



Aporia Consulting Ltd.

3219 Yonge St. Suite # 240 Toronto ON M4N 3S1 Canada [aporia@attglobal.net](mailto:aporia@attglobal.net)  
tel 416.686.2279 [www.aporia.ca](http://www.aporia.ca)

## **Learning About Increasing Engagement and Attendance in FNMI Students in Northwestern Ontario Schools**

Submitted by:

Steven Katz, Ph.D. & Lisa Ain Dack, Ph.D.

On behalf of:

Aporia Consulting Ltd.

July, 2013

## Table of Contents

Background .....	3
Data to Support the Initiation of the Project.....	4
Theory of Action.....	8
Design of the Initiative.....	8
Learning from the Initiative .....	12
Learning About the Implementation of Learning Networks.....	13
Learning Focus .....	13
Collaborative Inquiry .....	14
Instructional Leadership.....	17
Implications.....	19
Learning About Engagement and Attendance in FNMI Students.....	20
Interventions Focusing on the Correlates of Student Engagement.....	22
Learning from Case Management .....	24
Case Management Implementation.....	24
Case Management Outcomes .....	25
Case Study- Student A.....	26
Case Study- Student B.....	27
Case Study- Student C.....	28
Participants' Learning from Case Management.....	29
Implications.....	31
Moving Forward.....	32
Appendix.....	34
Reflection Questions to Track Learning and Prepare for the Teleconferences .....	34
Final Reflection Questions .....	35
Case Management Tracking Template.....	37

## Background

The current initiative brings together six school boards that are all part of NOEL (Northern Ontario Education Leaders). NOEL is an organization of leaders of educational organizations in Northwestern Ontario that serves as a forum to discuss issues of common concern and to develop projects that will be of direct benefit to students. The NOEL boards chose to engage in this project together because they are all facing a similar challenge - That many of the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) students in their schools are absent for significant portions of the school year, adversely impacting on their achievement.

Research has identified a robust link between student attendance and achievement. Specifically, there is evidence to suggest that students who attend school regularly are more successful in terms of academic achievement than are students who attend less regularly (e.g., see York Region District School Board, 2007<sup>1</sup>). Research has also identified a link between student engagement and attendance, in that students who are engaged in school (defined in multiple ways) are more likely to attend (see e.g., Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005<sup>2</sup>). As such, student engagement, attendance, and achievement are all deeply connected.

There is also significant research to suggest that learning networks have great potential to impact on school practice (e.g., see Katz, Earl, & Ben Jafaar, 2009<sup>3</sup>). The idea behind learning networks is that changes in schools emerge from leaders' and teachers' professional knowledge creation and sharing (i.e., learning), and that cross-school learning networks – in which individuals from different schools learn together about common challenges of professional practice – are one way to engage in this kind of learning. In learning networks, the learning is enabled through

---

<sup>1</sup> Zheng, S. (2007). Impacts of students' attendance on their academic achievement. Research & Evaluation Services, York Region District School Board.

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, B., Tilleczek, K., Boydell, K. & Rummens, A.J. (2005). Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school - final report. Prepared by Community Health Systems Resource Group The Hospital for Sick Children For the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, Special Education Branch. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

<sup>3</sup> Katz, S., Earl, L., & Ben Jaafar, S. (2009). Building and Connecting Learning Communities: The Power of Networks for School Improvement. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

engaging formal and informal instructional leaders in collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice in the area of a common focus (Katz et al., 2009).

In light of this supporting research, the goal of the current initiative was for schools from the six participating boards to work together in a learning network to develop strategies to increase engagement and attendance in their FNMI students, with the ultimate goal of impacting on student achievement. Each board initially selected one school to formally participate in the project on the board's behalf. Three of the boards selected elementary schools and three of the boards selected secondary schools. Subsequent to the beginning of the project, one of the boards invited a formal leader from other schools in the board that were facing the same attendance challenge to the learning network meetings, to spread the learning to additional schools. One of these "informal" participants (vice principal of a secondary school) became a full project participant, who chose to complete all project documentation even though it was not required. As such, this report will describe the learning from seven participating schools- three elementary and four secondary.

### **Data to Support the Initiation of the Project**

Prior to embarking on the current initiative in January 2013, data was generated from Compass for Success (which all of the participating boards are connected to) to confirm that the "problem" that the initiative was responding to was in fact grounded in evidence. First, the difference in attendance between FNMI students and non-FNMI students in the participating schools was considered, to confirm that FNMI students in these schools do in fact attend school less often than non-FNMI students. Figures 1 and 2 display this data graphically. Figure 1 shows the difference between attendance (defined as number of days of school missed) in FNMI<sup>4</sup> ( $n = 228$ ) and non-FNMI ( $n = 237$ ) students in the three participating elementary schools in 2011-2012. FNMI students missed an average of 26.7 days,

---

<sup>4</sup> Note that the FNMI students in Figures 1-4 include both the band and self-identified students combined.

which was significantly higher than the average 14.16 days missed by non-FNMI students,  $t(292.64) = 6.98, p < .001$ .<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1.

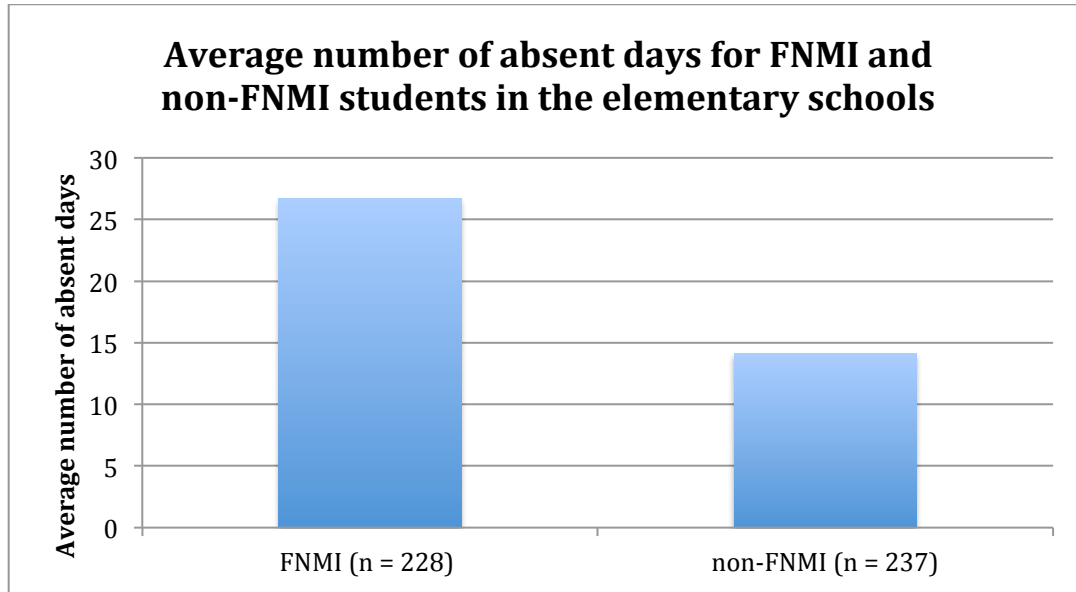
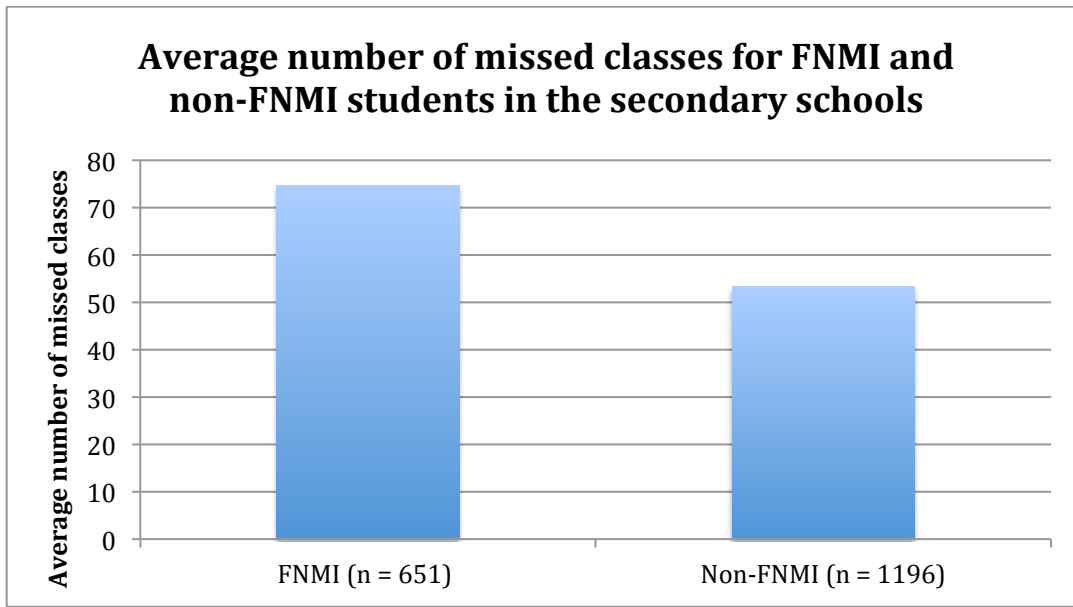


Figure 2 shows the difference between attendance (defined as number of missed classes) in FNMI ( $n = 651$ ) and non-FNMI ( $n = 1196$ ) students in three of the four participating secondary schools<sup>6</sup> in 2011-2012. FNMI students missed an average of 74.73 classes, which was significantly higher than the average 53.44 classes missed by non-FNMI students,  $t(1005.66) = 9.44, p < .001$ .

Figure 2.

<sup>5</sup> For all analyses reported in this section equal variances were not assumed.

<sup>6</sup> One of the participating secondary schools did not agree to their student data being included in the project.



Taken together, these data show that FNMI students were in fact absent from school significantly more often than non-FNMI students in 2011-2012.

Second, data looking at the relationship between student attendance and student achievement in FNMI students from the participating schools was considered, to confirm that the relationship that has been reported elsewhere (i.e., that students who attend school more often are more likely to succeed academically) is also present in the participating schools. Only FNMI students were included in these analyses since this is the group that was the focus of the current initiative. Figures 3 and 4 graphically display this data. Figure 3 shows the relationship between attendance (defined as number of days of school missed) and achievement (defined as report card English language reading scores) in the FNMI students in the three participating elementary schools combined in 2011-2012. The subsequent analysis combined report card levels 1, 2, and the one student in the category R (Remediation) into one category (below the provincial standard), and levels 3 and 4 into another category (at or above the provincial standard). Students at the level of R, 1, or 2 missed an average of 30.74 days, which was significantly higher than the average of 21.36 days missed by students at levels 3 or 4,  $t(91.48) = 2.60, p < .01$ .

Figure 3.

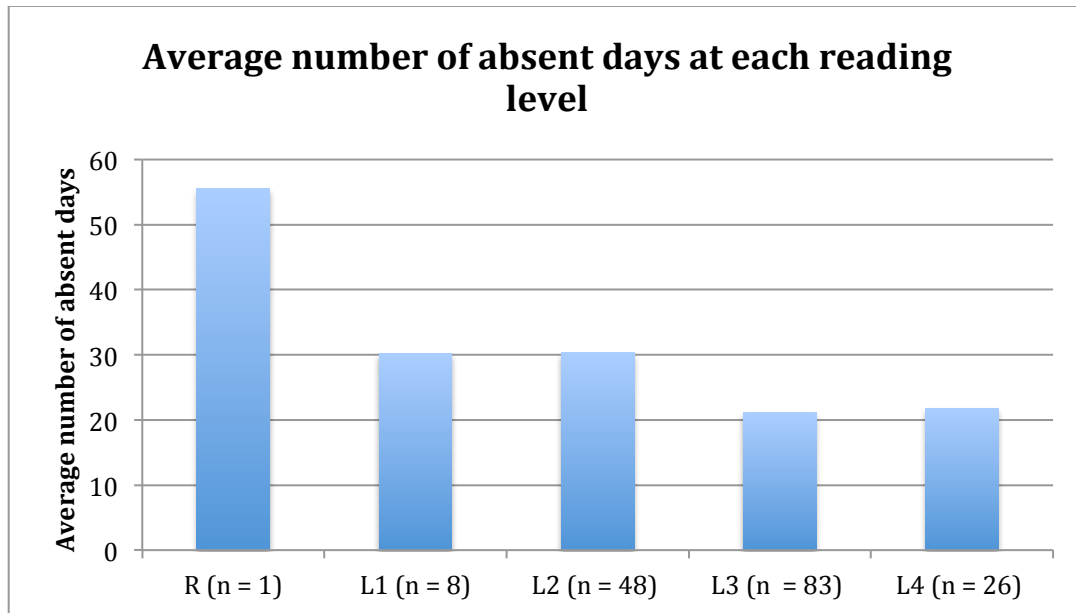
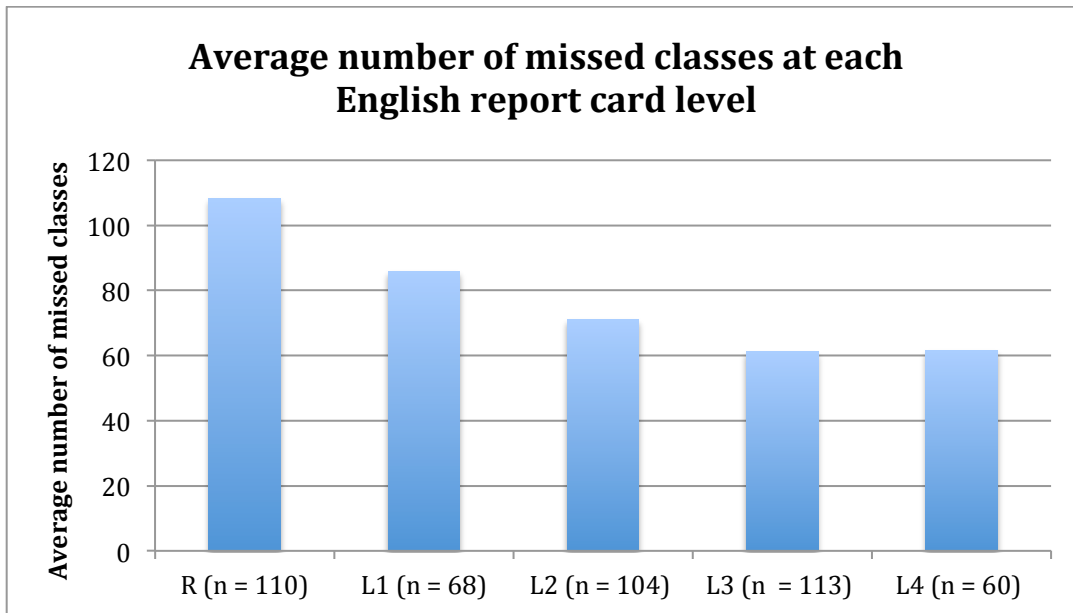


Figure 4 shows the relationship between attendance (defined as number of classes missed) and achievement (defined as report card English scores) in the three secondary schools combined in 2011-2012. The subsequent analysis combined report card levels R, 1, and 2 into one category (below the provincial standard), and levels 3 and 4 into another category (at or above the provincial standard). Students at the level of R, 1, or 2 missed an average of 89.17 classes, which was significantly higher than the average of 61.31 classes missed by students at levels 3 or 4,  $t(442.48) = 6.97, p < .001$ .

Figure 4.



Taken together these data show that the relationship between student attendance and achievement that has been reported elsewhere (i.e., attendance matters) is also present in these six schools.

### Theory of Action

This initiative is grounded in research that connects engagement to attendance and attendance to achievement. As outlined above, research has shown that students who are more engaged in school are more likely to attend, and that students who attend school regularly are more likely to achieve. As such, the theory of action for this project was that if school leaders (and teachers) engage in inquiry-based professional learning in a learning network around difficult problems of practice related to student engagement and attendance, then student engagement practices will change, resulting in improved attendance (and ultimately increased achievement).

### Design of the Initiative

Three elementary schools and four secondary schools were involved in the initiative. The goal was for the participating schools to form a learning network, which would work together to learn about the area of focus (increasing engagement and attendance in FNMI students). The purpose of the learning network was to build leader (and ultimately teacher) capacity to work with FNMI students. As such, a



formal leader from each school (principal or vice principal) was directly connected to the learning network (i.e., participated in the network meetings). However, an additional aim was for the formal leader to engage other staff in his/her school in the process and connect them to the initiative. In addition, the Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) lead from each participating board was connected to the initiative, in order to have the potential to spread the learning beyond the participating school and further into the board. As mentioned above, one of the participating boards also chose to invite a formal leader from other schools in the board that were facing the same attendance challenge to the learning network meetings, to spread the learning to additional schools.

The initiative was supported by an independent consultant, who NOEL engaged to facilitate the learning network meetings and support the schools in engaging in the learning process. The consultant planned the content for each of the network meetings, and regularly communicated with the participants between meetings. Well-versed in the areas of both FNMI student achievement as well as learning networks, the consultant was well-positioned to act as “critical friend” to the participating leaders, and to model this behaviour with the goal of the administrators beginning to serve in this critical friendship role for one another. The initiative was also supported by researchers from Aporia Consulting Ltd., who observed the network meetings and communicated with the participants, in order to track their learning. The researchers have expertise in the area of learning networks, and, when called on, did sometimes participate in the network meetings from this perspective. The consultant and the researchers were regularly in communication with each other throughout the project. The initiative was also supported by the Manager of Compass for Success, who brokered relationships with key individuals in the participating boards and provided all the quantitative data required for the initiative (since all of the participating boards used Compass for Success).

The learning network first met face-to-face on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, for a half-day meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to frame the initiative, have the participants introduce themselves and the schools they work in, and to begin to

understand the nature of the problem around the attendance of FNMI students in the participating schools. Significant time was spent unpacking the “attendance problem”, exploring the factors that impact attendance and discussing the “sphere of influence” for school staff, with the idea being that this initiative would aim to impact on the factors that are within the influence of schools, rather than those outside of schools’ direct influence. The consultant shared research on the relationship between student engagement and student attendance, as well as between student attendance and student achievement. The group then engaged in discussion around the correlates of student engagement that would be the focus of the project. The idea was that although there are a number of different aspects of student “engagement”, this project would aim to focus on the (research-based) correlates of engagement that are within the influence of schools. Participants discussed the correlates on engagement and considered them in the context of their own schools. The correlates of student engagement<sup>7</sup> that were the focus of this project (not intended to be exhaustive) include:

- **Overall School Environment** – feeling accepted by adults, viewing school as friendly and welcoming, seeking out extra help if available, the school building is attractive and good place to learn
- **Class Participation** – comfortable participating in class activities and discussions, including answering questions
- **Relationships with Other Students** – getting along with other students and feeling accepted by students in the school
- **Relationships with School Adults** – perception of teacher expectations, feeling supported and encouraged by teachers, feeling comfortable to discuss problems with teachers, and students’ background being respected by school staff

---

<sup>7</sup> Zheng, S., Sinay, E., & Anastasakos, R. (2012, April). Differentiated effects of adolescents’ demographic characteristics and school experiences on their engagement and academic outcomes. Roundtable conducted at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, British Columbia.

- **School Safety** – feeling safe in classrooms, in different locations in the school building and outside on school property
- **Inclusive School Experience** – school recognizes and addresses different issues in gender, cultural, racial, and faith backgrounds and sexual orientation

The group then discussed the idea of differentiating the strategies for increasing engagement and attendance within their schools based on the level of absence of students (with the idea being that more absence indicates greater risk). They were introduced to using Case Management as a differentiated response model for working with students who represent different rates of absence in the school. Case Management is a research-based collaborative inquiry process aimed to support the learning of staff and administrators. The “marker” students selected to follow are intended to serve as proxies for a broader group of students whose absence-related issues are similar to each of the “marker” students. The idea was that each participating school would select three students with whom they would engage in a Case Management process throughout the initiative (one who had been absent between 5 and 10% of the time in the first term of 2012-2013, one who had been absent between 11 and 15% of the time in the first term, and one who had been absent 16% of the time or more in the first term). Schools were to then use the learnings from the Case Management process to identify strategies for each of the groups of students, and eventually implement these within a school-wide context in order to positively impact on the attendance of the other students in the absence group (essentially, planning at the micro level to impact at the macro level).

Participants at the January 28<sup>th</sup> session were also introduced to the concept of learning networks and the “enablers” of knowledge creation (focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership, which are described further below). The session ended with a discussion of the expectations of those who were participating in the project. These included identifying a group of staff members who would be involved in this project at the school level and engaging them in it, creating a plan for implementing the project in the school, identifying three target students (from the three categories) and implementing a Case Management strategy with them,

participating in monthly learning network meetings (which took place via teleconference), and submitting monthly reflection sheets (one week in advance of the scheduled teleconference) that asked questions about the learning taking place in the school as well as monthly tracking sheets for the Case Management students (templates for both reflection and tracking were provided- see Appendix).

Following the face-to-face meeting on January 28<sup>th</sup>, each school was given an attendance report specific to their school (generated through Compass for Success). These reports considered the attendance of FNMI students in relation to the full population of students in the school. Schools were asked to use their attendance report, as well as all the information provided to them at the January 28<sup>th</sup> session to create a plan for how their school would engage in the project.

In addition to the work taking place in each individual school, there were four additional teleconference meetings (each approximately two hours) on February 25<sup>th</sup>, April 8<sup>th</sup>, May 9<sup>th</sup>, and June 10<sup>th</sup>. The teleconferences were facilitated by the consultant, with a researcher present. The purpose of the teleconferences was for participants to share their reflections on their work, share their experiences with their Case Management implementation, and interact with each other as “critical friends” to support the learning of one another.

### **Learning from the Initiative**

Although the ultimate intended impact in the theory of action related to this initiative is increasing student achievement, this was not measured in the current iteration of the initiative. Given that the initiative only took place over a five-month period, it would be unrealistic to expect changes at this level. As such, this section will report on learnings from the current initiative in relation to learning about implementing a learning network and learning about engagement and attendance in FNMI students (as a necessary precursor to impacting on achievement).

It is important to note that these two sets of learnings are not unrelated to one another. The theory of action for this project suggests that working in a learning network will impact schools’ work around student engagement and attendance. As such, the extent to which the network was successfully implemented relates to what

was learned about engagement and attendance. Following this logic, this section will first report the learnings about network implementation, followed by the learnings about engagement and attendance in FNMI students. The data sources that were used for reporting on the learnings from this initiative include notes from the teleconferences and the reflections and templates submitted by the participating schools.

### **Learning About the Implementation of Learning Networks**

This project brought together six school boards located throughout Northwestern Ontario into a single learning network. At the first network meeting participants were introduced to the concept of learning networks and the enablers of professional learning in networks: focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership. Research (e.g., Katz et al., 2009) has determined that the success of learning networks in part depends on the extent to which these enablers are in place. The goal of the learning network was for instructional leaders (both formal and informal) to work together to learn about an area of common focus, using collaborative inquiry as the methodology for learning. In addition, in cross-school learning networks like this one, the intention is for the entire school to be involved in the network, not just those who actually attend the cross-school network meetings. The following sections describe the extent to which focus, collaborative inquiry, and instructional leadership were evident in the learning network. Each section begins with a description of the enabler from the literature, followed by an analysis of what was seen in relation to the named enabler in the current project. Note that there is a broad literature to support each of the enablers described below. For more detail on these, please see Katz et al. (2009), and Katz, Dack, and Earl (2009)<sup>8</sup>.

#### ***Learning Focus***

*A learning focus refers to an explicit focus for the learning of the group (i.e., a focus for what the group will learn about, rather than a focus for what the group will do). When learning networks are established based on focus it means that the group is*

---

<sup>8</sup> Katz, S., Dack, L. A., & Earl, L. (2009). Networked learning communities to foster learning for teachers and their students. *Principal Connections*, 12, 36-38.

*established based on common needs or a common problem of professional practice. Meaningful, relevant, and appropriate data are strategically collected to determine the needs of those involved and the learning focus for the group as a whole.*

The focus for the network in the current initiative was learning about increasing attendance and engagement in FNMI students. The project was initiated because administrators expressed a significant problem of professional practice – that many of the FNMI students in their schools are not regularly attending – and the need to work on it. Importantly, in addition to administrators reporting this need, the schools’ data determined that there was evidence for it (as described above). The focus was shared amongst the participating schools, and was experienced as an urgent need. As such, the important elements of a network’s learning focus were all present.

However, despite the fact that all participating schools were experiencing FNMI attendance as an urgent problem, it was not clear that all believed this to be a worthwhile professional learning focus for the network. Some of the participants did not seem committed to the idea of collaborative professional learning as a strategy for impacting on FNMI attendance. Although this was only expressed overtly by one participant, this may also be inferred based on other formal leaders’ limited participation in the network (described below).

### ***Collaborative Inquiry***

*In collaborative inquiry, collective learning and understanding encourages innovation where meaningful information is analyzed and leads to effective, purposeful action. Group members ask effective, timely questions to create the compelling disturbances that generate new ideas and questions for the group. Collaborative inquiry tends to happen when questions are generated by members of the learning community; analysis of teaching practices and student learning takes place; and theories of action are developed that include investigations, proposed solutions, and testing through a plan, act, assess, and reflect cycle.*

This project had the potential for collaborative inquiry to take place at two levels– during the cross-school learning network meetings, and as the projects were being implemented in the individual schools. Judith Warren Little (1990) offers a

useful four-fold taxonomy for examining collaboration: storytelling and scanning for ideas; aid and assistance; sharing; and joint work. “Storytelling and scanning for ideas” is quick, informal exchanges between individuals that typically happen at a distance from the classroom. In “aid and assistance”, mutual aid or help is readily available when it’s asked for, but colleagues are unlikely to offer one another assistance in an unsolicited way. In “sharing”, colleagues make aspects of their work available to others, but there is no commentary on the work and no dimension of challenge. It is in “joint work” where colleagues share responsibility and really believe that they need one another’s contributions to succeed. In joint work, ideas are put on the table for discussion, analysis, debate, and challenge.

There was significant evidence of “storytelling and scanning for ideas”, “aid and assistance”, and “sharing” during the formal learning network meetings (i.e., the teleconferences), but limited evidence of “joint work”. Most of the participants regularly shared their experiences and offered advice and suggestions to one another. These were not of a superficial nature, particularly given the focus of the learning network. Participants shared very deeply, and there was certainly a level of trust among the group members that enabled this sort of sharing. However, there were few examples of analysis, debate, or challenge during the teleconferences. There were only a couple participants that seemed inclined to participate in this way, and as such, there was little evidence of true collaborative inquiry at the network meetings. It is important to note that given that this project only took place over a five-month period, there was little time for this kind of culture to develop.

Although “sharing” is not the highest form of collaboration, it did play a crucial role in the network. There were a number of times when participants reported that something that one of their colleagues had shared on a teleconference played a role in their future work. As an example, through the Case Management process one of the participating schools learned about the role of students feeling safe while riding the school bus, and how this is relevant in terms of their students’ attendance. Subsequent to hearing this on a teleconference, another principal reported that although s/he had never considered this issue in relation to his/her

school, school staff were now beginning to consider how this issue might also be relevant for the students in their school.

There may have been more evidence of collaborative inquiry in the individual schools participating in the project than there was at the formal network meetings, but the researchers were not privy to the details of how the individual school projects unfolded. Each of the individual schools implemented a Case Management process for working through this project. Case Management is, in essence, a collaborative inquiry process that has administrators and teachers inquire into individual students in relation to something in particular (in this case, attendance and engagement), determine strategies for trying to impact on the students, experiment with possibilities, and learn from successes and failures of the attempted strategies. Although the researchers were not privy to the details of how the Case Management sessions unfolded in the participating schools, the information submitted by the schools in their Case Management and reflection templates suggested variability. Some of the administrators seemed to engage a group of teachers in a Case Management process as intended, and the reports provided suggested true collaborative inquiry that included the important aspects of “joint work” (analysis, debate, and challenge). As an example, see the following description of the Case Management process submitted by one of the principals:

“We chose 3 students to focus on... We spent a long time trying to pick the right students and the conversations about why to pick certain students have been very rich. We’ve learned a lot about our thinking about our students... The teachers of each of the 3 students were released for 20 minutes every two weeks to come together and very formally discuss four aspects of student attendance. We looked at evidence of attendance from the past two weeks (attendance profiles and teacher anecdotal [evidence, such as] lates [and] leaving without permission). We discussed the strategies we were using with the student and anecdotal evidence of how the strategy was working. We chose areas of focus for the coming two weeks and considered what evidence we would use to support our findings.”

Another principal described the fact that for his/her staff the Case Management experience was an important way to test hypotheses and generate “next practice” for staff, even if it was not “best practice”, as consistent with a learning-focused inquiry approach. This principal wrote:



“The principal, vice principal and guidance team took this on as their area of focus. They looked at a pyramid of interventions for the three students and then were able to create a course of action to try in order to see if it made any difference. It was a little like a trial and error with a hypothesis (theory of action). We found that the work helped us to have focused discussions and that we were able to think about issues well with specific students in mind. Then we could generalize the information and try to scale it out to help more students. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it did not. However, it caused us to reflect and to generate new ideas and actions that we might not have thought of before. We did not succeed in terms of stats but made good connections and had good discussions...”

In contrast, other administrators reported that they mostly took the Case Management process on alone, meeting only infrequently with teachers. One principal reported that no formal Case Management was used at all. In these cases it is quite unlikely that collaborative inquiry was occurring.

One of the important components of collaborative inquiry is that the work follows a plan, act, assess, reflect framework. The initial teleconference for this project introduced this framework, and participants were encouraged to work through it. The “plan” portion of plan, act, assess, reflect is crucial, and requires people to develop an inquiry question that is based in evidence, hypotheses for the work, and a plan for investigating the hypotheses. The reason that the plan is so important is because it ensures that an initiative being undertaken is the “right” one and is most likely to be impactful (Katz & Dack, 2013<sup>9</sup>). However, it is unclear whether individual schools connected to this initiative truly created a plan for their work. It is certainly the case that these formal plans were not shared at the teleconferences. The fact that the planning was shortchanged in this project was likely due to the fact that the project unfolded within a very short timeframe. However, this might have impacted the potential for the projects to be successful within the schools.

### ***Instructional Leadership***

*Leadership within a learning network includes both formal and informal instructional*

---

<sup>9</sup> Katz, S., & Dack, L. A. (2013). *Intentional Interruption: Breaking Down Learning Barriers to Transform Professional Practice*. Corwin Press.

*leadership. Formal leaders (leadership defined by role and position) take responsibility for and monitor the network learning focus, and work to engage the whole school (including informal leaders) in the process. Informal leaders (leadership defined by activity or expertise) participate in collaborative groups designed to deepen professional knowledge and to share learning in specific domains that are relevant to the learning focus.*

Each of the participating schools had at least one formal leader connected to the learning network, who had the role of taking responsibility for the project and leading the project team in his/her school, attending the cross-school network meetings (i.e., teleconferences), and submitting the required documentation for the project. In reality, the extent to which the formal leaders fulfilled this role was variable. As reported above, in the cases of a few of the schools, there was little evidence that the formal leader was engaging other school staff in the project, rather than taking it on alone. In addition to this, two of the schools failed to submit one of their required reflection reports (25% of the requirement) and one of the schools failed to submit two of the reports (50% of the requirement). And in the case of most of the schools, even when the reflection reports were submitted, they were often submitted subsequent to the teleconference rather than prior to it. This is important to note because the reflections were intended to be an input to the teleconferences, rather than an output, and without the expected preparation there was less opportunity for the participants to benefit from the teleconference. It is also important to note that on each of the teleconferences there were a number of the formal leaders who were not present.

That said, there were a few formal leaders connected to the project who fulfilled their responsibilities wholeheartedly and appeared to take the process very seriously. Some of the administrators were committed to participating in every teleconference, and always expressed sincere regrets if this was not possible. More importantly, these few individuals took a learning stance to their leadership and to participation in the network, and worked hard to ensure that teachers in their schools were connected to the project. For example, one principal reported that s/he kept the teachers in the school informed about the work of the network, and

was very explicit about how it was connected to the work they were doing back in the school.

It is not possible for this report to describe the work of informal leaders in this project, as this would have been work happening at the individual school level that the researchers were not privy to. That said, it is unlikely that there was significant involvement of informal leaders in the schools whose administrators reported working on this project alone. In contrast, a couple of the formal leaders described processes used in their schools that seemed to highly involve teachers (informal leaders) in the project in a powerful way, as is evident in the Case Management description provided on the previous page.

### ***Implications***

There are a number of implications of the findings reported in this section. First, for a learning network to be successful participants need to come to the table (in this case, the meetings) prepared and with evidence of prior thinking and reflection. The teleconferences were not supposed to be about the facilitator “delivering information” (learning networks do not function as “mini ballrooms”), but were intended to be the place for the group to learn collectively. This is not possible without advance preparation on the part of participants. In addition, it is clear that participants need to “buy in” to the idea of a learning network and to the potential for this kind of collective learning to truly impact on school practice. It appears that some of the participants engaged in this project with expectations that someone would “tell them what to do,” when instead the focus was about collective learning through a structured inquiry cycle. Problems of practice, by definition, exist because they defy easy solutions. Inquiry processes are designed to create the conditions to allow for new learning, where the requisite knowledge doesn’t already exist or isn’t readily available. Perhaps future iterations of this kind of project need to ensure that more work is done upfront ensuring that participants understand the purpose of a learning network, what it is not intended to be (because it can’t serve those functions), and the responsibilities that come with participation, with people given the opportunity to “opt out” if they don’t feel that the initiative is a good match for them. Participating in the learning network is about *learning*. A shared problem

of practice among network participants is not enough; People need to interact with the network in a way that opens themselves up for change, and it was clear that some of the participants did not come prepared with this learning stance.

Linked to this is the observation of a lack of commitment (both in terms of submitting the required reflections and participation in the teleconferences) that was seen in some of the participating administrators. While it is understandable that the administrators sometimes found themselves in unexpected and unavoidable circumstances that got in the way of participation in the teleconferences, the level of administrator absence was higher than expected. This leads to the question of why this was the case. In addition to the potential lack of “buy in” on the part of some of the administrators that is described above, it is also possible that the participants felt less accountable to the network than they would have had the meetings been face-to-face (which would have been a challenge in the current initiative, given the distance between many of these schools). It is likely more difficult for people to get to know one another when they are not meeting face-to-face, and it is possible that the accountability that the participants felt to one another and to the project in general might have grown if there had been time for the network to develop beyond the five-month period.

That said, it is evident from the previous descriptions of those who did buy in, commit, and participate fully, that when particular conditions are in place a learning network of this kind has the potential to create new learning opportunities for leaders and teachers that can impact on school practice. This is particularly promising in areas such as Northwestern Ontario where schools are often a great distance from one another and face-to-face learning networks would be a greater challenge.

### **Learning About Engagement and Attendance in FNMI Students**

The goal of the current initiative was for schools to learn about the issues surrounding engagement and attendance in FNMI students that their schools are facing, and to implement strategies to positively impact on these things. The learning network – as described above – was part of the methodology for this learning, but each of the seven participants implemented their own school-based

projects. The goal of these projects was for schools to focus their work on one or more of the correlates of engagement (overall school environment, class participation, relationships with other students, relationships with school adults, school safety, inclusive school experience) in order to shift practice in the school. In addition, each school was asked to implement a Case Management approach by identifying three FNMI students (one in each of three groups– 5-10% of days absent, 11-15% of days absent, 16+% of days absent). The idea was that the Case Management would give staff the opportunity to learn in-depth about three particular students, and that the learnings could then generalize to other students in the school.

The project ran for a five-month period. During this time, the involved schools all implemented Case Management to some extent with three target students. However, there seemed to be variability in how the Case Management was implemented, as described above. In addition, there was significant variability in the extent to which the schools implemented projects that went *beyond* the Case Management students. A couple of the schools implemented projects that aimed to impact on many students in the school. These projects ran in parallel with the Case Management process that was also taking place. For example, one school focused on “student voice”. At the start of the project the administrator invited a group of FNMI students to a lunch where they had the opportunity to tell school administration and staff what is working for them at school and what would make things better for them. After learning what their students wanted and needed, they implemented strategies in response, with the goal of impacting on attendance of all their FNMI students. At the same time, this school undertook Case Management with three of their FNMI students, in an attempt to develop strategies that would work for these students in particular (and hopefully generalize to other students with a similar profile). This is an example of a school that was working on a “general” project to increase engagement and attendance in FNMI students at the same time as they were using Case Management with three particular students. In contrast to this example, other participating schools seemed to focus their projects only on the Case Management process, with little connection to the rest of the school. In these cases

“the project” was synonymous with Case Management, and did not go beyond it.

That said, regardless of whether the projects went beyond Case Management or not, this initiative provided schools with the opportunity to learn about, and develop strategies in relation to, the correlates of student engagement. The seven participating schools each had their own project focus, which centred on different correlates, but among them the projects touched on five of the six correlates. (The one that was not focused on in a significant way in any of the schools – at least as described in the reflection templates – was “Class Participation”.) The following table provides examples of how each of the five other correlates were focused on in the participating schools. Some of these strategies were introduced as global school strategies unrelated to the Case Management students, while others were strategies targeted to particular Case Management students but with the potential to be useful for other students as well.

***Interventions Focusing on the Correlates of Student Engagement***

<b>Correlate</b>	<b>Example Strategies</b>
Overall School Environment	<p>One school had the goal of increasing students’ overall sense of belonging in the building. As such, they introduced a hot lunch program and an after-school sports club to try to help these students feel welcome in the school.</p> <p>One school focused on supporting students who are not able to attend school for reasons out of their control, such as weather or caring for a family member. Their strategy was to include an aspect of blended learning in all courses, to try to help these students feel better supported.</p> <p>Through Case Management, one of the schools learned that a particular student had low self-efficacy. In response to this, the student’s four teachers implemented a strategy whereby they each provided the student with three pieces of positive feedback each day, so that the student received a total of twelve pieces of positive feedback each day. The goal was to help the student feel accepted and supported by adults in the building.</p>
Relationships with Other Students	One of the Case Management students in one of the schools had regularly been asked to complete missed work on the days that he did attend one particular class. Although the rest of the students

	were participating in interesting activities (such as a bonfire), the teacher was not allowing him to participate. The teacher implemented a new strategy whereby the academics were put aside and the student was permitted to participate in all class activities (rather than being asked to complete the missed work) in an attempt to build inclusivity between this student and his peers to increase his engagement in the class.
Relationships with School Adults	In one school, teachers implemented a strategy whereby they explicitly told students at the end of each class what would be learned in class the next day and why it was critical that the student attend class to participate in that learning. The intended (implicit) message was that the teachers care whether the students attend or not and that they believe that the students can be successful if they attend.  Another school used the focused conversation structure ORID (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) as a way of helping students make decisions and build relationships with teachers.
School Safety	Through Case Management, one of the schools learned that a student regularly missed school because she did not want to ride the bus. The school implemented a bus monitor to attempt to control students' behavior on the bus and increase safety.
Inclusive School Experience	One school purchased a reading series related to FNMI culture and teachings and encouraged teachers to use them, in an attempt to increase the extent to which the students identify with what they are reading.

In addition to focusing on the above correlates of student engagement, a number of the schools implemented projects that had a community focus. Most of the participating schools implemented projects that had some kind of connection to parents, and some attempted to connect to others in the community, such as the band education counselor. “Community” was not included in the list of correlates that this project attempted to focus on because the intent was to work with the correlates of engagement that are most likely to be within the direct influence of schools, which the community is not. That said, the list of correlates that were the focus of the initiative was not believed to be exhaustive, and it is clear that “Community” is an important focus for many of the participating schools.

### ***Learning from Case Management***

As explained above, each of the seven participating schools was asked to implement Case Management in relation to attendance and engagement with three students in the school- one in the category of 5-10% of days absent, one in the category of 11-15% of days absent, and one in the category of 16+% of days absent. The following sections will report on the implementation of the Case Management process in the seven participating schools, as well as the outcome from Case Management (i.e., what occurred with the target students).

#### ***Case Management Implementation***

The intent of Case Management is for school staff to build collaborative teams that work together to inquire into particular students who are at-risk (defined in this project in relation to attendance and engagement). Staff then develop strategies to implement with the particular student that may be relevant to other students that are similar to the target student. In this way, the learning can be transferred from the micro level to the macro.

As reported in the section on collaborative inquiry above, the extent to which the seven participating schools implemented a true collaborative inquiry process was variable. While a few of the schools appeared to implement a Case Management process that included a varied team of administrators, teachers, and other school staff that frequently met and engaged in “joint work” that was based in evidence, the Case Management process in other participating schools was less formal. In some cases the Case Management process had little involvement of teachers, in others the meetings occurred infrequently, and in others there was no evidence that formal Case Management really happened at all.

The participants were asked to complete a Case Management template after each session with the student to track the work of the Case Management team, and these were to be submitted in advance of each teleconference. However, for the most part the participants chose to reflect on the Case Management within their project reflection sheets rather submit a Case Management template separately. The disadvantage of this was that the researchers were not provided with detailed information about the Case Management process. That said, a few of the participants



did provide some detail about the Case Management process on their reflection templates, which was used in preparing this report. In contrast to this, about half of the participants reported very little about how Case Management was used in their schools, both in relation to the process undertaken and in relation to strategies employed with target students.

There was also variability in relation to the implementation of Case Management with respect to the selection of the target students. Although participants were asked to select one student who was absent 5-10% of the time, one who was absent 11-15% of the time, and one who was absent 16+% of the time, it was not clear that all did so. One participant, for example, chose to implement Case Management with three students in the 16+ category. Others reported selecting one student from each of the three categories, though it was not clear that they actually appealed to data in doing so. It may be the case that school staff believed that a student fell into a particular absence category when the student did not (at least as supported by the attendance data). For example, a school may have chosen a student who missed most of January as their 16+ student, even if that student missed significantly less school prior to January. Examination of the Case Management data at the end of the project revealed that this may have been the case, because some of the selected students did not actually fall into the absence category that they had been put in.

What is most clear from examining the implementation of Case Management in this initiative is that there was significant variability in every aspect of the Case Management implementation, from how the students were selected, to the process used in the schools, to the extent to which the process was tracked for the purposes of the research.

#### *Case Management Outcomes*

When reporting on the outcome of the Case Management implemented in the current initiative, it is first important to point out the very short duration of the projects. This initiative was launched on January 28<sup>th</sup>. This means that at the earliest, the Case Management process began in February, meaning that there were four to five months in which schools could have made an impact on students. As

such, it would be difficult to see evidence of impact in the target students' attendance data, even in schools that started the process right away and authentically implemented Case Management.

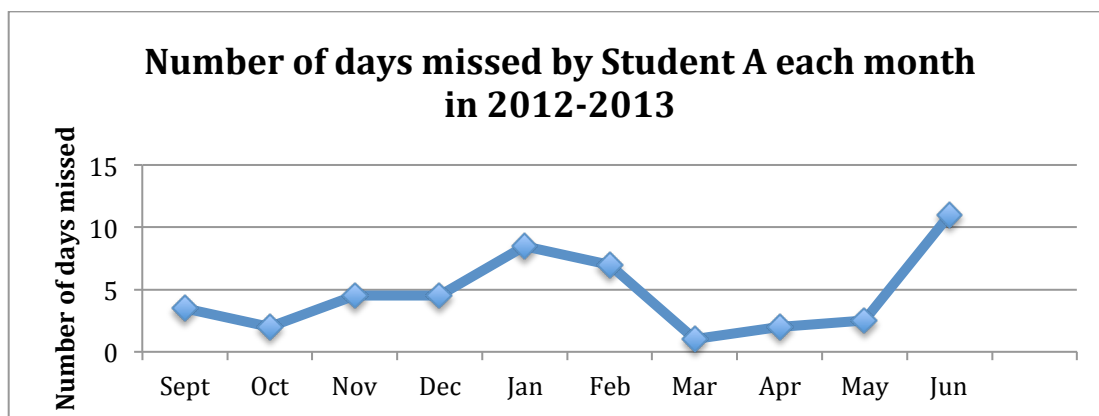
Second, it makes little sense to talk about the extent to which Case Management was successful or not in schools in which there was little evidence that it was actually implemented. For example, one of the principals reported that although s/he did select three target students, the school did not actually implement Case Management in relation to this project. It would therefore not make sense to look at the attendance data from this principal's target students. Two of the other principals provided little information about the Case Management process employed in their schools as well as about the target students, either in the reflection sheets or on the teleconferences. A fourth principal was not comfortable releasing the target students' Ontario Education Numbers, making it impossible to look at the impact of that school's Case Management. As such, there is only a small subset of target students for which it is possible to look at the impact of Case Management. "Case studies" of some of these students (including background about the student, the Case Management process used, strategies employed, and attendance data) are presented below. The data presented in the case studies were generated in July 2013 from Compass for Successes. Different information is provided for different students based on what was submitted by the administrators.

#### Case Study- Student A

Student A is a boy in Grade 1 in 2012-2013. Student A missed 23% of SK in 2011-2012, and had missed 24% of 2012-2013 when this project began in January. Student A has six siblings who attend the school as well, and attendance is an issue for all seven of them. The principal of Student A's school reported that s/he involved teachers in the Case Management process to a limited extent, and had a number of the meetings on his/her own. In meeting with Student A's parents, the principal learned that the parents want Student A to graduate from high school but were not aware of the link between attendance, achievement, and high school graduation. The principal also learned that Student A is very eager to please others, loves being outdoors (particularly hunting and fishing with his father and grandfather), and loves receiving one-on-one attention from adults. Strategies that were implemented with Student A included having the staff greet him every morning and encourage him each day, having him take part in a daily breakfast club and hot lunches once a week, and including books that reflected his culture in his reading. The principal

also met with his parents to emphasize the importance of attendance and the connection between attendance and achievement. This project began in February, and in March through May Student A's attendance rose substantially (see Figure 5). The principal also reported that Student A's six siblings' attendance increased at the same level as Student A. Although outside the scope of this project, staff reported that Student A's reading level increased dramatically in the second half of the school year. Student A's absence increased again in June. No information was provided that would explain this increase, but possibilities include a change in personal circumstances that may or may not be related to the time of year, or the question of sustainability of the strategies implemented with Student A.

Figure 5.



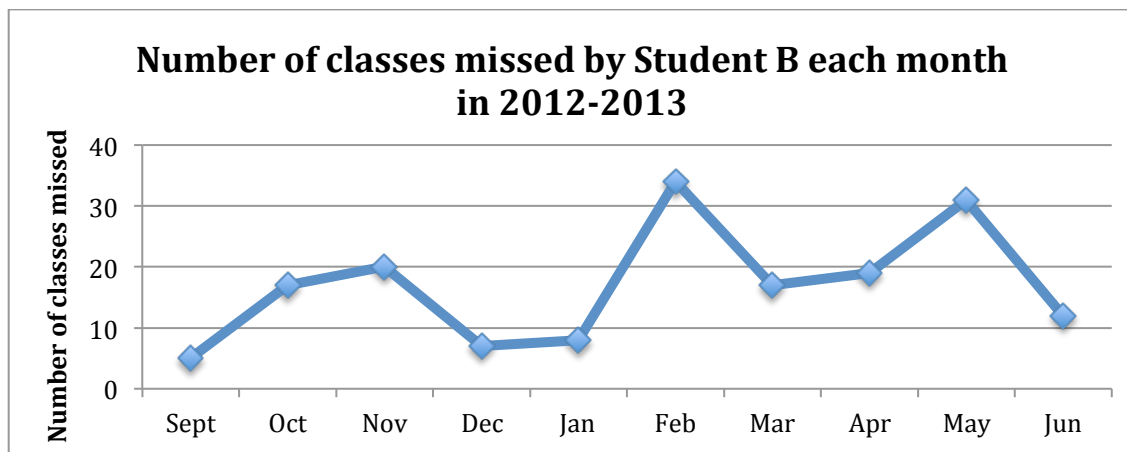
### Case Study- Student B

Student B is a girl in Grade 9, in the category of 5-10% absenteeism. Student B's parents are no longer alive and she is a caregiver to her grandparents. Case Management with Student B began at the beginning of April. Although the process in this school began later than in some of the others, the Case Management team – which included the Vice Principal, Student B's teachers, the student success teacher, and the guidance counselor – met every three weeks until the end of the school year. The team began by talking about Student B and her needs and then selecting the first intervention. Student B's first need as identified by the Case Management team was to increase her self-efficacy. The school implemented a strategy whereby each of her four teachers gave her three pieces of positive feedback in each class, so that she would receive 12 pieces of positive feedback per day. Staff reported that her attendance increased dramatically in that first 3-week cycle, though there is a question as to why this doesn't seem apparent in the attendance data shows in Figure 6. At the end of the three-week cycle the team met again, looked at Student B's attendance data, and then selected a new strategy. In a Case Management session Student B had shared that Mother's Day is a particularly difficult time for her because her mother passed away. In response to this, the second strategy implemented was for Student B's teachers to regularly check in with her and ask her questions about life outside of class to build a relationship with her and to reinforce

that there are adults in the building who care about her. They then completed a third cycle in the same way. Teachers had observed that Student B often sits alone in class. In response to this, the third strategy implemented was providing Student B with a peer group to work with in class to try to remove isolation and build her involvement and participation in class.

Because Case Management with Student B only began in April it is difficult to see results in the data, but her data is shown in Figure 6. There is a large increase in Student B's absences in May, followed by a significant decrease to the lowest levels seen in 2013 in June. This suggests that perhaps there was some resistance to the strategies employed at the beginning of the process, followed by substantial impact.

Figure 6.



#### Case Study- Student C

Student C is a boy in Grade 10. He comes from an “at-risk” family (only one parent present at a time and two siblings with autism). However, school is important to the family and both parents are involved. Student C participates in instruction and actively answers questions in class, enjoys school (particularly tech class), is confident and resilient, and has a full credit count. However, he completes just enough work to pass his courses, and does not do any extra, and all of his marks are borderline. For him school is a social experience (he spends a lot of time talking and on social media), and he believes that it is “not cool” to do well. Student C tends to do a lot of work in class to get ahead, and then be absent for significant periods of time. Student C regularly stays up late playing video games, and this is the cause of many of his absences. However, his parents regularly phone the school to report illness. School staff believed that Student C was representative of many other students in his school.

Student C's four classroom teachers met for 20 minutes every two weeks to engage in Case Management around Student C (and the two other Case Management students in the school). At each meeting they looked at evidence of attendance, discussed strategies and anecdotal evidence of how they were working, and selected a focus for the next two weeks and what evidence they would need to appeal to.

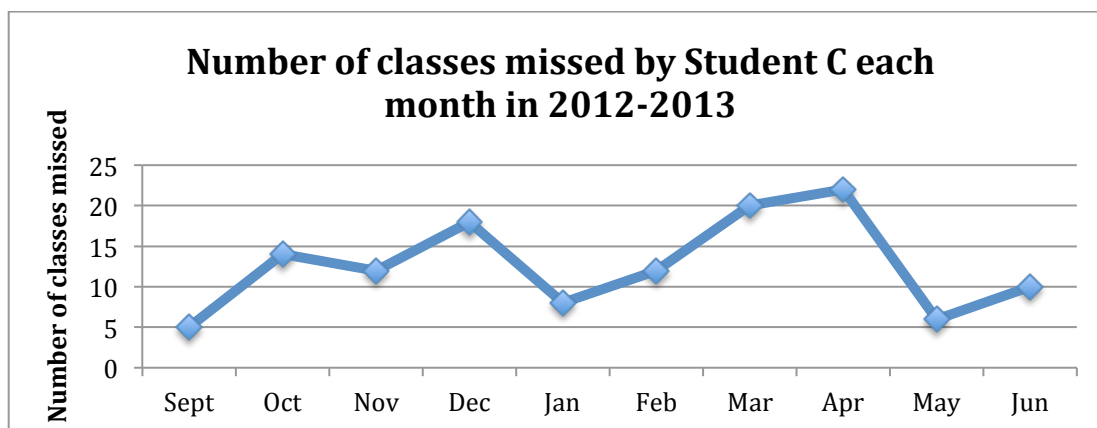
Over the course of the project, a myriad of strategies was implemented with student C, including:

- getting to know him better
- giving him something engaging to do in class long term to give him a reason to attend
- emphasizing the importance of attending
- having the attendance counselor follow up on the reasons for his absences
- helping him form positive relationships with adults in the building
- having teachers pay more attention to him
- emphasizing teacher belief in his ability to succeed
- providing him with feedback instead of a numeric grade to encourage him to keep learning
- encouraging him to take a leadership role with his peers

Student C's principal reported that his engagement and attendance increased after the implementation of some of these strategies, particularly giving him leadership roles and long-term projects to work on. Student C's attendance data – shown in Figure 7 – corroborates this, as it shows that although his absences increased in the first few months of 2013 (perhaps suggesting some early resistance to the strategies implemented), they then decreased substantially for the last two months of the school year.

The principal also reported that in early May Student C's parents removed him from school for seven days and he was very upset about it. He discussed with his teachers that the extended absence was difficult for him since he had been trying so hard to attend. This led the Case Management team to think more about how they can support students who must be away from the classroom, for example through online options for learning. The principal reported that through taking on leadership roles Student C has learned more about his abilities and potential, that his self-esteem has increased, and that other students are looking up to him.

Figure 7.



*Participants' Learning from Case Management*

In their final reflections of the project, participants were asked to reflect on what they learned from implementing Case Management in relation to student engagement and attendance throughout this initiative. Some of the learnings reported include:

- Some participants questioned whether the categories of absence used in this initiative (5-10%, 11-15%, 16+%) are in fact meaningful. They expressed that while Case Management students are sometimes representative of other students in the same category, this cannot be assumed. For example, the factors that lead a particular student to be in the category of 11-15% absenteeism may be the same ones that lead another student to be in that category, or may be completely different. In addition, these factors may also be important for students in the 5-10% or 16%+ categories, making the “category” somewhat irrelevant. In contrast, other participants believed the categories to be very useful, saying that the Case Management process helped them learn about many other students who were in fact similar to the target student. What appears to be the most important learning here is that it is the reasons behind a student’s attendance issues that matter most.
- One participant reported that an important learning from the Case Management process relates to the efficacy of strategies used. S/he reported that strategies that work for one student at a particular time may not continue to work for that student because students’ personal circumstances change frequently. As such, it’s important to continue to monitor the efficacy of strategies and the changing needs of students. This is the reason why the inquiry cycle requires all steps to be completed, including “assess” and “reflect”.
- Another participant reported that in his/her school, implementing Case Management allowed him/her to introduce a formal professional learning community (PLC) to a large group of teachers, without actually calling it a PLC, which in the past had carried negative connotations.

- Another participant reported that engaging in this process led staff at his/her school to think more about the difference between FNMI and non-FNMI students versus the difference between students with strong attendance and poor attendance. S/he reported that in his/her school the differences in the latter comparison were greater than in the former. As such, s/he believes that it is more worthwhile to focus on attendance as an issue for all students in the school, rather than as a gap-closing issue related to FNMI students in particular.

### ***Implications***

There are a number of implications of the findings reported in this section (learning about engagement and attendance in FNMI students). First, although the student engagement correlates focused on in this initiative were not intended to be exhaustive, it is possible that extensions or future iterations of this initiative may wish to focus on additional ones. For example, it became evident throughout this initiative that although Community was not included in the correlates of engagement intended to be focused on, it is an area of priority for most of the participating schools. This suggests that future iterations of this project or others like it might have more of a community focus. However, it is important for schools to consider not only building relationships with the community but also making specific requests of the community. Specifically, it is important for schools to think about the resources that are available in the community that would support student attendance and achievement and how those resources can be accessed and used. The participating schools seem to currently be at the level of talking about community relationship-building, but have not yet moved to thinking about the community “asks”. In the future, it might be important for schools to build this component into their plans.

Second, there were a number of learnings from Case Management reported in the previous section that are important for schools to consider in implementing or scaling up this kind of process. Although Case Management is intended to be a process in which exploring individual students in-depth leads to learnings that can be generalized to other students, reports from the participants underscore the

importance of considering each student's individual circumstances. While an individual student's profile (e.g., level of absence, FNMI or not, etc.) may suggest important contributors or strategies that may be successful, it is crucial that school staff do not make assumptions simply based on these descriptive factors.

## **Moving Forward**

This report describes the current initiative and what has been learned through its implementation, particularly in relation to developing a learning network, and implementing school-based projects that focused on increasing engagement and attendance in FNMI students, including the use of Case Management. Importantly, the initiative only ran for five months, which is not enough time to be able to document any deep and/or far reaching project impacts at scale, especially considering the complexities of the problem of practice that is at the core of this work. Although it is possible to talk about the impact of this project on some of the “marker” students involved in Case Management, there has been insufficient time to observe any broader impact on overall attendance (or achievement) for students in the participating schools. It is also evident from this report that some of the participants were significantly more committed to this project in terms of engaging in real professional learning that has the potential to make changes in schools than were others. While a project time extension would likely be of little benefit to the latter, if the former had the opportunity to continue with this project, it would give them the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive “scale-up” strategy in order to move the learnings from the Case Management “marker” students to the broader population of students in their schools. The scale-up strategy would also have to focus on how staffs (beyond administrators) can be engaged in the project to shift practice in ways that make a difference for students. Importantly, the learning from the lateral capacity building process that is at the centre of this project – the concept of a “learning network” – could potentially be leveraged in the scale-up phase to respond to geographic distance challenges among the participating schools.



In conclusion, some of the participants involved in this initiative have taken a serious learning stance towards the problem of engagement and attendance in FNMI students in their schools and have begun to make great strides in their work by tackling it as a professional learning challenge through a structured plan/act/assess/reflect collaborative inquiry process. The positive signs emerging from the early evidence of those who indeed committed to the requisite implementation would suggest that having the opportunity to spend more time connected to this initiative would be important. Specifically, it would allow for continued momentum with their staff and for the development of a scale-up strategy to impact on student engagement and attendance, with the ultimate impact of increasing student achievement.

## Appendix

### Reflection Questions to Track Learning and Prepare for the Teleconferences<sup>10</sup>

Respond to these questions prior to each teleconference as a way to reflect on your experiences and prepare for the teleconference:

1. What aspect of the attendance challenge are you currently working on?
2. Why is this your current focus (what's your evidence that this is an issue in your school)?
3. What have you done in response to this challenge? What strategies have you tried? Why did you choose these strategies?
4. What would you look for as evidence of the success of these strategies and why?
5. What have you learned?
6. What will you do next?

---

<sup>10</sup> This reflection template was used for the February, April, and May teleconferences.

## Final Reflection Questions<sup>11</sup>

School \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

- **Respond to these questions prior to each teleconference as a way to reflect on your experiences and prepare for the teleconference:**
- What aspect of the attendance challenge(Engagement correlate) are you currently working on?
- Why is this your current focus (what's your evidence that this is an issue in your school)?
- What have you done in response to this challenge? What strategies have you tried? Why did you choose these strategies? Please be specific in identifying your actions.
- Who have you involved in implementing your strategy and this project more generally (identify staff and roles if possible)?
- How have you engaged the informal leaders in the school in your implementation (the school team, etc)?
- Who else would need to be involved to continue to move this project forward in your school?
- What would you look for as evidence of the success of these strategies and why?
- What have you learned?
- What will you do next?

---

<sup>11</sup> This reflection template was used for the June teleconference.

- Describe any new insights that you have gained by participating in the Learning Network.
- What impact has the Learning Network or Case Management had on your work?
- What impact has the Learning Network or Case Management had on your staff?

### **Case Management Reflections**

- How was Case Management implemented in your school? Who was involved and what was the process used?
- In your Case Management reflections, please provide us with information on where each student was at the beginning of the project (remember, we met January 28 to begin) and where are they now. (We are trying to get anecdotal information on impact as well as attendance data).

## Case Management Tracking Template

Student:

Teacher:

Grade:

---

Month:

Attendance Profile:

**Description-** When does this student tend to be present/absent?, are there any attendance patterns?, are there any situations unique to this student or important in understanding this student's attendance history

**Student interests-** What are some student interests/preferences that may be used to attract this student to school?

**Family or community interests/needs-** What are the needs of the student's family or community that need to be taken into account to help increase this student's attendance/engagement?

Focus:

Consider what strategy/strategies would be most helpful at present in increasing this student's attendance and engagement

Next Steps:

What approaches are you going to implement to help increase this student's attendance and engagement? What interventions need to be made? How are they going to be made?

Evidence:

1. What evidence will be assessed to determine the success of your strategy/intervention?
2. What do you expect to see as a result of the strategy/intervention?
3. What is the timeline given for this strategy/intervention?