Case Study

ETHOS network

Number 1 Scottish Schools Ethos Network September 1995

Action on Ethos

This Case Study describes one school's account of investigating Ethos. It highlights the developments that took place as a result of the excercise.

CRAIGMOUNT HIGH SCHOOL

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1 Background

Cross-curricular discussion groups had emphasised a need for improved communication and relationships within the school community. It was decided to operate a steering committee whose remit was within the (then) vision statement of the school to identify some targets for the improvement of **relationships** within the school community. Members were recruited and a committee was established comprising three parents (drawn from the School Board and the PTA), two students, four teachers, one support member of staff and the Depute Head as chairperson. The wide representation on the group was considered vital, as it was a genuine attempt to draw together representation from all members of the school community. School Ethos was then established as a priority within the School Development Plan.

2 General Aims

There were very clear aims behind the use of the Ethos Indicators. Of considerable importance was the attempt to create a real dialogue between students, staff and parents about the strengths of the school and areas for development. The second major aim was to attempt to identify a few clear action points around which the whole community could unite. This fitted in very well with the process of creating the first major school development plan, providing as it did clear objective information.

3 Methods/Strategies

Once the committee was appointed its initial meetings were taken up with preparing appropriate questions for the staff, student and parent questionnaires. We adapted the Scottish Office Ethos questionnaires as appropriate and also prepared a support staff questionnaire as the staff questionnaire was very teacher orientated. Questionnaires were then distributed and retrieved. Staff completed the questionnaire during time allocated on a staff in-service day, students in P.S.D. or R.E. time and parents were circulated through student post. After considerable debate it was agreed that the questionnaire would be sent out to every home rather than just a sample. We had a high response rate from all groups: the survey system was generally accepted by the school community as a means of improving relationships between staff, students and parents and it was perceived as an honest attempt to establish a genuine dialogue for the future.

Notes

4 Making Sense of the Findings

The school Computing Department set up a programme which allowed cross referencing and the raw or qualitative data (sections 1-4 of the questionnaire) was processed by students as part of their course. The extended responses or qualitative data (section 5) was analysed by the Ethos Committee. Reading teams took a percentage of responses and identified staff, student and parent comments. It is worth remembering that these responses are subjective and are generally affected by the place, mood and issues of the moment. When analysing the data as a whole, it is wise to see what emerges positively, what needs to be improved and where there is a need for further information where contradictions appear. A summary of results was published and staff, students and parents were informed of these and of the areas of priority in non-curricular groups and suggested action points. A very positive and stimulating public meeting of students, parents, senior staff and the Ethos Committee was also held where there was a high level of constructive discussions.

5 Issues & Problems Identified

The committee identified four priorities as a result of the analysis of the data. These priorities were identified in particular as they were issues which were commented on by all the survey groups albeit from different perspectives.

a) A need to improve the fabric/cleanliness of the school – in particular student toilets.

b) A need to enhance current school relationships by examining school rules/discipline within the context of a desire to promote fairness, mutual respect and a positive work ethic throughout the school.

c) A need to improve communications and consultation by seeking ways of involving all staff, students and parents in formulating and publicising school policies.

d) A need to examine the issue of school uniform. This issue must however be handled sensitively given major differences of opinion. It would require a high level of involvement, consultation and co-operation.

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6 Action

In practical terms the easiest priority to overtake was to begin to improve the fabric of the school. This indeed is also the most visible undertaking and so far we have had extensive refurbishment of some toilets and have begun to improve the school fabric, as funding allows. The other priorities identified have far-reaching consequences and they will be included in an updated school development plan. Targets will include action in all three other priority areas.

7 Evaluation

To survey students, staff and parents views of the school ethos is a very ambitious challenging, time consuming but nevertheless very rewarding project. The outcome does not provide you with answers but gives you clear plans of action which involve the whole school community.

It is wise to discourage unrealistic expectations at the outset. It is sensible to emphasise to all the survey groups before the process is undertaken that only a few priority areas will be identified for action as soon as is feasible and that issues will be attended to in time. All have a right to know the outcome of the survey but whilst the full raw data is available in school, it is better if the data is digested by the committee and the results interpreted for others. The survey process itself from its commencement to the publication of the report can take upwards of a year so it is very important that the school community be informed periodically of the committee's progress. It is unwise to disclose information on any area without the whole but it is nevertheless important to report progress. At the end of the process it is necessary to ensure that a clear indication of issues and areas for action is communicated.

8 Practical Suggestions

From the outset and with each stage, we had to remember resource implications – time for meetings, reprographic costs, processing costs, clerical support, time for students and staff to complete questionnaires, staff meeting time, senior management team and management team time. Last but not least staff co-operation and goodwill has to be maintained.

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