

# Between the Bridges Student Success Alignment Team Summary of Qualitative Data Related to Student Success

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As of November 2018

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## Data Analysis Process

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In July 2018, Between the Bridges contracted Horizons Community Development Associates Inc ([www.horizonscda.ca](http://www.horizonscda.ca)) to review qualitative data related to student success, and prepare a summary of key themes from the data for members of the Student Success Alignment Table to consider. Sandra Bornemann, a Research Assistant at Horizons, completed the work, with support from Cari Patterson, Director at Horizons. We reviewed the documents and analyzed the data in July and early August, and prepared a draft summary, which we shared and reviewed with the Between the Bridges project team, Bette Watson Borg, Matt Spurway, and Elaine Rivers. They provided feedback and clarifications where we needed to clarify any information. We incorporated their suggestions into this document.

We began by reviewing a couple of documents for context: *Working Together for Children and Families*, and the *600 Voices Survey* report. Then we reviewed eight key documents that contained input from students, parents/guardians, and community members on the topic of student success:

- *Boys and Girls Club of Greater Halifax - Dartmouth North*
- *Creating a Shared Understanding of the Conditions for Student Success*
- *DNA Education Committee Resident Survey*
- *DNA Education Committee Student Survey*
- *Feedback from Strategic Roundtable on Student Success*
- *Harbour View Elementary School Student Survey*
- *MacPhee Centre for Creative Learning*
- *Student Success Video Transcription*

Next, we reviewed each of these eight documents carefully, and identified emerging themes in the data to create a preliminary set of categories around which we could organize the comments in the documents (this process is called ‘open coding’). Then we went through a process of comparing the preliminary categories and combining and/or expanding them as needed to ensure they best fit what participants said in the documents (this is called ‘axial coding’). We reviewed the documents again, and tested the categories for fit, and we edited them, as needed, to allow as much data as possible to fit in the emerging categories.

We also compared the data from these documents to the *Working Together for Children and Families 600 Voices Survey* reports. We drew inspiration from some of the themes previously identified in the *600 Voices Survey* document and reworked and re-envisioned these existing themes to appropriately fit the data in the new eight documents. For example, the previous theme of “safe and caring classrooms” that had been identified in the *600 Voices Survey* became “safe and caring schools” in this report to best reflect the new data emerging from these additional eight documents that discuss schools as a whole instead of just the climate of individual classrooms.

Through this process we were able to focus the ideas into the emerging eight key themes:

- A Solid Foundation
- Community Engagement
- Creative Academic Approaches
- Culture of Respect and Responsibility
- Focus on the Future
- Great Expectations
- Parents/Guardians as Partners
- Safe and Caring Schools

We reviewed data from each key theme, and combined, analyzed, and summarized the themes to provide a clear picture that captures both the variety and commonality of thought from participants (people whose voices are reflected in each of the eight documents). These final themes are presented here to reflect the ideas expressed by participants, and to attempt to capture as many voices as possible.

We describe each theme in greater detail in the following section, and we include quotes from the eight documents to illustrate each theme<sup>1</sup>.

### *Supplementary Input*

Between the Bridges obtained additional input on these key themes from the Student Success Alignment Team and from the Residents Roundtable. During the September 13, 2018 meeting, the Student Success Alignment Team was asked to identify what they considered important about each of the eight themes, and what they felt might be missing from the description of each theme. The key theme narratives were modified to incorporate their comments, and these modified theme narratives were then presented to the Residents Roundtable. Members of the Residents Roundtable discussed the eight themes over two successive meetings, four themes on September 25, and the remaining four themes on October 23, 2018. Their review focused on what they found important and what might be missing from each of the themes.

Perspectives offered by the Student Success Alignment Team and the Residents Roundtable are reflected in this current document. This was accomplished through a process that respected and retained the initial eight key themes. The narratives accompanying each of the key themes were expanded to incorporate additional insight, ideas, or examples offered by the two tables, and were modified to ensure that the narratives reflected the relative importance the tables attached to issues within each theme. Comments from the two tables are included in appropriate sections of Appendix A.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that some quotes contain a few words with square brackets around them. This is where we have inserted words to help clarify meaning or provide a brief explanation.

## Key Themes

**Key Theme: A Solid Foundation:** *Students must have their basic needs taken care of in order to be able to focus at school. All students need a solid foundation from which to achieve student success.*

When students' basic needs are met they are better able to focus, learn and succeed in school. This includes having a safe home life, access to nutritious food, and stable housing. Youth can't focus on school when they need to figure out where to find a safe place to sleep tonight; stable housing also ensures that students do not have to move between schools frequently.

Students' emotional needs must also be recognized and addressed. This includes the need to feel loved and accepted, to feel they belong in their school, and to see their cultural identity and their lived experience reflected there. This helps them develop individual self worth. Children need to learn respect and empathy, which form the foundation of all relationships. They need to learn and be shown common courtesy, and they need to engage with others.

Financial struggles can cause significant barriers and stress for students; for example it can have an impact on a student's ability to attend classes by limiting access to transportation to and from school. It may also

*"Students are thriving when they are safe – free from violence – violence has many forms and many impacts on the developing mind – food – housing – emotional – thriving when they are hopeful, ambitious, when they have joy in their lives. Find joy in your practice or else you are just working."*

*"If you are hungry or don't have a warm place to live, then students' lives need to be more than just survival"*

limit access to school supplies, extracurricular activities, and the potential for post-secondary education. The life obstacles students face outside of school impact life at school; for example, the need to be safe from violence and addiction impacts students' abilities to participate fully in school. Students can be successful regardless of what is happening at home or in other parts of their life, but life obstacles can make it more difficult for the student to focus and learn.

**Key Theme: Community Engagement:** *Students need their community spaces to be safe, and their community members to be supportive. Engagement with their community helps foster student success*

Community plays an important role in nurturing student success by helping students feel safe, supported, and connected while in their community. Good community experiences make a student more confident. Courteous interactions in and around the community with businesses such as corner stores, encourages a sense of self worth. Students benefit from having safe and caring adults in the community who provide an understanding and nonjudgmental listening ear. Connecting with others and establishing personal relationships in the community encourages empathy. Having community members who serve as positive role models and mentors gives students examples of what success can look like; it helps them learn how other people deal with issues, and exposes them to ‘other normals’. Having a supportive community and positive role models also helps students learn how to support one another as they become more successful, and encourages them to challenge themselves to be better.

*“[Biggest challenge is] having no one to support them, because even outside of school can affect how you are in school. If you’re having trouble outside of school, it can affect how you perform in school, so if you have someone to support you outside of school and in school it could help.”*

Having student involvement in community spaces and activities is also important. When youth are exposed to multiple community activities, they have an opportunity to determine what types of activities inspire them to do their best, and to see ways they could be involved in and contribute to their community. Some students identified that participating in community activities and contributing to the community was where they felt most successful (examples included air cadets, music classes, going to camp, and the Halifax pride festival). Connecting with and learning about other parts of your community – parks, facilities etc.— broadens your horizons.

These community experiences provide life lessons that extend into school life; negative experiences with community may lead to problems in school, just as positive community experiences can enrich school time.

*“So important for schools to bring people together, there is always somebody who could be a significant someone – we think teachers and parents, but it could be someone else who could be a significant person, who could listen and help a student feel heard.”*

Community is an extension of home. The impact of positive community experiences also trickles down from generation to generation; students who have good community experiences and connections will encourage the same positive experiences for their children. Intergenerational relationships with community members are mutually beneficial.

**Key Theme: Creative Academic Approaches:** *Utilizing a diversity of approaches to education within schools may help increase student success and ensure that no student is left behind.*

Students themselves had many suggestions for creative approaches to learning. These were often based on instances when students felt successful, and were suggested as approaches schools could further utilize to foster a sense of confidence and capability among students.

*“[One thing that would help is] more physical activity connected with learning.”*

Examples often focused less on academic workload, and more on outlets for creativity. These included specific creative activities such as writing songs, cooking, as well as specific physical activities (playing sports), and engaging in their community (attending a protest, volunteering). It was noted that there aren't many outlets for creativity in school, and that creative activities can engage a student's interest and have a positive effect on attendance. Additional suggestions included more field trips, a general increase in creative and physical activities, more reading of stories, using more technology (including phones), and listening to music in the classroom. It was also suggested that bringing in people who are involved in careers that aren't core subjects could be helpful, particularly if they provide mentorship opportunities – in music, for example.

Other options suggested by students focused on increased personal support for learning. This included smaller class sizes, more one-on-one instruction, and more academic supports available at school to help them keep up and avoid slipping through the cracks. A separate dedicated classroom was suggested as a means of reducing distraction for students who are trying to focus and learn. A longer school year and/or summer classes were also suggested as means of helping students get as much instruction as possible. Supports to help reduce stress were identified as potentially helpful – for example, meditation, yoga, use of a quiet room or garden area, or conflict resolution support.

*“[It would help me to succeed if there were] smaller class sizes.”*

It's important to choose approaches that are engaging, and that recognize that everyone learns differently. The use of peer support within age groups was suggested as helpful for students who are less comfortable talking to an adult. There is also a need to consider appropriate ways of supporting students who are falling further behind, year over year. Some parents, based on their experiences with their own children, may have suggestions for what would work for other children. Further exploration and research may identify other creative academic approaches that have been proven to be successful elsewhere; for example, research on the impact of class size, and of reducing or increasing the school year or day.

*“[It would help me to succeed if there were] more creative activities and support workers.”*

Additional resources and training may be required to ensure that teachers have the tools they need to provide creative learning experiences. Teachers themselves are taught through lectures, rather than through more creative approaches, and may need the opportunity to learn about and practice creative approaches. A suggestion at the structural level is for schools to partner together and mentor each other to help share resources.

**Key Theme: Culture of Respect and Responsibility:** *A healthy social environment can greatly impact students' school experiences. All partners -- students, teachers, parents/guardians, and community members take responsibility for their actions and treat each other with respect*

Respect, in the form of common courtesy, kindness and dignity must be a foundational characteristic of the school environment. Taking responsibility for cultivating an environment of respect and trust at school, while acknowledging barriers built by classism and racism, contributes to student success.

Students are responsible for getting their work done, setting their own goals, and following through. This includes making an effort to go to school, do their homework, and take responsibility for their actions. Basic kindness, in the form of sharing, helping others learn, following rules, and being well-mannered, is a goal in the school environment. Examples of showing respect in school include paying attention to what other students have to say, listening to teachers, and taking responsibility for one's own actions.

Making an effort to focus while at school is an important responsibility that also shows respect to others as it allows other students to stay focused as well.

Respect must be mutual. Adults (teachers and parents/guardians) play a role in creating a culture of respect, by earning respect, by modelling respect through their own actions and words. Teachers take an interest in students' lives, help students set goals, and acknowledge the positive achievements of students (not just focus on the failings).

Parents/guardians show respect for the education process by engaging with the school and with their child's work, and by supporting their child in their education.

Respect includes being aware of and respectful of the cultures of others. Schools can accommodate the practices of different cultures just as they accommodate the different abilities of students. Children shouldn't feel excluded because they don't celebrate the same holidays; for example, if the class is making Christmas trees, some children could be asked to make flowers instead. This doesn't mean putting down one culture's holidays, it means offering options to celebrate different holidays, in different ways. School authorities should be consistent in this matter. There may also be different understandings of what it means to be respectful; some cultures put more emphasis on having respect for your elders, for your teacher.

The physical setting of the school environment also has implications for respect. A clean, welcoming, well-equipped space tells students that they are valued and respected, that they deserve a nice place to learn; the physical environment can change their outlook on learning and life. This

extends to the community as well; walking to school along clean, well kept streets and neighbourhoods teaches children respect for their physical environment.

*"Students are thriving when we are interested in their lives. Adults can make changes in how they act and react to students which in turn changes how the students act and react."*

*"[Student success means] pay attention to your peers when they speak and your teachers. I also believe that you should take understanding for your actions when you're in the wrong."*



**Key Theme: Focus on the Future:** *Many students are focused on education as the key to future success. This focus on the future helps build motivation for students and places a value on their education*

By addressing students' needs for career/life planning skills, the education system plays an important role in preparing students for the future. Students would benefit from incorporating more learning about life skills (budgeting, healthy life choices, street smarts) and job skills into their education – and not just learning more about these skills but also about how to apply them in the real world. There is also a desire for building increased job training and work experience into the education system, including having schools offer employment sessions.

Career/life planning includes basic skills such as how to a job, how to interview, shake hands, etc. These are students need to know in life. Knowing these basic life builds confidence. It also helps students learn about options for accessing resources to enable them to continue their education/ training.

This learning must be relevant not only to the student's also to their living circumstances; if you're trying to budgeting and there's no money at home, students have anything to budget. It is also important to recognize that not all students come with the supports they need, and some students may not be able to access available resources due to eligibility criteria or limited availability.

There should be resources in schools for personal as well as career counselling; counselling resources are often shared among several schools. There is also a need for resources available to youth with intellectual abilities who are transitioning from high school.

Student success is crucial to future success. Students see themselves as wanting future jobs, wanting to not live on the streets, wanting "more in life", and desiring a successful life.

*"[schools should be responsible for] teaching essential life skills to succeed after high school"*

look for skills skills various

age but teach won't

*"[student success means] having a good education and following your dreams."*

**Key Theme: Great Expectations:** *Having high expectations for achievement helps keep students motivated. Students want others (parents/guardians, teachers, their community, etc.) to have high expectations for them, which also fosters having high expectations of themselves. Goal setting and striving to reach those goals is a tangible way of establishing these high expectations.*

Students identify goal setting as a means of establishing high standards for their academic success; this includes a wide variety of goals, with some students aiming for passing their grade level, others aiming for high grades in their courses, some aiming for graduation, and others discussing post-secondary education, and/or future success after high school. Students express a desire to gain knowledge, and an interest in being challenged academically, even to the point of hoping for more homework to help push themselves academically to the next level. Students are saying have high expectations – and then challenge us to be successful.

*“[Student success means] you go to school and study and good grades make friends and become a good person and great person.”*

Co-creating goals with students, rather than for them, is important; it ensures that goals will be attainable, and helps students take responsibility for working toward those goals. This could include developing strategies for identifying and achieving goals, rather than focusing on outcomes such as passing a course. Reaching one goal gives a student the confidence to set another, even higher goal. Breaking goals down into manageable, achievable steps helps students feel success with each step and learn to believe in themselves. Teachers work with students to identify goals that are possible but which the

student might not yet have considered; the challenge is to meet students where they are without limiting their potential. Having high expectations sometimes means students may be pushed beyond their comfort zones; it will be important to establish a safe environment for this to happen. It is also important that parents be aware of students’ potential, and that they support students in identifying and working toward realistic goals.

*“Part of caring is having high expectations. That we expect every one of our children to do well. We need to believe. Have high and attainable expectations – with the support to achieve it.”*

Others’ high expectations is a key factor contributing to student success. Some students lack confidence in their ability to succeed academically and identify others’ opinions as being crucial in

informing their confidence in their own abilities. Having other people recognize the effort students put into working toward their goals also serves as an important motivator. Students who have educators and other adults who believe in them, have high expectations of them, and celebrate their progress are more likely to believe in themselves and be motivated to achieve success.

**Key Theme: Parents/Guardians as Partners:** *Parents/guardians play crucial roles in their children's lives, and are significant links to the social and academic success of students.*

Parents/guardians are important partners in determining student success. They play many roles, from getting their children to school on time and helping with homework, to believing in and instilling hope in their children, providing a healthy home environment and enough to eat, teaching social skills, manners and respect, listening to and taking an active interest in their children, and letting them know that learning is important and their school life matters.

*"[Parent/guardians are responsible for] making sure their kids have life skills, helps them with homework. Make sure kids go to school. Be there for their kids."*

Communication between home and school is also important, providing an opportunity for parents/guardians to understand how the child is doing at school, from both learning and social perspectives. It helps school staff understand what's going on at home that may be having an impact on the child's school life. However, teachers' ability to reach out to families is often restricted by limitations on their time. Report cards have potential as a communication tool, although the current formatting of report cards may not always achieve this goal.

The partnership between school and family may take many different forms. Some parents may have very little time to help with homework, and some parents may need support in order to be able to help their children – for example, they may need a workshop on how math is taught. Systemic poverty makes it very difficult for the home-school partnership to function effectively. Parents/guardians who are struggling to feed their families and pay bills, to find decent housing and jobs, are often also coping with past trauma and their own experience with the school system. They may not be going to parent teacher meetings. It's important to understand why parents aren't involved and to recognize that these factors can interfere with parents'/guardians' ability to focus on their child's learning experience

Teachers who see 100+ students every day aren't able to have the same partnership with each family. Moreover, some schools are more receptive to parental involvement, while some schools are perceived as less welcoming. Parents who feel judged, looked down on, are less likely to establish or maintain a relationship with the school. A parent may feel stressed, but if made to feel welcome through a variety of approaches they are more likely to connect with the school and the school-parent relationship can be strengthened.

*"[Parents/guardians can] focus on their children's education and stress the importance of learning and social skills. Checking in with their children's teacher on a weekly basis. Follow up by taking quality time with their children. Letting them know they are important and it's important to engage with what they do on a daily basis."*

**Key Theme: Safe and Caring Schools:** *Everyone needs to feel safe at school, and feel cared for and valued. Everyone contributes to creating a sense of safety at school and fostering a sense of belonging amongst students.*

Students should feel safe, cared for, and accepted at school. Emphasizing safety at school, and making sure bullying and violence are adequately addressed, supports a positive learning environment. Safe and caring schools keep a focus on students – caring for, valuing, and supporting every child in their education, and having teachers who display empathy towards students and who understand the pressures and life circumstances affecting them. The relationships students have at school can make them feel safe with each other, with friends, and with other people.

*“[Schools should be responsible for] making sure you actually understand and making sure you feel safe and wanted.”*

Safety may have different meanings for students, and schools should be sensitive to the varied needs of their student population, including supporting students with mental health needs, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities. The cost of education may be a barrier for many students, and other students live with families that are not engaged with the student’s school life. The presence of police at school may have a different meaning for students whose families have past police involvement.

*“If you’re not getting the help that you need, the school should be responsible for getting you that help that you need so you can be successful.”*

Consistency both within and between schools is also important in establishing safety and caring. Consistency within schools means having low turnover of staff, allowing students to build real relationships with teachers and support staff and to therefore feel continually supported in their education. Consistency between schools means students having equal access to supports and resources, and having equivalent academic standards, regardless of which school they attend. Some schools, and the families of students attending those schools, have less access to resources and supports needed to make school a safe and caring place for students.

Schools need adequate resources to meet the needs of all students; this includes having more teachers, increased access to resource teachers and tutoring, and resources to help students with physical and mental health needs. Teachers need training and support to promote a safe and caring environment for both students and themselves. While the focus is on adopting a positive approach to making sure all students are cared for and appreciated, schools must also have the resources to deal with situations that may make an environment unsafe.

The promotion of a safe and caring environment also extends to role models; people tend to do what other people who look like them do. Students are looking to role models in their school and community, and in particular, role models who look like them. Dealing with racism is a barrier to achieving academic success; students feel supported in their efforts to deal with racism when schools are more reflective of the community diversity, and when there are more African Nova Scotian teachers (and support workers) in their schools and classrooms.

*“We don’t have an African American teacher, I think more of them would make us understand more things and educate us more.”*