

# Hapnot Collegiate's Qualities of a Good School

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## Abstract

*Politics and hegemony create barriers that public schools must endeavour to overcome in order to provide a quality education for all students. The diversity of students, mixed with society's demands upon schools, makes educators search for solutions to create quality schools. Public schools must take it upon themselves to create safe schools, have parental involvement, offer various educational programming options, have high academic standards, nurture a sense of belonging, and provide professional development specifically designed for teachers. Hapnot Collegiate fits this definition of a good school.*

Good schools strive to break free of hegemonic and political rules, by creating a safe and inclusive environment to promote higher education. It appears that public schools now face political struggles and hegemonic rules that force teachers to conform to these ideals. Schools also struggle to meet the ever-changing and growing needs of today's children. Breaking free of the hegemonic rule and political ties will cultivate a quality education for all students. Good schools, such as Hapnot Collegiate, function as an open school, have parental involvement, strive for academic excellence, provide various educational programming options, nurture a sense of belonging in staff and students, and support continuing education for all staff members.

## What is an Open School?

An open school has a clearly defined leadership structure that shares and collaborates, while respecting staff members' and students' individual needs to keep everyone safe (Cameron, Woods, & Campbell, n.d.). Hapnot Collegiate is such a school, wherein relevant information is shared between staff and administration, instead of the dated top-down system. In a closed system, administrators expect information to travel upwards, apparently without reciprocation. This type of system can cause negative feelings and valuable information to be withheld. Hapnot's former principal paved the way for creating an open school and giving staff and students a voice. Staff members felt that they were treated as trustworthy equals and there was reciprocal flow of information between students, staff, and administration. When teachers have a voice and it is acknowledged, a sense of ownership occurs, resulting in safer schools (Cameron et al., n.d.). Hapnot's students were given access to *PSSST*, a website wherein they could report anything bothering them at school. An open school gives people a chance to speak up and be acknowledged. Administrators are paramount to developing this open school climate.

Hapnot Collegiate's School administrators play a crucial role in creating an open school, wherein teachers and students follow the principal's lead. A strong principal recognizes that optimum leadership comes from staff and students in order for everyone to be successful, because "the principal is only one of the leaders in the school community" (von Frank, 2008, p. 26). School principals must model leadership in order to have teacher leadership skills flourish. A good school will have principals and teachers who "share similar concerns, blend roles, and ask tough questions" (von Frankte, 2008, p. 27). A strong, well-balanced administrator is one foundational pillar of many in good school setting. As an open school, Hapnot Collegiate has a strong leadership administration team, which creates a warm environment wherein everyone feels welcome, including parents.

## **Parental Involvement**

Parental participation in the school system is beneficial for students, staff, and parents, because parents can help to “generate a wider variety of possible solutions” (Cowley, 2004, p. 11). A well-functioning Parent Advisory Council has the power to update an old playground or offer a lunch program. A good school also has open and ongoing communication for parents to know how their children are doing and note any concerns. Hapnot Collegiate keeps parents informed of progress through Maplewood, the online attendance and grade book. Many teachers now have class websites, and email parents on a regular basis. Nevertheless, Hapnot teachers have reported a decline in parental involvement, from daily reading homework to parent-teacher interviews. Last year, for example, only 12% of my parents attended the spring interviews, and I have also found that students are not completing homework at home, therefore causing a decline in academic performance. Parental involvement is one key in producing academically successful students, but it requires monitoring because “the white middle-class parents are very powerful and their perspectives and desires tend to dominate this relationship” (Crozier, 2014, p. 280) in schools such as Hapnot Collegiate. In an absolutely good school, parents are heavily involved.

Parental involvement in schools may be viewed as a hegemonic ideal. In addition to being under involved, parents may be overinvolved and try to run programs at the school to suit their own needs, instead of the school as an entity. A good school recognizes overly involved parents as a concern, and works with parents to ensure that all students’ needs are met. In general, parents tend to respond favourably to teachers’ invitations to participate in their children’s education (Rodrigues & Elbaum, 2014). When teachers take the initiative to include parents and give direction, schools see “higher student performance on standardized achievement tests and better psychosocial adjustment” (Rodrigues & Elbaum, 2014, p. 69). Hapnot Collegiate’s teachers endeavour to provide a warm, welcoming environment to all parents and to maintain clear communication at all times.

Clear communication characterizes good schools, but sometimes open, clear communication can be lost between the school and parents. Parents may feel under informed or even misinformed, depending upon how the information is relayed from school to home. Relationships between schools and home can be damaged and a dangerous separation can occur. In a good school, communication can “transform and repair” relationships between school and home (Greene, 2009, p. 95) beyond the classroom level (Keller-Guenther, Rosenberg, Block, & Robinson, 2014). In Hapnot Collegiate, this communication takes the form of] weekly newsletters, an up-to-date website, and, most importantly, ongoing communication between the teachers and parents. When parents are informed of school and classroom events, procedures, and activities, parents are encouraged to support their children to achieve success.

## **Academic Success**

Good schools strive for academic excellence based on the mandated curriculum. Students must meet the curricular outcomes in order to earn credit for a high school class. However, students today are under pressures that range from difficult home lives to working part time. Schoolwork can be lost in the shuffle, and the quality of work teachers receive can be subpar. Many high school students seem content to meet the minimum expectations, rarely pushing themselves to excel. Schools, such as Hapnot Collegiate, could go back to the days of Saturday schools, summer classes, and detentions to show students the importance of an academic education. A mission statement, like that of the Frederick Douglass Academy, wherein students know what their role is, and how the school will make sure that they fulfill it, is key to academic success (Cowley, 2004). In addition, various course options will ensure that students are engaged and excited about what they are learning.

A good school offers a variety of courses in educational programming that meets a wide range of interests. Hapnot Collegiate's course offerings include a Cooperative Vocational Education program, cosmetology, French Immersion, and a business diploma. Canadians recognize that students need a "strong foundation of reading, writing and numeracy," and that public schools currently excel in providing that (Ungerleider, 2004, p. 20). Private schools are being created to meet the individual desires of parents and students (Langlois, 2004). Realistically, public schools cannot meet all the demands, but many are trying very hard to offer a vast selection from fine arts to the trades. Hapnot Collegiate offers a wide variety of options to engage students and make them feel more connected to the school environment.

### **School Environment**

The environment in a good school is welcoming and inclusive of all staff and students. This environment can be difficult for schools to achieve, however, because of the added pressure to accommodate all individual needs. Hapnot Collegiate uses extra-curricular activities to give students this sense of belonging, whether through various groups like Student Council, the newly formed GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) group, intramurals, or Dinner Theatre. Here, students connect with each other and creates ties to the school. These activities bring teachers and students together, whereby common interests are founded and groups are formed. Teachers may also feel a need for connection to their work and peers. Staff wellness activities, such as Hapnot's yoga at lunch, team building activities during staff meetings, and the new GSA group, help to create positive environments that nurture a sense of belonging for staff, as well.

Schools endeavour to ensure that every student and staff member has a sense of belonging. One new Hapnot Collegiate school group that has been the topic of controversy is the GSA group. Manitoba schools are promoting the creation of these groups within schools to provide a sense of belonging to students who may feel out-casted because of their identity. In today's society, hegemonic sitcoms and TV shows still reinforce "classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes" (Leistyna & Alper, 2009, p. 502). Therefore, schools also have to deal with what students are exposed to in their own homes, as students bring to reality the thoughts and behaviours that they have witnessed on television. GSA groups have been "inconsistent; due in part to the prevailing belief that talking about LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning) issues is inappropriate" (Ratts et al., 2014, p. 388). Many resources are available to staff and students, such as the website *My GSA* (2012), a Canadian website that promotes inclusive, safer schools for the LGBTQ community. This site contains links for educators, students, and parents, with helpful documents such as lesson plans and peer support anecdotes. Good schools such as Hapnot Collegiate are fighting the hegemonic battles that students will encounter for years to come, and are creating equality for all staff and students. In order for schools to be in touch with staff and students, all staff members require access to continuing education.

### **Continuing Education**

In Hapnot Collegiate, there is an expectation that teachers will continue with professional learning opportunities, because the world is constantly evolving, and practices and methods change commensurately. Schools should be more than credential mills; they ought to be places that create independent global citizens and prepare students for the working world (Aronowitz, 2009). Teachers are expected to find a balance of educating students for the world, without conforming to hegemonic practices. Professional development for teachers yields "positive outcomes for students' engagement, learning, and well-being" (Muijs et al., 2014, p. 246), which can educate and empower students to achieve success.

## Conclusion

The definition of a good school is fluid and ever changing. Educators in public schools, such as those at Hapnot Collegiate, benefit from safe schools, parental involvement, various educational programming options, high academic standards, a sense of belonging, and professional development specifically designed for teachers. A safe school includes a principal who will trust and delegate responsibilities to staff members. Rich parental involvement can take place only when teachers and principals keep parents informed and make them a part of the learning process. For students to feel a connection with the material that they are learning requires many programming options. Academic success is written into most schools' mission statements, but it is the sense of belonging that keeps students and staff coming back through the doors day after day. Professional development endeavours to provide the best educational experience for educators and students alike. In a good school, teachers focus on educating students, rather than on politics or on conforming to dominant societal pressures.

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Chelsea Russell is currently enrolled in a Master of Education, specializing in educational administration through Brandon University. She taught at the high school level before moving to the beautiful West Coast. Chelsea is now a stay-at-home mom, focusing on her children and her coursework.