



# REPORT ON HIGH SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS

ASD-N 2017

[Abstract](#)

Student Perspectives on Education in Anglophone North School District

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## Preamble

On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Anglophone North School District Superintendent, Beth Stymiest, and District Education Council Chair, Micheal Mortlock, embarked on an annual series of focus group sessions with students from the eight high schools in ASD-N. The purpose of these sessions was to gain high school students' perspectives on some big ideas about education so that we can compare their view of education with the work we are trying to accomplish, as well as determine directions to improve student engagement.

Sessions were held in each high school with groups numbering from six to sixteen students. A cross section of students was chosen by their perspective schools for this activity to ensure multiple perspectives were included. The format of the sessions was the same for all the groups in order to identify common themes.

### Dates for the Focus Groups:

High School	Date	Time
Sugarloaf Senior High School	January 10 <sup>th</sup>	9:00 – 10:30
Dalhousie Regional High School	January 10 <sup>th</sup>	1:00 – 2:30
Bathurst High School	January 11 <sup>th</sup>	9:00 – 10:30
Miramichi Valley High School	January 13 <sup>th</sup>	9:00 – 10:30
James M. Hill Memorial High School	January 13 <sup>th</sup>	1:00 – 2:30
Blackville High School	February 21 <sup>st</sup>	9:30 – 11:00
Bonar Law Memorial High School	February 9 <sup>th</sup>	10:00 – 11:30
North and South Esk Regional High School	February 21 <sup>st</sup>	1:00 – 2:30

Students arrived promptly for sessions and were provided with an overview of why we were meeting. The following is the information that students were provided as we began the sessions.

This focus group will last for 1.5 hours. Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means we won't reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside the group. It is extremely important that we all understand the nature of this confidentiality since it will help us get as clear and honest a picture of your school as possible. We will take notes during our discussions and where needed, fictional names will be substituted for the names mentioned here.

Since each of your perspectives is important, we need to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinions and no one takes too much air time. I will take responsibility for time keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions. Use your best strategies to express your opinions without making others feel uncomfortable.

Discussion will center around three broad areas including attendance, assessment and instruction, and school connection and you will also have time to express your thoughts about the direction education should take into the future.

## **Part I: Introductory Activity**

The sessions began with an opportunity for students to get to know each other using a Think Pair Share activity. Students initially began the session brainstorming on their own, focusing on one of several questions that they felt they had a strong opinion about. They were then paired with another student and asked to spend time with their partner sharing their answers. Once they each had time to share answers with each other, they introduced their partner to the group by sharing their partner's thoughts about their chosen question.

### **Think Pair Share Questions:**

- Is homework necessary?
- Should exams be abolished?
- Can cell phones be educational tools?
- What characteristics should a good teacher have?
- What advice would you give younger kids about high school?
- What should be the punishment for acts of cyberbullying?
- What are you looking forward to (or dreading) second semester?
- What can you do to support students who don't feel connected to school

### **Think Pair Share Answers:**

#### **Is homework necessary?**

- It allows students to remember and reflect on topics over a period of time
- Need to ensure that homework is given in moderation
- With all the work given in class, homework on top of that becomes too much
- Some work is not explained well enough, making homework very difficult
- There is often way too much homework and teachers don't collaborate on what they give for homework, meaning you might have homework in multiple subjects which makes for a long night
- You don't learn from it if you didn't already understand the lesson
- Teaches you to set goals
- Teaches you how to manage and prioritize
- Helps students prepare for college
- Teaches students to work hard for what they want
- Test and retest instead of a big exam
- Homework should not be a requirement to pass a class
- Takes away a lot of freedom and kids need their own time
- If you are comfortable with the material it shouldn't be enforced

- If you choose to do it, it should be to expand your skills, not just drill what you already know
- Should be used to strengthen your skills
- If you didn't finish your work in class, then you should do it at home
- A teacher can teach the material but it is up to you to reinforce the concept
- Having good study habits is a good thing
- It is good from extra help but should not be counted for marks
- It should be optional or a way to obtain bonus marks
- Helps you to remember what you learned in school that day
- As an educational tool it does help for certain assignments but it can pile up fast and squash any chance of fun in a students' day
- Need a network of help for those who don't have anyone to help them at home

### **Should exams be abolished?**

#### **Yes:**

- They should be abolished because students only memorize for the exam and then it is gone
- They create added stress
- Teachers over-exaggerate the importance of exams
- They make or break some students' grades
- They take time away from actual learning (review and study weeks)
- There should be multiple ways to demonstrate what you have learned, not just exams
- They don't really prepare you for university because not all of the exams are the same
- Many university courses don't even have exams now
- Students work better together. Need more assessments that allow collaboration
- If students are passing the class, they should not have to write an exam
- They are worth way too much
- Exempt those with exceptional marks
- The biggest part of your mark should not be based on one big test. In the real world, all your knowledge wouldn't be tested all at once and you would have the resources to find your answer in the real world

#### **No:**

- No, they are an easy way to bring up grades
- They help students remember everything they've learned.
- Go back to when only certain subjects had exams – English, Math, Science
- They prepare you for university
- You can learn how to study for long periods of time
- Helps you to refresh the information you learned throughout the course that you might otherwise forget about
- They help sum up a subject to make sure you know everything

- They could be minimized by using the incentive program - using excellent attendance to take away an exam
- They are necessary but perhaps a different approach to writing exams could be developed
- Everyone does not test the same way
- They are material that you should have already learned
- They demonstrate that students have an understanding of the course
- But students should have the opportunity to exempt at least 1-2 per term

### **Can cell phones be educational tools?**

- They can take pictures of homework/answers when textbooks are not available
- You can create chat groups with friends about homework
- You can google answers or lessons if needed
- You can email teachers
- You can check your marks
- Quick and easy way to access tools
- There is pretty much an app for everything including calculators, graphing apps, moviemaker
- Schools need to allow students to access WiFi if this is going to happen
- Students have to be trained to use them so they are not a distraction
- Can assist students with time management
- Greatly expand our resources and as such, should be allowed to be used at certain times and for certain situations
- Teachers would not have to print notes, saving paper

### **What characteristics should a good teacher have?**

- Enthusiastic
- Kind/friendly
- Accepting
- Empathetic
- Flexible
- Open minded
- Calm temper
- Willing to make changes when needed
- Firm but fair
- Willing to listen to an argument
- Not annoyingly righteous
- Understand students
- Love what they are doing
- Understand the different types of learners
- Professional language and behavior
- Thoughtful in terms of student individuality

- Can show different methods for finding answers
- They can identify and support students who are struggling
- Be on time for class
- Be willing to talk about and help with things that happen outside of class
- Someone safe to talk to

**What advice would you give younger students about high school?**

- Don't slack off on assignments
- Pass your work in on time
- If you need extra help, teachers are willing to help you
- Don't ditch class just because you don't like a certain subject or a certain teacher – it might become a really bad habit
- Always be ready for class
- Listen carefully
- Study those subjects you don't understand – don't give up
- Do your work neatly so others can understand what you have written
- Be brave and step out of your comfort zone
- Find friends who will support you
- Listen to your parents – they know what they are talking about
- Get involved
- Don't let your peers affect your performance
- Don't try to be someone else – be yourself
- Don't be afraid to try new things and ask for help
- Ask the questions that you have
- Try new things
- Explore your options
- Play sports
- Learn how to take notes

**What should be the punishment for acts of cyberbullying?**

- Punishment should be very severe as it could lead to suicidal thoughts or actions
- Should be handled by a complete expulsion from school property
- Their account should be deleted and the device should be confiscated
- They should apologize and work towards earning their privileges back
- They should be made to teach others about the issues that can arise because of cyberbullying

**What are you looking forward to (or dreading) second semester?**

- Dreading the inability to change selections due to limited course offerings
- Looking forward to seeing some new classes

- Having new teachers
- Not seeing the same thing everyday

### What can you do to support students who don't feel connected to school?

- Offer alternative education programs for students
- Set up peer friendship groups to ensure everyone has someone they can talk to at the school and check in often
- We need groups to support students with anxiety and other mental health issues

### Part II: Group Activity

#### What Skills Do Our Students Need to Meet Success in the Real World



A presentation about the key skills that research has identified as being the skills students need to meet success in the real world was made and each skill was clarified in discussions with the students. These skills include:

- Problem solving and critical thinking
- Collaborating across networks
- Adaptability and agility
- Initiative and Entrepreneurialism
- Grit
- Oral and written communication skills
- Accessing and analyzing information
- Innovation and curiosity
- Character

Students were then asked to form groups and complete an **Idea Focus Activity** on the following topic:

Identify as many ideas as you can that are needed to make our educational system one that allows student to develop the skills they need to meet success in the world beyond school. They were told to accept every idea that was offered, and they could use, but were not limited to, the following focus questions to aid their discussion:

- **What does every student need?**
- **What will schools look like?**
- **How will we get the best from our students?**
- **Who will be the teachers?**
- **What role will technology play?**

After the students brainstormed their ideas, they went back and prioritized their top three ideas. These were then written on post it notes and once all ideas were recorded and displayed, we arranged them into categories. Students were given three dots and were asked to place the dots on the categories they felt needed to be a priority (\* indicate categories that were repeated among the different groups).

#### **Priority Areas for Consideration:**

##### **Course Options \***

- Better access to more options
- Higher level courses
- Revamping on-line courses to better meet the needs of students
- Less required courses – opened up to student needs and interests
- More fine arts courses
- Credit system with courses individualized to your needs
- Courses in the skilled trades, fashion and beauty tech – lots of opportunities to explore these areas

##### **Technology \* \* \* \* \***

- BYOD was mentioned numerous times
- Easier access
- All students have access through either their own tech device or one from the school that is appropriate and that works well

##### **Teaching and Learning/Personalized Learning \* \* \***

- Opportunities to learn life skills such a filling in income tax, changing a tire, managing money, etc



- Class discussions so everyone has a voice
- Opportunities for one to one instructions
- Real-life demonstrations
- More hands-on learning
- Everyone does a coop placement at some point between grades 10 and 12
- Opportunities to earn bonus marks to help when the course gets tough
- Brain breaks
- Language choices
- Life skills choices
- 360 degree rooms where learning and teaching is happening all around you
- Extra material available for extra help
- Better materials
- Classroom cubicles
- Learning beyond the classroom – field trips
- Interactive classrooms with circular desk set-up
- Inspiring and motivating teacher
- Highly engaged students and teachers
- Teachers collaborate to bring their subjects to life
- Opportunities to learn coding
- Opportunities to study a variety of authors and genres – not limited to Shakespeare
- Team building
- Individual learning styles of students are well known and honored
- All lessons posted on-line for students
- Opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other
- Texting app that has reminders for important due dates
- Opportunities to work independently on projects of your choice

### **Mental Health/Positive Learning \* \* \***

- Chill room with quiet spaces, bean bag chairs
- Activity room with ping pong or pool for those with nervous energy
- Emphasis on mental health
- More guidance counselors – ratio of 1:100 students
- Puppies for stress relief
- Later start to the day
- Correct students when they do something wrong but don't punish – restorative justice model

### **Cafeteria Services**

- Drink of the week – protein smoothies or healthy choices
- Nutritious and tasty food

- Healthy selections that are reasonably priced

### **Physical Surroundings \* \* \***

- Change the physical space of schools
- Cleaner, nicer bathrooms
- Color on walls
- Libraries with a combination of technology and books
- Music breaks
- Shorter, smaller classes
- Skateboard parks
- Art work and quotes throughout the building
- Exercise rooms
- Open campus
- Air conditioning
- Bigger, more open classrooms
- A place to be creative
- Labs for chemistry, physics and biology

### **Study Block**

- Ensure schools have it and it is used effectively

### **Career Planning**

- Opportunities to think about your future with career people and career counselors

### **Student Voice**

- Various ways for students to give input – focus groups, surveys, idea box
- Many opportunities for a variety of school spirit activities
- Extra-curricular activities for all – ask the students what they want
- Students feel they are listened to and heard

### **Incentives \***

- Exam incentives for those who are doing well in a course
- Present incentive program needs to recognize that there are many different reasons why someone misses school
- Based on character and not attendance
- All students are not punished because of the actions of a few (activity days, dances, etc.)

### **Observations during Idea Focus:**

Students struggled with this activity. For the most part, they have only known the school system as it now exists, and which was developed based on the factory/obedience model in an industrial society. Although the world, and the work that happens in the world has changed dramatically, the educational model has not evolved as quickly and, for the most part, has not adapted to the modern economy's need for more creative and independent-thinking workers. They had a difficult time determining how things might be different from what they know. Their curiosity and creativity seem to be stifled. It would be really interesting to see how younger students would deal with the question of redesigning a school system to make it one where the key skills are embedded and lived on a daily basis. Research shows that students come to us with natural curiosity and creativity but for some, these skills seem to decline the longer they are in school.

The students grappled with identifying how schools might embed the key skills discussed into their everyday work. Technology was repeated as an answer at every session, however, discussions about technology and how it might be utilized to support student learning appeared to be very surface level and did not indicate a deep understanding of the technology itself or how to employ it to improve outcomes. This was surprising as we hear how youth today are technologically savvy and most of them carry the technology in their pockets in the form of a cell phone.

### **Other Discussion Points:**

The following statements were ideas and thoughts presented by students during the sessions and are good food for thought:

- Failure is a step to mastery. Schools need to be a safe place to say “I don't get it” and many students do not feel safe admitting this. Some students feel turned away from getting extra help because of their teachers' reactions to their request for help.
- Assignments and reporting of marks needs to be more personalized so that they represent student's knowledge and effort.
- Students want to have more responsibility for their own learning and choices for demonstrating their competence.
- Students desire more opportunities to collaborate and discuss ideas with rather than just taking notes from the teacher.
- When students are all doing poorly in a class, it is more than the students' issue.
- Guided study needs to be brought back to schools where it was removed. It needs to be tweaked, not scrapped.
- On-line courses are not popular and are not seen as a preferred alternative by most students due to the fact that students feel their marks are lower when taking on-line courses, there is not enough extra and/or timely help and the idea that working on your own is too difficult.

**Guiding Questions for Further Reflection: (Students, Administrators, Teachers, District Staff and Staff from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)**

*At the center of any great learning experience are two essential figures – a learner and an educator, and that for a school to excel, a third figure is critical – an inspired school leader who brings visions, skills and a keen understanding of the kinds of environment where learners can and want to learn.*

- 1. What can educators actually learn from students who are being served by the educational system?**
- 2. How do we change the “factory model” of school to one that is more in line with the world of today?**
- 3. What if our schools could train students to be better lifelong learners and better adapters to change? What would this look like?**
- 4. What are the fresh ideas out there that will help high schools transform to become engaged learning organizations?**
- 5. How do we ensure the natural curiosity and creativity of students is allowed to bloom throughout their educational experience?**
- 6. What would it look like and sound like in classrooms if we wanted to make “being wrong” less threatening?**
- 7. Why have promising initiatives like study block/guided study failed in some schools?**
- 8. Can we take what we have learned from this failure and try to revise the approach?**
- 9. How can we rally teachers around the idea that developing appropriate and healthy relationships with students is important to engaging them?**
- 10. How can we better utilize the technology we have available to us to enhance learning and achievement? Where are some best practice sites that we can learn from?**
- 11. How can we change the physical space of schools to more closely resemble the world of work that allows for collaboration and hands-on learning?**
- 12. What would you attempt to change in your school if you knew you could not fail?**