

Student and Teacher Perspectives on Model Schools for Inner Cities

Context and issue

Evidence demonstrates that student academic performance can be significantly affected by neighbourhood characteristics¹, family socioeconomic status^{2,3}, and school and family resources⁴, putting some children at additional risk based on sociodemographic factors. In light of this, it is important for educational institutions to acknowledge and respond to the unique experiences of children and youth in marginalized neighbourhoods in order to help improve student outcomes^{1,5,6}. For example, in low-income, inner city neighbourhoods, school-based programs and services such as physical education programs^{7,8}, nutrition programs^{9,10}, services aimed at promoting psychological and physical health^{11,12}, after-school programs¹³, and community service programs that help increase family involvement in schools¹⁴, offer opportunities for students to gain access to resources and supports that support their well-being, school performance, and overall development^{7,15}.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) created the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) initiative to help address inequities facing students who go to schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods¹⁶. The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada, with over 500 elementary schools. Since it began in 2006, the MSIC initiative grew from being implemented in four pilot sites in the first year to over 150 schools six years later. Grounded in maintaining high expectations for students and promoting a vision of excellence, the MSIC initiative is guided by five essential components^{16,17}:

1. Innovation in teaching and learning practices
2. Support services to meet the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students (including nutrition and after-school programs)
3. Supporting the view of school as the heart of the community
4. Frequent research, review and evaluation of students and program effectiveness
5. Commitment to share successful practices

Our approach

We spoke to students and teachers in three Toronto-area MSIC schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas to gather their perspectives on the MSIC initiative. We asked them about their experiences with various MSIC programs and activities.

We held focus groups in 2013 and 2014 with students (ages 4 to 13) and their teachers.

What we found

PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

- Overall, students and teachers viewed MSIC programs and activities positively, with many specifically noting the availability of numerous extracurricular programs and enriched activities before, during, and after school.
- Students reported playing on sports teams, accessing homework help and reading clubs, participating in arts-based activities, and volunteering in the community. Some students reported receiving additional academic support from their teacher after school. Some students also reported spending time after school at the local library, at a nearby park, or going home to watch TV or to go on the computer.
- Many students felt that there were more programs and extracurricular activities offered at their MSIC school compared to other schools, though some students commented that over time the number of programs offered had been reduced. Students generally reported wanting more programs and activities.
- Students discussed going on various [MSIC] school trips with their class.
- Some students noted a 'caring' program in their school through which students receive an award for helping or caring behaviours.

"The funding from [MSIC] has allowed us to run some other programs that meet [students'] learning needs." — Teacher, 2013

- One student spoke of a mentorship program in which high school students visited elementary schools and spoke with younger students.
- Teachers discussed 'wraparound care' and Parenting and Family Literacy Centres available at the schools. Some teachers noted that children enrolled in wraparound care were at school from early in the morning until the evening.
- Students reported that they wanted more library books and textbooks.
- Students reported interest in having school technology updated or repaired.
- Students and teachers noted the need for additional and improved yard equipment.

"There wasn't many opportunities that we could do... but now, there is a club for everything, everything you love." — Student, 2014

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- Many teachers spoke positively of MSIC health initiatives, describing that students were able to get glasses, have hearing tests, join nutrition programs, and access a paediatric health clinic through some schools.
- Students shared their different opinions about the food offered in the school breakfast, snack, and lunch program, with some feeling that it was very good and others feeling that the food was always the same. Some students wanted to have more food for snacks or lunch. Students from one school noted that they did not have a school lunch program.
- Some students reported a change in the quality and quantity of food over time. Teachers also raised concerns over the quality of food being served at the school and the financial sustainability of having nutrition programs at the school.
- Students reported having food celebrations in the past, such as Black History Month, salad bars, and after school family barbecues.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

- Some teachers felt that MSIC has allowed them to access additional programs and classroom support to help them better address the students' learning needs.
- Teachers reported that they implemented financial literacy programs in their classrooms, which included taking students to grocery stores or banks.
- Students and teachers reported a need for additional staff to be hired to support the specialized needs (e.g., behavioural issues, disability, etc.) of students, including more teachers, educational assistants, counsellors and nurses.
- Teachers described challenges associated with larger class sizes in some schools.
- Teachers noted a reduction in funding for non-teaching staff, including psychologists and educational assistants, saying that additional funding is needed to give students more timely and appropriate support. One teacher felt that the process of having students identified for special education was too long, noting long wait times for the school psychologist and other special education programs.
- Many teachers noted that they contribute personally to fundraising efforts at the school due to lack of adequate classroom resources.

"I still believe in the model schools... it's just definitely under-funded..." — Teacher, 2014

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND HOME SUPPORT

- With regards to family involvement in school, most students reported that their parents and/or caregivers were involved at home by helping with their homework. A few students reported that their family was unable to help with homework, noting that their family members were too busy or did not speak English.
- Teachers noted that parents would get involved in school issues. For example, at one school, parents voiced their concerns over Wi-Fi being installed at their school.
- Teachers discussed various school and community-based programs to support and encourage parent involvement, such as school-based preschool services and free programs and activities in the community.

"My grandma would help me with my homework. She's a genius. She is the smartest person I know, seriously." — Student, 2013

Recommendations and implications for practice

- In continuing to achieve innovative teaching practices and pedagogical approaches that reflect the unique experiences of students living in low-income areas, educators need equitable access to adequate physical space and resources^{6,18}, including updated technology, library books, and outdoor equipment. Regular reviews can help to ensure equitable distribution of resources and space.
- MSIC programs and activities include psychological and physical health support and after school academic support programs; research has demonstrated that these types of programs and services can result in positive student outcomes^{7,8,11,12,13}, and may help level the playing field for students and families living in lower sociodemographic neighbourhoods. In the present study, students and teachers highlighted the need for more staff to support students with specialized needs.
- School nutrition programs help support food security in low socio-economic neighbourhoods. The quality and quantity of food should be reviewed on a regular basis, particularly in terms of the nutritional needs of students living in inner city neighbourhoods¹⁰. Students spoke fondly about food celebrations at the school. These types of celebrations can help promote family involvement.
- As mirrored in our findings, research has suggested that culturally diverse parents may tend to focus their involvement in their children's education more so at home^{19,20}, as opposed to by being physically involved in the school through volunteering. In order to continue to support family involvement, the MSIC initiative established a Parent Academy, which aims to empower parents to share resources and provide opportunities for personal and professional development. Building on the Parent Academy, more at-home resources could be provided to families¹⁹, and more two-way communication could be fostered between families and schools²⁰, including supporting the school's capacity to connect with parents through experience in school-based child and family programs²⁰, to help encourage family-school-community partnerships, and support family involvement in students' educational success and well-being.
- Finally, teachers discussed concerns regarding the financial sustainability of the MSIC initiative, highlighting the need for additional funding and appropriate staffing to further support programs and services for students and their families in schools in lower sociodemographic neighbourhoods.

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