted. Categories were identified and every comment was reread and coded by category. Themes that emerged were highlighted by illustrative quotes in order to powerfully and accurately convey the theme. The data for each school were entered into their school development plan. In turn, the school data were aggregated and interpreted at the district level in order to inform district planning and provincial reporting.

Examining the findings
The greatest value of focus group findings arises from a thorough discussion and thoughtful reflection about what the data are telling us about students and their learning. Based on the data, what are the school-wide issues that will be incorporated for collective action through the school development plan? What are the issues that will be addressed through the PLC process? Is it possible for teachers to set professional learning goals around some of the issues? At the district level, what are students saying about our district strategy and AISI project that focuses on the personalization of student learning? Further,

how will what the students have said help us to personalize learning for them? Finally, how will we follow up with students to let them know that what they said "counts" and that their voice has been considered in school planning and improvement?

Summary
Listening to students not only demonstrates that we care about them, but also that we value what they have to say about their learning (and about our teaching). "When students sense that they are valued, they are confident that they can contribute to and gain from being a part of the group; they feel included" (Slater, 2004, p.59). Focus groups provide the opportunity to listen to students in a purposeful way so that our actions align with the expressed needs of our students.

Holcomb, E. (2010). Customer input through focus groups. *Professional Association of Georgia Educators.* p.22-25.

Slater, L. (2004). Relationship-driven teaching cultivates collaboration and inclusion. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 40 (2) p.58-59.*

Alberta Education (2011). *Action on Inclusion.* p.1-2. Retrieved from:http://www.education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/inclusion/about.aspx March 9, 2011.

Effective Assessment for Learning Practices

by Dr. David Townsend, University of Lethbridge

During the summer and fall of 2009, a team of researchers from the University of Lethbridge reviewed twenty-four assessment for learning projects from AISI Cycle 3 and published their findings in *Successful Assessment for Learning Projects from Cycle 3*. This article offers a brief summary of the review highlights, with particular attention to those findings that have immediate applicability to classroom practice.

The eight most effective assessment strategies for teachers were ranked as follows:
1. Having a thorough knowledge of the Program of Studies, with a primary focus on learning outcomes.
2. Ensuring the learning outcomes were known to students.
3. Using rubrics, exemplars and criteria for assessment.
4. Using I CAN statements extensively.
5. Providing continuous, informal feedback.
6. Developing questioning skills for teachers and for students.

7. Using portfolios.
8. Encouraging more student self-assessment.

The authors of project final reports and participants in focus group meetings identified several examples of changes in students' levels of engagement, confidence and learning, including students':

- understanding of learning expectations
- responsibility for their own learning
- uses of portfolios
- participation in the development of rubrics and criteria
- positive responses to descriptive feedback

Focus group participants offered a "top-10" list of factors they believed contributed to success in the twenty-four projects that were reviewed. In rank order, they were:

1. Leadership
2. Professional learning
3. Collaboration (learning partnerships)
4. Planned changes in teaching practice
5. Job-embedded (site-embedded) time
6. Increased levels of commitment
7. Trust
8. Reflective practice
9. Clarity of purpose
10. Personal empowerment

The participants in the review process have added something new to our knowledge of school improvement and change.

First, they have shown how the professional learning of teachers can be synonymous with fundamental principles of adult learning.

Next, they have confirmed that success in AISI projects can be enhanced through the application of collaborative inquiry methods and a commitment to evidence-based practice.

Finally, through their involvement in communities of practice, and their achievement of project goals, they have demonstrated how the principles of assessment for learning can be applied equally as well to both student and adult learning. In the process, they have confirmed that, at the heart of every school improvement initiative, there must be a focus on student learning.

The report is available on the AISI website at http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi/leaders/publications.aspx .

Research Centre

Alberta Excels in International School Leadership Study

Alberta was one of eight world-leading education systems invited by McKinsey & Company to participate in the research project entitled *Capturing the Leadership Premium: How the World's Top School Systems are Building Leadership Capacity for the Future*, conducted by co-researchers Sir Michael Barber, Fenton Whelan and Michael Clark. The systems involved were Alberta, New Zealand, England, Netherlands, New York State, Singapore, Ontario and Victoria, Australia.

The study included a literature review on school leadership, surveys and interviews.

Alberta principals ranked the highest in the following characteristics:
- were mentored by an experienced school leader
- support staff development
- meet or work with individual students every day
- walk the hallways and attend assemblies
- hold a leadership position in a non-education volunteer organization

The study found that high-performing principals worldwide share the following characteristics:
- have a joy of teaching
- set clear vision, direction and goals
- support staff development
- are involved with students, parents and the community
- gained skills and insights as assistant principals
- network regularly with peers and other schools

The researchers noted the importance of school leadership and the processes necessary for improvement:
- Leadership that is focused on teaching, learning and people is crucial to the current and future success of schools.
- High-performing principals focus more on instructional leadership and the development of teachers than on other roles.
- System policies and practices make a difference to leadership capacity.
- Leaders are grown through experience and support; actively cultivating them can increase the leadership capacity of the system.
- Leaders learn best in context and from a diverse range of sources, including peers, superiors, online resources and formal training.

- Selecting a school leader is one of the most important decisions for an education system.
- Maximizing leadership capacity means regarding the selection and development of leaders as integral parts of the work of schools and the system, rather than discrete processes within it.

The full report may be accessed at http://www.mckinsey.com/clientservice/Social_Sector/our_practices/Education/Knowledge_Highlights/Capturing%20the%20leadership%20premium.aspx.

Minister's Student Advisory Council

Speak Out is now accepting applications for the 2011-2012 Minister's Student Advisory Council. The Council consists of 24 youth, ages 14 to 19, with varying backgrounds, opinions and experiences from all regions of Alberta. The council will meet with the Minister of Education three times per year to provide perspectives on educational issues affecting youth.

Council members commit to a term of one year and can serve for a maximum of two years. They will receive leadership, facilitation, media and public speaking training. Each council member hosts his or her very own Speak Out Forum using the DVD Tool Kit, and also acts as an ambassador for Speak Out at various other events and conferences where student voice is valued.

The online application is available at http://www.speakout.alberta.ca/Council/tabid/65/Default.aspx [or select the Council tab on the Speak Out site].

Deadline to apply for the 2011-2012 Council is 4:30 p.m., Friday, May 27, 2011.

Contact: Kelley Bessette, Student Engagement and Speak Out, at Kelley.bessette@gov.ab.ca.

University Partners Launch New AISI Periodical

Our AISI University Partners are launching *The AISI Journal*, a new online venue for the publication and dissemination of AISI-inspired research and scholarship. This new journal will be edited by the AISI University Partners and will be published twice a year.

Suggested Themes:
- History of AISI
- AISI and Student Learning
- AISI and the Application of Technology
- AISI and Professional Learning
- Action Research through AISI
- AISI and School Improvement

Submissions—approximately 3,000 words in APA style—can be sent to any of the following university-based AISI coordinators:

Jim Parson, University of Alberta
Kelly Harding, University of Alberta
Joanne Steinmann, University of Calgary
Stephanie Davis, University of Calgary
David Townsend, University of Lethbridge

The deadline for the first edition is now past, but this is an excellent time to begin writing for the second edition!

Alberta
Freedom To Create. Spirit To Achieve.

AISI
Celebrating 10 Years
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Government of Alberta