

November 3, 2006

Celebrating Success

“Nothing succeeds like success” is as true today as when it was first put into print by Sir Arthur Helps in 1868. With success comes confidence – and with confidence comes more success. We are all familiar with sports teams that get on seemingly incredible winning streaks, and we know that students who do well in one subject or grade tend to do well in the next. And so, structuring learning situations to increase the probability of students being successful is a tremendously important responsibility we share as professional educators. Likewise, maintaining established patterns of success is an equally important aspect of our work as teachers, coaches and leaders. Celebrations of student success help do both: they reinforce the success-confidence-success connections for the individuals being recognized, and they present these individuals as positive role models for younger students. And, they are fun.


This fall, School District No. 70 (Alberni) has really taken action on the “nothing succeeds like success” adage by holding its first annual Student Success Forums to celebrate the achievements and successes of all students in diverse learning areas. Held on three successive Monday evenings, the events celebrated Academic Success, Aboriginal Success and Success in Arts and Athletics. These forums enabled the district to communicate with all stakeholders and partners and raise awareness of the successes, increasing achievement levels, and the wide array of programs in the district.

The Academic Success Forum included a structured activity that guided participants through a review and discussion of district achievement results data. The

Aboriginal Student Success Forum centered around honouring the First Nations students who are in grade twelve this year. Family members and representatives from First Nations groups gathered to celebrate their accomplishments thus far and cheer them on to graduation and post-secondary education. The Arts and Athletics Forum took the form of a fair with dozens of displays, presentations and performances showcasing student success in Art, Drama, Music, Trades, Technology and Sports.

These sessions recognized the accomplishments of individuals while celebrating the efforts of all the partners and stakeholders who contributed to them. In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner suggest that celebrations are especially powerful when they are focused on key values, when recognition is publicly visible, and when the formal leaders are personally involved. “Cheerleading – not cheer managing – is a large part of the leader’s function.” These Forums focused on **all students’ achievements** – the thing we value most in our work. The recognition was publicly visible, and school and district leaders led the cheering.

Another feature of these celebrations that I found noteworthy was the timing. Sometimes we wait until the end of the school year to showcase our students’ successes, and sometimes we only invite the students who are being recognized. However, when such events occur earlier in the year and are open to other students, there are some other benefits. The students in the spotlight get some well-deserved recognition and an assurance of continued support as they work through the rest of the school year. Younger students, including their siblings, benefit from seeing some



positive role models recognized. And the whole community gets an emotional boost and sense of accomplishment. Worth thinking about.

Speaking of recognition, it is not just students who benefit from hearing some genuine statements of appreciation. We all like to receive some sincere, unsolicited words of thanks and recognition from time to time. I know that many educational leaders around our province devote the first few minutes of their staff meetings to what they call “acknowledgement of colleagues.” This is a kind of open-mike opportunity for the leader and other members of the group to publicly recognize and thank individuals for particularly significant things they have done in their professional work. While some people may initially feel a bit awkward about this, it usually becomes an agenda item that people value and remember - and it establishes a positive professional tone for the balance of the meeting - another good way to Celebrate Success.

So...this is Alberni’s story. How are you sharing examples of success in your school and district? I often speak of our system provincially as being one of the highest achieving public education systems in the world...but, we need to “drill down” more frequently and put a more local, familiar face on what that success looks like. What are your success stories, and how are they celebrated?