

Applying inspirational engagement initiatives

to reduce anxiety and enhance school climate

St. Dominic Fine Arts School

Calgary, Alberta
Canada

Background

St. Dominic School strives to inspire creative learners through faith in everything they do. The Principal, Kevin DeForge, and Assistant Principal, Joelle Marshall, work with the staff to foster an environment where students drive their own learning in innovative and creative ways. *“The way I see education is that it’s all about students telling us what they want to learn and how they want to learn it,”* said Kevin.



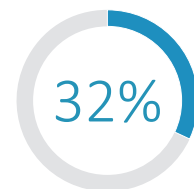
Kevin and Joelle started at St. Dominic in 2015, the first year the OurSCHOOL Student Survey was implemented there. *“We wanted to get a real understanding of the school culture; how engaged the students were, if they were happy and challenged at school and if anxiety was impacting their success,”* said Kevin. Along with the OurSCHOOL questions around student well-being, school climate and engagement, the admin team added their own custom questions to capture specific information tailored to the unique initiatives at St. Dominic.

Measuring results

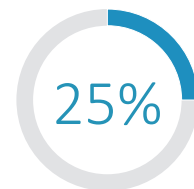
“The surprising result for us, was that 32 per cent of our students reported feeling anxious at school,” said Kevin. Determined to deepen their understanding of the context contributing to these results, the admin team dug deeper and analyzed the data provided by the custom questions within the OurSCHOOL Survey. Of those students indicating a medium to high level of anxiety, 60 per cent experienced this when performing or presenting in front of peers and teachers and 41 per cent during peer interactions. *“We weren’t expecting this from a school focused on the arts!”*, said Kevin.

Student Anxiety Levels (Moderate to High)

2015 - 2016



2016 - 2017



Using the data

The OurSCHOOL results helped Kevin and the team create a three-pronged approach to reducing anxiety and empowering students.

1 Using data to build confidence and embrace experimentation in the classroom

"It was fundamental for us to create a growth mindset in the classroom, where both students and teachers would welcome challenges, where success and failure could be supported and both parties feel encouraged to 'give it a go', no matter how many times they fall."

Through the course of the year, St. Dominic introduced opportunities for students to explore mindfulness and yoga in the classroom; learn about movie making, coding, and dance from guest organizations; and participate in workshop sessions to support emotional wellness. Teachers learned alongside students and took part in professional development to explore new philosophies of learning and to support student engagement.

2 Fostering a safe and inclusive school environment

Kevin and Joelle know the importance of self-worth and using positive reinforcement to enhance school climate. Guided by the data, they consulted with teachers, staff, parents and the school council to develop school programming ideas. *"We wanted to emphasize the importance of each and every child. We worked closely with our students to decorate the stairwells and bulletin boards with aspirational messaging."* said Kevin.

3 Engaging parents and caregivers

Of course, students' feelings don't end when the school day does. St. Dominic staff wanted the new initiatives to resonate at home. *"When introducing new teaching methods and student driven initiatives we need to ensure transparency in all we do and that means making sure parents and guardians are engaged."* Kevin, Joelle and many of the teachers virtually bring parents into the classroom through:

- daily posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Google Classroom, to show parents how students are learning through new activities and engaging with teachers;
- a monthly blog, to share the progress of initiatives by using the OurSCHOOL Survey results to track and measure change over time; and
- a weekly e-newsletter.

Reviewing the outcomes

"All the efforts by students, teachers, parents and the admin team this year have really empowered our students to build on their unique skills and celebrate their successes," said Kevin. The recent OurSCHOOL Survey reported improvements in all areas of student engagement and school climate; the most significant change showed that the number of students who felt anxious at school had decreased by 7 per cent from the previous year. *"The survey gives our students a voice and helps us to introduce targeted initiatives that we know will have the biggest impact on their learning and socio-emotional needs. It is important that we include children in decisions about how the school can best meet their needs. The OurSCHOOL Survey helps us to do that."*

"I believe in a student-driven approach to learning, where students are encouraged to have a choice and a voice in their learning. The OurSCHOOL Student Survey has helped us achieve this."



Kevin DeForge
Principal