

SD 91 Indigenous Student/Parent Engagement

Overview

As expected, we received a wide range of responses in the surveys that were distributed. We designed the surveys to focus on strengths-based approaches, which start the survey to position all students as being successful, because every student is successful in some way. Building from the self-identified successes we asked students about their potential for continued success, transitions to high school, barriers to success, community support, and racism in the school. Similar questions were posed to parents/guardians in a separate survey. While there are a range of findings and fascinating data, this can be difficult in a short synopsis. The one page summary will be followed by several pages of data analysis, creating themes from the responses and presenting them in both qualitative and quantitative measurements based on each response.

Sample

The sample size we were able to draw from in this study substantial, given the size of the population we are addressing in our schools. We were able to collect surveys from 149 participants. Of the surveys that were collected, 82 were from parents/guardians and 67 were from students. Based on these numbers we have a large sample to develop themes and responses to ensure a responsive education system in our district. Our home-school coordinators deserve all of the credit for creating an environment where parents and students felt comfortable participating in research. This is especially impressive since research studies historically have not always been welcoming and supporting of Indigenous families. Really great work!

Important Findings

There have been a number of initial findings that are fascinating and important for the district and the school to pursue.

Social engagement – the most significant barrier facing students during periods of transition are the social relationships they have in the high school. Repeatedly we heard parents and students talk about the social aspect of the transition being the most difficult. Either students lacked a social network or parents were worried about the students entering a potentially distracting social network. Based on the research of Friesen, we know that a lack of social engagement is the most significant predictor of dropping out of school.

Racism is often peer related – While there are examples of teachers marginalizing students, most of the discussions of racism are related to student behaviour. Often it is students being resistant to or dismissive of Indigenous topics or learning in the school. It is clear students need to be educated to see the value of other ways of knowing or life

experiences in the school. As they are interpreting Indigenous content as not important to them.

Small gestures go a long way with parents – It is clear from the parents’ feedback that small gestures like phone calls, emails, or notes home to parents create a significant amount of goodwill. Moreover, focused attention on students or positive affirmation made the students feel validated, valued, and welcomed. The school can build upon this by encouraging teachers to pursue these personal forms of communication, perhaps at the beginning of the year to start the relationship off in a good way.

Low expectations and separate classes – A number of parents felt that their children were being set up for failure by placing them in separate classes. Students said they were treated as if they were “stupid” from the rest of the students. Quite a few parents made strong pleas to have their children educated in “normal” classes, which related to high and low expectations for students.

Common barriers to other teenagers – We heard repeated discussions of phones, social media, video games, and other aspects of technology being a barrier to student success. These factors align with barriers for all students, regardless of race. However, we must consider these barriers as cumulative with the barriers specific to Indigenous students.

Next Steps

Building from the knowledge we have developed here, we can create professional development sessions for each school in order to present the findings, but also establish school responses to the stated needs. In addition, we can start off by showing the schools what they are doing well, reinforcing the positive practices and expanding. We can also set up sessions for parents to show that they have been heard and that we are taking action based on what they have recommended. This both shows that we are listening and that their participation in the research is having an impact. Parents will also be shown that the district is serious about pursuing evidence-based approaches to offering their children a more responsive and respectful education.