

Leadership for All Minchau Staff Make Leadership What They Do Best!

By Kelly Harding

Abstract

The staff at Minchau School have used their AISI Cycle 4 funding to integrate Stephen Covey's Habits into every aspect of their teaching, and their students' learning. This article presents evidence of positive changes in teacher behavior, student behavior, student learning, and student responsibility that are seen to be directly related to this comprehensive initiative.



In the front entry of Minchau Elementary school, a brightly decorated question asks, **CAN YOU SEE THE LEADER IN ME?** When a visitor enters, a student wearing a bold blue scarf embroidered with **Minchau Greeter** bids a happy "Good morning!" and offers a reminder of one of the seven *Leader in Me* habits. If the visitor is not quite yet inspired, Gandhi's **BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE IN THE WORLD** beams affirmation from another wall!

According to Principal Pat Davidson, the staff noticed an immediate change in the tone of the school as soon as these and other practices were put into place. They observed that when children are met every day by someone who says, "Good Morning—don't forget to be proactive today!" those children tended to feel and act more positively for the rest of the day. Every student, teacher and visitor to Minchau Elementary is welcomed in this way, and it is only one aspect of the many commitments Pat and her staff have made to transforming Minchau's population into a dynamic team of leaders.

It started with AISI.

Minchau's current AISI project examines the question: *How does the focus on engagement through the teaching of 21st century literacies across the curriculum impact student learning?*

Knowing that time to meet and reflect is essential to supporting the work of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Pat's first AISI priority was to buy time for her teaching staff to work collaboratively. Having completed her master's degree with a focus on Professional Learning Communities, Pat decided to use the PLC concept, with a SMART Team (Figure 1) and Distributed Leadership Model (Figure 2). SMART Teams are arranged around grade level groupings. Teachers work together, using an inquiry process, to analyze achievement data, set goals for improvement, develop and implement action plans and then reassess to see if what they are doing is making a difference to student learning—an ongoing and cyclical process for continuous school improvement.

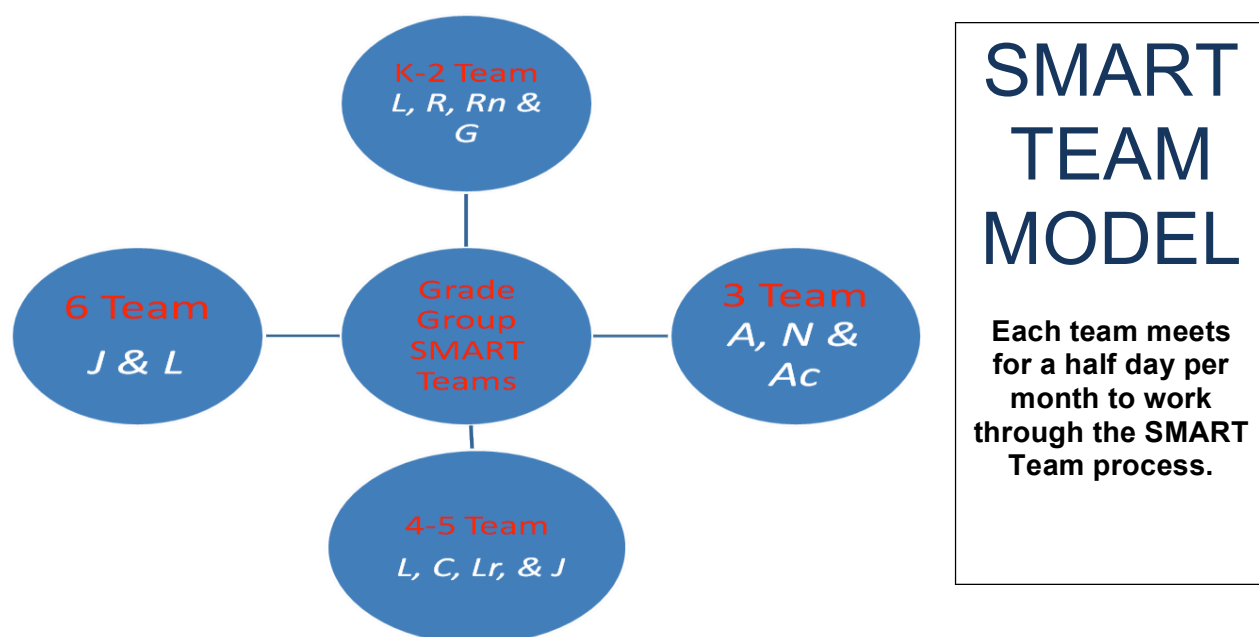


Figure 1. Smart Team Model.

As Pat explains, the SMART Team members also serve on a Distributed Leadership Team, "in which all teachers take a leadership role in one of four areas—Literacy, Math, Technology, and 'The Leader in Me'—with the purpose being to generate fresh ideas and continue to build the capacity of staff." Each of these leadership teams commits to a year of focused professional learning through working with a District consultant, networking with others schools, and then sharing their professional learning with their grade-group teams. According to Pat, "The teams are wonderful and the teachers are amazing. They work so hard at continually making things better for kids. What they have achieved has changed this school."

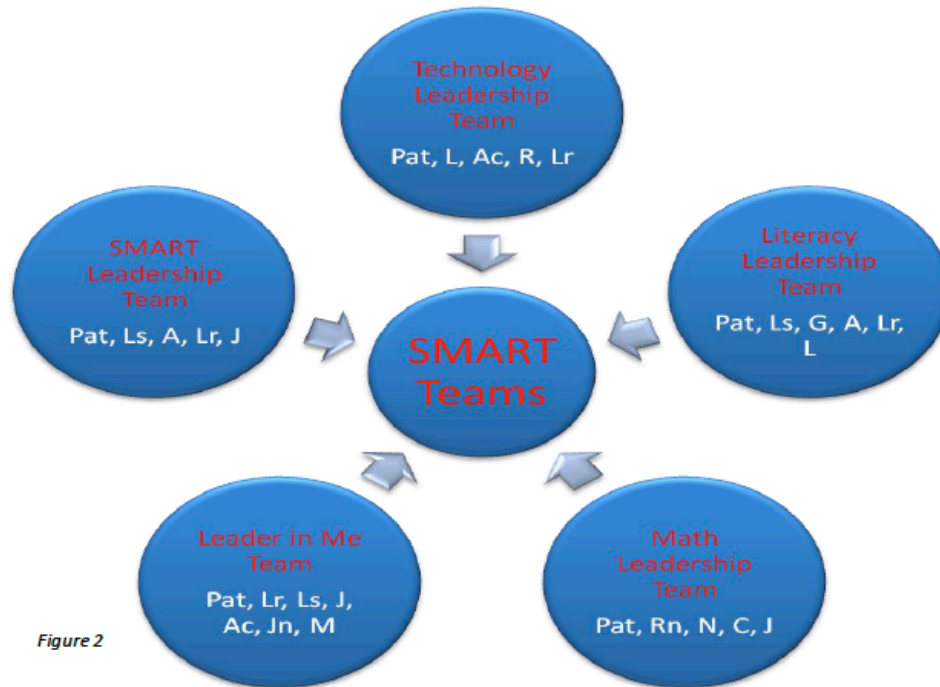


Figure 2

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODEL

Each Leadership Team has one lunch meeting per month and network sessions.

Figure 2. Distributed Leadership Model.

The Leader in Me Team has been instrumental in providing leadership school-wide around 21st century skills through Stephen Covey's **7 Habits of Highly Successful People**. Pat describes the program—now well into its second year—as “Remarkable. It has changed the way kids behave, the way they act towards each other and their teachers, even how they act at home.” At the beginning of the school year, each classroom creates its own mission statement. All students contribute their thoughts and ideas to what they believe their mission is as leaders and learners. Collectively, each class works together at creating a single comprehensive statement, which is then posted for everyone to live by. Next, the class drafts a Code of Cooperation (Figure 3). It, too, is posted.

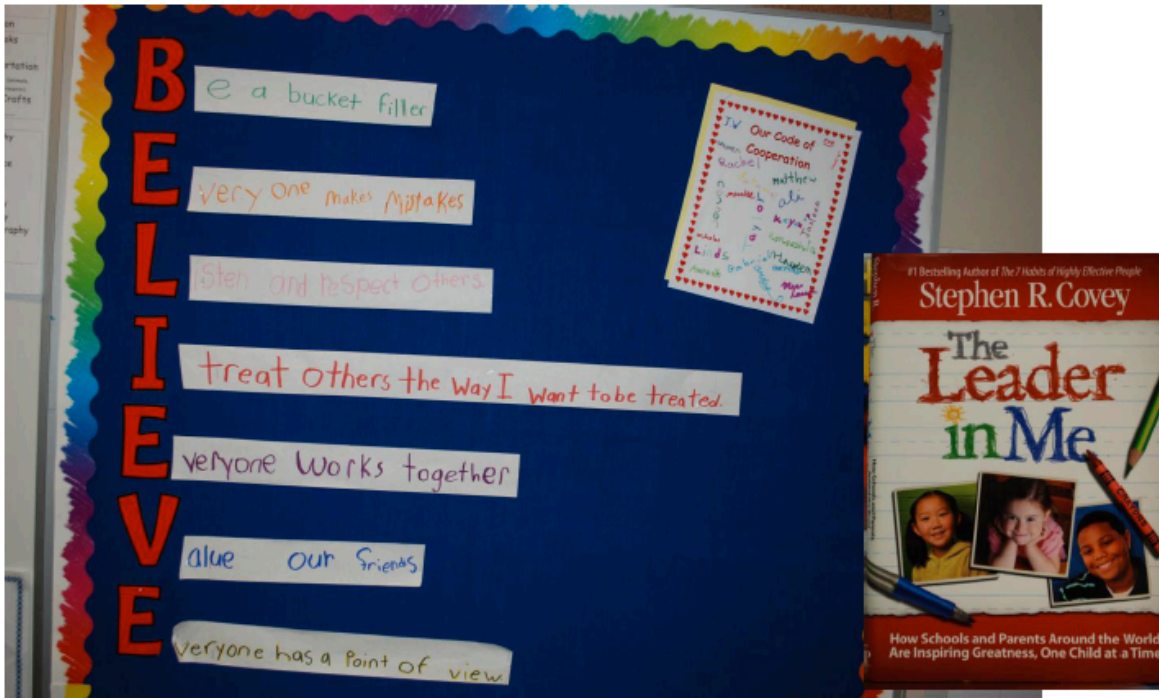


Figure 3. Code of cooperation.

Following the establishment of these guiding elements of classroom culture, the students are asked to select an area of leadership in the classroom to which they would like to be appointed. As might happen in a job interview, the students indicate why they would be ‘the best person,’ for example, to troubleshoot technology, maintain and organize the resources, act as class secretary, feed the class pet or water the plants.

The students are grouped into leadership teams (Figure 4) and, on a rotating schedule, they each have turns being ‘the leader’ of their task. The team network structure created by the teachers is the same in all the classrooms. Each student belongs to a team and is responsible for ensuring whatever duties and tasks assigned to them get done.



Figure 4. Student leadership teams.

Serving as a leader requires that students develop essential leadership skills. Beginning the first week of school, teachers introduce one Covey habit per week, starting with helping students see that they are responsible for themselves, and can take control of their lives in many ways. The first three habits get the students to take account of their own choices, attitudes and priorities. They are: “Be Proactive,” “Begin with the End in Mind,” and “Put First Things First.” The teachers work with their students to examine what those habits might look like in their own lives—for example, getting homework done before playing videogames, or keeping a promise to clean their bedroom on the weekend. The next three habits encourage the students to consider how they work with others, and how they each contribute to a positive, friendly and supportive environment. They are “Think Win-Win,” “Seek First to Understand, Then be Understood,” and “Synergize.”

These statements are seen and heard everywhere in the school (Figure 5); the conversations and activities they help generate throughout the building are positive and collaborative. Students in their teams discuss, plan and take responsibility for certain tasks—if anyone needs help, they all pitch in.

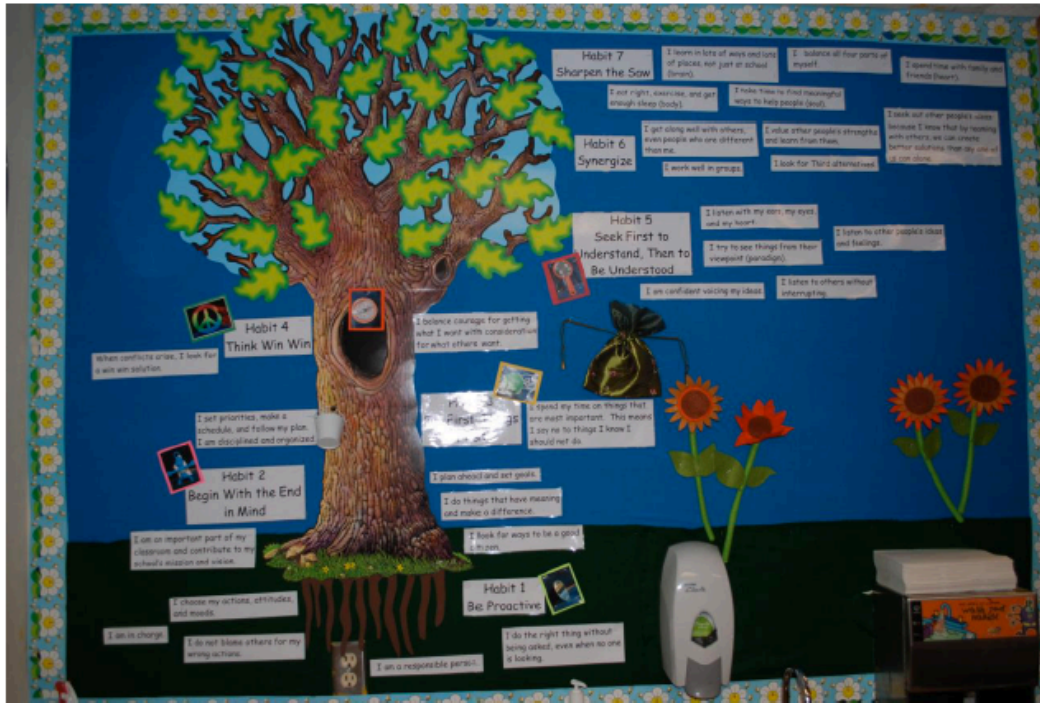


Figure 5. Display of statements.

The final habit, “Sharpen the Saw,” encourages students to take account of their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. Are they balanced? Are they eating well, getting enough sleep, taking part in sports or other physical activities? The focus on a healthy mind, body and spirit is an essential habit, preparing the students for a lifetime commitment to good health, and ensuring a confidence necessary for the challenges and peer pressures of the teenage years.

Grade 3/4 teacher Norma Keiller describes the excitement, sense of purpose and pride the students have in knowing they are responsible for taking care of themselves, each other, and some aspect of the classroom (Figure 6). She describes how different the students are after only a few weeks of the *The Leader in Me* process and their team roles. “They are so attentive and mature, they pull together and work together—if something isn’t working, like my SMART Board, the kids on the Tech Team will have it fixed and working in minutes,” says Norma.



Figure 6. Classroom

That they are trusted and deemed capable of ever expanding responsibilities is evidenced in the students all over the school. For example, students can apply to act as office receptionist and telephone operator over the lunch hour. As one student explained, “This is an important job, and I really wanted to apply for it. My parents helped me practice for my interview. If a kid comes in and he has been hurt, I take him to the first aid centre and give him help until a grown up comes. They are really proud of me, and I think that this job will help me in the future because I’ve learned a lot.”

Another important job, assigned to the division two students, is the operation of Minchau TV (MTV). As leaders, a team of students took over the production of the morning communications, which are broadcast into every classroom through SMART Boards. As with the rest of the teams, students apply for the role they want: producer, scriptwriter, anchor, technician or station manager. Every morning around 8 a.m., the team begins to prepare. The program includes the anthem, important announcements, a weather update, scenes from around the school—captured by the students on their flip cameras—upcoming events, a reminder of the day’s Habit, and a physical warm-up that students perform beside their desks for a couple of minutes before the day begins (Figure 7).



Figure 7. On-air morning program.

The members of this team are in most ways typical 11 and 12 year olds. However, on the job they are quick, articulate, confident and incredibly tech-savvy. Pat pointed out how the experience had changed MTV's on-air anchor, noting, "She was so shy before, I was surprised she applied for that role. But she got it, and what a difference. She is so confident in herself—a different kid."

Another indicator of responsibility? The outgoing team recruits, interviews and trains the in-coming team to ensure the quality of MTV for the following year. As the tech-producer said. "I already have my eye on this kid in grade five—he has the skills, and I think he would be right for this job!"

"Kids used to be sent to the office for discipline," Pat observed, "Now they come to the office for commendations." When she was asked where all the positive changes started, Pat pointed to the formation of SMART goals and Leadership Teams, using their AISI project as the vehicle for change. She confirmed that although *50% of the school's population is identified with special needs, or has an ELL code*, students have enjoyed increasing levels of success each year.

For Pat, there is no doubt that this concentrated focus on leadership, combined with purposeful teacher collaboration, has had an extremely positive impact on many aspects of school life, including student achievement. As reported in the 2010 Accountability Pillar, 94% of Minchau students achieved the acceptable standard, and 22% achieved the standard of excellence—with a *100% participation rate*—on the Provincial Language Arts Achievement Tests.

Leadership at Minchau is a shared responsibility that, in turn, inspires learners and leaders. Principal Pat Davidson has helped create a system that ensures her vision of "a leader in everyone" becomes a living reality.