

## **Empowering Students as Leaders in Alberta:**

### **A Literature Review**

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## **Positive School Climate, Leadership, and Pro-Social Behaviors**

When considering The Leader in Me (TLIM) as a continuing program, it is essential to look at the understandings educators find in distributed leadership and how it affects the community and climate of the schools using a program.

Pederson et al.'s (2012) findings suggest that leadership roles held by students create a positive school environment, positive emotional growth in the student leaders, and a positive example and influence on other students. Pederson et al. (2012) notes that distributed leadership includes students' effect on a school and community climate. It is suggested that three themes emerge in the evaluation of this form of leadership: "schoolwide collaboration and trust, adequate time for growth and development, and a positive influence on their peers." These themes resound in the 7 Habits (Covey, 2013), moving individuals from dependence to independence to interdependence, which reflects the global and community aspects in Pederson.

Findings in Pederson's work (2012) reflect that there is "more respect among students," and that leadership and accountability have created a "great sense of responsibility for the school climate" and "the more ownership a student can have in his/her learning and behavior practices, the more permanent the impact becomes." Pederson's observations on student-leadership programs relates directly to the goals and outcomes of TLIM.

Alberta Education has been conscious of creating "safe and caring" schools, and implemented a series of documents, workbooks, curricula, and mandates from 1999 to the present, which integrate school culture within the construct of safety and caring. This work follows the aforementioned commitments to create positive schools:

"Building a safe, caring and inclusive school culture means teaching it minute by minute, day by day, integrating it into discipline practices and curriculum, using instructional models that provide practice in social and relationship skills and, most importantly, modeling it." (Alberta Education, 1999).

In 2003, Alberta Education collaborated with the Calgary School Board to create the resource: *Working Together for Safe and Caring Schools, Grades 7–12: Resource Manual for Students, Staff and Parents* (2003), noting that the goal of this work was "to encourage students to take a leadership role to promote safe and caring schools" (Alberta Education, 2003).

TLIM invigorates the integration of safe and caring schools, within all elements of the leadership curriculum, the 7 Habits (Covey, 2013) infuse all points articulated within the Alberta safe and caring curriculum; this infusion is manifested in all activities, events, and practices in TLIM, and participants are able to create the atmosphere of safe and caring within the school environment within the leadership framework. Safe and Caring

Schools fall under Alberta Education's promotion of Character and Citizenship Education, all of which aligns directly with the work done within TLIM schools.

"Positive school climate engages students in learning and promotes academic achievement and success." Preliminary studies have shown that lower rates of "bullying and teasing was predictive of higher graduation rates 4 years later" in 276 American high schools studied (American Educational Research Association, 2013). A study, piloted by AERA, goes on to note that schools with a positive atmosphere and particular characteristics can lower bullying rates. Discussion of a "positive school climate" mirrors the work done in TLIM, particular to this White Paper are the following points:

- Develop a shared vision among educational leaders and the entire school community about what kind of school they want their school to be.
- Teach pro-social skills in regular classes, advisory classes, and other small-group experiences with opportunities for practice.

Accurate data on bullying is difficult to ascertain, as not all incidents are reported or observed. However, it is clear that an engaged leadership program, which creates a shared vision for the community, teaches pro-social skills, and provides opportunities for leadership development creates the atmosphere, which lends itself to a "pro-social" environment. Empathy is the key to reducing bullying behaviors and TLIM provides the opportunity for students to develop and practice the skill of empathy. By establishing a proactive approach to dealing with bullying behaviors, the whole school climate becomes more positive.

### **Leadership Development Creates Positive Growth in Children and Youth\***

The Framework for Student Learning: Competencies for Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit (Government of Alberta, 2012) is the culmination of a review of research, educational literature, and provincial/international constructs for education. It encompasses consultations and conversations with students, teachers, administrators, academics, parents, scholars, and community (nongovernment) stakeholders. The results note a general support for the "competencies" presented in Inspiring Action on Education (2010), which create an inclusive system of schooling and individual-student success. The claim is that placing these competencies in the curriculum will set the stage for relevant and engaging learning for Alberta students.

The notion of leadership is a thread, which runs through the framework. The Framework for Student Learning creates a three-themed model highlighting Engaged Thinking, Ethical Citizenship, and Entrepreneurial Spirit. Within this model, called Subject/Discipline Areas, seven competencies are presented. While some competencies are precisely aligned with the three themes, others overlap into two categories. Significant for this white paper are that six of the seven categories apply to one or more

themes and are reflected in Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (2013), central to TLIM (see Appendix for details of the habits),:

Theme	Competencies	7 Habits Alignment
Entrepreneurial Spirit & Engaged Thinker	Collaboration and Leadership	Habit 6: Synergize Habit 1: Be Proactive
Engaged Thinker	Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making	Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind Habit 3: Put First Things First
Engaged Thinker	Creativity and Innovation	Habit 6: Synergize
Ethical Citizen	Social, Cultural, Global and Environmental Responsibility	Habit 4: Think Win-Win
Ethical Citizen	Communication	Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood
Entrepreneurial Spirit	Lifelong Learning, Personal Management, and Well-being	Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

\*Most literature focuses on college/undergraduate student leadership and its importance in relation to employment, career development, and citizen productivity. (Wooten et al, 2012; Ward & Yates, 2012). Findings on the impact of leadership skills/education for children and youth are limited. This speaks to the precise need of TLIM to generate not only leadership development with children and youth, but to develop much-needed data and longitudinal and anecdotal research on the success rate and mental/physical changes when TLIM is engaged.

Heckman and Kautz (2013) note that among the three insights they delineate is “the multiplicity of skills required for successful functioning in society. A core set of skills promotes success in many aspects of life.” TLIM’s leadership focus facilitates a multiplicity of skills. Traditionally, school systems/districts direct children through cognitive skills, emphasizing a monolithic focus (Steinberg, 2010). TLIM emphasizes “non-cognitive skills” as they are sometimes called which, when combined with cognitive and curricular knowledges, lead to the development of a whole child.

**Importance of High School Graduation and Decrease of Dropouts**

Hankivsky (2008) articulates the importance of an increase in the high school graduation rate as “essential to the future productivity of the Canadian economy.” While many scholars understand the necessity of an increase in high school graduation for a productive society, few lay out foundational frameworks for successful programs, which facilitate graduation success as a holistic endeavor for each young person. Hankivsky (2008) and The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) indicate that private individuals, as well as Canadian society as a whole, may benefit from completion of high school. High school dropout rates contribute to negative societal behavior and higher crime rates, and

incur costs to society including incarceration, legal fees, infrastructural increases, health care, and social assistance. Failure to graduate from high school is a crucial societal issue that impacts society as a whole and each individual (Oreopoulos, 2005). The individual dropout is apt to have fewer opportunities for employment and income, and lack of a high school diploma affects “health status, housing, and many other amenities” (Levin, Belfield, Meunig & Rouse, 2007, p. 2). In Canada, Campbell (2000) claims “finishing high school may be the single most important challenge for youth over the next 10 to 20 years” (p.29).

The concerns and difficulties for high school dropouts may include regrets, lost of previous social connections, unsatisfied need for higher education, and unemployment. They are also more likely to be reduced to alcohol and drug abuse, and even to committing crimes (Price Waterhouse 1990). “The risk factors for non-completion are related to socioeconomic status, family structure, school type, geographic local, excessive employment, and psychological variables such as low self-esteem and aggression” (Hanvisky, 2008, p. 12; Audas & Willms, 2001; Bowlby & McMullen, 2005; Bushnik et al., 2004; HRDC, 2000). Compared to high school dropouts, those who have completed high school are more likely to get hired, tend to have a healthier lifestyle, and may also be spared frequent visits to physicians (CCL, 2005). Vaillancourt (1995) noted that “the highest rates of returns, private and public, for both men and women, result from the completion of high school” (p.548).

The Alberta high school completion rate is as follows (Alberta Government, 2012):

3-Year Completion	74.8%
4-Year Completion	79.4%
5-Year Completion	80.8%

The government has increased its interest in high school completion with a positive endeavor: High School Success. The Alberta High School Completion Strategic Framework was created in 2012 citing three major goals:

1. Enhancing student engagement and achievement.
2. Increasing high school completion rates.
3. Reducing dropout rates.

With the emphasis on enhancing student engagement and completion, it is clear that cognitive skills will not continue to be the singular goal of Alberta education. In the October 2012 newsletter on High School Success, three key learnings are noted in the 2011–2012 first year of Action on High School Success. The first indicator is:

- In this first year of the Action on High School Success project, a key learning has been the importance of shared leadership. The school has established a volunteer team of leaders who work closely with administration to improve student success.

This indicator directly links to the mandates in TLIM; the High School Success program continues to expand and early indicators point to a positive reception in the implementation and positive emphasis on leadership.

### **Summary**

This white paper has reviewed the literature related to student leadership development in Alberta education and has found that TLIM is connected to three primary benefits: more positive school culture and climate, the development of critical student competencies, and the improvement of key factors that drive high school graduation rates.

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