



Research Report

**LOTS OF ENCOURAGEMENT GOING
AROUND:
ANALYSIS OF THE 2005 IMAGINE
STUDENT SUCCESS WEB SUBMISSIONS**

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Lots of Encouragement Going Around: Analysis of the 2005 Imagine Student
Success Web Submissions
Robert Brown, Ed Doc
January 2006

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	Pg. i
BACKGROUND	Pg. 1
The Imagine Student Success Web Submissions.....	Pg. 1
Analysis	Pg. 2
SPSS and Nvivo.....	Pg. 3
PART A. OVERALL POPULATION DESCRIPTION – ISS PARTICIPANTS.....	Pg. 4
1. Grade	Pg. 4
2. Age	Pg. 4
3. School	Pg. 5
4. Location of Participating Schools.....	Pg. 7
5. Interview Subjects.....	Pg. 8
PART B. IMAGINE AN IDEAL FUTURE.....	Pg. 9
Overall Results.....	Pg. 9
1. Help or Helping	Pg. 11
2. School as “Fun” or “Interesting”	Pg. 12
3. Encouragement	Pg. 15
4. Respect	Pg. 15
5. Motivation and Engagement.....	Pg. 17
6. Co-operation and Working Together.....	Pg. 18
7. Extracurricular Activities.....	Pg. 18
8. Parental Support.....	Pg. 19
9. Communication.....	Pg. 19

10. Hands On	Pg. 20
11. Relationships.....	Pg. 20
12. Secondary Themes	Pg. 21
Support/supportive to students.....	Pg. 21
Freedom or Independence.....	Pg. 22
Safe Schools.....	Pg. 22
Enthusiasm.....	Pg. 22
Diversity and Mutual Respect.....	Pg. 23
Smaller Classes	Pg. 23
13. Uncoded Submissions.....	Pg. 23
Bullying/violence.....	Pg. 24
Homework.....	Pg. 24
Discipline (strictness)	Pg. 24
Uniforms	Pg. 25
SUMMARY-DISCUSSION	Pg. 26
APPENDIX	Pg. 29
REFERENCES.....	Pg. 33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the Ministry of Education's *Student Success Program*, the Student Success Advisory Committee is mandated to identify and promote programs that will result in improved success for students. In September 2004, the TDSB embarked on *Imagine Student Success* to:

- identify student success from a student perspective
- broaden TDSB understanding of what constitutes student success
- support the Student Success Advisory Committee in its overall development of a TDSB vision.

Schools with students in grades 7-10 selected six students who trained as interviewers. One teacher supervisor monitored and assisted the students. Students worked in pairs to conduct interviews with other students, parents, school staff, and other adults in the community. A user-friendly web-based data entry system supported the capture and management of interview information. Between November 2004 and May 2005, stories and themes from 1,291 submissions were captured on the web-based system.

The web submissions had four key components:

- "Best of the past": what the subject believed was the best of his/her time in school
- "Bringing forward the past": the relationship of the subjects experience of school into the future
- "Imagining an ideal future": where the subject, from his/her perspective of time in school and in the time since, imagines what the best school would be;
- "Theme": the overall key theme/themes of the interview, as described by the interviewers.

In addition, a certain amount of background information was provided: the school attended by the interview team, age and grade of interviewers, age of interviewee, grade (if a student), occupation/organisation (if an adult).

METHODOLOGY

The TDSB Student Success Leader and the Student Success Advisory Committee requested Organizational Development/Research and Information Services to provide an analysis of the ongoing web submissions over the 2004-5 school year. After the May deadline had passed, web provider iCohere provided the final set of 1,291 submissions. On an on-going basis between June and November, updates were provided to the Student Success Leader and the Committee. There were two main directions to the research: one quantitative, one qualitative. 1) ICohere's Excel download was migrated to SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) and from there to ArcView 3.3, a GIS software program. This provided the basis for an overall description of the web submissions. 2) The download was also imported into NVivo, a qualitative content analysis software program. This provided the facility for examining first the submitted themes from "Imagining an ideal future".

RESULTS

Current research on student success is centred on aspects of student achievement, and correlates to achievement. The Secondary Student Success Indicators studies have documented very clear and consistent relationships between credit accumulation, marks, and absenteeism in Grades 9 and 10, and such ultimate outcomes as completion of the Ontario literacy requirement, graduation, and dropping out of school. These have been shown to interact with background and demographic information like gender, neighbourhood income, region of birth, and school mobility. There was a great divide between this 'official' dialogue, and the general content of the Imagine Student Success web submissions. In describing a successful school, participants concentrated not on achievement characteristics, but on the school environment—specifically, importance of a *positive* environment-- the "lots of encouragement going around" identified by one submission as necessary for a successful school.

This may be at least in part due to who was doing the submitting. It was, for the most part, the perspective of students currently involved in the transition between the elementary and secondary panels. Around half the interviewees were in the elementary panel, while little under a third were in Grades 9/10; over three quarters were 12-16 years of age. Likewise, almost all the interview process took place within the school-- two thirds were with students, while around a quarter were teachers/staff. Therefore, for the most part this is the story of the 'transitions' school community.

There were around twenty identified themes or codes. The most frequently identified themes looked at supportive adult/teaching presence, a comfortable and supportive environment, and social/communication skills related to this sort of environment. Thus, submissions were more likely to discuss issues around help or helping than any other-- teachers helping students, extra help for students, students helping each other.

Almost as important, students wished to make school more "fun" or "interesting". Experiencing 'motivating' teaching was thought of as fun; likewise it was equated with a more comfortable environment so that the student would be more interested in coming to school. Other key elements of student success were thought to be encouragement (in a wide variety of circumstances), respect (of teacher for student, students for teachers, and mutual respect); motivation and engagement (from within the students, as well as motivation from teachers); and co-operation/working together.

For a number of submissions, the involvement and challenge of extracurricular activities were thought to add to student success (a few suggested new alternatives to the traditional activities). In-school activities that would make school more interesting were also put forward. As well, it was suggested that concrete, hands-on activities were often more motivational and interesting to students than were abstract lectures. Parental support, communication, and positive student-teacher relationships were also put forward as characteristics of a successful school.

A number of secondary themes were also offered by submissions. These included: the importance of support for students (teachers supporting students, students supporting each other, teachers and students supporting each other); the importance of the student having greater freedom; enthusiasm in the classroom and school; diversity/mutual respect; and smaller classes. The roles of homework, discipline, and uniforms were raised by some submissions, although there did not appear to be any consensus on these. A necessary part of the successful school was the safety (or feelings of safety) of the student. This was brought up in different ways that tended to fly somewhat below the radar screen of the 'theme' methodology, but was obviously an important consideration for many of the submissions. In some ways safety was different from other themes, in that it was more of a precondition of success than a characteristic of success.

Few of the stories concentrated on one theme or recommendation. Instead most listed multiple characteristics of a successful school. Participants recognised that for a school to work, there is

no one magic bullet, but that success is a cumulative result of many directions—a convergence of many positive characteristics.

It is also worth pointing out that students recognised that a positive environment was only part of the story. Many of the submissions simultaneously recommended high academic standards, hard work, and/or discipline. Students did not seem to have a problem with benchmarks or hard work - they just wanted it within the context of a supportive and enjoyable school setting. They wanted to work hard, and to have fun.

As with much research, this analysis should be considered introductory. There are many possible directions for future work. One might be to use the NVivo modeling process to examine the relationship(s) between themes outlined above. The ISS Committee and the TDSB Board have already embarked other directions as well. It is hoped that these will assist the "lots of encouragement" identified by the ISS submissions as necessary for successful schools.

BACKGROUND

As part of the Ministry of Education's *Student Success Program*, the Student Success Advisory Committee is mandated to identify and promote programs that will result in improved success for students. This Committee and our Trustees have been exploring the question of what student success means.

In May 2004, representatives from this committee – a cross-section of stakeholders, including parents, trustees, and staff-- discussed this issue, resulting in the collection and synthesis of many ideas. Members agreed at that time that it was critical to hear the student voices and present a balanced view.

In September 2004, the TDSB embarked on *Imagine Student Success* to:

- identify student success from a student perspective
- broaden TDSB understanding of what constitutes student success
- support the Student Success Advisory Committee in its overall development of a TDSB vision.

The *Imagine Student Success* Web Submissions

Schools with students in grades 7, 8, 9, and 10 selected six students who trained as interviewers. One teacher supervisor monitored and assisted the students. Students worked in pairs to conduct interviews with other students, parents, school staff, and other adults in the community. They were equipped with a defined set of questions and an interview protocol structured around a strength-based approach called Appreciative Inquiry.

A user-friendly web-based data entry system supported the capture and management of interview information. Seven schools across the TDSB were part of a pilot project in October. These schools tested the interview questions and techniques.. Based on the pilot project, the questions and interview protocol were modified. Between November 2004 and May 2005, stories and themes from 1,291 submissions were captured on the web-based system.

The web submissions had four key components:

- “Best of the past”: what the subject believed was the best of his/her time in school

- “Bringing forward the past”: the relationship of the subjects experience of school into the future
- “Imagining an ideal future”: where the subject, from his/her perspective of time in school and in the time since, imagines what the best school would be;
- “Theme”: the overall key theme/themes of the interview, as described by the interviewers.

In addition, a certain amount of background information was provided: the school attended by the interview team, age and grade of interviewers, age of interviewee, grade (if a student), occupation/organisation (if an adult).

More than 650 students along with 200 guests participated in a concluding Summit at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre on May 3, 2005. The Summit provided students with the opportunity to further refine their ideas through dialogue with students from other schools. Guests and speakers included Gerard Kennedy, Minister of Education. The web-based submission process was shut down at the time of the Summit.

Analysis

The TDSB Student Success Leader and the Student Success Advisory Committee requested Dr. Rob Brown, Project Co-ordinator in Research and Information Services attached to Imagine Student Success, to provide an analysis of the ongoing web submissions over the 2004-5 school year. There were four phases to this, each with a different focus.

1. November 2004: iCohere, developer and maintainer of the ISS web site, sent an Excel file with the pilot themes provided by the seven participating schools during the October pilot. From this, an initial list of key themes was generated.
2. March 2005: iCohere sent an Excel file with the 907 submissions completed up to that time, including “stories” (“Best of the past”, “Bringing forward the past”, “Imagining an ideal future”). The researcher concentrated on “Best of the past” stories, providing preliminary results of a content analysis to the Committee.
3. April 2005: At request of the committee, the researcher concentrated content analysis on “Imagining an Ideal Future” stories, providing preliminary results of

a content analysis to the Committee between the end of April and early May (this used the March download of 907 submissions).

4. May-November 2005: In May, iCohere provided the final set of 1,291 submissions. On an on-going basis between June and November, updates were provided to the Student Success Leader and the Committee.

SPSS and NVivo

There were two main directions to the research: one quantitative, one qualitative.

1. ICohere's Excel download was migrated to SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) and from there to ArcView 3.3, a GIS software program. This provided the basis for an overall description of the web submissions.

2. The download was also imported into NVivo, a qualitative content analysis software program. This provided the facility for examining first the submitted themes; then, the "Best of the Past" stories; and finally, "Imagining an ideal future".

Each of these processes were done twice, first in March with approximately 900 submissions, and the final download of 1,291 submissions in May.

The analysis used an on-going didactic research process, with the researcher interacting with the Student Success Leader, and the Advisory Committee. The process involved both formal and informal face-to-face meetings, e-mail, and telephone calls.

Summary Analysis

This report contains the key information from the final May download of submissions. There are two components: an overall population description, taken from the submissions when migrated into SPSS and ArcGIS; and a description of the themes from "Imagining an ideal future" migrated into NVivo.

PART A.
OVERALL POPULATION DESCRIPTION—ISS PARTICIPANTS

The total dataset of TDSB “stories” in the ISS process was sent to Research and Information Services by iCohore on Thursday May 26. There were a total of 1,291 stories, completed by sets of interviewers between November 2004 and May 2005.

For analysis, information was exported into three formats for analysis: SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences), Acrobat Professional, and NVivo 2.

The information below summarises some characteristics of the participants, as provided in the submissions.

1. Grade

The majority of students in the “Interviewer 1” category were in Grades 7 and 8 (52%), whereas 29% were in Grades 9 and 10, and 8% were in Grades 11 and 12. (The grade breakdown of students filling out the “Interviewer 2” category were similar.) Thus, it would appear that the participants in the process are predominately students who are describing the secondary system they will experience in the future.

Table 1: Grade of Interviewer 1

Student Grade	Frequency	Percent
Missing	145	11.2
Grade 7	322	24.9
Grade 8	345	26.7
Grade 9	116	9.0
Grade 10	261	20.2
Grade 11	46	3.6
Grade 12	54	4.2
Not in school	2	0.2
Total	1291	100

2. Age

77% of Interviewer 1 students were between 12 and 16 years of age. (As seen above, the vast majority of students were Grades 7-10, which would be 12-15 years of age, so this is consistent with grade information. (In future, it might be more useful to have more defined age categories.)

3. School

Out of the 1291 submissions, 98% had a clearly identifiable school. These came from 88 schools —56% (50 schools) were in the elementary panel (including 3 Junior High Schools) and 43% (38 schools) were in the secondary panel. For a complete list, see Table 2 below.

Table 2: School of Stories

Planning number of school	School Name	Number of submissions	Elementary or Secondary
3432	A Y Jackson Secondary School	59	SEC
4120	Albert Campbell Collegiate Institute	9	SEC
4112	Bendale Business and Technical Institute	23	SEC
1412	Bessborough Drive Elementary and Middle School	16	ELE
3211	Beverley Heights Middle School	6	ELE
4336	Birch Cliff Public School	18	ELE
4118	Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute	17	SEC
5505	Bloor Collegiate Institute	4	SEC
2024	Bloorlea Middle School	19	ELE
4360	Buchanan Public School	23	ELE
3441	C W Jefferys Collegiate Institute	19	SEC
4385	Charles Gordon Senior Public School	11	ELE
3070	Charles H Best Middle School	6	ELE
1521	Cosburn Middle School	19	ELE
3314	Don Valley Junior High School	19	ELE
4116	Dr Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute	18	SEC
5220	Duke of Connaught Junior and Senior Public School	16	ELE
5304	Earl Beatty Junior and Senior Public School	18	ELE
5222	Earl Grey Senior Public School	5	ELE
1924	East York Collegiate Institute	15	SEC
5705	Eastdale Collegiate Institute	11	SEC
5810	Eastern Commerce Collegiate Institute	7	SEC
3212	Elia Middle School	18	ELE
4468	Ellesmere-Statton Public School	16	ELE
5225	Essex Junior and Senior Public School	14	ELE
6225	Fairbank Middle School	20	ELE
3118	Faywood Arts-Based Curriculum School	19	ELE
5226	Fern Avenue Junior and Senior Public School	12	ELE
3316	Fisherville Junior High School	18	ELE
6532	Frank Oke Secondary School	8	SEC
4498	General Crerar Public School	18	ELE
3439	George S Henry Academy	18	SEC
3446	Georges Vanier Secondary School	8	SEC
5298	Glenview Senior Public School	1	ELE
5710	Heydon Park Secondary School	10	SEC

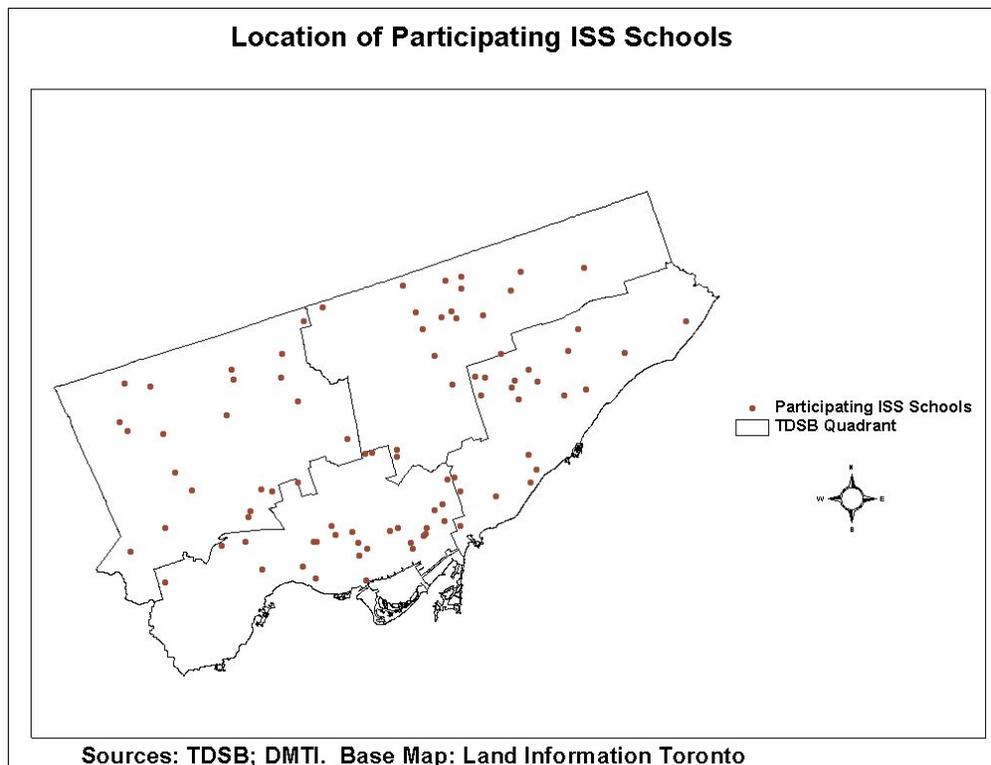
Planning number of school	School Name	Number of submissions	Elementary or Secondary
2038	Hilltop Middle School	1	ELE
2060	Hollycrest Middle School	13	ELE
3135	Humber Summit Middle School	15	ELE
6346	Humbercrest Public School	19	ELE
5582	Inglenook Community School	3	SEC
4594	Ionview Public School	18	ELE
4598	J B Tyrrell Senior Public School	10	ELE
4600	J G Workman Public School	23	ELE
4602	J S Woodsworth Senior Public School	17	ELE
5520	Jarvis Collegiate Institute	9	SEC
2033	John G Althouse Middle School	12	ELE
4610	John McCrae Senior Public School	2	ELE
6250	Kane Middle School	16	ELE
5243	Kent Senior Public School	18	ELE
2019	Lambton Kingsway Junior Middle School	18	ELE
4226	L'Amoreaux Collegiate Institute	11	SEC
1836	Leaside High School	21	SEC
5248	Lord Lansdowne Junior and Senior Public School	19	ELE
5530	Malvern Collegiate Institute	18	SEC
4647	Mary Shadd Public School	18	ELE
4648	Maryvale Public School	11	ELE
3196	Milne Valley Middle School	18	ELE
5261	Nelson Mandela Park Public School	12	ELE
3442	Newtonbrook Secondary School	10	SEC
5540	North Toronto Collegiate Institute	19	SEC
5620	Northern Secondary School	18	SEC
5550	Parkdale Collegiate Institute	18	SEC
3337	Pleasant View Junior High School	18	ELE
5266	Queen Alexandra Middle School	22	ELE
5555	Riverdale Collegiate Institute	14	SEC
6270	Rockcliffe Middle School	10	ELE
5273	Ryerson Community School	21	ELE
4109	Scarborough Centre for Alternative Studies	8	SEC
4732	Scarborough Village Public School	19	ELE
2831	School of Experiential Education	12	SEC
5596	SEED Alternative School	4	SEC
4731	Sir Ernest MacMillan Senior Public School	13	ELE
4154	Sir John A Macdonald Collegiate Institute	18	SEC
4214	Sir Oliver Mowat Collegiate Institute	18	SEC
4160	Sir Robert L Borden Business and Technical Institute	15	SEC
4208	Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute	12	SEC
5846	Subway Academy II	19	SEC
5311	Swansea Junior and Senior Public School	15	ELE
2051	The Elms Junior Middle School	14	ELE
5288	The Waterfront School	3	ELE

Planning number of school	School Name	Number of submissions	Elementary or Secondary
5569	West End Alternative School	5	SEC
2814	West Humber Collegiate Institute	20	SEC
2044	West Humber Junior Middle School	15	ELE
4768	Wexford Public School	18	ELE
3444	William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute	8	SEC
4196	Winston Churchill Collegiate Institute	1	SEC
4202	Woburn Collegiate Institute	14	SEC
6697	York Memorial Collegiate Institute	3	SEC
	No Identified School	27	

Note: in addition, North Kipling and Winchester submitted stories directly to ISS administrator.

4. Location of Participating Schools

The map below shows the location of participating schools from the 1,264 submissions for which we have school information. Note that submissions come from all four quadrants (including North Kipling and Winchester, this was a total of 90 schools).



5. Interview Subjects

Almost all of the interview process took place within the school community. That is, almost two thirds of Interview Subject 1 were students (65%) while slightly less than a quarter (23%) were teachers or staff. 2% were from the community while 3% were family members.

Table 3: Interview Subject 1

Interview Subject 1	Frequency	Percent
Missing/unknown	84	6.5
Adult Family Member	40	3.1
Community Representative	22	1.7
School Administration	50	3.9
School Support Staff	62	4.8
Student	843	65.3
Teacher	190	14.7
Total	1291	100

PART B. IMAGINE AN IDEAL FUTURE

When the final 1,291 submissions were examined in NVivo, it was found that 1,209 had provided a description of an imagined ideal future for the secondary school environment. Responses varied from 1-2 lines, up to several detailed paragraphs (most responses were about a short paragraph in length).

Analysis focused on key words and phrases. A complete list of how each theme was derived is contained in Appendix 1. For example, the code 'relevant or real life ~ future' looked for any responses that had the text 'relevance', 'real life', or 'relevant'.

The first codes were derived from the pilot of seven schools in October, and was supplemented through the preliminary analysis of the 'Best of the past' stories in March. Most codes were finalised by the preliminary analysis of 'Imaging an ideal future' stories in April. The process was evolutionary, with codes added (and, occasionally, deleted) over time.

Codes from NVivo were then exported into SPSS. For example, all of the submissions with the above 'relevant or real life ~ future' code were identified by submission ID number in NVivo, and this information was then linked through submission ID number to the SPSS dataset.

We were able to get some sort of code for 71% of the submissions (858 submissions), where students were asked to describe the ideal school of the future. (Many of the submissions had multiple codes, or 'utterances'.)

Most of these responses tended around positive and motivational aspects of school, rather than information around "school achievement" and the like.

Overall Results

The key responses centered around

- Help
- fun/enjoyment
- encouragement
- respect

- motivation/engagement
- involvement (parental and otherwise)
- communication.

Thus:

The key for students is an adult who cares about them, and a comfortable and supportive environment.

The ‘soft skills’ were thought essential to help students succeed.

This section will explore the key codes or themes identified in the content analysis.

Table 4: Key Responses: Imagining An Ideal Future

Theme	# utterances	# submissions	% submissions (of 1209)
Helping	290	233	19%
Fun~enjoyable~interesting	293	225	19%
Encouragement/encouraging	237	204	17%
Respect or Respectful	161	127	11%
Motivation and engagement	105	92	8%
Cooperating/working together	88	82	7%
Extracurricular activities	84	78	6%
Parent involvement	95	77	6%
Communication	88	77	6%
Hands on	62	56	5%
Relationships	54	47	4%
Others	234	161	13%

total codes: 858 students of 1209 (71%)

The five most-frequently cited themes were examined for differences between elementary and secondary panel, and between grades of submissions. No obvious differences were found. It would appear that these themes are thought important for quality education whether the students are in Grade 7 or Grade 9.

1. Help or Helping

When looking at schools in an ideal future, submissions were more likely to discuss issues around help or helping than any other (233 or almost a fifth of submissions)¹.

At the most standard, this centred on teachers helping students.

Give help when necessary...Help students who are shy to obtain help they need. Don't just stand by and watch students struggle.

A successful school would include students and teachers helping each other, being kind and respecting one another. Students would be more involved and ask for help if needed.

Also important in an ideal education was 'extra' help offered to students, e.g.

Teachers should offer extra help and really understand what is going on in their students lives.

(The school) should also offer extra help for kids with family problems and other issues outside of school so that they can deal with the outside distractions from the students' best academic performances at school.

There are programs to ensure that students can get the resources they need for extra help and the students who excel will have more reasons to work harder.

We need after school time where we can get help and/ or catch up on work. Teachers should influence the students to stay in for extra help.

Sometimes the reference was to students helping each other, e.g.

Another thing that would be in an ideal school is peer-to-peer tutorship. Students helping students is an idea that can revolutionise learning. Also, these programs would provide a safe learning environment for students. I would maintain all this by getting more leaders in the school to volunteer, and I would choose likeable teachers.

Something my school should do to ensure successful students would be to have more students helping students. The philosophy of paying it forward would do well in this school.

¹ In fact, the majority of submissions had the word 'help' somewhere. However, the submissions here refer to specific references to helping students, teachers and each other—see the Appendix for the specific list of words and phrases. One difficulty is that the "help" is a verb, adverb and noun, and sometimes using a 'text' search resulted in inappropriate listings among the "help" theme. On the other hand, many valid uses of "help" were not included because of spelling and other variances; the two probably balanced each other out.

Helping was also thought to be a two-way street: some submissions referred to both students helping teachers and teachers helping students. Again, communication was important here.

Teacher could give more support and student could seek extra help. Everyone could help each other out more and be more supportive.

At a high level school, there will be a lot of working together with students, teachers and parents. The higher level students will help other students. Everyone will work and help each other.

In a school where every student is successful every student and teacher would be working together to help each other to become successful. They should communicate openly and be able to trust each other. there should be reciprocal learning; teachers learn from students and students learn from teachers. and there should be a nurturing attitude where the students can always get help and support from teachers.

2. School as “Fun” or “Interesting”

Almost as important as “help” was students’ interest in making schools more “fun” or “interesting” (225, or almost a fifth of submissions). However, this in itself was rarely a complete objective. Making school fun was usually associated with doing something else.

Students sometimes used “fun” in opposition to what they were seeing now. For example, it was often contrasted with ‘boring’ teaching (example page 3b, 2b).

Teachers should exchange with each other ideas on how to make teaching more fun and memorable. They would approach teaching in different ways and techniques instead of lectures.

This young man also thought that school should be more fun instead of the teacher just standing up to the front of the class and talking in a boring way. Also the school needs to have seminars and students should talk to teachers more comfortably. Also we should let the older teachers now how classes can be fun and exciting.

I also think that they should make classes more interesting. No matter what course it is, it can be always interesting and more active stuff instead of sitting down at a desk, having teacher by the chalk board writing notes.

Also, for many students, “fun” was used together with “hard work”—that is, a successful school is seen as one where students worth work hard AND have fun:

He sees a successful school with students working hard, finishing assignments, having a high school spirit and the teachers are fun and exciting and their methods are a variety and are fun, active and not so boring. People should be looking forward to coming to school. There should be more people participating in extracurricular activities and there should be more trips. He could help by encouraging people and being there for them.

A successful school is having fun studying hard for test and getting good grades by thinking positively. Making learning fun instead of reading textbooks and having more activity days and spirit days would encourage the students to participate in school and different activities more.

It was also used in examples of good teaching, equated with motivation, e.g. this story:

In grade eight we had a very fun and energetic teacher for Science. Although my mark was low at the beginning of the school year, the teacher's enthusiasm, help, my hard work and my participation made it rise greatly by the end of the term. Because of all this I was awarded the 'Most Improved Award'. I learned that when you need it, you can gain much more than before.

Having "fun" was, in some ways, equated with a more comfortable environment so that students would be more interested in coming to school, e.g. with this description of one of the secondary alternative schools.

The students and teachers would be engaging, and supporting each other. There would be something going on that affects how the students feel. There would be a fun environment like the environment at (the school). There should always be less power, more equalness between students and teachers. To ensure successful students, students should be kept interested, and should want to come to school. Extra co-curricular activity would help, joining with other schools, to form alliances or sports teams. To maintain success I would reach out to other small schools and bridge the "gap".

A school where teachers are making things interesting helps students become successful. A good community and a safe and happy learning environment help students to become successful as well. Knowing that you are safe, helps one to concentrate more because of the lack of stress regarding your well-being and one is able to express themselves better. A school with a lot of extra-curricular activities will be a successful school. Students that are involved with extra-curricular activities have the opportunity to open up more. When a student feels comfortable with the students that they are going to school with, he or she has the ability to communicate better, thus, builds confidence.

In addition to motivating teaching, students pointed to the importance of enjoyable activities:

Our school should have more fun activities so that more students would be involved and it would keep the students from skipping. To help maintain this success I would be involved in these activities.

A school in which everyone is successful will be a school in which everyone can choose which paths they would like to follow and be able to do so with very little restrictions. Also they should experience fun activities like hands on work and school spirit activities.

A “fun” environment was also contrasted in at least a few cases with the too-serious current state of school.

In an ideal school I picture teachers as an inspiration to students to work hard. By them putting more thought and heart into teaching, the students would be having fun while they were learning. Students are very stressed these days due to the high amount of homework and the lack of fun and motivation in the classroom. I don't think that school should be all serious; there should be fun and motivation experienced by students. I think that the schools should receive more funding for field trips that promote cultural values and empower the human mind.

Activities suggested that would make school more interesting included:

- Going on field trips/outdoor learning
- Science experiments
- Guest speakers
- Make activities into games (and/or interactive/hands-on)
- Poster contents
- More time to do homework in school
- More gym/gym equipment (although one suggested less gym and more art)
- More free time/fun time/time to relax.

As one submission put it,

How to make the school more successful? Put in more field trips. The board has really trampled over the fun in schools, making students less enthusiastic about what they do. Motivated kids do well in school, and kids who are not, don't. There should be set days where students and teachers could get to choose what they want to do, whether it is rock climbing, down hill skiing or even a day at Wonderland. It would be a nice breather from all of the textbooks. There also should be more Outdoor Ed. trips, anything that involves just the students getting together to socialise and to have fun.

3. Encouragement

Encouragement/encouraging/encourage were terms/words also found frequently in the submissions (204 or 17% of submissions). In part (like 'help') this was partly an artefact of the words: as an adverb, verb and noun, they were used in a pretty wide variety of circumstances, e.g.:

Teachers would continue encouraging a sense of self in everyone.

Teachers would try to do alot more for students by encouraging them and supporting them the whole way.

The student would be encouraged to learn and motivated to be successful.

The teachers should continue encouraging weaker students to do better.

Students should be doing their best, encourage one another, love what they're doing so they improve by having confidence in themselves, making people that care about you proud of both you and them.

The amount of effort a student puts into their subjects depends highly on the kind of teacher that they have, and a better teacher will no doubt encourage a student better.

All kids would feel safe and welcome at school because friendship and co-operation would be encouraged.

Although the specifics of recommendations differed, what most of these submissions had in common was an emphasis of the importance of a positive and supportive environment. "Rather than unleashing punishments in response to students lack of motivation" according to one submission, the successful school "would encourage and nurture maturing students."

Or, in the words of another submission,

A successful school would consist of lots of encouragement going around.

4. Respect

Respect was an important topic noted by many submissions (127, or 11% of submissions). The term was used in several (related) ways.

First, it was often simply included as an unexplained general characteristic of a successful school, e.g.

...there would be co-operation, respect and kindness among staff and students.

A successful school would include students and teachers helping each other, being kind and respecting one another.

Whether intentional or not, some of the submissions were one way: respect of students for teachers; respect of teachers for students.

Students will be respectful and not rude to the teachers.

The children should obey and respect the teachers.

A successful school would have students who respect their teachers. Not in the way that they have to be scared or just behave because they don't want to be in trouble. But respect meaning that they want to pay attention because they enjoy learning from the teacher and they have this certain bond going. All teachers should give the right encouragement, that's what gets students going. When something motivates or interests them then that's what makes them feel like they can really do something. We shouldn't have students complaining about cranky teachers.

But the majority envisaged mutual respect-- teachers to students and students to teachers.

In the ideal school, there would be respect between both the students and teachers. When you think about it, the teachers would teach better and students would learn more if they felt respected and in control with their futures. Students would also be better at listening because in our world today, our technology has grown alot. Now, that we have MSN, we are able to talk to more than one person at a time without really taking in what they are saying. People don't put alot of emphasis on the listening skills these days, but they play a big role in the learning process.

And for the last question she said that success could be maintained in a school if there is respect from the students to the teachers and from the teachers to the students as well...because we want to be appreciated as well.

Main thing my school desperately needs right now is the respect and trust between staffs and students in my opinion.

My ideal school is one in which everyone respects each other. The students are attentively listening and keeping their thoughts to themselves. The teachers are encouraging and always explain how to do the work. They use different methods of teaching such as hands on work. There is a good communication between the teachers and the students. Everyone participates in a mutual respect.

5. Motivation and Engagement

Like many of the other key themes, 'motivation' was often just added as part of a general list of characteristics of a school (the collective parts of a supportive environment).

Imagining a school where every student is successful, I see student and teachers more co-operative and motivated in the sense of being and doing their best. I see students and teachers communicating and getting along more and receiving the encouragement and guidance needed. The way we could ensure this would be by teachers helping students and acknowledging their interest and developing and understanding their learning habits.

Some submissions more specific about motivation. Often it was interpreted as something that the teacher was responsible for, e.g.

I feel motivated when my teacher motivates me.

...when teachers have no negative thoughts, it truly reflects on the students. It keeps them motivated to do well.

Instead of telling us what to do, teachers should motivate us.

But others thought that motivation should come from within the students, rather than from teachers, or from both teachers and students.

Some submissions thought motivation would result from increased resources or programs, or different activities.

With more peer programs, the student body would become more motivated and there would be more school spirit.

We should do more activities in informal settings such as outside, it would motivate both teachers and students, students need choices.

Several submissions made the point that "what would make students more successful would be more motivation, either from their teachers or their fellow students."

6. Co-operation and Working Together

Co-operation is very similar to both 'Helping' and with 'Encouragement/encouraging'. Submissions suggested that a school would be successful with co-operation of:

- students with each other
- teachers and students
- teachers with each other (which would inspire the students)
- the school in general.

For a school to have a 100% success rate, teachers and students would have to co-operate. A working relationship, as opposed to a teacher-Student relationship would be emphasised so that goals can be set and met on a level ground.

7. Extracurricular Activities

For 78 submissions (6%) the involvement and challenge of extracurricular activities were thought to add to student success. Among those cited as examples were:

- Wood workshop
- Dance, yoga
- Basketball and sports teams
- Academic clubs
- Choir
- Music (e.g. Kiwanis festival)
- Robotics team
- Cultural clubs.

In one case it was suggested that extracurricular activities were important so that "everyone is able to experience new things and focus on other things besides academics". Another submission recommended keeping traditional activities but to explore new alternatives because "times have changed and kids are into different things". Likewise a submission suggested there should be "more diverse extracurricular activities, not just sports and a couple of clubs, so more people get involved, and they have a good reason to

come to school.” While in a few cases it was also suggested that extracurricular activities should be mandatory, this was not seen in most submissions.

8. Parental Support

Parents were discussed (or at least mentioned) in 77 or 6% of submissions. Parental support was thought to be a general characteristic of school or student success.

Parents need to be involved in their child’s learning.

Parents could be more supportive to their children and get involved in their child’s education.

What I think a successful school would be like would be where students are happy and actually excited about school. Where teachers helped students achieve their goals. It would be like a triangle, where students, parents and teachers worked together to achieve their goals and be successful.

Parents were also thought to be a resource. In one submission an interviewee suggested that parents could provided much-needed information on career paths.

Letting them know that university is not the only solution after your high school years. The most important thing is to realise where your passion lies and pursue it. I am planning to set up a career workshop to allow parents to participate and acknowledge the different stages available after high school, like colleges, apprenticeship, and work force or even continue high school. I want the students to know there are many pathways that lie in front and they’ll have a choice to make.

In another it was suggested that parents should “be talking about what is important to kids”.

9. Communication

The importance of communication—especially between teachers and students—was emphasised in 77 submissions (6%).

The teachers and students should always be communicating with each other. The teacher needs to be in more contact with the student to find out about their personal liking and feelings about learning. The teachers should make sure that the student is comfortable and should always support. It also takes time and organisation for the teacher to communicate with students individually.

A more relaxed environment where the teacher communicates more with the students and really makes them feel like part of a community would encourage better academic success. The amount of effort a student puts into their subjects depends highly on the kind of teacher that they have, and a better teacher will no doubt encourage a student better.

In a school where every student is successful I can picture teachers and students being able to talk to one another, not like the teacher with a SUPERIOR authority. Just like friends, talk openly with one another because that's the problem now, students can't communicate with teachers cause if there is one little problem or misunderstanding, the teacher doesn't even try to fix it, instead you're sent to the office. The students don't want to talk to the office, they want their teachers to listen to them and maybe give them some suggestions.

10. Hands On

A less frequent but still important suggestion by 56 submissions (5%) had to do with hands-on activity. That is, it was thought that concrete, hands-on activities were often more motivational and interesting to students than more abstract lectures; “activities would be fun and interactive with a hands-on approach”. One submission recommended that all students should be doing more math and science. But at the same time it was recognised that

To change our school we need more hands-on classes and many more different courses. We should recognise student success so that they can be ensured that they are doing well in school and that their efforts are appreciated. One goal that could change our school in one year would be to get an auto-mechanic shop. I know that many people like hands-on things. Therefore some students will not feel like they are worse students than others. By making a course like this students will be more motivated because they would enjoy something hands-on.

More hands on activities were sometimes recommended in tandem with outdoor activities, extracurricular activities and field trips.

11. Relationships

The most frequent reference among the 47 submissions (4%) was the importance of positive student-teacher relationships.

Strictness, too much structure, and large/frequent detentions will damage the student-teacher relationship. Teachers need to care more about the students, and students need have good relationships with teachers to promote good learning situations.

In an ideal future, and a very successful school, she thinks the teachers and the students would be comfortable talking to each other, and it wouldn't be a teacher/student relationship, but more of a friendship.

In a successful school both students and teachers would have a good relationship. Canada is very different from my country; teachers care more here in Canada.

12. Secondary Themes

161 submissions (or 13%) raised a variety of secondary themes. While these were not raised with the same frequency as the above themes, they are worth examination.

Table 5: Number of Utterances of Secondary Themes

Others themes:	
Support/supportive to students	45
Freedom	37
Safe schools	34
Enthusiasm	24
Diversity/mutual respect	23
Smaller classes	22
Relevance/real life	15
Open/open minded	11
Learning/teaching styles	11
Mentor/mentoring	10
Inviting environments	2

234

Support/supportive to students

This is closely related to the 'help' and 'encouragement' themes, with which it is frequently associated. It usually refers to the importance of teachers supporting students, students supporting each other, or teachers and students supporting each other.

Teacher could give more support and student could seek extra help.

To help maintain this success, we would have to continue being supportive of the students and pay extra attention to at risk kids.

In a perfect school, all the teachers are encouraging and supportive, just like my best teachers were.

Freedom or Independence

These submissions emphasised the importance of the student having greater freedom (sometimes it was specified that the freedom would be around instructional choices or in the classroom environment).

There would be trust and the kids would appreciate this independence and work harder.

I think all students should get more freedom. (change some policies, less strict rules). I think that the school board should let the students choose more things to do in school.

In this (ideal successful) school, teachers help kids with more personalised attention. Schools would give more freedom of speech. So, the staff can get the student perspective. This will help the student focus on their goal and they will achieve life long goals. That is what I think the students and teachers of a perfect school would be doing to make every student successful.

Safe Schools

Safety was usually thought of as more of a precondition rather than a reason for school success by these submissions. That is, keeping the school safe was thought essential by for making sure that there would be an environment conducive to school success.

Also to be consistent in keeping the school safe. Misbehaviour cant be tolerated, but also giving students a chance to shine, and helping unfortunate students with lunch cards and bus tickets.

It should be a place where everyone should be included and safe in the community.

It would be a clean, safe environment in which people - teachers and students - can develop.

While there were fewer than 40 submissions that used the 'safety', an examination of uncoded submissions (see below) found that many students used the terms 'bullying' when discussing the same issues. If the two were combined this would have emerged as a major rather than a secondary theme.

Enthusiasm

Submissions putting 'enthusiasm' as a characteristic of successful schools said many of the same things as submissions talking about "fun" and "help". Submissions

were equally split between those who thought teacher enthusiasm important, and those who thought student enthusiasm important; as well, several submissions pointed to the importance of both teacher and student enthusiasm.

In a school where every student is successful, I think teachers would be getting involved with the students, and students would be more enthusiastic and would want to learn.

In a school where everyone is successful teachers are being more enthusiastic and are creating a positive learning experience for their students.

Diversity and Mutual Respect

The term “diversity” here was sometimes used to refer to diverse learning environments/course choices, sometimes not defined. Mutual respect normally was in context of students and teachers respecting one another.

Acceptance of diversity.

Students could also be more respectful to their teachers so they will receive the same mutual respect back.

Smaller Classes

Smaller classes were recommended in that they would provide better opportunities for more personalised teaching.

There would be more one-on-one time so that teachers could focus more on students.

An achievable goal that can be achieved in a year is by giving students that are struggling in certain subjects more individualised attention. We can maintain this by having smaller classes and maybe fundraisers to buy prizes and awards for various achievements.

13. Uncoded Submissions

29% of the submissions did not have any of the above codes. In many cases, when examined, it was found that the submissions did actually have a recommendation around a positive/supportive school environment-- but the wording did not fall precisely into the specific words or phrases outlined in the Appendix. In other cases they were excluded because of spelling or grammar irregularities. As is common with today’s e-mail and web entry, submissions had a rather freethinking attitude towards grammar and exhibited an almost Elizabethan inventiveness in spelling.

There were a number of other secondary themes that came up in looking at uncoded submissions:

Bullying/Violence

Reference to bullying and violence provided a certain background context in the uncoded submissions (as well as some coded submissions). This was the submission noting that one of the characteristics of a successful school would be the lack of bullying. Some student commented that in a well functioning school where all students are successful, there would be no need of bullying.

A school where every student (is) successful would look like everyone getting along. A few things our school could do to ensure successful students could be a bully free school.

Homework

There was also some discussion of homework, although no consensus about it-- i.e. some students thought there should be more homework, others that the current amount of homework was adding stress to students' lives.

(In an ideal school) students would be working harder and moving at a faster pace. They would spend more time on homework and if their homework was not done then the teacher would scold them.

This person feels that less homework would equal less stress for students. She thought that homework should be spread out throughout the term rather than condensed into the last few weeks of the term.

Discipline (Strictness)

Likewise, several submissions discussed the role of discipline in the school, but while some thought that teachers were overly strict, others recommended more discipline.

I feel that some teachers are overly strict, and should be more lenient towards students.

I believe that teachers should be more strict and that each teacher should mark so that it's not unfair to the kids.

Uniforms

A few students recommended uniforms as part of a successful school strategy; yet this was also opposed by others.

Get rid of crime, Don't carry around weapons, get uniforms.

There will be equal inputs and no uniforms which kids don't like.

Finally, several of the participants cautioned that it was all very well to talk about the ideal school, but "in a perfect world, every student would study hard, learn at the same level, pay attention in class and be successful in school, but we do not live in a perfect world. Everyone is successful in their own way."

SUMMARY-DISCUSSION

Current research on student success is centred on aspects of student achievement, and correlates to achievement. Thus, the Secondary Student Success Indicators studies (Brown, 2004) and Grade 9 cohort studies (Brown, 2005) have documented very clear and consistent relationships between credit accumulation, marks, and absenteeism in Grades 9 and 10, and such ultimate outcomes as completion of the Ontario literacy requirement, graduation, and dropping out of school. These have been shown to interact with background and demographic information like gender, neighbourhood income, region of birth, and school mobility. Likewise, the focus of the province's accountability office, EQAO, has been on academic achievement: Reading, Writing, and Math in Grades 3 and 6, Math in Grade 9, and literacy scores in Grade 10.

There was a great divide between this 'official' dialogue, and the general content of the Imagine Student Success web submissions. In describing a successful school, participants concentrated not on achievement characteristics, but on the school environment—specifically, importance of a *positive* environment-- the "lots of encouragement going around" identified by one submission as necessary for a successful school.

This may be at least in part due to who was doing the submitting. It was, for the most part, the perspective of students currently involved in the transition between the elementary and secondary panels. Around half the interviewees were in the elementary panel, while little under a third were in Grades 9/10; over three quarters were 12-16 years of age. Likewise, almost all the interview process took place within the school-- two thirds were with students, while around a quarter were teachers/staff. Therefore, for the most part this is the story of the 'transitions' school community.

There were around twenty identified themes or codes. The most frequently identified themes looked at supportive adult/teaching presence, a comfortable and supportive environment, and social/communication skills related to this sort of environment.

Thus, submissions were more likely to discuss issues around help or helping than any other-- teachers helping students, extra help for students, students helping each other.

Almost as important, students wished to make school more "fun" or "interesting". Experiencing 'motivating' teaching was thought of as fun; likewise it was equated with a more comfortable environment so that the student would be more interested in coming to school.

Other key elements of student success were thought to be encouragement (in a wide variety of circumstances), respect (of teacher for student, students for teachers, and mutual respect); motivation and engagement (from within the students, as well as motivation from teachers); and co-operation/working together.

For a number of submissions, the involvement and challenge of extracurricular activities were thought to add to student success (a few suggested new alternatives to the traditional activities). In-school activities that would make school more interesting were also put forward. As well, it was suggested that concrete, hands-on activities were often more motivational and interesting to students than were abstract lectures. Parental support, communication, and positive student-teacher relationships were also put forward as characteristics of a successful school.

A number of secondary themes were also offered by submissions. These included:

- the importance of support for students (teachers supporting students, students supporting each other, teachers and students supporting each other);
- the importance of the student having greater freedom;
- enthusiasm in the classroom and school;
- diversity/mutual respect;
- smaller classes.

The roles of homework, discipline, and uniforms were raised by some submissions, although there did not appear to be any consensus on these.

A necessary part of the successful school was the safety (or feelings of safety) of the student. This was brought up in different ways that tended to fly somewhat below the radar screen of the 'theme' methodology: students sometimes discussed 'safety', or sometimes discussed 'bullying' or used different words. But this was obviously an important consideration for many of the submissions. In some ways safety was different

from other themes, in that it was more of a precondition of success than a characteristic of success.

Few of the stories concentrated on one theme or recommendation. Instead most listed multiple characteristics of a successful school. Participants recognised that for a school to work, there is no one magic bullet, but that success is a cumulative result of many directions—a convergence of many positive characteristics.

It is also worth pointing out that students recognised that a positive environment was only part of the story. Many of the submissions simultaneously recommended high academic standards, hard work, and/or discipline. Students did not seem to have a problem with benchmarks or hard work-- they just wanted it within the context of a supportive and enjoyable school setting. They wanted to work hard, and to have fun.

It should be recognised that this interpretation of Imagine Student Success submissions resulted from one researcher working with a committee of educators/practitioners. The focus on specific words or phrases in the content analysis-- necessary in looking at over 1,200 submissions-- meant that some themes may have received less emphasis than under a different methodology (e.g. concerns about school safety outlined above). Nonetheless, while a different research design would have looked at the stories in at least a somewhat different way, this interpretation hopefully has captured the *general intent* of most of the submissions.

As with much research, this analysis should be considered introductory. There are many possible directions for future work. One might be to use the NVivo modeling process to examine the relationship(s) between themes outlined above. The ISS Committee and the TDSB Board have already embarked other directions as well. It is hoped that these will assist the "lots of encouragement" identified by the ISS submissions as necessary for successful schools.

APPENDIX

Imagining an Ideal Future: Theme Descriptions

Help or Helping:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'help students', text matching the pattern, 'help the students', text matching the pattern, 'help to students', text matching the pattern, 'assist students', text matching the pattern, 'help each other', text matching the pattern, 'helping students', text matching the pattern, 'helping others', text matching the pattern, 'give help', text matching the pattern, 'obtain help', text matching the pattern, 'help maintain success', text matching the pattern, 'give them help', text matching the pattern, 'go for help', text matching the pattern, 'help people', text matching the pattern, 'help their students', text matching the pattern, 'get extra help', text matching the pattern, 'help program', text matching the pattern, 'teachers help', text matching the pattern, 'helping each other', text matching the pattern, 'ask for help', text matching the pattern, 'asking for help', text matching the pattern, 'help kids', text matching the pattern, 'extra help' }

Mentoring:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'mentor', text matching the pattern, 'mentoring' }

Engagement:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'engagement', text matching the pattern, 'motivation' }

Smaller or small classes~ future:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'smaller classes', text matching the pattern, 'small classes' }

Inviting environments ~ future:

Text Search: text matching the pattern 'inviting'

Relevant or real life ~ future:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'relevance', text matching the pattern, 'real life', text matching the pattern, 'relevant' }

Hands on ~ future:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'hands-on', text matching the pattern, 'hands on', text matching the pattern, 'experiential' }

Fun or enjoyable or interesting:

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'fun', text matching the pattern, 'enjoyable', text matching the pattern, 'interesting' }

Freedom or independence ~ future:

on: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'freedom', text matching the pattern, 'independence', text matching the pattern, 'independent' }

Extracurricular ~ future

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'extracurricular', text matching the pattern, 'extra-curricular' }

Learning or teaching styles ~ future

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'learning styles', text matching the pattern, 'teaching styles' }

Open minded~communication ~future

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, '\<open minded', text matching the pattern, '\<open communication', text matching the pattern, '\<open with students' }

Parents~parental support ~future~

Text Search: text matching the pattern 'parents'

Relationships ~future~

Text Search: text matching the pattern 'relationships'

Diversity and Mutual Respect

Text Search: text matching the pattern 'diversity' and 'mutual respect' (merged)

Safe or Safety ~ future

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, '\<safety\>', text matching the pattern, '\<safe\>' }

Support to Students

Note: support to students; supportive; supporting

Respect/Respectful

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'respect', text matching the pattern, 'respecting', text matching the pattern, 'respectful' }

Extracurricular

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, '\<extra-curricular\>', text matching the pattern, '\<extracurricular\>' }

Communication

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, '\<communication', text matching the pattern, '\<communicating' }

Enthusiasm

Union: text with any of these properties: { text matching the pattern, 'enthusiasm', text matching the pattern, 'enthusiastic' }

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Brown, R. (2004). *TDSB Secondary Student Success Indicators, 2003-2004*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board.

Brown, R. (2005). *The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: An Interim Four-Year Analysis, 2000-2004*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board.

