

# Assessing Our Learning Community: Staff Perceptions



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## Introduction

A key aspect of Saskatoon Public Schools' strategic planning process is to provide stakeholders in our organization (i.e., students, parents, staff, and the community-at-large) with an opportunity to offer their advice and input regarding the operation and direction of the division.

During this school year, we conducted perception surveys with our staff as well as with members of the general public and the business community. This report focuses on the results of the staff perception survey.

## The Survey

This is the fourth systematic survey of our employee learning community. This biannual survey (as well as similar parental and student surveys conducted in 2005-2006, 2007-2008, and 2009-10; and the residential, business surveys reported under separate cover as part of this board file) is important because staff members are provided with a voice to contribute to the board's strategic plan.

Traditionally, learning communities have been conceptualized in terms of small teams of professionals gathered together for a common interest (e.g., a book club, a professional growth network, grade-alike or department grouping, etc.) or as an individual school community. However, this survey sees *all* employees of Saskatoon Public Schools – members of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (teachers, principals, and vice/assistant principals) and Canadian Union of Public Employees (journeyman tradespersons, maintenance staff, caretaking personnel, driver instructors, educational assistants, information services technicians, and other support staff) as well as out-of-scope personnel – as contributors to one large learning community focused on supporting student learning.

The survey instrument asks staff members to comment on several statements that reflect the six main attributes of a learning community identified by Dr. Larry Sackney – a leading international learning community researcher. These characteristics include:

- Shared Understanding and Collaboration,
- Reflective Practice,
- Quality of Work Life,
- Organizational Resources,
- Currency, and
- Learning Opportunity.

About half of the survey items ask respondents to reflect upon the frequency of certain behaviours among their workplace colleagues that would be typical in effective learning

communities. The remainder of the survey invites respondents to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements referring to personal experiences that would be common among employees in effective learning communities.

In addition, we asked staff members three broad open-ended questions to give them the opportunity to:

- Comment on the board's current priorities,
- Suggest potential future priorities the board may wish to consider, and
- Elaborate on their responses to the survey items or to offer their views on issues not directly addressed by the survey.

## Findings

In general, we found that, in the view of our staff members, we have been successful in creating the basis for a learning community within Saskatoon Public Schools; however, we still have room for growth. The results are reported in two sections: Behaviours and Workplace experiences.

### Behaviours - this year's results

Staff members were asked to indicate how frequently their workplace colleagues engage in eleven behaviours typical among learning community members. They were asked to rate the statements according to the following scale:

- Staff members *rarely* engage in what is described in the statement.
- Staff members engage in what is described *once in a while*.
- Staff members *sometimes* do what is described.
- Staff members do what is described *fairly often*.
- Staff members do what is described *very frequently or almost always*.

Generally, statements related to a focus on student learning and assistance to each other were highly rated by respondents (see Figure 1).

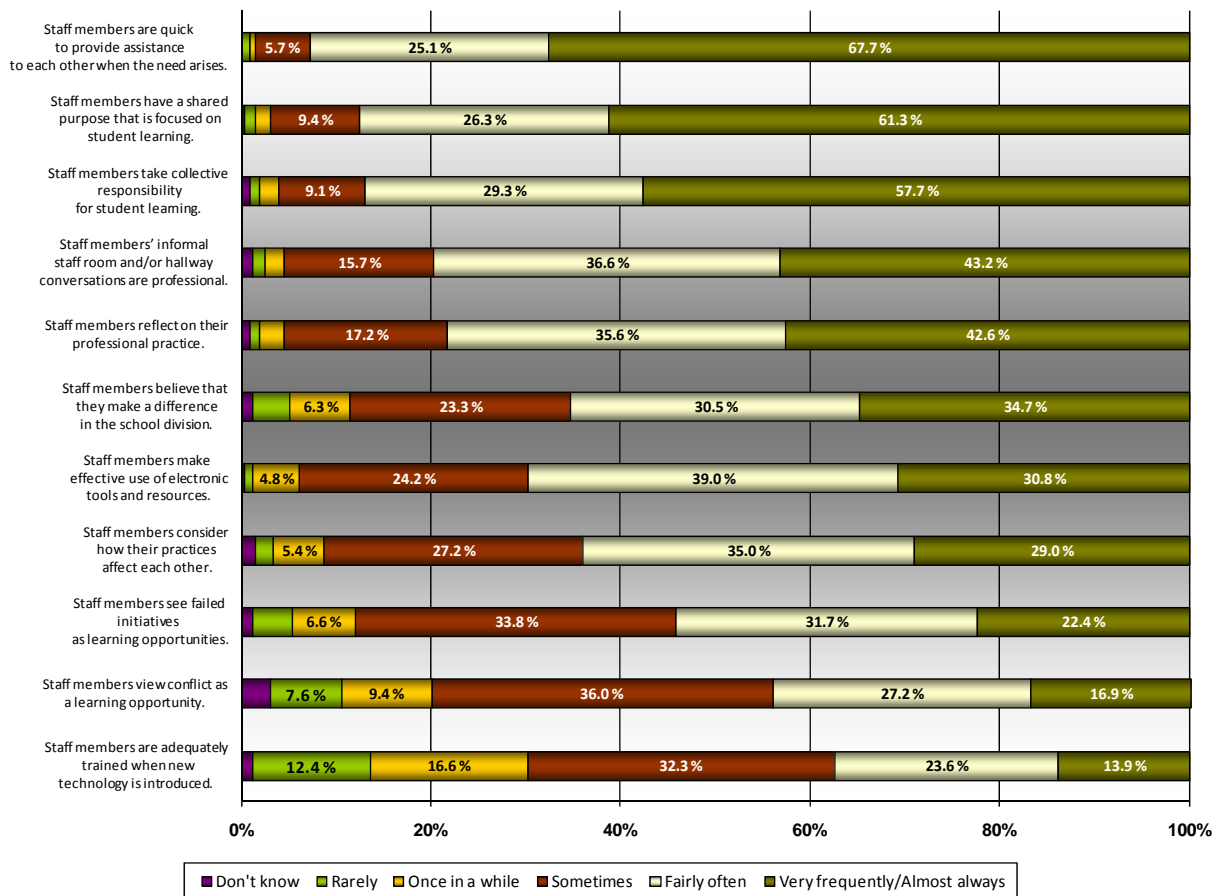
- 68% feel that staff members are very frequently or almost always quick to provide assistance to each other when the need arises; while another 25% engage in this behaviour fairly often.
- 61% feel that staff members very frequently or almost always have a shared purpose that is focused on student learning.
- 58% also feel that staff members very frequently or almost always take collective responsibility for student learning.

Statements related to aspects of professional development and professional practice were rated less positively.

- 31% indicated that staff members make effective use of electronic tools and resources.

- 29% indicated that staff members very frequently or almost always consider how their practices affect each other.
- 22% indicated that staff members very frequently or almost always see failed initiatives as learning opportunities.
- 17% indicated that staff members very frequently or almost always view conflict as a learning opportunity.
- 14% indicated that staff members are adequately trained when new technology is introduced.

Figure 1 – Staff ratings of the frequency of learning community behaviours



## Behaviours – Trends over time

Staff ratings of the frequency of learning community behaviours show improvement in nine of the 11 areas included in this survey (See Figure 2) – Note: two items in this section of the survey were asked for the first time this year. This is particularly true when we look at the data in light of those who frequently or almost always engage in these behaviours.

The improvement for six of these items was sufficient to be considered statistically significant.

- Staff members take collective responsibility for student learning (up 12.8% from 2009).
- Staff members have a shared purpose that is focussed on student learning (up 11% from 2009).
- Staff members' informal staff room and/or hallway conversations are professional (up 7.4% from 2009).
- Staff members reflect on their professional practice (up 7.1% from 2009).
- Staff members see failed initiatives as learning opportunities (up 7% from 2009).
- Staff members believe that they make a difference in the school division (up 6.7% from 2009).

Employee perceptions of collegial behaviours in the three remaining areas included in this survey also improved but not enough to be considered statistically significant.

- Staff members are quick to provide assistance to each other when the need arises (up 6% from 2009).
- Staff members view conflict as a learning opportunity (up 3.9% from 2009).
- Staff members make effective use of electronic tools and resources (0.7% decline from 2009).

Figure 2 – Trends in staff ratings of the frequency of learning community behaviours

Very frequently or almost always	2011	2009	2007	Difference from 2009
Staff members take collective responsibility for student learning.	57.7 %	44.9%	43.5%	▲ 12.8pp
Staff members have a shared purpose that is focused on student learning.	61.3 %	50.3%	48.5%	▲ 11.0pp
Staff members' informal staff room and/or hallway conversations are professional.	43.2 %	35.8%	29.2%	▲ 7.4pp
Staff members reflect on their professional practice.	42.6 %	35.5%	30.9%	▲ 7.1pp
Staff members see failed initiatives as learning opportunities.	22.4 %	15.4%	15.4%	▲ 7.0pp
Staff members believe that they make a difference in the school division.	34.7 %	28.0%	27.3%	▲ 6.7pp
Staff members are quick to provide assistance to each other when the need arises.	67.7 %	61.7%	60.1%	► 6.0pp
Staff members view conflict as a learning opportunity.	16.9 %	13.0%	13.1%	► 3.9pp
Staff members make effective use of electronic tools and resources.	30.8 %	30.1%	24.5%	► 0.7pp
Staff members are adequately trained when new technology is introduced.	13.9 %	N/A	N/A	N/A
Staff members consider how their practices affect each other.	29.0 %	N/A	N/A	N/A

## Workplace experiences

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with each of nine statements regarding their experiences in the workplace. They were asked to use the following rating scale:

- Strongly disagree,
- Disagree,
- Don't know,
- Agree, and
- Strongly Agree,

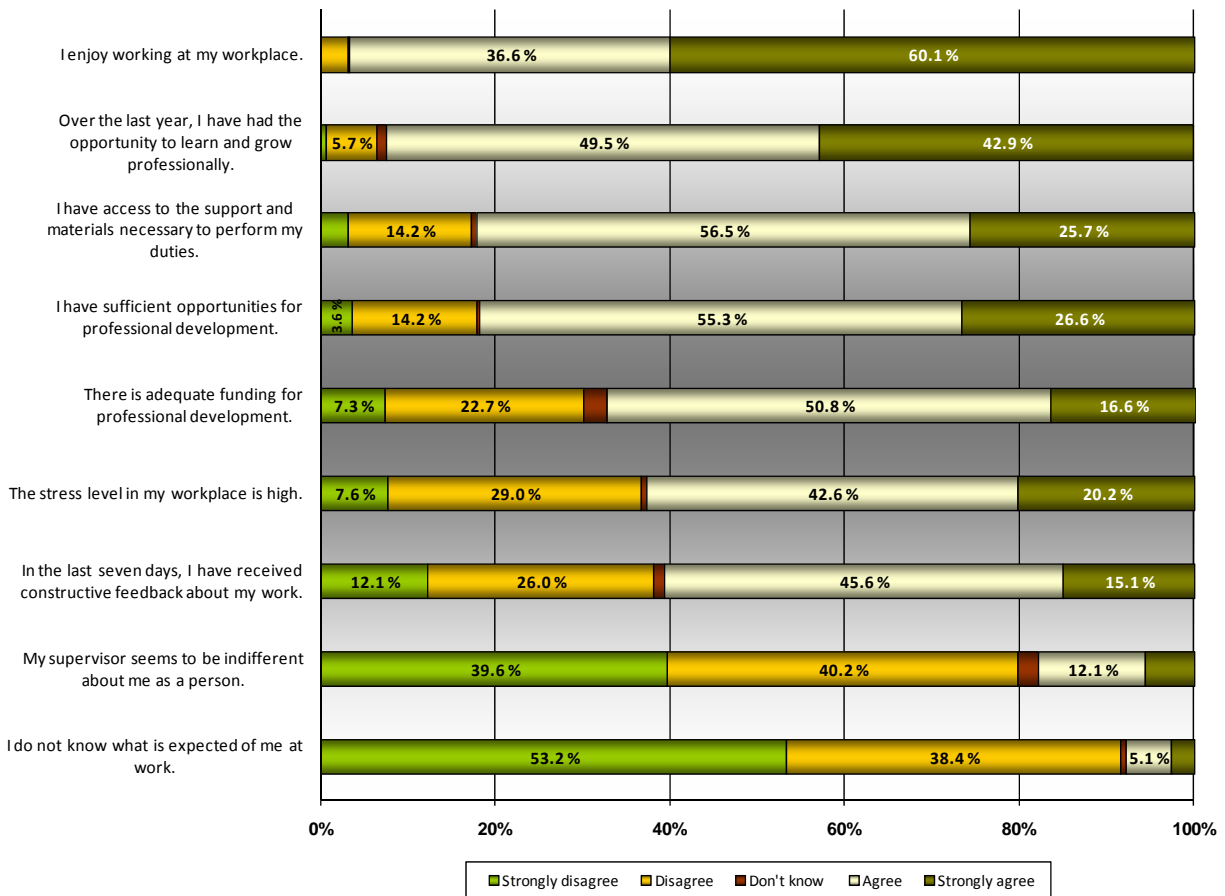
Overall, employees tend to be fairly positive about many aspects of their workplace experience (see Figure 3). For example, 60% strongly agree that they enjoy working at their workplace; while an additional 37% agree with this statement. Additionally, 43% of respondents strongly agree that they have had the opportunity to learn and grow professionally; while a further 50% agree. Other statements that had fairly positive results include:

- 27% strongly agree that they have sufficient opportunities for professional development (an additional 55% agree), and
- 26% strongly agree that they have access to the support and materials necessary to perform their duties (an additional 57% agree).

There were two statements that were worded to elicit strong levels of disagreement. In other words, we hope to see that employees strongly disagree with them.

- 53% of staff strongly disagreed that they do not know what is expected of them at work (an additional 38% disagree), and
- 40% of staff strongly disagreed that their supervisor seems indifferent toward them as a person (an additional 40% disagreed).

Figure 3 – Staff ratings of their workplace experiences



## Workplace experiences – Trends over time

Overall, staff responses related to their experiences in their workplaces showed improvement in six of the nine areas included in this survey – especially in the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed with survey items (see Figure 4). Note: three questions used a reverse scale. In one case – *The stress level in my workplace is high* - a decrease in agreement is a desirable result. In the other cases – *I do not know what is expected of me at work* and *My supervisor seems to be indifferent about me as a person* – an increase in agreement is an undesirable result.

The improvement for four of these items was sufficient to be considered statistically significant.

- There is adequate funding for professional development (up 9.4% from 2009).
- I enjoy working at my workplace (up 8.9% from 2009).
- Over the last year, I have had the opportunity to learn and grow professionally (up 8.3% from 2009).

- I have sufficient opportunities for professional development (up 6.7% from 2009).

Three statements also improved but not enough to be considered statistically significant.

- I have access to the support and materials necessary to perform my duties (up 2.2% from 2009).
- In the last seven days, I have received constructive feedback about my work (up 0.6% from 2009).
- The stress level in my workplace is high (2.4% decrease in strong agreement).

The results for two statements declined slightly.

- I do not know what is expected of me at work (1.5% increase in strong agreement).
- My supervisor seems to be indifferent about me as a person (1.2% increase in strong agreement).

Figure 4 – Trends in staff ratings of their workplace experiences

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Difference from 2009</b>
There is adequate funding for professional development.	16.6 %	7.2%	6.4%	▲ 9.4pp
I enjoy working at my workplace.	60.1 %	51.2%	58.5%	▲ 8.9pp
Over the last year, I have had the opportunity to learn and grow professionally.	42.9 %	34.6%	35.9%	▲ 8.3pp
I have sufficient opportunities for professional development.	26.6 %	19.9%	15.8%	▲ 6.7pp
I have access to the support and materials necessary to perform my duties.	25.7 %	23.5%	23.9%	▶ 2.2pp
I do not know what is expected of me at work.	2.7 %	1.2%	2.1%	▶ 1.5pp
My supervisor seems to be indifferent about me as a person.	5.7 %	4.5%	4.3%	▶ 1.2pp
In the last seven days, I have received constructive feedback about my work.	15.1 %	14.5%	18.7%	▶ 0.6pp
The stress level in my workplace is high.	20.2 %	22.6%	16.1%	▶ -2.4pp

## Open-ended responses related to Board priorities

As mentioned earlier, this year's employee survey included the following three open-ended questions related to Board priorities:

1. If the Board's current priorities – *Literacy for Life* and *Collegiate Renewal* – were to be renewed for the next three years, what should continue to be a focus?
2. What changes in focus (if any) would you suggest for the current priorities?
3. If the Board were to select a new priority, what do you believe that priority should focus on? Why do you feel this way?

### What should continue to be a focus?

Staff members' comments regarding aspects of current Board priorities that should continue to be a focus followed three main themes.

- 49% of respondents stated that *Literacy for Life* itself or various components usually associated with this initiative should remain a board priority:
  - 38% suggested that *Literacy for Life* itself should be continued,
  - 9% suggested a continued focus on reading, writing, and literacy in general, and
  - 2% suggested a continued focus on PWIM.
- 23% of respondents stated that *Collegiate Renewal* or various components usually associated with this initiative should remain a board priority:
  - 15% suggested that *Collegiate Renewal* itself should be continued, and
  - 8% suggested a continued focus on student engagement.
- 23% of respondents suggested continued focus on aspects of student learning that tend to be aligned with both current priorities:
  - 13% suggested a continued focus on providing teachers with key resources and supports – including professional development opportunities,
  - 7% suggested a continued focus on using technology to enhance student learning, and
  - 3% suggested a continued focus on Assessment for Learning (AFL).

### What change (if any) to the current priorities should be considered?

Staff members' comments regarding aspects of current Board priorities that should be changed followed two main themes.

- 40% of respondents suggested changes to the levels of funding, resources, and support associated with the current priorities:
  - 17% requested increased funding and support for current priorities,
  - 15% requested further priority-related training and information for staff, and
  - 8% requested more staff-directed options within the priority areas.
- 32% of respondents suggested enhancements to the current priorities:
  - 16% suggested that the current priorities should be broadened to include a variety of areas of student learning,
  - 10% suggested adding a specific emphasis on mathematics, and
  - 6% suggested adding a specific emphasis on issues related to students with special needs.

Additionally, 13% of respondents indicated that there were no changes needed; and 4% indicated that change initiatives should be introduced less often.

### Potential new priority areas

Staff members' comments related to suggested new areas of focus were wide-ranging and diverse. However, five broad areas were frequent enough to be considered themes.

- 22% of staff suggested that the Board should consider making *Mathematics* a priority.
- 12% of staff suggested that the Board should consider making *Technology* a priority.
- 10% of staff suggested that the Board should consider a priority focusing on *Students with "special" or "diverse" needs*.
- 9% of staff suggested that the Board should consider making *Cultural Responsiveness* a priority.
- 9% of staff suggested that the Board should consider making *Health and Wellness/Nutrition/Physical Activity* a priority.

### Respondent final comments

About one-third of respondents (35%) offered additional comments at the end of the formal survey.

- 35% of these respondents offered general comments about the Board's initiatives and strategies. These comments were wide-ranging – most were supportive of the direction in which the Board and Division are going; but some

were critical of such things as the pace of change, the “top-down” nature of some initiatives, and the content and structure of staff development activities.

- 19% made general positive comments such as, “I like my job/colleagues”.
- 14% felt that more funding/support/staff were required in classrooms and other workplaces.

## Reflections on Staff Satisfaction

Overall, Saskatoon Public Schools’ staff members were very positive about the quality of their work life. They tend to enjoy working at their work places, and they have a shared purpose that is focused on student learning. However, they also identified some challenges in terms of ensuring that all staff members feel that they have a voice in School Division decisions and that they are equipped with the knowledge and confidence that they can cope with the ever-increasing pace of change in the educational world.

Our staff members indicated that while they were satisfied with the collaborative atmosphere in their workplaces, they were concerned about the level of support available for self-directed personal and collective professional growth. In addition, technological use and training among our staff requires additional support – particularly as it relates to embedding technological tools in support of Board priorities and strategic initiatives. Finally, we must continue to encourage everyone to see themselves and others as both teachers and learners and to value both conflict and unsuccessful initiatives as learning opportunities.

This project continues to be a learning experience for all of us. We must continue to build trust and to communicate with our staff members not only to improve their experiences as employees in the Division but also to encourage them to grow and learn together as colleagues. We must also continue our work toward enhancing leadership capacity throughout the Division to support employees and Board priorities. Nevertheless, many respondents are looking forward to the opportunities ahead as we strive to meet the changing needs of students as they adapt to the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century information age.