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CANADIAN STUDENTS “TELL THEM FROM ME”



MOST CHILDREN HAVE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS school when they enter middle school at age 10 or 11. School is where their friends are. It is a place where they can enjoy sports and other school activities. They are able to establish good relationships with teachers and other school staff, and generally they feel they belong at school. They see how academic pursuits are relevant to their future, and they have begun to establish long-term aspirations.

But this is not the case for all students. Some students become disaffected from school even before they reach middle school. They do not view schooling as relevant to their future, and they start to withdraw from school activities. As they progress through middle school, their feelings of alienation increase. They spend less time doing homework and preparing for class; they start skipping classes; and their academic results begin to suffer.

An examination of students' engagement at school across the 42 countries that participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a large comparative study of 15-year old students conducted in over 40 countries, revealed a curious paradox for Canadian students.¹ Overall, Canada fared very well in its literacy skills compared with other countries: it ranked among the top three countries in reading literacy, and among the top 12 countries in mathematics and science. However, despite the strong literacy skills of Canadian students, they are not strongly engaged at school. Canada ranked 15th in students' sense of belonging at school and 29th in student participation.

Engagement and academic achievement usually go hand-in-hand, but it is not necessarily the case that disengagement precedes a decline in academic achievement. Students who experience repeated academic failure are especially prone to becoming disaffected from school. As Benjamin Bloom noted, "At the other extreme are the bottom third of students who have been given consistent evidence of their inadequacy...over a period of five to ten years. Such students rarely secure any positive reinforcement in the classroom...from teachers or parents. We would expect such students to be infected with emotional difficulties [and to] exhibit symptoms of acute distress and alienation from the world of school and adults."² The causal pathway between engagement and achievement may vary

among students; however, the important point is that student engagement is an important schooling outcome in its own right. It is “a *disposition* towards learning, working with others and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students’ feelings that they belong at school, and in their participation in school activities.”³

TRAILING AND LEADING INDICATORS

The PISA study also measured a number of important aspects of classroom and school climate, such as teacher-student relations, the disciplinary climate of the classroom, and teachers’ expectation for academic success, which are correlated with student engagement and academic achievement. In addition, some provinces and school districts have developed their own instruments to collect student and parent “perception” data. The reports furnished by PISA and our national, provincial and district monitoring systems provide *trailing indicators* that measure student outcomes and school processes after a fixed period of schooling. They are important in that they enable us to portray the distribution of educational outcomes within and between schools, examine long-term trends in student outcomes, assess the extent of inequalities in educational outcomes among ethnic and social class groups and between the sexes, and discern the extent to which student performance is related to structural features of the schooling system. They can also provide a base for research on the relationships between student outcomes and classroom and school processes.

However, the links between the results stemming from these monitoring systems and classroom practice or school policy are arguably weak. The collection and reporting process does not usually meet the needs of school staff as the turnaround time is usually too long – typically four to six months – making it difficult to link assessment results to school improvement efforts. District administrators, principals and teachers need *leading indicators* that provide a framework for intervention, can be used to guide school policy and practice, and can help staff identify issues relevant to particular students or groups of students. Principals and teachers have been pressed to use data for evidence-based decision-making, but many of them lack the expertise to learn from assessment results and need a process for using data to help staff engage in conversations about teaching and learning.⁴

TELL THEM FROM ME

In 2004 we began the development of an assessment system called *Tell Them From Me* that could provide leading indicators of student engagement and wellness, and classroom and school climate. Our aim was to meet the needs of school and district staff for timely, reliable, transparent results with a system that is cost-effective, user-friendly, extensible and affordable. *Tell Them From Me* includes a dynamic web-based student survey and optional teacher and parent surveys, which together assess 16 student outcomes pertaining to student engagement and wellness and 15 aspects of classroom and school learning climate that are known to affect learning outcomes. The measures are consistent with Lezotte’s correlates of school effectiveness,⁵ and with the features of a preventive, whole-school approach to supporting positive student behaviours as

EN BREF Les administrateurs de commissions scolaires, les directeurs d'école et les enseignants ont besoin d'indicateurs de l'engagement des élèves qui leur procurent un cadre d'intervention, qui peuvent guider les politiques et méthodes de l'école et qui peuvent aider le personnel à dégager des éléments pertinents pour des élèves ou des groupes d'élèves en particulier. Mené auprès d'élèves, le sondage anonyme à base Web Tell Them From Me évalue 16 résultats se rapportant à l'engagement et au bien-être des élèves et 15 aspects du climat de classe et d'apprentissage de l'école qui sont des facteurs connus qui se répercutent sur les résultats. Depuis 2005, plus de 50 000 élèves de 120 écoles canadiennes ont pris part à l'enquête, remplie par un échantillon aléatoire d'élèves de chaque école, chaque semaine. Selon un directeur d'école, l'enquête ne convient guère aux timorés, car elle invite à remettre franchement en question le statu quo. Cependant, les élèves apprécient cette possibilité de donner leur avis et les écoles participantes ont vu des résultats positifs.

advocated by Sugai and Horner.⁶ Their work, and recent research on vulnerable children in Canada,⁷ calls for schools to have effective policies and practices to support vulnerable youth, strong student advocacy, and positive relations with students, parents, and the wider community.

A unique feature of *Tell Them From Me* is that a random selection of students from each school completes the survey each week. The student survey results are updated daily, creating a system for continuous feedback that enables school and district staff to respond immediately to specific concerns and assess whether school reforms and interventions are having their intended effect. In addition to Likert-style questions that assess student outcomes and classroom and school climate, the survey also gives students, teachers, and parents a chance to voice their opinions through a set of open-ended questions, with their responses then contributing to the school’s evaluation. For example, students are asked, “Please tell us about some of the things you really like about your school, or things that would make it even better.” Schools can include one or two of their own questions pertaining to issues relevant to their students. The responses are provided to the principal and school coordinator each month, providing a rich source of information for a dialogue among parents, teachers, and students.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT VARIES AMONG SCHOOLS

Since 2005, over 50,000 students in 120 schools across Canada have participated in the survey. One of the measures of student engagement is students’ sense of belonging at school, which has to do with their feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers and by others at their school. For example, students are asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to statements such as: “At school I feel accepted for who I am” or “I get along well with others at school.” Students respond to these statements on a five-point scale, which is scored as follows: 0 (strongly disagree), 1 (somewhat agree), 2 (neither agree nor disagree), 3 (somewhat agree), and 4 (strongly agree). Students with an average score across the items that is above 2.4 (which is slightly higher than a “neutral” response) are considered to have a positive sense of belonging. For the 108 middle and secondary schools that have participated in the survey, the prevalence of students with a positive sense of belonging ranges from about 60 percent to 90 percent. This means that in some schools about 40 percent of the

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students have a low sense of belonging, while in others the prevalence is only about 10 percent.

Schools that score high on the five measures of classroom and school climate – effective learning time, disciplinary climate of the classroom, expectations for academic success, teacher-student relations, and student advocacy – tend to have fewer disaffected students; the correlations range from 0.36 to 0.61. Similar findings are evident for the other measures of student engagement, which include participation in school sports and clubs, truancy, aspirations to pursue a post-secondary diploma or degree, and the extent to which students value school outcomes. Schools vary substantially on these measures of engagement, and each of them is strongly correlated with the measures of school climate.

STUDENT HEALTH AND WELLNESS

The emotional, social, spiritual and physical health of children and youth is closely tied to their engagement in school life and their learning outcomes. *Tell Them From Me* includes six indicators of student health and wellness. One of these indicators is self esteem. Studies from several decades of research have consistently shown that youth with higher levels of self esteem tend to have greater academic success, better mental health, and a stronger ability to cope with negative life events. Two other *Tell Them From Me* indicators measure student anxiety and depression. Many children and adolescents experience feelings of intense anxiety and worry incessantly about particular events or



social situations. They can exhibit a range of physical symptoms including dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, a dry mouth, sweating or feelings of panic. Other students experience depression, a mental state characterized by feelings of sadness, discouragement and inadequacy. These feelings tend to persist for long periods, from two or three weeks to several years. Youth experiencing depression are typically unable to find joy and happiness in activities at school or at home, and some suffer to the extent that it affects their ability to concentrate, their appetite, and their sleeping patterns. For youth who have problems with anxiety or depression, their feelings tend to be chronic and can become worse if there is no intervention.

The survey results for this year reveal that about 11 percent of middle and secondary students experience high levels of anxiety or depression. Anxiety problems tend to be more prevalent than depression during the middle school years, but the prevalence of depression is higher at the secondary level. Both types of problems are more prevalent among girls, with the odds of girls experiencing anxiety or depression almost twice that of boys. Family socioeconomic status (SES) also plays a role; children from low SES families are about 15 percent more likely to have these problems. Dr. Alexa Bagnell, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax who helped develop the measures of anxiety and depression for *Tell Them From Me*, noted that the 8 to 10 percent of children with high levels of anxiety and depression are those who are more likely to need help in a clinical setting. However, a further 10 percent of middle and secondary students have moderate levels of anxiety or depression, and these children can also benefit from early school-based interventions to help with mild to moderate anxiety.⁸ Therefore, the reports provided to schools with *Tell Them From Me* track the prevalence of students with both moderate and high levels of these problems. Dr. Bagnell has been helping schools in recognizing youth with anxiety and depression and providing resources for school staff with the future goal of establishing a sustainable, web-based intervention aimed at reducing the prevalence of anxiety and depression.

DRILLING DOWN

As principals and teachers become more familiar with the leading indicators provided by *Tell Them From Me*, they usually want to identify particular groups of students who are most in need of support. The system includes a "drill down" feature that enables the school administrators to break down results by gender, socioeconomic status, and grade level. Also, when student data are loaded into the system at the beginning of the school year, the district coordinator can establish up to three drill-down categories of interest to schools and the school district. The popular

AFTER ONE PRINCIPAL RECEIVED THE FIRST BATCH OF OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES FROM STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN THE FALL, HE NOTED, "TELL THEM FROM ME IS NOT FOR THE FAINT-OF-HEART."

ones have been related to Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal, students enrolled in French-immersion programs versus non-immersion programs, the academic program or track, and district indicators of at-risk status. One principal noted: "Using our school drill-down, I am seeing some significant and steadily more alarming indicators that life for our at-risk population is not what I would like them to have at our school. [The at-risk student population] appears to be becoming more disconnected with life at school, even though they still appear to value schooling and many have aspirations for graduation and beyond. I'm hoping to pose this as a question to the staff at our next staff meeting."

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IS CRITICAL

The availability of high quality, timely data does not by itself cause schools to change. School reform requires leadership that encourages the collaborative use of data to set the course for a school. In our work with schools over the past two years we have found four requirements that are necessary for *Tell Them From Me* to have a positive effect.

- **Support for the use of data to make decisions.** Principals and senior school administrators need to stress the importance of using data for decision-making, and support school staff in its use. The process of interpreting

data and setting priorities is very school-specific, and cannot be accomplished without dedicated time and leadership. One principal said, "We publish our TTFM findings and provide copies to staff at staff meetings. We also provide a copy to our School Parent Support Committee." Tell Them From Me results can shift the focus of staff meetings from administrative issues to matters that are relevant to student engagement and learning.

- **Grapple with challenges to "common knowledge".** When students, parents, and teachers express their views with an anonymous on-line system they tend to be very frank. They are willing to challenge the common knowledge about teaching and learning, and raise questions about how the school is managed. After one principal received the first batch of open-ended responses from students and teachers in the fall, he noted, "*Tell Them From Me* is not for the faint-of-heart." Being open to feedback, especially when it is critical, allows the dialogue necessary for school change to begin. About 80 percent of students who do the survey answer the open-ended questions at the end. With some exceptions, their responses are respectful and thoughtful.

- **Respond to Feedback.** The most common concern raised to us initially, from student and teacher feedback coming directly to us, is that nobody actually reads what is said, takes it seriously, or takes some action on it. One student said: "I think the survey is important, the only thing I'm questioning is ...will it actually be taken into consideration, or are we 'just kids'?" Another student insisted, "I would like to see some results from this survey. I don't

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want you to just have this survey sitting in the basement ten years from now. I want you to learn from it and not make me waste my time." One school tries to meet this challenge by regularly posting students' comments and the staff responses on the video monitors that students see when they enter the building. Two examples: "You said: 'Parking pass in the student parking lot is a dumb idea.' We say: 'We hear you and the idea is withdrawn.'" and "You said: 'I like this school because it has a lot of clubs, activities, and athletics.' We say, 'Take a minute to thank the people (teachers, staff and parents) that make these events possible.'" Several schools have now adopted this approach to saying "we have heard you". Principals and teachers do not have to agree with everything students have to say or do everything students ask of them, but students need to be heard.

- **Identify long-term goals, commit to short- and medium-term strategies.** *Tell Them From Me* is being used to help school staff establish benchmarks, see trends over time, monitor the impact of selected interventions, and assess the progress of sub-groups within the student population. Its use as part of long-term school improvement plans is already well established. The schools that have been most successful are those that use the results to identify and commit to short- and medium-term strategies. In one school, students asked for more activities that would encourage greater school spirit. The staff responded by inviting students to bring specific ideas and suggestions to teachers and their student representative council. In Prince Edward Island, four schools from two school districts are introducing advisory groups, which will provide youth with an adult to advocate on their behalf. Teachers will act as advisors and help provide students with a sense of direction during their middle school years. The success of the strategy is being formally assessed with a mixed methods design that uses data from *Tell Them From Me*, teacher interviews, and student focus groups.⁹

STUDENTS APPRECIATE THE CHANCE TO BE HEARD

At the end of the survey, students are invited to provide feedback about the survey directly to the CEO of The Learning Bar Inc.,¹⁰ which owns and manages *Tell Them From Me*. As noted earlier many students express the concern that the data will never be used. However, the most prominent response is appreciation for the opportunity to express their views.

"I think this survey is a really good thing to ask students what they think, and should maybe be done more often. This could affect the school in positive changes, and that would be awesome!"

"Your survey is good. I hope it helps other kids who get bullied and stuff like me."

"I hope that everybody in the school gets to do this survey because it really makes you think about your friends and everybody at school."

"I can never talk to a teacher or confess anything without someone else ever finding out. Thank you for this opportunity." |



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