

Building Student Success in B.C.'s Public Schools

A Guide for Parents

By Catherine Abraham and Joyce Gram

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The authors have been involved in parent education in British Columbia for over twenty years. Catherine Abraham has written extensively for parents in the areas of special education, parent support, and policy development. Joyce Gram has written for parents in all areas through newsletters and websites. Both have held numerous executive and advocate positions on school and district parent advisory councils and have worked at the provincial level.

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Other guides for parents in this series, available electronically from the authors:

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Building Student Success in B.C.'s Public Schools

As parents, we have a major stake in the success of our schools. We often measure school success by how well our children perform, and we sometimes go to great lengths to find a school where we believe our children will do well.

But do we understand the factors that go into creating a school where children can succeed?

Our education system has become exceedingly complex. People and ideas compete for acceptance—and parents are often left wondering what to think.

To make sense of this complexity, researchers have looked at the factors that lead to student success and have found that certain things have a consistent and positive impact on how well students perform. When those factors are present and well managed, students do better.

In this guide, we have isolated key factors in building student success. For each factor, we have provided background explanation and information on research findings.

We hope the information that follows will give you a better understanding of what leads to student success. We also hope it will help you, as a parent, as a member of your Parent Advisory Council, or as a parent representative on your School Planning Council, to contribute more effectively to the improvement of our schools and districts.



Leadership

Background

Principals and superintendents are leaders in our public school system. They carry the ultimate responsibility for everything that happens in our schools and districts.

Over the past twenty years, a dramatic change has taken place in the role of administrators. Principals and superintendents used to be seen primarily as managers—their skills as managers were paramount, overshadowing their skills as teachers. But many recent reforms in education have required them to develop high levels of expertise in teaching and learning. Now, they are expected to be experts in these areas and to lead others through their expertise.

What the Research Tells Us

Researchers agree that strong leadership is fundamental to the success of our schools. Administrators take the lead in changing our schools. They must motivate others and bring together everything that schools and districts need to raise student achievement.

Successful administrators create, or help others to create, a number of key requirements for improvement and success in our schools and districts:

- A clearly expressed vision for success that is widely shared and put into practice
- Leadership in instruction and curriculum
- Better connections with parents and agencies to support students
- A culture that brings students, parents, teachers, and administrators together
- Ways to measure and account for student performance
- Ongoing attention to good quality teaching
- Continual professional development that is linked to curriculum
- An approach to change that encourages wide participation

How can we support administrators in fulfilling their role?

Teacher Quality

Background

“Teacher quality” can mean:

- The qualifications a teacher brings to the classroom
- The teaching practices a teacher uses in the classroom

Teacher quality is a complex blend of a teacher’s abilities, education and certification, knowledge of subject areas, professional development, and teaching in the classroom. All of these can be used to measure teacher quality.

What the Research Tells Us

Many researchers see teacher quality as the single most important factor in improving student success. One researcher said:

Highly effective teachers were found to be effective regardless of racial composition of the class, poverty level of the students, heterogeneity¹ of the class, school climate or class size. These other factors pale to triviality in comparison to teacher effectiveness.²

Improving teacher quality requires collaboration at all levels. The following factors play a part in improving teacher quality:

- Better teacher preparation at universities
- Good hiring and assignment practices
- Mentoring programs to help teachers at all stages of their careers
- Continuous, top quality professional development
- Accurate methods for measuring teacher performance
- Ongoing evaluation of teacher performance
- Remediation and ultimately removal of those who perform below standard

Some recent research also shows that compensation may be effective in acknowledging and encouraging excellence.

¹We commonly refer to this as “class composition.”

²Phillips, Susan M. *Teacher Quality in Canada*. See Resources, page 12.

How can parents, at the school, district, and provincial levels, play a part in improving teacher quality?

Parental Involvement

Background

Parental involvement in our schools happens in many different ways and at all levels. It includes helping our children with homework, volunteering in the school and classroom, participating on parent advisory councils and school planning councils, and working with the community, to name only a few.

The role parents play in our schools and districts has changed significantly over the past twenty years. Parents used to be confined to supporting schools from the fringes. Now, parents support our schools and students in more meaningful ways and from within.

What the Research Tells Us

The research is clear—students do better in school when parents are involved. This is true regardless of race, ethnicity, social standing, economic status, educational level of parents, and so on.

Students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to achieve higher grades, attend school regularly, have better social skills and behaviour, and go on to post-secondary education.

Researchers have found that parental involvement programs that focus on the relationship between parents and educators produce better results. When parental involvement is strong, teacher morale improves.

Schools themselves can make a difference in the level and type of parental involvement in the school and district. Especially at the higher grades, schools need to encourage parents to stay involved. As students grow older, and in schools with high numbers of poor and minority students, research shows that parental involvement tends to be less.

How is parental involvement supported in your school?

School Culture and Climate

Background

Researchers define school culture and climate in different ways. Perhaps the best definition is this one:

How we meet. Metaphors we use. Our humor. Our symbols. Our stories. Our rituals. Our use of space. Our rewards. How we meet people. How we communicate. Our sacred cows. Time issues. How mistakes are dealt with. How we celebrate. Our heroes and heroines. How we learn. How we view hurdles. Our tribal rules. How we deal with skeptics. How we approach new problems. How leaders lead. How we deal with angry customers. How we get better at what we do. How we induct new people. Our status symbols.¹

¹ *Assessing and Transforming School Culture to Improve Student Achievement*. Michigan Association of Schools Boards. Presentation by Pat Meaux and Linda Smith, March 2006.

What the Research Tells Us

Day-to-day culture and climate in our schools affect student achievement more than race or economic factors. School culture affects the way we think about our schools and our roles. Research tells us it influences how well we accept new things, value each other, and work together in improving our schools.

When school culture and climate are healthy, improvement can and does happen. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators find it easier to work together to make change.

Culture and climate have a direct impact on students. In a positive culture, students feel safer and behave better.

The B.C. Ministry of Education conducts a satisfaction survey of students, parents, and teachers every year between January and March. This survey provides valuable information on school culture and climate. The results are available at http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/sat_survey/.

Are you satisfied with your school and district culture and climate? How can they be improved?

Class Size

Background

Many studies have been done on class size, perhaps more than on any other area of education.

Most parents want their children in small classes—intuitively, it feels right. By and large, teachers agree. Teachers’ unions throughout North America have advocated for smaller class sizes as a way to raise student achievement. Class sizes have been dropping over the past twenty-five years.

What the Research Tells Us

Parents might be surprised to learn that research on class size as a way to improve student achievement is not very clear.

Students in kindergarten and grade one, especially at-risk students, benefit the most from smaller classes, particularly if the classes are below twenty students. Teacher morale and workload improve with smaller classes.

After grade one, the research is not as consistent. Some studies show that primary students continue to demonstrate the benefits of having been in small classes in kindergarten and grade

one. Other studies find no difference in achievement by the end of grades two and three. Researchers speculate that smaller classes in kindergarten and grade one may help students develop social skills. Older students from larger classes may have found other ways to learn to socialize.

Class size in secondary schools has not been well researched. So far, reductions in class size have not been shown to improve student achievement. Some research has even suggested that smaller classes may lower student achievement, if reducing class size means hiring less qualified teachers.

The research points to the need to change teaching methods at the same time classes are reduced, to achieve the most benefit. Researchers caution that reductions should be done slowly, rather than dramatically, and should be monitored for their impact on student achievement.

Some researchers are critical of reducing class size. They wonder whether it is worth the cost, and note that the modest advantages are expensive compared to other things that can be done. For example, they suggest that better teacher training is effective and less costly.

How is your school or district monitoring the effect of changes in class size on student achievement?

Early Identification and Intervention

Background

Many children enter kindergarten at risk for reading difficulties. For these children to succeed in school, they need two things:

- Early identification of their learning difficulty
- Early intervention that addresses their particular difficulty

Educators have known about the importance of early intervention since the 1980s or earlier. Many school districts in B.C. screen kindergarten children to identify those at risk for developing reading problems. Students who are identified and receive intensive instruction can acquire average reading skills. Nevertheless, kindergarten screening is not consistent across the province.

Does your school actively promote early identification and intervention for at-risk students?

What the Research Tells Us

Kindergarten children who are at risk for reading difficulties and receive early intervention can catch up to their age-mates. Some studies have shown dramatic results using *phonological awareness training*.¹ Students who do not receive special attention during the first three years of school may never catch up. Many will require ongoing assistance throughout their education.

Researchers have found that, without good diagnosis and intervention, the academically rich get richer and the academically poor get poorer. Learning disabilities that are not diagnosed and addressed have an escalating, negative effect on children. Students with learning disabilities develop poor self-image and self-esteem as they continue to fail academically and socially.

Failure to identify and address learning disabilities is expensive. As students get older, they require more highly specialized training. Teacher preparation programs do not always give classroom teachers the knowledge and skills they need to help these students. Specialists must be brought in, at considerable cost.

¹*Phonological awareness* is the ability to hear sounds that make up words in spoken language. This includes recognizing words that rhyme, deciding whether words begin or end with the same sounds, understanding that sounds can be manipulated to create new words, and separating words into their individual sounds. See http://www.reading-tutors.com/tips/TH_Tips_PhonAware.pdf

Behaviour Management

Background

Good behaviour in schools is linked to strong academic achievement. Students generally do better academically in schools that focus on improving student behaviour.

But the reverse is also true. Students who are given the opportunity to succeed academically tend to behave better. The two things—good behaviour and academic success—are inextricably linked. This means that schools and districts need to encourage both behavioural and academic success.

What the Research Tells Us

Behaviour and discipline are major issues in many of our schools. Despite concern shared by parents and educators, behaviour management has not kept pace with what we understand from research.

Research tells us that simply reacting to misbehaviour is not effective in changing the behaviour. Punishing problem behaviour often leads to more aggressive behaviour, absenteeism, and dropping out of school.

Positive strategies that teach and encourage good behaviour are effective. Schools that have made broad, or *systemic*, changes have succeeded in building stronger, safer school environments. Researchers have found that these changes must be:

- Proactive rather than reactive
- Related to classroom learning
- Consistently applied throughout the school
- Continuously monitored
- Based on a careful examination of what the school needs
- Supported by administrators

Some students need individual support to improve their behaviour. For these students, school-wide changes are not enough. Nevertheless, school-wide changes are necessary for individual support to succeed.

There are many good sources of information on how well our schools and districts are managing behaviour. These include:

- Satisfaction surveys
- Office referrals—the number and reasons
- Suspensions and expulsions—again, the number and reasons

How does your school measure behaviour management to see if it is improving?

Other Factors

English as a Second Language

B.C. is a multicultural province—dozens of languages are spoken in our schools. Many students come to school with poor English skills.

Numerous studies of ESL students have shown that these students are at risk for lower grades than their English-speaking age-mates. Their abilities are often underrated, and they tend to drop out of school earlier. Those with learning disabilities may be overlooked because their learning disability is mistaken for language difficulty.

Early intervention can be extremely effective with ESL students, especially when it includes the following:

- Phonological training (sounding out letters to understand the way sounds make words)¹
- Emphasis on vocabulary and the structure of the English language

ESL students who receive intensive help can learn to read as well as, or better than, their peers by the end of grade two.

A recent study of non-English speaking preschoolers found that, when their teachers spoke some of the children's language, the preschoolers experienced less aggression, bullying, and teasing by classmates and were better adjusted in class.

¹ See Early Identification and Intervention

School Calendars

There has been growing interest in school calendars as they relate to student achievement.

In particular, research has shown that balanced calendars benefit student learning. A balanced calendar is one in which vacation times are evenly distributed throughout the calendar year. Curriculum and number of teaching days remain the same.

Balanced calendars have been found to benefit students in the following ways:

- Student attendance improves.
- Students are better motivated and achievement rises.
- At-risk students retain knowledge that is otherwise lost during long vacations.
- Teachers spend less time reviewing material.
- Teacher wellness and student behaviour improve.
- Drop-out rates are lower.

Other Factors, continued

Class Composition

“Class composition” means the kinds of students who make up a class: their gender, social and economic status, race, language, and learning requirements.

Many teachers tell us that the composition of a class is more significant than the size.

It is difficult to study the effects of class composition in isolation from other factors, and it may serve little purpose. Children come to our public schools from all backgrounds and with various skills and abilities—and we must accommodate them all.

Research on class composition tends to be mixed. Some studies show better student achievement in homogeneous classes, others show better results in classes where students come from various backgrounds. With this in mind, we have not attempted to provide an overview of research on class composition.

All the factors we have addressed in this guide influence student success and apply to all types of classes, regardless of their composition.

Resources

The resources listed on this and the next page are a sampling of the studies and commentaries we consulted in the preparation of this guide. The list is in no way exhaustive. We chose these items because we thought they would be of interest to our readers. They are all available on the Internet for easy access. If you would like to know more about our research, please contact us at parenteducation@hotmail.com.

On Leadership

Phillips, Susan, Patrick Renihan and Helen Raham. *The Role of the School Principal: Present Status and Future Challenges in Managing Effective Schools*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2003. Available at http://www.sae.ca/publications/A_031_BBI_MID.php

Maquire, Patrick. *District Practices and Student Achievement: Lessons from Alberta*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2003. Available at http://www.sae.ca/publications/A_019_BBI_MID.php

On Teacher Quality

Phillips, Susan M. *Teacher Quality in Canada*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2002. Available at http://www.sae.ca/publications/A_016_DDD_MID.php

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On Parental Involvement

Henderson, Anne T. and Karen L. Mapp. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, 2002. Available at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>

Epstein, Joyce L. Director, Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships: National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University. Available at <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>

On School Culture and Climate

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <http://www.ascd.org>. Click on Education Topics, then School Culture & Climate.

LeadSpace. Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand. http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/leadership/school_culture/school_culture.php

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Resources, continued

On Class Size

Canadian Council on Learning. *Making Sense of the Class Size Debate*. September 14, 2005. Available at <http://search.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LiL-14sep2005.htm>

Guillemette, Yvan. *School Class Size: Smaller Isn't Better*. C.D. Howe Institute, 2005. Available at http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/commentary_215.pdf

Wagner, Katherine. *Class Size Policy*. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2001. Available at http://www.sae.ca/policy/D_014_BBZ_LON.php

On Early Intervention and Identification

Moore v. B.C. (Ministry of Education) and School District No. 44. Paragraphs 565 to 611 (pages 169 to 183 of the judgment). Available at [http://www.bchrt.bc.ca/decisions/2005/pdf/Moore_v_BC_\(Ministry_of_Education\)_and_School_District_No_44_2005_BCHRT_580.pdf](http://www.bchrt.bc.ca/decisions/2005/pdf/Moore_v_BC_(Ministry_of_Education)_and_School_District_No_44_2005_BCHRT_580.pdf)

Research Works! <http://www.research-works.ca/Resources.htm> Click on *Focus on Literacy – Canadian Education Association*

Siegel, Linda. <http://www.research-works.ca/PDFfiles/Words-Siegel.pdf>

On Behaviour Management

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: <http://www.pbis.org>

B.C. Ministry of Education. Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/sco/>

On English as a Second Language

Siegel, Linda and North Vancouver School District. *How can we prevent reading difficulties in all children including those learning English as a second language?* <http://www.research-works.ca/PDFfiles/Facts-Siegel.pdf>

With Proper Intervention, ESL Students Not at Learning Disadvantage. HGSE News, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/features/lesaux11052003.html>

Relationship of English-only to young children's social and language skills. FPG Snapshot. University of North Carolina, March 2007. <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~snapshots/snap41.pdf>

On School Calendars

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