



Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools

in Alberta



thoughtexchange

Hearing 1000 student perspectives on bullying

The stigma and complex emotions associated with mental health and bullying make gathering input from students, and the parents and teachers affected by these issues challenging.

Despite the challenge, Catholic Schools in St Albert, Alberta reached out. As part of the District's consultation approach, it held community conversations and town halls with staff, parents and other community members. From these meetings, the need to expand the conversation was identified.

More than hearing from parents and other adults, however, the District wanted to hear directly from students. As David Keohane, Greater St. Albert Catholic School's Superintendent, admits, with traditional face-to-face methods "there can be a tokenism around student voice that limits the process. Having a group of high-performing students come and talk to the board about an issue doesn't really give you the best possible, representative understanding of your student population."

Ensuring broad representation of the student voice became a top priority for the District and its Board. In the fall of 2015, the District partnered with Thoughtexchange to achieve this goal. "We heard from over 2,000 participants, 50% of which were from our student body. Our board is very pleased with that," says Keohane.

2,086 participants

86,106 stars

4,151 thoughts

121,958 stars

21,958 stars
participants

2,086 thoughts

121,958 stars

2,086 participants

121,958 stars

4,151 thoughts

More than just anecdotal data

The District credits Thoughtexchange's ability to theme thoughts and breakdown results school-by-school with making rich, narrative-based datasets workable. "Thoughtexchange developed reports for us in manners that will help us make the next level of difference – and that's difference going right down to the classroom," says Keohane.

Keohane asked principals to look at the school-by-school Thoughtexchange results, and based on what they saw, determine what work they needed to start, stop or continue with respect to how mental health and bullying were being addressed in their schools.

Next, he and his team looked at the district-wide themes to understand what universal initiatives needed to be in place. "We were able to determine some really meaningful perspectives and we've been able to distill our priorities around bullying to six main initiatives over three years. In mental health, we were able to come up with eight initiatives – and that all came from the voice of 2,000 people," says Keohane.

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DAVID KEOHANE SUPERINTENDENT GREATER ST. ALBERT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Identifying gaps in understanding

The results of Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools Thoughtexchange also revealed a lack of awareness about a protocol the District was using to deal with incidents of bullying. The community believed the District's approach was about zero *tolerance* and high consequences when in fact it centered on zero *avoidance* – a guarantee that reports brought forward anonymously or personally would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and guided by the principles of restorative justice. "We were led by this information to communicate more effectively about restorative mechanisms so that our community could understand why what we are doing is different and why we believe it is more effective at keeping children safe in schools," Keohane explains.

Breaking down stigma

The ability to provide thoughts privately, and still see them recognized and heard by the community, has had a transformational effect on the students. “The faceless part of it is actually a positive thing because it enables people to just honor the words that are shared. I think our kids have figured that piece out and they see that there’s been a lot of attention to their comments,” Keohane explains.

He also believes that the success of the collective conversation has started to destigmatize mental health in the schools. Since the Thoughtexchange, the District has felt a palpable difference in empathy and seen increased participation in school events focused around mental health wellness. For example, at Hats On for Mental Health Day, students showed each other that they would respect and honor however their fellow students wished to identify themselves by wearing hats representing their own identities.

Recognizing strength in openness

The strength the students showed in sharing their stories and embracing and understanding vulnerability has inspired Keohane and his team more than ever to continue to work openly and in partnership with the community. “There is always that sense of vulnerability because we can come to believe that by putting information out we’re simply stating what’s wrong with the system. Through doing more Thoughtexchanges and by being responsive, we send the message that we’re really trying to find out how we can be strong and how we can use that information to create action plans and demonstrate that it’s making a difference.”



Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools is a welcoming learning community that awakens the hearts and minds of students while educating and nurturing each to learn, live fully, and serve others.

gsacrd.ab.ca



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