

AURORA CHARTER SCHOOL



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SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As part of its own school improvement initiative, Aurora Charter School commissioned this School Effectiveness Review. This report outlines the review procedures, presents and analyzes the data collected, and provides the findings of the review. Using an appreciative inquiry approach¹, these findings are then to be used by the school staff to determine those aspects



of the school requiring further attention, as well as those requiring continued successful efforts. The school staff will use these findings to develop an action plan for school improvement.

Purpose of the Review

This Review was designed to provide all of those interested in the quality of education at Aurora Charter School with a picture of their school as perceived by various stakeholder groups. The Review provides an opportunity for students, teachers, parents, and the administration to become involved in thinking about the school and its future.

Specifically, the School Effectiveness Review is intended:

- 1) to identify those areas in which the school is performing well;
- 2) to suggest areas in which aspects of school life can be improved;

¹ Whitney, D. K., & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010). *The power of appreciative inquiry: A practical guide to positive change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

- 3) to suggest ways in which the various stakeholders can work more effectively together;
- 4) to provide a picture of the school as perceived by the various stakeholders;
- 5) to celebrate the successes of the school; and,
- 6) to provide information to be used in planning for the future.

The school's administration has been particularly interested in identifying the correlates of school effectiveness and the relations between the stakeholders' perceptions of school effectiveness and the educational practices at Aurora Charter School. The findings outlined in this report will provide a starting point to initiate collaborative planning initiatives within the school.

The Review did not evaluate any individual or individuals associated with the school; rather, it was designed to look at the total operation of the school with the purpose of highlighting areas of strength and areas for further improvement.

Conceptualization

The conceptualization for the School Effectiveness Review is premised on the indicators of school effectiveness and the teacher effects research. Over the past 40 years, researchers have identified numerous characteristics that depict successful schools. According to this research, effective schools are characterized by an 'ethos' or 'culture' that permeates the school and results in positive learning outcomes for students.

In an attempt to address the purposes of the Review, the School Review Model developed by the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit (SELU) (Renihan & Sackney, 1992) guided this study. This heuristic model has been refined, tested, and used in numerous schools and school systems over the intervening years. This version of the model was updated in the fall, 2002.

Procedures

A variety of procedures were used to gather information for this Review. These included site visits, observations, surveys, individual and focus group interviews, and

document analysis. These procedures are deemed as appropriate methods for collecting data according to the principles of qualitative research.

Data Collection Methods

Each of the data collection methods is briefly described. The time frame used for data collection was the months of May and June during the 2011-2012 school year.

Site Visits.

In order to obtain a picture of how the school works, site visits were undertaken. These involved general observations of classrooms, the facility, and ‘walk-about’ of the entire school and playgrounds by the reviewer. A visit was made for the purposes of viewing the school facilities, interviewing the staff, and conducting focus groups with parents.

Survey

An *online survey* was administered to students in grades 4-9 (see appendix A). The survey was designed following a five-point Likert scale. The students were surveyed in relation to their perceptions and experiences of the school. A total of 140 students were surveyed. Table 1 illustrates the grades and number of students who took the survey.



From **Table 1**, it can be seen that students groups from grades 4 to 9 grade were well represented.

Semi- Structured Interviews

The administration placed a call for teachers interested in contributing to this study. Twelve teachers volunteered to be interviewed. The teachers represented different grade levels and subject areas providing a representative sample of the faculty. During the interviews, the teachers were asked to share their perceptions regarding their professional practices, the school environment, and the factors that they perceived as associated with school effectiveness. The interviews were semi-

structured allowing the teachers to elaborate and speak freely on related topics that they perceived as important (Appendix B).

Parents' focus groups

The administration placed a call for parents interested in contributing to this study. Eighteen parents volunteered for the focus group and they were divided in 2 separate groups. The parents shared their opinions regarding the instructional model, the effectiveness of the school, home-school communication, and most importantly, their reasons for choosing Aurora school. The interviewer used a list of predetermined questions (see Appendix C) but allowed the group to engage in lively conversation in order to capture the insights that emerged in the dialogue.

Document Review.

The Principal, Vice-principal, and Superintendent provided the researcher with documents pertaining to institutional planning, former school evaluations, the charter agreement, the instructional model, and school policies. Additionally, sample communications were obtained from information supplied by the principal. The documents supplied were useful to supplement and clarify different aspects of the school's organizational life referenced by the participants during the data collection.

Table 1

Survey Returns for Each Respondent Group

Group	Total	Respondents	Percentage
Grade 4 Students	45	23	51.11
Grade 5 Students	47	24	51.06
Grade 6 Students	44	23	52.27
Grade 7 Students	48	24	50
Grade 8 Students	48	23	47.91
Grade 9 Students	43	22	51.16
Parents		18	
Staff	30	11	36.66

Data Analysis and Presentation

All of the data were collated and analyzed following the principles of appreciative inquiry and interpretive analysis. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed for themes, topics, concepts, and ideas pertaining to the correlates of school effectiveness, these ideas were organized in a matrix, and the respondents were randomized to guarantee anonymity. The focus groups followed a similar pattern: the interview data were analyzed for patterns, concepts, ideas and themes related to the correlates of school effectiveness. These themes were included in a matrix for further analysis and comparison. The student survey is presented in the form of frequencies and percentages for each statement. The means and standard deviations are also included (see appendix D). The written part of the students survey was also analyzed for themes related to the correlates of school effectiveness, and the identified themes were included in the matrix for further analysis and contrast.

Information from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys was collated thematically, content-analyzed, and together, with the observation data, combined to provide a review of the school according to the 10 correlates of school effectiveness. Other documents such as the student agenda, the charter agreement, the instructional model, and school policies were analyzed – as well, some instances of school-home communications were subjected to content analysis.



CHAPTER 2



The Correlates of School Effectiveness

There is a general consensus in the literature on school improvement regarding the factors that influence school effectiveness². According to the research in this area, effective schools are characterized by a number of specific correlative factors, such as, achievement orientation, cooperation, adaptive leadership, monitoring, parental involvement, positive school climate, and meaningful opportunities to learn, among others. Renihan and Sackney³ proposed 10 correlates of school effectiveness that clearly summarize the consensus in the field:

1. A consistent and clear vision and purpose shared by all stakeholders;
2. An empowering and positive leadership style;
3. An emphasis on a professional community where everyone is a learner.
4. A conscious attention to the maintenance of a warm, caring climate that is conducive to learning;
5. Strong, consistent emphasis on academic skills that is maintained in keeping with the school's philosophy of instruction;
6. The setting of appropriately high expectations for student learning;

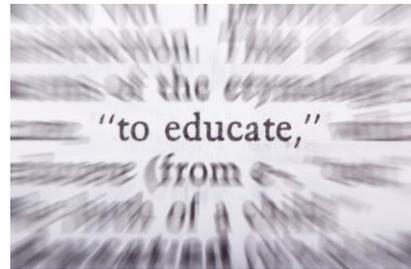
² Avalos, B., & Townsend, T. (2012). *International handbook of school effectiveness and improvement*. Dordrecht: Springer.

³ Renihan, P., & Sackney, L. (1999). *Reviewing School effectiveness: An approach*. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan. Educational Leadership Unit.

7. The provision of a safe, attractive, well-resourced, and maintained physical environment;
8. The attention to continuous, consistent, fair, and timely feedback to students and parents on the students' academic and social performance;
9. The promotion of active and positive parental involvement;
10. A deliberate provision for the participation of students in the life of the school.

Vision and Purpose

Good schools project a consistent philosophy and a sense of mission that are shared by teachers, pupils, parents, and administrators. Successful schools manage to keep their mission at the centre and build communities of parent support while keeping their common purpose



paramount in the operation of the school. An effective school always keeps student learning as the focus of its work. While parents and other key stakeholders have a role in the development and clarification of the school's mission, the professional staff are pivotal in assessing the school's performance, discussing priorities, and developing collaborative ways of doing things that matter most in the school. Such a focus on mission is reflected in the following characteristics: shared norms and consistency throughout the school; agreed-upon ways of doing things; clearly stated goals known to all; a high degree of acceptance of the importance of goals; and, joint planning initiatives. Inherent in achieving the mission of the school is the belief that the professional staff has the potential to change the culture of the school.

Findings: School Vision and Purpose

The school's mission and vision is clearly stated in several documents oriented to different stakeholders (website, staff handbook, students handbook, etc.). It is evident that the school has exerted a tremendous effort to keep everyone at the school

informed about the goals, purposes, mission and vision. One particular element to highlight is the respondents' knowledge of the instructional model: Parents, staff, and students exhibit a clear understanding of the direct-instruction model, which suggests that considerable time and effort has been put into developing and maintaining a clear philosophy of instruction central to the school's vision and purpose.

The answers gathered during the interviews, focus groups, and surveys, reveal a consistent knowledge of the school's instructional policy and core values. There is clearly a sense of value sharing among the respondents and an evident commitment to promote the school's vision. For instance, it is evident from the focus groups that the interviewed parents feel that the school's values speak to their own expectations and values regarding education. Some parents mentioned aspects like uniforms, small class sizes, discipline and academic focus as core components of Aurora's institutional identity. In relation to students, the survey shows that a large number of students think their teachers expect work to be done to the best of the students' abilities (Q16, 85%) and that the expectations for learning are clear (Q14, 76%). Which suggests a wide acknowledgment of the academic focus of the school and a satisfaction with the demanding nature of the program. Students are generally satisfied with the teaching methods and academic demands (Q17, 72%). In fact, some students mentioned the academic focus as one of the school's strengths.

Possibilities for Future Action: School Vision and Purpose

A shared understanding of the school's values and principles is an indication of a thriving educational community⁴. The responses evidence solid grounds for consolidating the current collaborative partnerships between stakeholders and suggest opportunities to create *innovative ways to engage parents, teachers, staff and students in future partnerships to enhance the school's mission and vision.*

⁴ Sergiovanni, T. J. (1999). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Some of the respondents expressed their desire to see more parental involvement, especially from families who are new to Aurora. The evidence suggests that Aurora has developed a solid sense of community and *future initiatives to reach parents could take this fact as a starting point to develop new partnerships.*

The school has gone to great effort to communicate its vision and purpose to all stakeholders. Data gathered from policy documents: school communications, parents' surveys and other reports (Annual Education Results Report; Accountability Pillar) suggest that stakeholders share the same interests and expectations regarding education at Aurora. It is clear that stakeholders at Aurora know *what* differentiates this school from other schools. The data suggest that the school community at Aurora has developed a shared identity around the values of traditional academic education. The literature suggest that school identity could be sustained by paying attention to the ways identity is communicated and institutionalized through symbols and meanings⁵. The research on institutional identity recommends *undertaking concrete initiatives to identify and sustain* the ways symbols and messages about the school's mission and purpose are communicated to all stakeholders.

Leadership

Effective schools invariably have effective leaders who are a visible and an active presence in the school. They display common leadership qualities of assertiveness, willingness to assume responsibility, high standards for staff and students, personal vision, expertise, and strength of character. Effective leadership, however, does not reside solely in one or two people. It is also a team quality and is, therefore, a reflection of the professional staff and the culture of shared decision making in the school. The opportunities for, and assumption of, leadership among staff members is an important consideration in achieving school effectiveness. Leadership in effective schools is *shared, collaborative, and empowering.*



⁵ Furman, G. C. (2002). *School as community: From promise to practice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Findings: Leadership

The interviewed teachers are generally interested in leadership opportunities within the school. Their responses suggest that teachers are willing to participate in school-wide leadership initiatives; they recognize leadership as an empowering element of school life. Notably, some teachers exercise both formal and informal leadership roles in the school community when they volunteer for school activities, lead, or participate in various committees, contribute in professional development, and in some cases, when they mentor other teachers or collaborate with other teachers in joint initiatives.

The interviewed parents understand the importance of parental involvement in the educational process; they are aware of the staff's expectation that the parents will be involved in their children's education. Parents favour permanent contact and communication with the school leaders and appreciate being informed about the different school initiatives and activities. Additionally, the respondents appreciate personalized responses and prompt resolution to their concerns. The results of the 2011-2012 parents' survey support these findings; parents who participated in the focus groups expressed their satisfaction with the approachability of the administration.

Sixty nine percent of surveyed students indicated that they are encouraged to take leadership roles in the school (Q8); 49% of the surveyed students agreed that students have a say in the school decisions affecting them (Q6). Also, 72% of the respondents indicated that the school encourages them to become involved in school life; 62% of the surveyed students indicated that students actively participate in school activities (Q9). Students made positive mentions about some of the students' council initiatives. These students noted that the student council has a positive impact in promoting student leadership.

Possibilities for Future Action: Leadership

It is evident from the different instances of data collection (Interviews, Focus Groups, School visits) that Aurora School has an extremely professional and committed staff. This fact could be taken into account in order to generate

collaborative instances of decision-making at Aurora. Teachers are at the forefront of the educational process in Aurora, they have the crucial responsibility to disseminate knowledge about the school mission and to infuse the school vision in students and parents. The evidence suggests that teachers are doing an excellent job at maintaining the high educational standards that Aurora is known for. In order to continue this trend, it is necessary to develop and strengthen the scenarios for teachers' collaboration and participation. Some scenarios for teachers' collaboration include collaborative projects on instructional development or in-house educational research projects.

Based on the evidence that suggests that teachers are highly committed to the school's mission and that they are interested in leadership opportunities, the administration could take this as an opportunity to strengthen the communication channels with the staff by implementing individual meetings to discuss teachers' initiatives and ideas⁶.

Climate

In effective schools, specific attention is given to the creation and maintenance of a climate that is conducive to learning. This includes the establishment of a safe, caring, and attractive environment in which students can enjoy school and the relationships they experience within it. Climate, in turn, is related to the nature of school discipline, how people get along with each other, and the overall school spirit that prevails. In these contexts, school rules and regulations are enforced consistently and are clearly understood by everyone.



Findings: Climate

The interviewed teachers reported high levels of discipline and a welcoming climate for students in Aurora; respondents also reported good rapport with students. Subsequent school visits and the results from the students' survey corroborated this

⁶ Sergiovanni, T. J., & Starratt, R. J. (2007). *Supervision: A redefinition*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

and suggested that Aurora school has achieved a balance between high levels of discipline and a school climate that is welcoming and caring for students.

Some teachers reported high levels of collegiality that derived from mentorship and professional collaboration. Careful attention to successful professional partnerships among the school's staff could provide useful insights about "best practices" that already exist within the school. These practices could be identified and documented with the potential to be replicated and improved. Some teachers manifested their willingness to contribute by offering opinions and suggestions for the improvement of the school, they suggested strengthening the communication channels among the staff and the improvement of the mechanisms to identify the staff's satisfaction levels.

Parents in the focus groups indicated that the school fosters a welcoming environment; they highlighted the diversity of the school as a positive aspect. The respondents praised the culture of collaboration and friendship among students. The parents in the focus groups evidenced high levels of respect and appreciation for the teachers. Parents are strong supporters of a culture of respect for teachers.

Seventy two percent of the surveyed students agreed or somewhat agreed to the statement "I'm happy to come to school" (Q1). Regarding the opportunities to be involved in non-academic activities (Q10), 52% of the students supported the statement, whereas 26% were in disagreement. Seventy one percent stated that they get to help their teachers (Q11), suggesting a positive rapport between teachers and students. Regarding out of class activities, 64% of respondents stated that they enjoy activities out of class (Q12). Sixty eight percent of students agreed that teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning (Q13), whereas only 12% disagreed. Forty nine percent of the respondents suggested that the school offers ample opportunities to get involved in athletic activities (Q5).

Students commented that one of their biggest motivations to attend Aurora school is the opportunity to socialize with their peers. Extra-curricular activities seem to offer a major motivation to students at Aurora. Additionally, several students were in favour of expanding the number of extra-curricular options (athletic and non-athletic).

Possibilities for Future Action: Climate

Evidently, Aurora has consolidated a culture that fosters academic commitment and discipline for students. All respondent groups highlighted the importance of sustaining the current academic environment while keeping in mind that socialization and relationship building is a fundamental component of the educational process.

One way to foster the social development of students is through the creation and development of extra-curricular activities. In fact, students mentioned gym and extracurricular activities as among their favourite aspects of the school. This is a clear indication that students perceive athletics and extracurricular activities as spaces that generate a positive school climate.

In relation to teachers' wellbeing and professional relations, the responses suggested that there are growth opportunities in relation to the establishment of stronger collegial and professional relationships. Some examples of current professional collaboration could be seen as sustainable practices that could be documented and replicated.

Some parents in the focus group were in favour of maintaining high discipline standards. The parental interest in the preservation of an orderly educational environment could be seen as an opportunity to include parental input in future reviews of the discipline policy.

Academic Emphasis

One of the crucial concerns for any school is its emphasis on academic work as a continuing priority. Good schools place a marked focus on academic skills, and the importance placed upon this is reflected in the amount of school time and professional energy devoted to it.



In effective schools, time on task is maximized and homework is assigned regularly and used as the basis for remediation. Adequate attention is devoted to the basic skills of reading, writing, and computing. Students are taught how to solve problems and how to use technology to enhance their learning.

Findings: Academic Emphasis

One of the most remarkable findings of this study is the consistency exhibited by all the school stakeholders towards the Direct Instruction Model: staff, parents and students are very knowledgeable about the model and have embraced it as a fundamental component of the educational practices in Aurora. The interviewed teachers indicated that all teachers in Aurora are coherent [consistent?] in their application of the direct instruction model; they noted that the model offers a consistent structure, however, it allows for flexibility and adaptation to the classroom needs. In relation to successful approaches to instruction, the respondents mentioned the Phonics program as an example of a successful and effective initiative; some parents also praised the phonics approach as effective and practical. In general respondents perceived the direct instruction model as generating a culture of discipline and academic rigour that is central to the identity of Aurora school.

Another aspect highlighted by all the respondents was homework: from the teachers' perspective, it is an extension of classroom practice that gives the student the possibility to explore, practice and learn in an independent yet structured way. Parents perceive homework as an opportunity to develop self-discipline and study habits. In the focus groups, parents praised the school for adopting a homework policy: they were all in favour of maintaining the current homework levels. The evidence obtained in the data collection suggests that there is community consensus regarding the contribution of the homework to the educational achievement and personal development of students.

Student responses were generally in favour of the current levels of academic responsibility: 87% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed to the statement "Teachers expect work to be done to the best of students' abilities" (Q16). Only 1% of surveyed students disagreed. Additionally 72% indicated that teachers use a variety of teaching strategies (Q17). Sixty seven percent of surveyed students like how their teachers teach (Q19). Only 13% disagreed with this statement. Students are generally satisfied with the teaching methods in Aurora. Forty six percent of surveyed students responded that students use the library regularly (Q 20), 15% of students disagreed

with this statement. A significant number of students stated that they don't use the library as often as they would like to. In their written responses, some students mentioned the need for better bibliographic resources. It is worth mentioning that some students highlighted the academic focus as one of the school's strengths.

Possibilities for Future Action: Academic Emphasis

The respondents seem to share a common vision in relation to the instructional model and the academic focus of the school. This fact could be taken as an opportunity to further educate parents regarding the direct instruction model and other educational initiatives in the school.

The responses suggest that there is a widespread acceptance of homework as a legitimate tool to support student learning. This opens a wide range of opportunities for teachers' professional collaboration in relation to the development of innovative ways to sustain the current homework policy, while exploring new ways to design and evaluate homework⁷.

Research on school effectiveness has indicated that meaningful professional collaboration is a key element in promoting school improvement⁸. Aurora teachers have high levels of professionalism and commitment, and the respondents expressed interest in engaging in improvement initiatives and professional development. The administration could take the evidence from this report to structure new opportunities for professional collaboration within the school. Teachers could join school-based research initiatives that reflect their own classroom realities and perceptions. Researchers on school change have argued persuasively⁹ that the best professional development comes from reflective practice in collaborative contexts.

⁷ Hallam, S. (2004). *Homework: The evidence*. London: Institute of Education.

⁸ Hargreaves, A. (2001). *Learning to change: Teaching beyond subjects and standards*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass

⁹ York-Barr, J. (2001). *Reflective practice to improve schools: An action guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press

High Expectations for Student Learning

School effectiveness research has pointed to a strong positive relationship between student achievement and the expectations that teachers hold for them. Behind this is an underlying theory that all students have the capability in various areas to achieve and grow intellectually. In particular, multiple



intelligences theory supports the notion that every child has some area of strength and that other areas can be developed utilizing appropriate instructional strategies. Generally, teachers who hold appropriately high expectations compared to teachers who hold lower expectations for learning will have students who achieve at higher levels. Teachers who utilize a variety of instructional strategies, who make expectations for student work clear, who are available to provide extra help when needed, and who keep students motivated to succeed, have students who achieve better.

Findings: High Expectations for Student Learning

Stakeholders at Aurora evidence [is this the correct word?] high expectations for student learning. The respondents share a remarkable interest in student achievement. In general, all the interviewed teachers indicated that the class activities extend beyond the classroom boundaries in the form of homework and study habits related to continuous evaluation. The teachers acknowledged that families are interested in the academic focus of the school; they perceive this factor as a positive element that contributes to raising academic standards in the school. Parental support is perceived as a strong correlate of student achievement.

The interviewed teachers indicated that the instructional model provides a solid structure to teaching practices at Aurora. Students know exactly what is expected of them, and teachers work towards those expectations. All the interviewed parents expressed their support for maintaining high expectations for student learning.

The parents in the focus groups commented that their children have developed high levels of independence and discipline. They perceive teachers' high expectations, the instructional model, and the homework as the main reason to keep students

interested in academics. The respondents also highlighted the focus on language arts and math: they perceive these two as the foundations of a good education. However, parents indicated that the school should not overlook other areas of the curriculum that also motivate students, such as the arts, physical education and extracurricular programs.

Students are generally supportive of the academic demands of the school: 76% of respondents indicated that teachers make expectations for classwork clear to students (Q14). Sixty two percent of respondents indicated that their teachers keep them interested in their schoolwork (Q22), 15% disagreed. Sixty eight percent of students also responded that teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning. Also, 78% of students indicated that teachers expect work to be done to the best of students' abilities. Notably, no students responded strongly disagree and only 4% were in partial disagreement with this statement. Sixty seven percent of the surveyed students were in agreement with the statement "I like how my teacher teaches", whereas 20% were in disagreement. Finally, 62% of the students agreed with the statement "my teacher keeps me interested in my school work", 26% were in disagreement.

In general, the data suggest that students are satisfied with the demands of the academic program. They reported good relations with their teachers and highlighted the variety of teaching methods and approaches. The diversity of teaching methods perceived by the students speaks to the flexibility of Aurora's instructional approach; teachers use the direct instruction model in their classes, but they adapt it to a variety of classroom situations.

Possibilities for Future Action: High Expectations for Student Learning

Aurora School could consider exploring in depth the perceptions of students and parent/guardians regarding the use of a variety of teaching strategies. There are still significant levels of disagreement in statements like "my teacher keeps me interested in my school work" or "I like how my teacher teaches", noted in the student survey. A thorough examination of specific aspects of teaching in Aurora would provide the school with useful insights to sustain and improve curriculum delivery.

Parents and students emphasized the importance of the arts, physical education, and extracurricular activities. There are documented cases that show the positive effect of extracurricular activities, the arts, and sport in the educational development and academic achievement of students¹⁰. The school could continue to explore possibilities for expanding the offerings in these areas, while maintaining the academic standards. Evidently, the input from students, parents, and staff would suggest the development of a more comprehensive extracurricular program.

Feedback

Professionals in effective schools consider feedback on student work to be a core activity, worthy of considerable time and effort. Good feedback on academic performance means that teachers are constructive, consistent, continuous, and fair when assessing student work. Increasingly, teachers in effective schools are providing a tighter focus on student assessment through linkages with curriculum and attention to clarity and validity of assessment procedures. Effective teachers recognize good work, reward students for their efforts, evaluate fairly, regularly talk to students about their work, and provide feedback on assignments in a reasonable amount of time. Moreover, effective teachers use evaluation for the purposes of remediation.



Findings: Feedback

The interviewed teachers evidenced consistent feedback practices; some indicated that meaningful feedback is the key to a successful learning environment. Some teachers mentioned the instrumental role of homework in the process of providing feedback to students. The interviewed teachers highlighted the importance of

¹⁰ Mahoney, J. L., Larson, R., & Eccles, J. S. (2008). *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school, and community programs*. New York: Psychology Press

homework review: homework review is essential to legitimize homework as a component of the educative process at Aurora.

Some teachers made reference to the small classes as another critical component of meaningful feedback. Students in small classes have the opportunity to receive a thorough assessment of their classwork. Evidently, teachers are in favour of keeping the current class sizes. In general, teachers evaluate their students in a consistent way: some teachers indicated that continuous evaluation contributes to student engagement as it fosters a challenging classroom environment that also motivates students.

Teachers have the capacity to assess students' needs in their classroom; however, some teachers expressed their interest in learning about the experiences of other teachers in the school.

The interviewed parents indicated that there is more structure and organization at Aurora than in other schools. The environment at Aurora contributes to a positive learning experience for students who do not get distracted by class disruption or discipline issues. The parents in the focus group perceive that there is continuous communication between the school and the home. They see this fact as an important one, because it allows parents to contribute in a more active way to the educational process of their children. Parents generally like to be surveyed about the school, and some indicated that an annual anonymous survey would be a useful assessment mechanism.

Some students like the way teachers provide feedback on their homework; this was a frequent comment on the written section of the survey. Also, some students mentioned the importance of keeping high discipline standards in order to keep high academic standards. Students evidently perceive a link between discipline and academic achievement. In relation to feedback, 60% of respondents indicated that their teachers let them know when they are doing well (Q18). Twenty percent of respondents disagreed with this statement. Sixty two percent of respondents indicated that their teachers keep them interested in their schoolwork (Q22) whereas 15% disagreed. Eighty nine percent of the surveyed students indicated that they do their homework (Q23). In contrast, only 1% said they do not do their homework.

Possibilities for Future Action: Feedback

Some teachers have developed meaningful and consistent communication channels with parents, the respondent teachers perceive these connections as beneficial to student achievement. The school could begin by identifying these as “best practices” in order to replicate them.

A large number of students (60%) indicated that their teachers provide them with feedback; however, 20% of the surveyed students were in disagreement. The school could embark on an investigation of feedback practices in the school in order to explore in depth the perceptions of students in this area and generate improvement.

Teachers have developed meaningful ways to evaluate their students at Aurora. The school could begin by documenting these different approaches to evaluation; also, it would be prudent to foster new teacher-led scenarios for sharing experiences and mutual feedback. Finally, it would be worth exploring the possibility of future in-house research on this topic: teachers could collaborate to develop school-wide, grade, or subject-specific projects on evaluation and improvement.

Parental Involvement

There is a significant body of research that points to the fact that improved parental involvement is closely related to significant gains in several measures of school and classroom success. Recent studies have found that parental involvement is related to decreased absenteeism, improved achievement, and improved perceptions of school and classroom climate. A few studies have noted that student behaviour improves as parents became more involved in their child's schooling. Parents have an important role to play in encouraging, monitoring, and supporting their children's educational efforts. Numerous studies have documented how children from dysfunctional homes have a difficult time being successful in school. The school needs the support from the home to ensure the child's success.



Findings: Parental Involvement

The interviewed teachers perceive the levels of parental involvement as high. Teachers use the homework book to communicate with parents, along with other personal communication channels such as email, the website, or telephone. In addition to this, the school sends school-wide communications via email and produces a very well designed monthly newsletter that is posted on the website. These strategies certainly contribute to parental support and awareness.

The teachers who participated in the interviews indicated that teachers and parents share the same expectations regarding the school's academic goals. This shared expectation contributes to positive parental involvement, as parents feel that their own aspirations are reflected in the school's educational philosophy.

The interviewed teachers perceived themselves as respected and valued by the parents. Conflicts between parents and teachers were reported as rare. The administration encourages personal dialogue between the teacher and the parent before getting involved in cases where conflict might exist.

Teachers explained that parents are generally willing to volunteer for school activities (e.g. monitors). This points to a sense of ownership and a potential for collaboration. In fact, some teachers perceive parental leadership at the board of directors as a positive feature of the school's organizational structure; this sends a message of ownership that encourages other parents to participate more actively in the school's life.

Parents are involved in the school in different capacities: from reviewing the students' homework and agendas at home to volunteering during school hours. The parents in the focus groups demonstrated high levels of participation in school activities; they were well informed about the events, procedures, and happenings of the school; they feel welcomed and perceive the school environment as positive and engaging. Some respondents indicated that not all parents share the same level of participation; however, they believe that all parents have shown high levels of responsibility towards their children's education.

Eight seven percent of the surveyed students indicated that their parents are supportive of their learning (Q24). Notably, only 2% of the respondents disagreed with

this statement. Eighty nine percent of the surveyed students indicated that they do their homework (Q23). In contrast only 1% said they don't do their homework. This indicates the presence of parental supervision at home, as parents are expected to supervise the students' work at home.

Possibilities for Future Action: Parental Involvement

Evidently, not all parents have the time to volunteer in the school, and it would be unrealistic to make such a demand. The reviewed data suggest that parental involvement at Aurora has many forms; this includes homework supervision at home, continuous home-school communication, and the support for the well being of the students. The respondents perceive levels of volunteerism as high; however, some teachers and parents expressed their desire to attract even more parents to the school activities. Exploring the motivations and experiences of volunteer parents would give the school some direction about how to attract more parents into school activities.

Student Involvement

Student participation in school life is measured by the extent to which: (a) students are encouraged to make the school an attractive place to be; (b) students have a say in the decisions that affect them; (c) students are actively encouraged to become involved; and, (d) students want to become involved. Recent school effectiveness research indicates that as student leadership increases in the school, student behaviour and learning



outcomes improve. Student involvement develops student leadership skills and their identification with the school. It also contributes to a more democratic school.

Findings: Student Involvement

The interviewed teachers indicated that the school provides students with spaces for participation. They mentioned the student council, the buddy system, and student clubs as prevalent forms of student participation. The student council is active in the school and hosts a number of activities that are promoted through different institutional channels. Some teachers said that increasing the number of student clubs would boost student participation and would give opportunities to emerging student leaders.

Some parents indicated their interest in the development of social activities for students, such as clubs and student groups. During the focus groups some parents suggested that more social activities and leadership opportunities for students would bring about better social skills for students in the future.

Forty nine percent of the surveyed students agreed that students have a say in the school decisions affecting them (Q6). Whereas 69% indicated that students are encouraged to take leadership roles in the school (Q8). Also, 72% of the respondents indicated that the school encourages them to become involved in the school life. Sixty two percent of the surveyed students indicated that students actively participate in school activities (Q9). Seventy seven percent of respondents agreed with the statement “Teachers provide students with the opportunity to work with one another”, indicating that teachers are actively promoting group work and participation in their classroom activities. This could be seen as the first step in developing leadership potential in some students.

There seems to be conflicting evidence in the survey data. Twenty three percent of students seem to disagree with the statement “Students have an adequate say in school decisions affecting them” and 22% responded as undecided. However, 69% agreed that students are encouraged to become involved in school life, and 62% indicated that students actively participate in school activities. From a research point of view, this finding requires more exploration. The evidence seems to suggest that students desire more influence in school governance, but this conclusion requires larger evidential support.

In their written comments, some students suggested that the student council provides meaningful leadership opportunities. A large number of students mentioned the loony bin as a one of their favourite activities in the school.

Possibilities for Future Action: Student Involvement

The research data suggest that students are highly motivated to participate in school life. There are some opportunities for students to exercise their leadership potential, and the main venue seems to be the student council. The different participants in this study were supportive of the student council's initiatives. Support and sustainability for the student council could be seen as a priority in future strategic planning for Aurora.

As the school grows students require more spaces to learn and discover their leadership potential. Student leadership in schools has many forms, and not all are related to instances of school governance. Sports, the arts, and technology could generate meaningful opportunities for student engagement and leadership.

The participants were vocal in their desire to have more spaces for student participation and social development. Although there has been some progress in this area with the creation of extracurricular activities, the school could explore additional spaces such as debate clubs, toastmasters, UN club, activism, etc.

Physical Environment and Resources

The physical environment is an important supporting condition by which the key qualities of schoolwork can be enhanced. Most importantly, the appropriateness of the classrooms and related space and environment for the program offered is important. Additionally, basic standards of appearance, attractiveness, and cleanliness relate to the upkeep



of the facility and speak eloquently of the priorities and attitudes of those who work in it and those who are responsible for its maintenance. Another important physical

component is the resources to do the job adequately. Effective schools are appropriately resourced with computers, books, equipment, and materials. As well, there are adequate human resources to work with the wide range of student abilities.

Findings: Physical Environment and Resources

The interviewed teachers are satisfied with the school facilities, and they find the current building comfortable. The current facilities are a tremendous improvement from the previous building. In relation to resources, some teachers mentioned the recent moves towards adopting more technological tools in the school. There appear to be mixed responses to this change: some teachers would not like the new additions to disrupt the instructional model; some are very supportive and expect the innovations to bring about new possibilities for teaching and learning at Aurora.

The parents in the focus groups indicated that one of the attractive features of the school is the small class sizes; they expressed their desire that the school maintains small class sizes in the future. Some parents praised the recent initiatives toward including more technological tools in the school. They hope this will generate new learning opportunities for students and more variety in terms of instructional strategies without distracting from the academic focus or disrupting the direct instruction model.

Regarding the facilities, 64% of the students are satisfied with the school grounds and facilities (Q2), and 71% stated that the school has adequate instructional materials (Q4). Seventy one percent agreed that the school is clean and comfortable (Q3). Seventy five percent of respondents indicated that teachers are available to give extra help when needed (Q15). Forty six percent of surveyed students agreed that students use the library regularly (Q20) whereas 33% disagreed with this statement.

A large number of students listed "Gym" as one of their favourite things about the school. Some students indicated that they would like to use the library and computers more often. Additionally, some students said that they "would like to have a better playground".

Possibilities for Future Action: Physical Environment and Resources

The school has made considerable improvements in providing a comfortable facility that responds to the expectations of Aurora's educational community. Very recently, the school has begun plans to expand the current facilities, purchase technological equipment, and improve the wireless system in the school.

The introduction of new resources in the school environment requires also a plan that guarantees the project's sustainability. Researchers have found that technology implementation projects that are sustainable usually have a combination of stakeholders' support, collaboration and flexibility¹¹.

Professional Community

In recent years, numerous researchers on school effectiveness have devoted considerable attention to teacher professional community. Research on notions such as collaboration, opportunities for teacher learning, and teacher professional development has noted that certain teacher conditions are important in improving



student and teacher learning. In particular, the degree to which teachers plan jointly, engage in dialogue and discourse on teaching and learning, share their mental models, have a shared sense of vision and purpose, and the extent to which systems thinking exists, are important determinants of student learning.

¹¹ - Gura, M., & Percy, B. (2006). *Recapturing technology for education: Keeping tomorrow in today's classrooms*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

- Lee, M., & Winzenried, A. (2009). *The use of instructional technology in schools: Lessons to be learned*. Camberwell, Vic: ACER Press

- Schrum, L., & Levin, B. B. (2009). *Leading 21st century schools: Harnessing technology for engagement and achievement*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin

Findings: Professional Community

The interviewed teachers indicated that teachers have the opportunity to lead instances of professional development; (PD) (e.g. committees; discussion; attending teacher conventions, and in- house PD). Teachers were overwhelming in their support for PD initiatives, and they are willing to explore more collaborative ways to engage in professional learning. Mentorship between teachers is regarded as a positive form of advancing PD goals. Some teachers indicated that communication between teachers is key in addressing student needs; they reported that some teachers at Aurora communicate with each other and engage in informal dialogue and collaboration.

The respondents also expressed that PD has the potential to impact classroom practices. Aurora has provided teachers with funding to attend professional development opportunities outside the school. Some teachers commented about the importance of teacher leadership in professional development. Some teachers have taken up the responsibility of leading some sessions to promote discussion and awareness regarding school related topics. Collaboration and the opportunity to interact with other teachers in conventions and conferences are very useful; they believe that good PD is reflected in classroom practices.

Regarding specific professional development initiatives, some teachers would like to explore ways to improve and sustain the phonics program, among other subject-related topics.

Possibilities for Future Action: Professional Community

At Aurora, there is a genuine interest in professional development. One of the initiatives referenced by the respondents was the PLC (Professional Learning Communities) meetings, in which teachers get together to discuss topics of relevance to the school; it must be emphasized that these sessions are led by teachers. Teachers perceive these meetings as a good starting point, and their responses indicate a good degree of motivation toward in-house professional development.

The organization of collaborative professional learning initiatives requires a commitment from several levels of the organization; especially those responsible for providing the time and resources so teachers can engage in research.

A number of authors¹² have highlighted the link between teacher-led research and school improvement. Teachers who collaborate and create knowledge in the school gain a sense of ownership of the issues that affect them. They construct explanations about the issues in their own classroom practices and provide appropriate answers tailored to the school context.

Aurora's professional community is caring and committed. The school could anonymously survey the staff's satisfaction levels every year in order to fine-tune the strategies to improve the well-being of teachers and to respond to their needs and expectations.



¹² Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Los Angeles, Calif: SAGE

Chapter 3

Conclusions

The success of Aurora Charter School resides in a number of interrelated factors that have been highlighted in this report. The evidence shows that the school has developed a unique community that shares a set of core values reflected in the instructional model. The evidence suggests a connection between the specific educational practices described in this report and the correlates of school effectiveness. In order to sustain and improve these achievements, the school could take action in a number of fronts described as follows:



1. Aurora school is a thriving educational community; future planning in the school could take this fact into account in order to articulate innovative ways to engage parents, teachers, staff and students in partnerships to enhance the school's mission and vision.
2. Parents play a pivotal role in the construction and promotion of the mission and vision of the school; the current strategies need to be sustained in order to attract more parents to contribute to school activities.
3. Stakeholders at Aurora have developed a shared identity around the values of traditional academic education. The school needs to identify and sustain the ways symbols and messages about the school's mission and purpose are communicated to all stakeholders.
4. Aurora School has an extremely professional and committed staff. This fact could be taken into account in order to generate collaborative instances of decision-making at Aurora.
5. Teachers at Aurora are highly committed to the school's mission and they are interested in leadership opportunities; the administration could take this as an opportunity to strengthen the communication channels with the staff.

6. Aurora has consolidated a culture that fosters academic commitment and discipline for students. Stakeholders support the current academic environment and have indicated that socialization and relationship building is a fundamental component of the educational process.
7. There are growth opportunities in relation to the establishment of stronger collegial and professional relationships. Some examples of current professional collaboration could be seen as sustainable practices that could be documented and replicated.
8. The parental interest in the preservation of an orderly and disciplined educational environment could be seen as an opportunity to include parental input in future reviews of the discipline policy.
9. Homework is a key component of Aurora's instructional approach. Stakeholders perceive it as a legitimate tool to support student learning. Teachers could explore professional collaboration initiatives to find ways to sustain the current homework policy while exploring new ways to design and evaluate homework.
10. Aurora could structure new opportunities for professional collaboration within the school. Teachers could join school-based research initiatives that reflect their own classroom realities and perceptions.
11. The instructional model provides a solid structure for teaching practices at Aurora. The evidence suggests that this is at the center of the shared perception of effectiveness held by all stakeholders.
12. Parents perceive teachers' high expectations, the instructional model, and homework as the main reasons contributing to students' interest in academics.
13. In general, the data suggest that students are satisfied with the demands of the academic program. They reported good relations with their teachers and highlighted the variety of teaching methods and approaches.
14. A thorough examination of specific aspects of teaching at Aurora would provide the school with useful insights for sustaining and improving curriculum delivery.
15. The school could embark on an investigation of feedback practices in the school in order to explore the perceptions of students in this area and generate improvement.

16. The school could begin by documenting the different approaches to evaluation and also foster new teacher-led scenarios for sharing experiences and mutual feedback.
17. Some teachers and parents expressed their desire to attract even more parents to school activities. Exploring the motivations and experiences of volunteer parents would give the school some ideas about how to attract more parents to school activities.
18. Sports, the arts and technology could generate meaningful opportunities for further student engagement and leadership. The input from students, parents and staff would benefit the development of a more comprehensive extracurricular program.
19. The organization of collaborative professional learning initiatives requires a commitment from several levels of the organization; especially those responsible for providing the time and resources necessary for teachers to engage in research.
20. Aurora's professional community is caring and committed. The school could anonymously survey the staff's satisfaction levels every year in order to fine-tune the strategies to improve the well-being of teachers and to respond to their needs and expectations.

Appendix A

Students Survey

1. I am happy to come to school.
2. I am satisfied with the school grounds and school facilities.
3. The school is clean and comfortable.
4. The school has adequate instructional materials (e.g., books, visuals, computers, etc.) to help students learn.
5. There are ample opportunities for students to be involved in athletic activities.
6. Students have an adequate say in school decisions affecting them.
7. Students are encouraged to become involved in school life.
8. Students are encouraged to take leadership roles in this school.
9. Students actively participate in school activities.
10. There are ample opportunities for non-athletic activities.
11. Sometimes I get to help the teacher.
12. I enjoy the school activities out of class.
13. Teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning.
14. Teachers make expectations for class work clear to students.
15. Teachers are available to give extra help when needed.
16. Teachers expect work to be done to the best of students' abilities.
17. Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies.
18. My teacher lets me know when I am doing well.
19. I like how my teacher teaches.
20. Students use the library regularly.
21. Teachers provide students the opportunity to work with one another.
22. My teacher keeps me interested in my schoolwork.
23. I do my homework.
24. My parents are supportive of my learning.
25. My favourite thing about school is....
26. What I would like to see at school is. . .

Appendix B

Teachers' Interview

1. From your perspective, how do staff members assume their responsibilities for student learning?
2. From your perspective, how does the traditional school program contribute to successful student learning?
3. From the perspective of your instructional practice, how would you describe teacher directed instruction?
4. How would you describe staff professional learning in Aurora School?
 - a. in relation to curriculum development
 - b. in relation to student needs
 - c. in relation to technology
5. From your perspective, do you think your professional practice affects the professional practices of other teachers?
6. From your perspective, how do staff members assist each other in their professional practices?
7. How do teachers manage their own workloads and job-related stress?
8. From your perspective, do you think the expectations for teachers' performance are clear?
9. From your own perspective, how does the administration provide support for teachers and their professional practices?
10. What is your perception of parental involvement in relation to students' achievement?
11. From your experience, what factors contribute to the strong student achievement at Aurora Charter School?
12. Please feel free to share comments and observations related either to the interview questions or to other topics you may wish to address.

Appendix C

Parents' Focus Group

1. Why did you choose to enrol your children at Aurora?
2. Was the waiting list a problem when you first registered your children?
3. How does the school communicate with parents? Are you satisfied how the school communicates with you?
4. How do you encourage your children to study?
5. In your own view, is the school environment welcoming?
6. Do you think the school values your opinion?
7. What is your perception of parents/teachers interviews?
8. Do you think school celebrates/recognizes student achievement?
9. What is our opinion of the school's instructional model?
 - a. In relation to teaching strategies
 - b. In relation to student evaluation
10. Do Aurora teachers and the school keep you informed about your son/daughter's progress in school?
11. What is your perception of student-teacher relationships at Aurora?
12. Do you think that teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning?
13. Do you think teachers make expectations for class work clear to students?
14. Are teachers are available to provide extra help to students who need it?
15. Do you think teachers have high expectations for students learning?
16. What is your perception of the school facilities?
17. Do you think students use the school resources regularly? (Library, gym, computers)
18. In your opinion, why is Aurora School successful?
19. Please feel free to share comments and observations related either to the interview questions or to other topics you may wish to address.

Appendix D Students' Survey Results

Likert Scale:

1. Disagree; 2. Somewhat Disagree; 3. Undecided; 4. Somewhat Agree; 5. Agree

		AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION
1	I am happy to come to school	4.08	1.13
2	I am satisfied with the school grounds and school facilities	3.75	1.21
3	The school is clean and comfortable	4.09	0.95
4	The school has adequate instructional materials (e.g., books, visuals, computers, etc.) to help students learn	4.25	1.08
5	There are ample opportunities for students to be involved in athletic activities	3.41	1.39
6	Students have an adequate say in school decisions affecting them.	3.40	1.22
7	Students are encouraged to become involved in school life	4.16	1.00
8	Students are encouraged to take leadership roles in this school	4.01	1.09
9	Students actively participate in school activities	3.76	1.18
10	There are ample opportunities for non-athletic activities	3.39	1.33
11	Sometimes I get to help the teacher	4.02	1.21
12	I enjoy the school activities out of class	3.87	1.31
13	Teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning	4.04	1.16
14	Teachers make expectations for class work clear to students	4.20	0.97
15	Teachers are available to give extra help when needed	4.25	1.00
16	Teachers expect work to be done to the best of students' abilities	4.75	0.65
17	Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies	4.13	1.08
18	My teacher lets me know when I am doing well	3.74	1.25
19	I like how my teacher teaches	3.92	1.20
20	Students use the library regularly	3.18	1.42
21	Teachers provide students the opportunity to work with one another	4.21	0.92
22	My teacher keeps me interested in my schoolwork	3.72	1.19
23	I do my homework	4.67	0.62
24	My parents are supportive of my learning.	4.79	0.63
25	My favourite thing about school is...	Written answer	
26	What I would like to see at school is...	Written answer	

Appendix E:
Summary of Students Survey

	1. I am happy to come to school	2. I am satisfied with the school grounds and school facilities	3. The school is clean and comfortable	4. The school has adequate instructional materials (e.g., books, visuals, computers, etc.) to help students learn	5. There are ample opportunities for students to be involved in athletic activities	6. Students have an adequate say in school decisions affecting them.	7. Students are encouraged to become involved in school life	8. Students are encouraged to take leadership roles in this school
1. Disagree	4%	6%	3%	4%	11%	8%	2%	4%
2. Somewhat disagree	8%	13%	2%	7%	20%	14%	5%	6%
3. Undecided	8%	11%	16%	6%	13%	22%	11%	13%
4. Somewhat agree	29%	33%	35%	24%	19%	29%	29%	29%
5. Agree	43%	31%	36%	51%	30%	20%	43%	40%

	9. Students actively participate in school activities	10. There are ample opportunities for non-athletic activities	11. Sometimes I get to help the teacher	12. I enjoy the school activities out of class	13. Teachers create an atmosphere that promotes student learning	14. Teachers make expectations for class work clear to students	15. Teachers are available to give extra help when needed	16. Teachers expect work to be done to the best of students' abilities	17. Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies
6%	12%	5%	9%	6%	1%	2%	1%	4%	
10%	14%	9%	6%	6%	6%	6%	0%	5%	
15%	16%	8%	14%	10%	9%	10%	4%	12%	
32%	28%	26%	22%	27%	32%	26%	9%	26%	
30%	24%	45%	42%	41%	44%	49%	78%	46%	

	18. My teacher lets me know when I am doing well	19. I like how my teacher teaches	20. Students use the library regularly	21. Teachers provide students the opportunity to work with one another	22. My teacher keeps me interested in my schoolwork	23. I do my homework	24. My parents are supportive of my learning.
7%	7%	15%	1%	6%	1%	1%	
12%	6%	18%	6%	9%	0%	1%	
14%	14%	16%	8%	17%	4%	4%	
26%	29%	22%	34%	32%	20%	6%	
34%	38%	24%	43%	30%	69%	81%	

Group	Total	Respondents	Percentage
Grade 4	45	23	51.11
Grade 5	47	24	51.06
Grade 6	44	23	52.27
Grade 7	48	24	50
Grade 8	48	23	47.91
Grade 9	43	22	51.16
Totals	275	139	50.54