

# Solving Problems Together: The Importance of Parent/School/Community Collaboration at a Time of Educational and Social Change

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It has been well documented that we are living through an unprecedented acceleration in the rate of change in the way people live their lives. This is creating tremendous stress for people and communities, and there are many signs that our children and youth are at increasing risk of alienation, apathy, rebellion, delinquency, and violence. The changes are so widespread that negative consequences are occurring even for those who are secure economically. In such a period of social, political, and economic transition, education assumes a critical role. As people experience escalating, unpredicted changes, their health and prosperity depend increasingly on having acquired the effective communication, coping, and decision-making skills that are provided by a good education.<sup>1</sup>

At a time of such change and stress, more students have more challenges than ever before, placing tremendous demands on teachers. At the same time, however, in many jurisdictions teachers have fewer and fewer resources, and less and less support for living up to this responsibility. In many ways, we are reaching a time of crisis in education, a time when too many students have too many needs that teachers do not have sufficient resources to meet. Consider this case, for example:

Alex is now in Grade 10 in a Gifted program at a secondary school. Grade 9 did not end well; in fact, at the end of the year, the school principal told his parents that she would accept him back into the Gifted program for a “trial period.” The length of the trial period was left unspecified, but Rose, the guidance counselor, wants to do her best to ensure he makes a success of it. She is looking at Alex’s official school record and trying to make sense of it, along with the report of a private consultant hired by the parents, who are very worried their son will be quitting school soon. She wants to come up with some concrete recommendations that will help Alex do as well as he can, so that he can stay in the Gifted program, which she and the parents – and Alex himself – all believe to be the best place for him.

According to his teachers’ reports, Alex began his school career very positively, with all indications of ability and competence in Grade 1. He was in the top category, and received this comment from his teacher: “Alex is a delightful student, a keen and enthusiastic learner.” By Grade 5, there was evidence of some serious behaviour problems, although he continued to achieve top marks in most subjects. By Grade 7, Alex’s academic standing had declined, and he finished the year with a B+ average. The past year in Grade 9, his average had declined even further, to 65%. Grade 10 has not started at all well, which is why Rose has become involved. Alex has been absent about half the time, and has

been sent out of class on several occasions by two of his teachers. All but one of his teachers describe him as inattentive and uncooperative.

Based on the variability of their comments, Rose observes that Alex has done well with the teachers who are more flexible, those who are willing to accommodate individual interests and learning styles.

Turning to the psychoeducational report, Rose looked at Alex's test scores. She saw that he had done very well on the IQ test, even by giftedness standards, scoring at the 99.6<sup>th</sup> percentile. His academic language skills were similarly exceptionally strong, all in the Superior and Very Superior categories, with many of them well above the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile. His mathematics skills were significantly lower, in the Average range. Rose leafed through the pages, and came to the end of the report. There were many recommendations, but what she found most intriguing she highlighted:

- *Alex might be described as having an artistic temperament and intelligence: he has the intensity, sensitivity, emotionality, and struggles both with himself and the world that are shared by many successful artists of all kinds, including writers, filmmakers, actors, musicians, painters, and sculptors.*
- *There have been many comments through the years about his outstanding performance ability, his writing skills, his wonderful sense of humour, his creativity, his imagination, his musicality, and his athletic ability.*
- *He should be encouraged to continue his pursuits in all of these areas in which he has an interest, for several reasons: their intrinsic value in supporting his development in a number of ways, as media for self-expression, and as potential professional or avocational directions.*

While Rose thought it made good sense of the child she had come to like very much, she pondered over how to translate this into something Alex's classroom teachers might find useful.

Alex is an exceptionally capable young man whose learning needs are not being very well met in the school system. His teachers are understandably frustrated with him; he is unwilling to comply with the extra work that he is being asked to do because of his Gifted designation, and they have little or no support for adapting curriculum demands to meet his individual interests. His parents are at their wits' ends, and are understandably worried about his future. Alex himself is miserable; he feels that he is wasting his time at school, but doesn't know what else he can do. He too is very worried about his future; at 15 years old, he wonders if he is a loser and a failure. And, as problematic as this situation is for all of the participants, its repercussions go far beyond them.

Alex's case can be used as a starting point for thinking about many of the issues in education today, in particular the need for parents and educators to work together and to look past the school walls for learning opportunities, to the community and beyond. In fact, it is likely that the only chance Rose has to turn this story around is to

“think beyond the (school) box,” to capitalize on everyone’s motivation and frustration, and to encourage Alex, his parents, and his teachers to work together to find and create an authentic education for Alex, to look for learning approaches that engage his creative intelligence and need for relevance.

Although science has made tremendous progress over the past several years in identifying how learning happens, educators have little or no access to the relevant findings. Concerned about this, a consortium of top international scientists has recently synthesized the main findings about teaching and learning, and managed to communicate their synthesis in a professional and user-friendly format. Along with several other points, their report emphasizes the needs for school-family partnerships, student engagement, opportunities for relevant and authentic learning, and community involvement in the learning process. They recommend community-centred approaches to education, approaches that encourage communities of learners (both for students and for teachers), and that connect learning to students’ lives and interests. For example, “Schools need to develop ways to link classroom learning to other aspects of students’ lives. Engendering parent support for the core learning principles and parent involvement in the learning process is of the utmost importance.”<sup>ii</sup>

Rose could use these principles in solving the problem posed by Alex’s situation by working toward a collaboration of all of the immediate stakeholders, with the idea of moving the collaboration beyond the family/school and into the community, as productive directions are identified for doing that. She might want to do some preliminary work with each of the participants before setting up a group meeting, getting answers to as many of these questions as possible ahead of time:

To Alex: “What do you enjoy doing? Is there anything you want to learn about? How do you learn best?”

To the teachers: “How can you help make this happen?”

To the parents: “What do you see as your roles?”

Each of the participants might have helpful observations about the answers to the other participants’ questions, and might be invited to share these at a collaborative problem-solving meeting. At this group meeting, specific learning objectives could be identified and plans made to help Alex feel engaged in and responsible for co-creating his learning, in ways that ensured that his teachers were not left with a burden of customizing the curriculum for him. His parents’ roles might be to investigate learning opportunities in the community and beyond, including such things as special classes, competitions, community service options, mentoring, apprenticeships, etc.,<sup>iii</sup> all of which could be considered for academic credit by Rose, who could take responsibility for administrative co-ordination and communication. It is essential in the process that Alex is listened to, that his needs for relevant and authentic learning are respected, and that school and family co-operate to help make that happen.

This sounds like a lot of time and trouble for one student, and it is. However, it is also a very good investment in preventing further problems with Alex, in keeping him sufficiently engaged by his learning that he finds productive ways to use the abundant potential he has. And it is an even better investment for the school as a whole. We have seen this kind of collaborative effort in action, and know that as soon as it happens for one student, teachers’ attitudes begin to change, and soon the school culture changes in a way that benefits all students and teachers. Teachers begin to realize that they

have some of the best curriculum development allies in their problem students and their parents, and that there are all kinds of resources available outside the school that can supplement an increasingly resource-stretched situation within the school walls. Parents of problem kids are usually relieved that their child can begin to be academically successful, and even the busiest parents are only too glad to help with figuring out how to make that happen within the context of the regular school system. They see this as a relatively small investment of their time, with a big payoff, in the light of some of the other possibilities they had been dreading.

Basic principles illustrated by Alex's case include:

#### The value of school/family partnerships

When educators facilitate parents' active involvement in their children's education, schools can benefit in many ways. When educators are flexible in considering ways to meet the child's learning needs, they can gain sorely needed resources, particularly for exceptional and difficult students. Although parent participation is often encouraged in elementary schools, it is usually in the form of assistance in classroom routines that have been established by the teacher. As children get older, the possibilities for independent and alternative programming expand, and parents can become increasingly active in creative problem-solving partnerships with schools.

#### The need for student engagement in learning processes and outcomes

When students' learning is connected to their lives and interests, they see its relevance and become much more engaged by it. Two of the best ways for schools to encourage an engagement in authentic learning are (1) facilitating students taking ownership and responsibility for their own learning, and (2) encouraging community-based learning opportunities.

#### The value of community in the learning process

By allowing and even encouraging community involvement in the learning process, educators can gain important allies and access to resources, while simultaneously increasing student engagement and learning outcomes. Schools that we have worked with have developed thriving mentorship, apprenticeship, and community service programs that have enriched learning opportunities for students, energized teachers, and transformed the schools themselves.<sup>iv</sup>

There are many reasons to think that, by encouraging and facilitating collaborations among families, schools, and communities, we will find and create the best educational responses to a rapidly changing world. By opening the door to collaborations with families and to creative community possibilities, schools can gain access to the resources they are lacking, and reduce the burdens they are experiencing. Educators find themselves professionally reenergized when they realize that, not only can they not do it alone anymore, but they don't have to – and in fact, it is better if they do not. When parents and educators work together in educational problem-finding and problem-solving activities that integrate schools within communities, everyone benefits.

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<sup>i</sup> D.P. Keating and C. Hertzman (eds.) *Developmental health and the wealth of nations: Social, Biological, and Educational Dynamics* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

For more information about this resource, including chapter summaries, see <http://lsn.oise.utoronto.ca>

<sup>ii</sup> J.D. Bransford, A.L. Brown, and R.R. Cocking (Eds.), *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1999), 23. Available at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu)

<sup>iii</sup> see the resource section of [www.donamatthews.com](http://www.donamatthews.com) or [www.beingsmart.ca](http://www.beingsmart.ca)

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.