

Assistance

COMMUNICATION

DRAFT

Inclusion

Listening

Participation

TEN OPPORTUNITIES

Practical Ideas for Supporting Students and Families Living in Poverty



REMEDICATION

Resilience

Understanding

Unity

Welcome



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Connecting with Agencies: *Opportunities for Assistance*

There are many agencies and organizations which provide support for students and families in need. Within the TCDSB, principals can connect with Social Workers, Settlement Workers and Community Relation Officers. The Angel Foundation for Learning administers 18 bursaries, awards and funds to “ensure that all TCDSB students are equally able to participate in opportunities that sustain and enhance the education process”.

Community agencies include:

- Boys and Girls Clubs
- St Vincent de Paul Society
- Knights of Columbus
- Kids Up Front Toronto (donated tickets to games, events and plays are given to kids in need)
- TCDSB Partnership Development

First Book Canada

Our school discovered this non-profit organization where you can get free books if at least 70% of the students in your class come from low-income families.



Access to New Books for Children in Need

We have already received over 1000 books. “I like the books I got because the topics were interesting,” said Daniel, a Grade 3 student. “My books were *Traitor’s Gate*, *Ancient Rome* and *Medieval Times*. What a great way to help bring more books into my classroom!



The Angel Foundation for Learning, TCDSB

At an in-service, I heard the executive director of the Angel Foundation speak about help we can access for our students. Loblaws has a “Kids See Free” Fund which provides one pair of free eyeglasses to any child (aged 19 or under) with a valid eyeglass prescription issued within the past 365 days. Two of my students now have new glasses!

As a way of paying it forward, I also signed up for the Cents-Off program where the cents from my pay cheque are donated directly to the foundation.



Fostering Healthy Dialogue: *Opportunities for Communication*

The Performance

As a teacher, I'm sensitive to the pressure points of poor families since we grew up poor. My sister's class was going to the symphony and they were told to dress appropriately. My sister carefully washed and ironed her best dress and polished her shoes. The day of the performance, the teacher told her she couldn't go "like that" and she was forced to stay behind. Now I go out of my way to tell kids they look great even if the clothing is out of season.

Children, teens and families have stories they do not share with schools unless a certain trust is built between them.

A Kindergarten child does not know how to tell her teacher that she won't be coming to the Christmas Concert because Mommy cannot afford to take the night off work. An OAC student is late again for school. He could not sleep because his parents were fighting loudly.

When you live with a situation for a long time it becomes your "normal". Poverty can create stressors that escalate to the point where most of us would find it hard to cope. And yet for one in six of our students and their families, the pressure of trying to make ends meet is the reality they face every morning. Like a house of cards, one limitation can lead to another until the challenge becomes just trying to hold things together. From the vantage point of having the resources to plan for adversity, it can be difficult sometimes to understand lives held together with a shoestring. But planning, preparing and putting aside for a rainy day require resources. For some families, every day is a rainy day.

Schools cannot change the situation but they can offer umbrellas of hope by building trust, listening with empathy and understanding and providing contact resources that help scaffold tenuous situations.

Bus Tickets

One boy in Grade Eight was frequently absent or late for school. He often "forgot" his lunch and rarely came in full uniform. His mother expressed dismay and said she was trying everything to get him organized to come to school on time. It wasn't until after Social Work was involved that we learned about their tough choices: do the laundry or have bus fare, cereal and milk or bus fare for a week. Neither Mom nor son had told us they had moved and were no longer within walking distance of the school. They were embarrassed to mention that they had been evicted again and weren't sure even how long they would be at this address. Once we knew, we applied for bus tickets and Social Work was able to provide food vouchers. I bought an alarm clock and some lunch items that I placed in a box in the nurse's room for him to access when he needed.



Engaging the Parent Community: *Opportunities for Inclusion*

A Different Interview Night

For the past year, I have encouraged our CSAC to attend all school events and greet parents. For interview night, they set up a free coffee and donut table in the foyer, take emails and encourage parents to attend CSAC meetings. What a surprise it was this year to see groups of parents mulling about discussing the proposed school addition and the upcoming FDK. Informed CSAC members were sharing their knowledge along with the architect's plans. With great pride, I realized that this is truly their school and all feel welcome to be a part of its future.

Parents/guardians may feel alienated or unwelcome during traditional school events because of negative past experiences or their own current stressors.

The principal can be the catalyst of change for school communities by looking for opportunities for inclusion. The gateway for reaching parents is through the local CSAC. Parents can play a far greater and more meaningful role in the school by being ambassadors of goodwill. Engaging the CSAC executive in school promotion and sharing with them the ongoing good news and school challenges through open and transparent dialogue, can help in reaching out to new parents and those who have not yet become involved in parent activities. The costs of reaching out to the parent community can be defrayed through PRO grants and CPIC.

There are many opportunities to involve parents in fun and non-threatening ways:

- Family BBQ
- Family Math or Science Nights
- PJs and Hot Chocolate Reading Nights
- Conversational French Classes
- Early Canada Day Celebrations
- Community Draws

Community Event

On the final day of school last year, we held a BBQ, showcased our school bands and had student performances. Many people from the community dropped by to join in the festivities. In September, when we held our Curriculum Night BBQ, they all came back! It turned into a community event where graduated students and their parents shared stories with new Kinder parents. We had the continuity of time: the school was an important fixture in the community and everyone regarded it as "their school".



Honouring Student Voice: *Opportunities for Listening*

Student engagement is a key to supporting students living in poverty and contributing to their feeling of belonging. All too often students experiencing poverty feel excluded from their community and have an intense desire for their voice to be heard.

Student councils are an effective way for students to impact school policy and practice. Intentionally seeking out marginalized students to be part of the committee could be one approach to honour the voice of the voiceless. Other school clubs (e.g., Me to We and Free the Children groups) help students further develop their leadership skills and their feeling of inclusion.

Most secondary schools have “Stop the Stigma” committee through which a group of students are encouraged to plan and deliver workshops and assemblies around the critical issue of mental health.



Student Council

Two years ago was the first year of our uniform policy. Our student council read the Board No Sweatshop document and brought it to my attention. They felt that too many of the students were purchasing items from unapproved vendors and that parents were not aware of the implications. They asked to be put on the CSAC agenda and made a presentation to parents. They then followed up with a presentation to students. Not only did we all become cognizant of the reasons behind the policy, but some of the teachers followed up on the initiative by doing the *Teaching Mathematics Through a Social Justice Lens* as demonstrated by the multi-media Webcasts for Educators resource from the Student Achievement Division of the Ministry.

As a principal, on one hand, I was humbled by their sense of global solidarity with other children. On the other, I was delighted that their voices displayed the reflective, creative moral conscience of the responsible citizens we expect them to be. This was Catholic Social Teaching in essence.

Building Blocks

Our Me to We team is asking for small change donations to help build a school in Nicaragua. Last week a boy in grade three brought in a \$50 bill. Of course we called home after he insisted it wasn't a mistake. His father told us that the child had received the money as a birthday present and they fully supported his decision to donate it towards the building of the school. He said his son would receive more satisfaction from giving than from any toy on the market.

Breaking Down Barriers: *Opportunities for Participation*

Parental involvement impacts on children's attendance, attitude and school achievement. Parents may have limited time to participate in school events because of multiple jobs or child care issues. When planning for events involving families, make sure to consider community needs. Would a CSAC meeting be better attended if held at 3:45 pm or at 7:00 pm? Would a Saturday meeting bring out more parents? What issues are important to the community?

- Invite secondary students (who need community service hours) to act as babysitters during the meeting
- Provide food
- Invite speakers who are fluent in the language of the community
- Build trust with parents by making the dialogue reciprocal and respectful
- Ask parents what they need. Listen carefully to their responses.
- Create opportunities for parents and students to work together on Math, Science or Reading activities

Backpacks of Food

We have 10 families who have food security issues so every time we have a food drive, we skim off items for our own families first. Then about once a month we have the kids drop by the office on their way home on a random basis and stick a bag of rice or cans of fish, pasta sauce or beans in the backpacks. Since most of these families have three or more kids, it's not too heavy or noticeable and yet helps provide the odd meal.

Mouth or Ears?

A school beginning to involve parents "often leads with its mouth, identifying projects, needs and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream and worry about." (Larry Ferlazzo, 2011)

Math Night

We held a family Math Night at our school last winter and made sure to invite the parents of our new refugee family from Pakistan. Well they came, but to do so, they all walked for a half a mile in -15° temperatures and without adequate winter clothing. The whole family was so frozen when they got there that we had to take them aside and make hot chocolate. It never struck me that the busses don't run to our area at night.



Bridging the Gap: *Opportunities for Remediation*

Students living in poverty often academically lag behind their classmates.

At age four years, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. (Knitzer, 2007)

Teachers, principals and support staff witness the negative impacts of poverty on a daily basis. They understand that chronic stressors (such as food insecurity, precarious living conditions and a constant worry about money) that has a significant impact on a student's ability to concentrate and reach their academic potential.

In supporting students living in poverty to achieve success in school, educators are encouraged to keep two key ideas in mind

Insist on high expectations: Instead of seeing students living in poverty as “at risk”, school staff is encouraged to view them as “with potential”. Accept no excuses for students for academic failure.

Develop a growth mindset for students and yourself: Carol Dweck, a Stanford University researcher, has shown that when a growth mindset (intelligence and talent can go up or down) is adopted over a fixed mindset (intelligence and talent are fixed at birth), students who have historically underperformed are more likely to believe in the idea that their own effort combined with the support of teachers can overcome difficulty and academic struggles.

After School Literacy and Numeracy Programs can make a big difference for students who could use a little extra support.

Math Clubs, Homework Helpers, Oware Clubs and Forest of Reading Clubs encourage students to prioritize their learning, hold high expectations of their ability while offering the teacher or peer support needed to enable this to happen.



Homework Club

A family of six kids arrived at our school in February. It was the third school they'd been at that year. Teachers complained that homework was rarely done and nothing ever made its way back to class when sent home. I had a chat with dad one morning when he was dropping the kids off. Apparently, there were three more kids at home who were (or should be) in high school. All 11 people lived in a two bedroom apartment, Dad was out of work and the family was struggling to put food on the table. After that, we created a “homework helpers” club at lunch recess.



Developing Non-Cognitive Skills: *Opportunities for Resilience*

While **resilience** (or the ability to “bounce back”) is important for every student, it is critical for those experiencing the stresses associated with poverty. A key factor in the development of resilience is the presence of a caring adult in the student’s life. Students also experience academic resilience when they

- have opportunities to learn and develop effective problem-solving and information processing skills
- complete homework
- participate in classroom activities
- pursue opportunities in the arts and sports, both inside and outside school (*Possibilities*, 2012).

Recent research has pointed to the importance of other non-cognitive skills in achieving academic success. Angela Duckworth speaks to the need for **grit** (“perseverance and passion for long-term goals”). In his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, Paul Tough identifies seven critical key strengths including **optimism, curiosity, self-control** and **gratitude**. Realizing that these skills are malleable and able to be taught is important for both teachers and administrators. Beginning the discussion at staff meetings on how to develop these skills in students is an important second step.

IS 318: Building Success by Examining Failure

The success of students at an inner-city Brooklyn public school has been directly attributed to the efforts of their teacher and coach, Elizabeth Siegel. After every losing match, she walks her students through the moves to show where they went wrong and what would have been a better choice. Understanding “good failures” has helped the chess players persevere and achieve success.



Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be.

Dr Rita Pierson
TED Talks, March 2013



I’m not sure if resilience is ever achieved alone... But if we have some who loves us—I don’t mean indulges us, but loves us enough to be on our side—then it’s easier to grow resilience, to grow belief in self, to grow self-esteem. And it’s self-esteem that allows a person to stand up. If children are given the chance to believe that they’re worth something—if they truly believe that—they will insist upon it.

Dr Maya Angelou
Educational Leadership,
September 2013

Celebrating the School Culture: *Opportunities for Understanding*

Getting to know your community is valuable for principals. Something as simple as driving around the streets or shopping at the local supermarket can provide vital information about norms and practices. Using the local gym or barbershop can show the community that you feel that you belong there. When parents feel welcome and respected in the school they are more likely to share their challenges and ask for assistance in meeting those challenges (which can be compounded by cultural difference or perceived cultural blindness).

Ways to make all families feel valued :

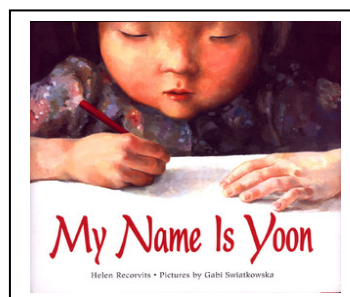
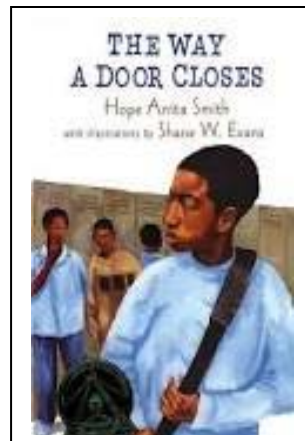
- Display a variety of signs in the languages of the community
- Acknowledge cultural celebratory days and customs (e.g., wishing “Happy Diwali” over the PA or post the Grandfather Teachings in a prominent place)
- Validate cultural artistic expressions of art, music and dance
- Include a column in your monthly newsletter written in one of the prominent languages on a rotating basis
- Find opportunities to showcase the accomplishments of the various cultures in your community

Chinese New Year

Every year our school celebrates Chinese new Year due to the efforts of one of our teachers. Her class parades the hall in a dragon costume, recites a Chinese poem and we listen to Chinese music on the PA. The celebration has become so much a part of what we do, that I have witnessed children handing each other red envelopes or bringing candy treats to make the day.

Where Am I in the Library?

When I’m assigned to a new school as Principal, one of the first things I do is to go to the Library and look at the books. If the student community is diverse, then each one of those cultures should be represented in our book collection: as characters, as heroes and as valued academics. Likewise, the stories those books tell should be relatable to the experience of the students. Stories that deal with urban challenges, families dealing with job loss etc. should be included prominently as well posters, photos and visual displays.



Supporting the Staff: *Opportunities for Unity*

In their report *Poverty and Schools in Ontario: How Seven Elementary Schools are Working to Improve Education*, researchers Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker and Joseph Flessa caution against the idea of the “hero teacher”. Burnout can often result if teachers do not feel supported. “Teachers cannot address the impact of poverty on schooling outcomes by trying to do it alone. Professional connections that sustain optimism and commitment to working in challenging circumstances should be pursued.” (p 106)

When principals provide opportunity for all staff members to work together, they will be able to come up with solutions which best suit the needs of their students and community.

- Include discussions of poverty and its impact during staff meetings and PD days
- Make available professional learning materials (Ministry monographs, books, websites, etc)
- Encourage staff to brainstorm solutions and take responsibility for new initiatives
- Recognize and celebrate small successes

McCarthy Room

Affording uniforms can be a major problem for secondary students living in poverty. We are very fortunate that graduates will often donate their uniforms for the incoming Grade 9 students. How to distribute the clothes was definitely a challenge. When we were renovating the front office, the school secretary asked if we could use a spare room to display the uniforms so students in need could “shop” for items. The room was cleared out and bars were installed to hang the clothes. The uniform room makes it possible for students to maintain their dignity while shopping for uniforms.

Common Understanding, Common Solutions

The principal arranged for internal coverage for the staff to meet for a half day as a group to discuss the issue of poverty within their school. In the morning, the Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers met and in the afternoon the Grades 4-8 teachers met. Frank discussions about their experiences led to new concrete practices: no longer would teachers ask students for money in a public way, wish lists for Book Fair would be discontinued and the CSAC would be asked for funds to cover pizza lunches for those who could not afford them.



Opening Front Doors: *Opportunities for Welcome*

One of the most overlooked but critical aspects of engaging low-income families, is providing a welcoming environment where people of all incomes and walks of life feel like they belong. The simple act of walking into a school can be intimidating for parents and students who may feel separate or apart due to financial hardship. In the Best Start document *I'm Still Hungry: Child and Family Poverty in Ontario*, one service provider speaks to the need of being present with family members. Front office staff and administrators set the tone for a welcoming school.

"With your smile, with your tone of voice, you are telling people they are welcome. Pay full attention, and I know we are all guilty of this because we are doing too many things at the same time. We are talking to a parent but not giving them our full attention".

In welcoming schools

- Parents and students are greeted warmly
- The physical space of the lobby is safe and inviting
- Phone calls are returned promptly
- Signs provide directions in the languages of the community
- Student work is prominently displayed
- Photographs celebrate individual and school achievements



Making a Difference:

Rose's Story

In September of this year, a new family came to register at our school. Dad, a very pregnant mom and three young girls walked into the office. As they approached my desk (rather timidly), they all kind of huddled together with downcast eyes, a less than stellar appearance, and more importantly, very little to say. Getting information from them was not easy.

I measure progress with them in very small steps. One small step may not seem like much but a lot of small steps make a big difference. With a smile on my face and a welcome greeting to Dad and the girls every morning, they all started to walk in looking comfortable and at home.

Recently, there was a birthday party for two of the girls and I was surprised to receive an invitation to attend. In fact, a couple of the teachers and an EA were invited as well. Not bad for a family that looked uncomfortable just a few short months ago.

The Elevator

As a new VP, I stood by the front door and pointed out to children that the bell had rung and they were late. I thought it was a good way to teach time management skills. One day, a little boy came rushing through the door 5 min. after bell time. I mentioned that he was late. He said "I'm so sorry but the elevators weren't working and I had to climb down 18 stories". The next day when I stood in the hall, I only said "Welcome" to the students. The little boy had taught me that getting there despite the challenges was the most important issue.