

Assessing Our Learning Community: Staff Perceptions



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Introduction

Saskatoon Public Schools has adopted the learning community model as one of the foundations of our strategic plan and operation. The hallmark of a learning community is an atmosphere in which all stakeholders – especially staff and students – feel affirmed and welcomed and, at the same time, challenged to grow and learn together. Thus, a key aspect of Saskatoon Public Schools' strategic planning process is to provide stakeholders in our organization (i.e., students, parents, staff, and the community-at-large) with a venue for offering their advice and input regarding the operation and direction of the Division.

During this school year, we have conducted perception surveys with our staff as well as with members of the general public and the business community. This report focuses on the results of the staff perception survey.

The Survey

This marks the third systematic survey of our staff members under the banner of the learning community. This survey (as well as the similar parental and student surveys reported during the 2005-2006 and 2007-2008 school years and the residential, business surveys reported under separate cover as part of this Board file) is important not only for the purposes of our Division in that we provide staff members with a voice to contribute to the strategic plan, but also because it breaks new ground in the broader academic community with respect to learning community research (Tunison, Sackney, & Anderson, 2006).

Traditionally, learning communities have been conceptualized in terms of small teams of professionals gathered together for a common interest (e.g., a book club, a professional growth network, grade-alike or department grouping, etc.) or as an individual school community. This research uniquely applies the concept of a learning community to encapsulate all stakeholders of an entire school division. The staff survey sees *all* employees of Saskatoon Public Schools – members of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (teachers, principals, and vice/assistant principals) and Canadian Union of Public Employees (journeyman tradespersons, maintenance staff, caretaking personnel, driver instructors, educational assistants, information services technicians, and other support staff) as well as out-of-scope personnel – as contributors to one large learning community.

During the 2004-05 school year, we invited staff members to respond to an on-line survey administered internally. While this is an efficient method to collect data, it posed some challenges in terms of perceptions of anonymity and confidentiality as well as in statistical representation of the total population of our staff members. In order to

address some of these challenges, a statistically representative sample of the staff members of Saskatoon Public Schools were contacted via telephone by a third-party market research firm during the 2006-2007 school year and invited to participate in that year's survey. Given the success of the telephone survey methodology in 2006-2007, we repeated the process with a statistically representative sample of our employees this year.

All three iterations of the survey were grounded in the work of Dr. Larry Sackney, an internationally-known expert in learning community theory. In broad terms, the items included in the survey were designed to assess the extent to which the culture of a learning community has been cultivated across the Division.

The survey instrument asks staff members to comment on several statements that reflect the six main attributes of a learning community identified by Dr. Sackney. These characteristics include:

- Shared Understanding and Collaboration,
- Reflective Practice,
- Quality of Work Life,
- Organizational Resources,
- Currency, and
- Learning Opportunity.

About half of the survey items ask respondents to reflect upon the frequency of certain behaviours in their workplace that would be typical in effective learning communities (i.e., how often do particular behaviours take place). The remainder of the survey invites respondents to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements referring personal experiences that would be common among employees in learning communities.

In addition, we invited respondents to elaborate on their responses to the survey items or to offer their views on issues not directly addressed by the survey through an open-ended question.

Our Results

In general, we found that, in the view of our staff members, we have been successful in creating the basis for a learning community within Saskatoon Public Schools; however, we still have room for growth. In both 2004-05 and 2006-2007, our employees were particularly positive regarding the dimensions of *Shared Understanding and Collaboration*, *Reflective Practice*, and *Quality of Work Life*. In contrast, staff members were least positive about *Organizational Resources* in both the 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 surveys.

Analysis from this year's survey reveals that, for most survey items, results mirror the results from the previous two survey iterations. However, instances in which there are significant differences are referenced in this report (Please note that the statistical margin of error is $\pm 5.4\%$).

The following provides a detailed discussion of our employees' comments organized according to the six dimensions of a learning community identified in Dr. Sackney's research (see Appendix A for a graphic representations of the results from these survey items).

Shared Understanding and Collaboration

This dimension refers to the extent to which staff members – Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) members, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) members, as well as out-of-scope employees (OSE) – work together with a common purpose – particularly one that is focussed on student learning. Five survey items speak to facets of this important dimension.

Results from this year's survey indicate that staff members remain positive with respect to their shared understanding of their role in supporting students' learning. In addition, employees' perceptions reveal that there is a collaborative and mutually supportive climate in our various schools and offices. Notably, one of the survey items in this section – "Staff members' informal staff room and/or hallway conversations are professional" – has seen marked improvement over the previous two survey initiatives. This finding is supported with additional evidence from principals and supervisors who frequently indicate that "Conversations are different" or "Conversations have changed".

The results from the survey items related to "Shared Understanding and Collaboration" are as follows (results are reported in two sections – frequency of behaviours and personal experiences):

Frequency of Behaviours: (Please note: The scale used for these items includes five categories of frequency – very frequently/almost always, fairly often, sometimes, once in a while, and rarely. The percentages cited throughout this report reflect those respondents who chose "very frequently/almost always" and "fairly often")

- 89% indicated that "Staff members have a shared purpose that is focused on student learning."
- 83% indicated that "Staff members take collective responsibility for student learning."
- 78% indicated that "Staff members' informal staff room and/or hallway conversations are professional."
- 65% indicated that "Staff members believe that they make a difference in the school division."

Personal Experiences: (Please note: The scale for these items includes four categories of agreement – strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The percentages cited throughout this report reflect those respondents who agreed or strongly agreed)

- 93% agreed that “I know what is expected of me at work.

Reflective Practice

This dimension focuses on staff members’ professional practices – especially in relation to the link between their daily work activities and their reflections about what they can learn from those activities. One survey item speaks to reflective practice.

The findings related to this dimension from this year’s survey are statistically identical to those of our previous two surveys. In 2004-2005, 71% of staff believed that “Staff members often reflect on their professional practice”; whereas, in 2006-2007, 72% of staff members believed this to be so. This year, 74% of respondents indicated that they frequently observed themselves and their colleagues to be reflective practitioners.

Quality of Work Life

The quality of work life for staff members in all employee groups is an important indicator of the health of the learning community. Four survey items addressed this important dimension of our learning community.

Behaviours:

- In 2004-2005, 76% of respondents indicated that their “Colleagues are quick to provide assistance to each other when the need arises”. In 2006-07, 90% of our employees felt that this was true. This year, 91% observed this to be a frequent occurrence.

Personal experiences:

- Eighty-eight percent of the respondents to our 2004-2005 survey indicated that they “Enjoy working at their workplace”. In 2006-2007, 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This year, 96% of our employees responded positively to this statement.
- Fifty-five percent of 2006-2007 survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that “The stress level in my workplace is high.” This year, 64% of our employees agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. (Note: this question was not asked in the 2004-2005 survey)
- In 2006-2007, 81% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their “Supervisor seems to be indifferent about me as a person”; whereas, 79% of this year’s respondents felt this to be true. (Note: this question was not asked in the 2004-2005 survey)

Organizational Resources

This dimension focuses on the level of support available within the Division for activities such as professional learning. Three survey items speak to this aspect of our learning community. Each of these items focuses on respondents' personal experiences.

In both the 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 surveys, this dimension included the item with the lowest level of agreement. This was also true for the 2008-2009 survey. Although, the item(s) that received the lowest level of agreement was not consistent from one year to the next.

For example, the item from the 2004-2005 survey with the lowest overall agreement – *"There is adequate funding for professional development"* – had 31% agreement among staff members. In 2006-2007, on the other hand, 52% of staff indicated agreement with this statement. This year, 58% agreed with this statement.

The item in both the 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 surveys that received the lowest overall level of agreement was *"Staff members are adequately trained when new technology is introduced"* (in 2006-2007, there was 32% agreement among staff members and this year 34% agreed with this statement). However, a larger proportion of staff members (40%) from the 2004-05 survey felt that they were adequately trained for using new technologies.

The third survey item that addresses organizational resources is *"I have access to the support and materials necessary to perform my duties"* (while this question was not asked in precisely the same way in all three iterations of the survey, there was enough similarity in the text that comparisons may be made). In response to this statement, 60% of staff members in 2004-2005 agreed that this was true; in 2006-2007, 84% agreed; and, in 2008-2009, 80% agreed.

Currency

Currency refers to the extent to which staff members feel that they stay abreast of the latest developments in their areas of responsibility. There is one survey item that speaks to this dimension of a learning community. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement, *"Staff members make effective use of electronic tools and resources in their daily work"*, 64% of this year's respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; whereas, 66% agreed in 2006-2007 and 57% agreed in 2004-2005.

Learning Opportunity

This dimension explores the extent to which all Saskatoon Public Schools' staff members use their experiences – both positive and negative – as opportunities to learn and grow. In a way, it measures the extent to which staff members exhibit the behaviours of life-long learners. There were three items that speak to this dimension.

Behaviours:

- Fifty percent of this year's respondents believed that *"Staff members frequently see failed initiatives as learning opportunities"*; whereas, in 2004-2005, 40% of respondents said this was so, and in 2006-2007 51% responded in this way.
- This year, 35% of our employees indicated that "Staff members see conflict as a learning opportunity". In 2004-2005, the result was 40% and in 2006-2007, 47% indicated that we capitalize on these learning opportunities.

Personal Experience:

- When asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "In the last seven days, I have received constructive feedback about my work", 60% of the 2006-2007 respondents indicated some level of agreement; while 55% of this year's respondents agreed with this statement (this item was not included in the 2004-2005 survey).

Open-ended Responses

As mentioned earlier, our survey included an open-ended question that invited respondents to provide general comments. Several staff members (46%) chose to provide feedback of this nature. While their observations were diverse, several common themes emerged. The three most common themes are presented here along with representative quotations.

1. Funding and professional development

The most common theme that emerged from open-ended comments referred to issues related to funding for professional development as well as the types of professional development opportunities. On one hand, many staff members indicated that they value the in-service sessions related to the Board's priorities. On the other hand, however, there were also several who felt that there were too few opportunities for them to engage in self-directed role-specific professional development. Another common thread was the need for more professional dialogue – especially among those from varied work placements but with similar roles.

"For many people in the system, there are very few financial resources for professional development ... [however] the Saskatoon Public School [Board] works very hard to

encourage people to be self-directed in their learning but I think providing time to them is hard."

"I don't think that there is enough freedom for [staff members] to choose their own professional development."

"My concern is the minimal amount of funding for outside professional development such as conferences that are related to what we deal with daily [although] funding will always be a problem."

"I really feel supported by the school division. I strongly agree with the direction the school division is going. I do understand there are areas that the school division can improve ... more professional development would enhance teaching and learning for staff and students."

"The level of accountability has increased too fast with too little input from teachers ... the number of in-service session days away from students is too great or too many for some teachers."

2. School board initiatives and strategies

A common theme among the responses indicated that our staff members have a strong commitment to continuous improvement and that they support recent initiatives that appear to be beneficial to children. However, some staff comments about new initiatives indicated that they felt their voices were not heard in the decision-making process and that decisions – especially about large-scale initiatives – have recently been “top-down”. In addition, some staff expressed that they were feeling “innovation overload” in that too much was changing too fast.

"The Literacy for Life initiative has changed how I think and teach. My students have benefitted greatly from the training I've been given and I really appreciate it. I'm very proud to be a part of a system that forges ahead and doesn't just go with the ebb and flow."

"Positives – in the academic approach it has been taken and the in-service with regards to literacy. Negatives – initiatives aren't always grassroots up ... [sometimes there is] not enough input from staff on how new initiatives are introduced."

"The stress in the workplace is caused by not having enough time for preparation and too many initiatives [being] thrown at us in a school year, the class sizes, [and] the pressure to meet the initiatives of the school board."

"I have seen the bar raised for student achievement. The school board is focused on greater student achievement [and] we are a data driven Division. [However] I think we need to be careful that our data driven focus does not interfere with teaching."

3. Support/funding/staff/work life

Many staff members indicated that they feel supported by their colleagues and administration. In addition, several observed that, should the need arise; they had “critical friends” in the Division to whom they could go to for additional support. However, there were also general comments about stressful situations and, in some cases, a lack of resources.

“The schools I’ve been working with have been really good (in regards to me being a sub) about making me a team member. I’m not treated like an outsider which is really nice.”

“Saskatoon Public Schools is positive, supportive, and advanced with respect to literacy, AFL, and I have also been on many provincial committees and SPS is on the top with respect to current research and practices and I am very proud to be an employee. At the same time, though, we face challenges but have effective leadership.”

“[Sometimes there is a] lack of support ... I didn’t have all the books I needed all the time [and] classes of 35 students [are very stressful].”

“I know it’s not very [easy] but I would like to see something done about lowering the stress level in the workplace. I am thankful for the time that the school board does put into professional development [though].”

“When things come up there is support at the school and I can talk to someone and get things figured out.”

Reflections on Staff Satisfaction

Overall, Saskatoon Public Schools’ staff members perceived the quality of their work life to be good. They tend to enjoy working at their work places, and they have a shared purpose that is focused on student learning. However, they also identified some challenges in terms of ensuring that all staff members feel that they have a voice in School Division decisions and that they are equipped with the knowledge and confidence that they can cope with the ever-increasing pace of change in the educational world.

Our staff members indicated that while they were satisfied with the collaborative atmosphere in their workplaces, they were concerned about the level of support available for self-directed personal and collective professional growth. In addition, technological use and training among our staff requires additional effort – particularly as it relates to embedding technological tools in support of Board priorities and strategic initiatives. Finally, we must continue to encourage everyone to see themselves and

others as both teachers and learners and to value both conflict and unsuccessful initiatives as learning opportunities.

This project continues to be a learning experience for all of us. We must continue to build trust and to communicate with our staff members not only to improve their experiences as employees in the Division but also to encourage them to grow and learn together as colleagues. We must also continue our work toward enhancing leadership capacity throughout the Division to support employees and Board priorities. Nevertheless, many respondents are looking forward to the opportunities ahead as we strive to meet the changing needs of students as they adapt to the conditions of the 21st Century information age.

References

Tunison, S., Sackney, L., & Anderson, K. (2006). *Assessing school system learning community capacity and satisfaction: The non-school sector*. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration. York University, Toronto, ON.

Appendix A: Graphic Representations of Staff Survey Results

Figure 1- Results from the 2008-2009 Survey - Behaviours

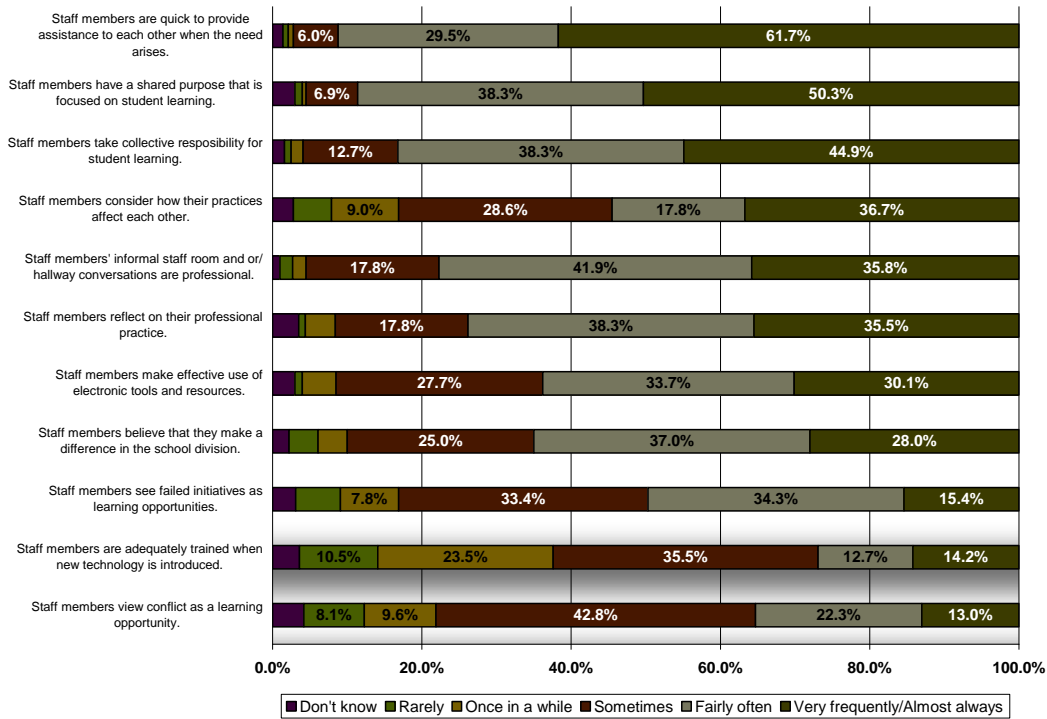


Figure 2 – Results from the 2008-2009 Survey – Personal Experience

